

## The Sunday School.

## SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON.

3rd SUNDAY IN ADVENT, DEC. 14, 1884.

## BIBLE LESSON.

## Vanity of Worldly Pleasure.

Ecclesiastes always formed part of the Jewish Scriptures, being one of the lesser Hagiographa, or holy writings, which are made up of the Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes. The Hebrew title is *Koheloth*; the Greek, Ecclesiastes, which in English is equivalent to "The Preacher." The authorship and date of this book were in ancient days undisputed. It was universally ascribed to Solomon, King of Israel, it being commonly supposed that the Song of Solomon was written by that monarch in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his old age. Very many modern commentators, however, have assigned it to a later date. It will be sufficient here to take the title as it stands, especially as the assumption of a later date need not interfere with the canonicity or authority of the book. In ancient days it was not unusual to introduce as a spokesman some well-known person of old times, as in the apocryphal Book of Wisdom; and sometimes in the Book of Psalms an author speaks not in his own name but in that of another person, without any intention of asserting that the words were actually those of the so-named speaker. We may, therefore, without further discussion, assume that it is Solomon who is speaking, especially as commentators have in general spoken of the contents of this Book as *the words of Solomon*, without intending thereby to express any precise opinion of its authorship and date.

The great design of this book is evidently to show the utter insufficiency of all earthly pursuits and objects as the chief end of life, to confer solid happiness, and then to draw men off from apparent good to the only real and permanent good,—the fear of God and communion with Him.

I. THE WISE MAN'S EXPERIMENT (vs. 1-10).—The king had been a seeker after happiness. All men are seekers after it. No man ever yet purposely framed his course with the notion of making himself miserable. Men all around us are wearying themselves in the effort to obtain this thing and that. Why? Because they imagine that these things will make them happy. But will they? Not so. Men seek their happiness for the most part in wrong directions. They are giving their fruit unto the caterpillar and their labor unto the grasshopper. They are hewing out cisterns—broken cisterns—which will hold no water. They are giving their money for that which is not bread, and their labor for that which satisfieth not; and the marvel—the sad thing—is that men never seem to realize the accumulated experience of others. Hence the subject of our lesson has great practical importance. Solomon was in pursuit of happiness. He had royal resources of every kind at his command. He sought it in many directions, and of many things. These, for the practical purposes of our lesson, may be generalized under two heads,—pleasure and business. The king resolved to try—

1. *What varied and costly pleasures would do.* He said in his heart, "Go to now; I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure." He proposed that kind of self-indulgence which excites mirth,—the pleasures of gay society. But this failed to satisfy him. It turned out to be vanity. "His experience compels him to say of laughter, 'It is mad!' The Hebrew word for 'mad' suggests rather that it shines with a false glare, and plays off a false splendor in which there is nothing substantial. Of mirth he said, 'What can it do; that is, for the real good of human souls?' He tried wine (v. 3). Not abandoning himself to indulgence, but carefully observing its influence upon him. "The first clause plainly means that he experimented with wine, aiming to use it wisely; but the more precise sense of the Hebrew, rendered, 'To give myself to wine,' is very much in dispute." . . . Clearly the author means that he sought to make a very discreet and wise use of wine; to get all the physical good and all the present enjoyment from it he could with the least possible evil,—a dangerous experiment, to which he fell a victim. He found that there is no satisfaction for the soul in the indulgence of appetite. He tried more costly pleasures. He says, "I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts." "Musical instruments . . . of all sorts" is now generally conceded to be a mistranslation (see notes). It is, rather, "a princess and princesses," or "a wife

and wives," from an Arabic root. One regular wife or queen (Esth. i. 9), Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings iii. 1); other secondary wives, "princesses." Had these been omitted, the enumeration would be incomplete. With seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines in his harem, Solomon sought to find happiness in the indulgence of his passions; but he sought in vain.

2. *What great business and vast wealth would do.* He gave himself to building houses and waterworks, and to the care of his wealth, so that he became very rich. "I made me great works, I builded me houses, I planted me vineyards," etc. (vs. 4-8). Here he passes from the experiment in the lusts of the flesh to the lust of the eye and the pride of life, thus including all that is in this world (1 John ii. 16). The experiment, in its historical form, is in 1 Kings, 9 and 10. Solomon built, besides the temple for the Lord, a palace for himself, one for his Egyptian wife, and "the house of the Forest of Lebanon." "Among his other buildings may be mentioned a summer palace in Lebanon, stately gardens at Etham, *paradises* like those of the great Eastern kings, the foundations of something like a stately school or college, costly aqueducts bringing water, it may be, from the well of Bethlehem, dear to David's heart, to supply his palace in Jerusalem." Thus he busied himself, and his wealth became incalculable. But out of it all he was not able to extract that of which he was in pursuit,—true happiness, real soul satisfaction and rest.

II. THE WISE MAN'S CONCLUSION (vs. 11-13).—In a word it was, that these things were incapable of yielding genuine happiness. "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do; and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun." He puts his folly beside wisdom, and sets himself to consider both. His conclusion is "that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness."

"What can the man do that cometh after the king?" If Solomon, with all his resources, could not satisfy his soul with earthly good, surely it is useless for others to seek to do so. Why repeat the experiment in the face of certain failure? If we are wise, we will not.

Yet how many there are, especially among the young, who fancy that happiness is to be found in the thing they call pleasure, and are seeking it there. They will seek in vain. Solomon did not find it there, nor have any who have since tried his experiment. Says Lord Chesterfield, the glass of fashion and the mould of form of the last century, "I have enjoyed all the pleasures of the world, and consequently know their value; but I by no means desire to repeat that nauseous portion for the sake of a fugitive dream." Lord Byron, at the age of thirty-five, wrote—

"My days are in the sere, the yellow leaf;  
The flowers, the fruits of life are gone;  
The worm, the canker, and the grief  
Are mine alone."

How many others, who regard themselves as sensible, practical persons, are seeking to satisfy their souls in the activities of business and the accumulation of wealth. Solomon's experience ought to tell them how futile are their efforts. Their own experience will teach them by-and-by. Gold cannot buy true happiness. There is a tribe of Indians who are said to eat clay. They do no more for their body than they do for their hungry soul who seek to satisfy it with material wealth. There is only one kind of wealth which has or can have true happiness. It is the treasure, not of earth, but laid up in heaven,—the wealth which is spent in works of mercy and beneficency, and which is increased by the limitation of reigning desires.

## COLLECT.—The Ministers of Christ.

1. *What they are called.*

(1) *Heralds.* Messengers from God. "Ambassadors for Christ." (2 Cor. v. 20). Sent by the King of Kings with a message to proclaim. Do we listen to them?

(2) *Ministers, i.e., servants or attendants.* "Ministers of Christ," (2 Cor. xi. 23), to attend upon His Church, to administer the Gospel (2 Cor. v. 18) and the Sacraments (1 Cor. ix. 13). Hence called also—

(3) *Stewards.* Stewards are ministers, and something more. *They have charge over their master's goods.* Our pastors called stewards because they have a charge to keep (1 Tim. vi. 20; 2 Tim. i. 14). In the name of God and the Church—stewards of God's mysteries, *i.e.,* of the things which, having been before hidden, He has revealed; and of things which, having been revealed, are yet more or less beyond our understanding. Mysteries of former kind are the Atonement (Rom. xvi. 25, 26), the Resurrection of the body (1 Cor. xv. 44), Eternal Life (2 Tim. i. 10). Of the latter, the Trinity-in-Unity, the Incarnation. These God's stewards must "hold fast" (Tit. i. 9).

Observe that Christ's ministers are never called "priests" *hierets*, offerers of sacrifice in the new Testament. The word "priest" in the Prayer Book is simply the contraction of "presbyter."

2. *The duty of God's Ministers.*

Read Coll.,—"May likewise . . . wisdom of the just." (1) *The work to be done.* John Baptist sent to prepare the way for Christ's first coming, these for His second. (See Acts xxvi. 16-19). To prepare is to make everything ready to receive Him. This is not an easy task. Read Isa. xl. 3-6. May be compared to levelling mountains—raising valleys—making crooked roads straight, and new roads where there are none. Yet Christ shall come (Heb. x. 37), and preparation shall be made. God's name shall be known and His Church extended (Matt. xiii. 31-33) over the whole earth.

(2) *How this work is being done.* "By turning," etc. Again like the work of John Baptist. Read Luke i. 16, 17. Men are "disobedient" because their "hearts" are not right in God's sight—"desperately wicked" (Jer. xvii. 9)—need to be changed (Eph. v. 5). Now the unregenerate man is foolish. Only the "just" are "wise" (Job xxviii. 28), *i.e.,* those who are "justified" (Rom. v. 1), and sanctified. To prepare Christ's way is to change men thus. Mark—

(a) *The power that affects this change.* Not man himself (Prov. xx. 9, Jer. xiii. 23). *God alone!* He can and does (Ezek. xi. 19), by the power of His spirit, with whom the Baptist was filled. Hence we pray, "Grant," etc. (Ps. li. 10).

But we pray that *our ministers* may turn, etc. How can this be? Read Acts i. 8; and comp. Mark xvi. 20: Eph. iii. 20; Col. i. 29. "Workers together with Him." Here, then, we have—

(b) *The mode in which the spirit works.* Preaching the instrument, made effectual by Him. So it was in the case of the Baptist (Matt. xxviii. 5, 6); so it was promised in case of Christian preachers (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20), and the promise was and is being fulfilled (Acts ii. 37 to end). Let us be diligent to "hear sermons" (Baptismal Services). God's ministers preach *Repentance* (Acts. ii. 38; iii. 19), *i.e.,* change of heart and conduct, and *forgiveness of sins* to the penitent believer—*salvation through Christ*, after the manner of the Baptist (Matt. iii. 2), but more fully, after the manner of Christ (Mark i. 15), like St. Paul (Acts xvi. 31), "Repent and believe"; and thus "make ready" for Christ's coming "by turning," etc.

3. *The end of their Ministry.* "We may be found etc." Their work will end at Christ's second coming. And then there will be—

(1) *Trial.* Read 1 Cor. iii. 13, 14. Christ will "judge" the work—try it. So much implied in word "found" *i.e.,* found on trial. And on trial—

(2) *Approval.* The people gathered in will be "an acceptable people" (Coli.); holy (Eph. v. 27); acceptable by Christ and the Father in Him (Eph. i. 6). But approval will bring—

(3) *Reward.* "Well done!" (Matt. xxv. 21, 23.) Every Christian rewarded, but the Christian pastor's a special reward (Dan. xii. 3; 1 Pet. v. 4); they shall have an unfading crown—"shall shine as the stars." And this reward will be the souls they shall have saved (Phil. ii. 16 and iv. 1; 2 Cor. i. 14; see especially 1 Thess. ii. 19, 20), "the acceptable people." Let us sum up what we have learnt.

1. *How great the Importance of the Ministerial Office.* What are ministers called? Office of *importance to themselves*—if faithful, rewarded; if unfaithful, woe to them! (Jer. xxiii. 1; 1 Cor. ix. 16; Gal. i. 8, 9). How earnestly we should pray for them. "Grant," etc. *But of equal importance to us.* Either a Saviour of life or of death (2 Cor. ii. 15, 16). If we believe, their preaching is life; if not, death eternal! (Ezek. iii. 19, 21.) How earnestly we should pray for ourselves—"Grant," etc.

2. *Have you profited by your Pastor's Ministry?* If you have, you may profit still more. Grow in knowledge (1 Pet. ii. 2). Value his ministry. Pray that he may show you "things new and old" (Matt. xiii. 52; Eph. vi. 19). You can never profit by it too much. If you have not, then listen to their sage "now" (2 Cor. vi. 2). Be not like Chorazin and Bethsaida (Matt. xi. 21); but be rather like Nineveh (Matt. xii. 41). "Be ye reconciled to God!"

## Book Reviews.

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S CARDS.—In the Willard Tract Depository, corner of Yonge and Temperance street, Toronto, there is one of the finest collections of cards of every variety we have ever seen. We are particularly pleased with those designed and printed at the Deaconess House, Mildmay. The de-

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