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SOLOMON'S EXPERIENCE AND OBSERVATION.

"Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me; for all is vanity and vexation of spirit."—Eccles. 2: 17.

THERE are few parts of the sacred Scriptures more difficult of interpretation than the one which contains this text. The style of the Book is peculiar; and the rapid transition of thought from one subject to another, and from one state of mind to another—a transition often made without any express mention of it—throws an air of obscurity and, indeed, sometimes an appearance of contradiction over the sentiments uttered.

Hence, the most extravagant ideas have sometimes been deduced from it;—the most mischievous, the most absurd. Some expressions in it have been employed in a manner which might well rejoice libertines; and the licentious themselves have sometimes seized upon ideas contained in it, to justify all the extravagances of an unbridled licentiousness. They have very eloquently repeated that passage in the seventh verse of the ninth chapter, "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart," as if it were a fit motto for a man of pleasure. With equal animation and eloquence, they have recited that passage in the twenty-fourth verse of the second chapter—"There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor," as if it were designed to give loose reins to indulgence.

And infidelity, as well as libertinism, has made itself merry over the supports supposed to be found in some of these chapters. It has called ideas found here contradictory—the whole Book a jumble of inconsistencies. Bringing together the second verse of

the second chapter—"I said of laughter it is mad, and of mirth what doeth it;" and the fifteenth verse of the eighth chapter—"Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry;" infidelity has put on a malignant smile, as if she had found at once a refutation of the Bible in its inconsistency, and liberty for the indulgence of chosen "amusements" and sensuality.

Libertines and infidels are not always worth noticing. Most of their pretences are a compound of folly and falsehood, both silly and dishonest. And when men have descended so low as *that*, they are ordinarily best treated, when left to become wise and right, or not, just as they shall choose. Many a foolish man has become confirmed in error, when his error has been dignified by noticing it.—But some of these ideas are worthy of notice; especially, as the notice of them may lead us to a just understanding of the writer of this Book; and as some serious minds also have been embarrassed by expressions contained in it.

The text before us has not escaped misconception: *I hated life because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me.* This has been said to justify an entire disgust with life. It has also been adduced as a proof, that a man of religious sentiments must be so far led off from the ordinary feelings of humanity, as to *hate life* and the world; and must therefore be unfit for society, in respect to enjoying it, or aiming to promote its good. And, it may be, that a true believer sometimes, in dejection and trouble, may seek to justify the gloom of his sentiments, and his dark dislike of a wearisome life, by supposing himself to resemble the author of the text—*I hated life.*

Before, therefore, we enter upon the special consideration of the text itself, we propose to furnish an explanation of the peculiarities of this Book; a matter which seems necessary, not only for a just explanation of the text itself, but for *justifying* the explanation, and for guarding the Book in general from misconception.

On this point we have several ideas to present. We want your entire attention. We are going to teach you a matter for you to remember whenever you read this Book of Solomon.

To this object we devote this sermon. We will attend to the particular idea of the text hereafter.

Let us enter upon the subject. Let us learn how to interpret the Book before us—a Book containing some expressions which sound strange to many ears.

We make one remark, as a clue to the meaning of the author, as a key to unlock the mysteries hidden here, as a wand to sweep away the fogs and clouds, which infidelity, worldliness, and libertinism, (always superficial), have hung round the expressions of this author. The remark is this:—That almost the entire sum of

this Book is composed in the style of *experience* and *observation*. In some passages the writer speaks from experience. In others he speaks from observation. In others still, he mingles both these together, grounding his ideas on both what he had *seen* and what he had himself *felt*.

I. He speaks as a man of *experience*. Examine the sixteenth and seventeenth verses of the first chapter: "I communed with mine own heart, saying, lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly." So in the second chapter, to the end of the tenth verse, he speaks of his own experience. "I said in mine heart, go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure . . . I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine . . . I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and orchards." And he goes on to tell of his *servants*, and *cattle*, and *singers*, and *silver*, and *gold*, and *delights*, not "withholding his heart from any joy." In the same style of experience he utters the fifteenth verse of the eighth chapter (already cited), "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat and to drink, and to be merry."—The same style of experience, of history, of autobiography, runs through the Book.

If ever there was a man qualified by the experience of it, to tell what pleasure is worth, that man was Solomon, the author of the Book before us. He was "king over Israel in Jerusalem," in the days of its highest splendor. His proud city glittered with gold. It abounded in luxury—in every refinement. To its glory all the civilized world had contributed. Egypt had sent thither in profuse abundance, the finest of her wheat. The East had sent the choicest of her delicacies,—the aroma of her plants to breathe their perfumes on the air of Palestine, and the glitter of her gems to flash in the sun-light abroad, or adorn the persons that moved amid the splendor of her proud palaces at home. The South and the West had contributed all the adornments of architecture. Science and art contributed to the enjoyments of taste. Arabia had sent in her mathematics. Tyre and Sidon their purple and fine linen. Poesy sang. Music found a home there. And amid all these resources and all this splendor, Solomon gave loose reins to his desires to enjoy them all, better situated than ever man was, before or since, to prove by his own experiences what the pleasures of the world are worth. And in this Book, he has given us an account of the whole matter. He has summed it up in five words—**VANITY AND VEXATION OF SPIRIT**. He summed it up (just as you would have done if you had had his wisdom and trial), on the ground of his own experience. He had tried it all, and knew what was its value; and as he recapit-

ulates to us in this Book his experiences, he tells us how he turned from one pleasure to another, and one earthly promise to another, with the sickening feeling, *this also is vanity*.—It is on this principle that he makes his remarkable introduction—an introduction which has no parallel or resemblance in any other writing that we have ever seen: “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” He spake from the heart; he was a man of experience. He had tried “*amusements*.”

Now let me ask you to notice, in his own phraseology, how this remark about his style is applicable. Commence with the text itself. “I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me.” *When* did he hate it? How are we to understand him? Is he telling us what he thinks *now*? or what he thought while his reason was entranced and he was pursuing the vanities of the world?—If you were to write your own biography, how would you write it? Suppose you had been eagerly pursuing some object for a time, and afterwards had altered your sentiments in distaste and disappointment, and still afterwards had set your heart upon something very different, and suppose you were going to employ your own experience as an argument to persuade other people to take a wiser way than you had taken at first, how would you be apt to express yourself? You would have three different points to hold up. At one time, you would mention the sentiments you entertained at *the period* when you were eagerly pursuing your favorite object. At another time, you would mention the sentiments you entertained at *the period* when you had concluded to abandon it. At another time, you would mention the sentiments you entertain *now*, when having set your heart upon another object, you are aiming, by the force of your own experience, to induce your friend to shun the error and copy the wisdom of your example. And if you were much gifted in the art of persuasion, your ideas would move backwards and forwards from one of these periods to another, in order to bring into frequent contrast the benefits of one course and the evil of its opposite.—Well: Solomon has done precisely this in the book before us. He has done just as you would have done. He states his sentiments *after* his recovery from error, and while he is under the direction of Divine wisdom. He states his sentiments in the outset. And he states his sentiments in the intermediate time—in the day of his disappointment, when he had got no farther than to hear and feel the *rebuke* of truth, but had not yet taken its positive direction. And he passes from one of these to another, under no rule but that of the heart’s logic, more intent on persuasion than on the name of scholarship. And when he says, “I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me,” there is no difficulty in perceiving to *what period* of his heart’s history he alludes. Manifestly he does

not express his *present* sentiments. He speaks of the past; he employs what the grammarians call the "past tense," *I hated life*: he does not say he hates it now. Just as manifestly, he does not express the sentiments he entertained when he was pursuing, with all the zest of his heart, the vanities of the world. The expression refers to the other period—to the time of his disappointment, disgust, and dissatisfaction—to the moment when he awoke from his dream, and found it *was* a dream: *I hated life*. Nothing is more natural. He had been living for mere pleasure. It did not satisfy him. It could not. He knew of nothing better to live for. His pleasures palled upon his senses—his heart was sick—he was disgusted with life itself: *I hated life*.

It may be that some of you can sympathize with him, far enough at least to understand him. Tax your recollection. Has there been no moment when you were disgusted with life itself? Have you not felt so? When your plans have been dashed, or your pride mortified, or your hearts have sickened amid your worldly vanities, or your health has failed and your spirits sunk, and all the world seemed to you a bubble, a dream; have you not wondered what you lived for; and amid this empty and sickening scene, been disgusted with life itself? Very well; Solomon would have you feel so. He would convince you, that sooner or later you *must*. He would employ this feeling as an argument, *first* to turn off the heart from the world's deceitful promises, and *second*, to turn it to something better—to that love and service of God, wherein life shall be as valuable, as, spent upon the world, it ought to be disgusting.—Do not stop with your disgust. Follow Solomon farther. Heart-sick of the world, do not ask merely in distaste and despondency, what do I live for? or, in disgust and despair, do not wish you had never lived at all. Turn to the great and valuable ends of your existence, which Solomon has summed up in the closing sentence of this Book, and calls the *conclusion of the whole matter*—"Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man, for God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil."

On the same principle we interpret the verses immediately after the text. "Yea, I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun, because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?" So he felt when he had become disgusted with his dissipation, and *before* he had turned him to labor for another life and another world. How natural his expression! It is an artist-sketch of the heart of a selfish man! "I hated labor, because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me," *wise* or *fool*. He must leave it, be it crown, or gold, or splendor. He must leave it, and perhaps the son that inherits it shall be a *fool*! He

must leave it; and this was the lament of his selfishness, at the time of his disgust with life. If he had now been a man of benevolence, it might have given him some satisfaction, that what he should leave behind him might contribute something to the good of his successor. But he was not yet a man of religious benevolence. He was a man of selfishness, and of selfish disgust and dissatisfaction, mourning that he must leave his gold to his heir, and exchange his royal purple for the shroud of the tomb.

In the expression, "who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool, yet shall he have rule over all my labor," possibly Solomon utters his present sentiments, and not the sentiments of his period of disgust. We told you that the sentiments of these two periods were sometimes mingled together in his argument. Take your choice betwixt the two. Neither is very unnatural. A wise man, a pious man, may very well feel that his living for another world has an enforcement from the fact, that his heirs may be fools, and the inheritance he leaves them may do them no good: this reflection may very well come in, to check his remaining worldliness of spirit, or to induce him to do good with his possessions *before* he is dead, and others shall employ them to do hurt. A man disgusted with life and the world may very well find his sentiments of disgust strengthened by the idea, that all his labors and possessions may be as vain for his children as they have been for himself. *Fools* may be his heirs! *fools* may take the avails of his labor! and as he thinks of it, his increased disgust may exclaim, "this also is vanity."

On the same principle we interpret the fifteenth verse of the eighth chapter. It is a piece of autobiography. The author is telling, not what is his opinion *now*, but what his opinion was once; not what it was in his period of disgust with life, but what it was before that, in the period of his dissipation. "I commended mirth"—(he does not commend it *now*),—"I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat and to drink and to be merry." So he thought in his season of pleasure and dissipation. He thought there was *nothing better*. He thought just as the silly sons of pleasure think now. He confesses it to them. He tells them that he has been over their ground, he has tried the whole matter, he was once foolish enough to feel as they feel, "that there is nothing better under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry." And now, as a man of experience, as an old hand in the business, who has been through the whole, and knows all about it, he claims to be heard, when he tells them, "this also is vanity—it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God" (8 : 13).—Young men would do well to hear him. He ought to be heard. Besides

his inspiration, he was now an old man. He was an experienced man. He had run the whole round of pleasure. He had justified it. He had said as they say, that "there is nothing better than to eat and to drink and to be merry." Now he knows better. He knows those of such merriment and dissipation do not *fear God*, it cannot be *well with them*: and when he says that "the wicked shall not prolong his days which are as a shadow;" young men should remember that he who lives *to eat and to drink and to be merry* will not live long; and, however screened and hidden may be this drinking and merriment now, it will not be hidden long—"God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing."—He does not plead for "amusements."

On the same principle we interpret a multitude of other expressions found in this Book. "I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine. . . . I made me great works; I builded me houses and planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and orchards; . . . I gathered me silver and gold; I got me men-singers and women-singers; . . . I commended mirth; . . . I said, drink thy wine with a merry heart; . . . live joyfully; let thy garments be always white and thy head lack no ointment;"—these, all these, are expressions of the sentiments which Solomon entertained in the days of his pleasure.

You cannot err in fixing upon the passages which express his sentiments *after* the days of his pleasure were ended. The Book is full of them. After pleasure palled upon his senses, and his heart sickened with disgust of life; he chose something more wise than either—he turned to religion. His sentiments *now* are uttered in such passages as that, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them. Fear God and keep his commandments; this is the whole of man"—his duty, felicity, and interest. "Though a sinner do evil an hundred times and his days be prolonged" (as sometimes they may be), "yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God . . . but it shall not be well with the wicked." (Ch. 12 : 1, 13,—8 : 12, 13.) Looking on the world, all its pleasure, pomp and promise, he turns from one thing to another, *this, this also is vanity*. Looking at the trials and fears that cluster around the pathway of life, he says, "he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." (7 : 18). Looking forth into another world, he sees that the retributions of *that* shall clear up the confusions of this, "for God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (12 : 14).

Let this suffice on the head of *experience*. It is plain that Solomon in this Book gives much of his own heart's history, as an argument for religion; and that he makes three points promi-

ment: *first*, his sentiments in the period of his indulgence; *second*, his sentiments in the period of his disgust with life; and *third*, his sentiments in the after-period—the period of his piety.

II. A second characteristic of the style of this Book is a little variation from this: much of it is in the style of *observation*. The author not only states what his heart had felt, but what his eyes had seen. He does this for the same purpose, namely, to persuade men, especially young men, to religion. He draws an argument for it, from things that met his eyes. And while he is pursuing the argument, he sometimes unites, *with* the account of what he had noticed, the sentiments he entertained at the different periods we have mentioned. This, also, is perfectly natural. You would have done the same thing. If you had wished to persuade any person, you would both have mentioned the facts, (what your eyes had seen), and your own feelings in view of them—your feelings at different times.

You cannot but be convinced, that Solomon argues as an observer, when you notice the abundance of passages like the following (1: 14)—“I have SEEN all the works that are done under the sun, and behold all is vanity.” (3: 16)—“I SAW under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there, and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.” (5: 13)—“There is a sore evil which I have SEEN under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.” (If he had lived till this time, he might have seen the same thing.) (6: 1, 2)—“There is an evil which I have SEEN under the sun, and it is common among men; a man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honor, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it.” (8: 9)—“All this have I SEEN, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt.” (8: 16, 17)—“When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to SEE the business that is done upon the earth . . . then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun, because, though a man labor to seek it out, yet he shall not find it.” (10: 7)—“I have SEEN servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.” (He would see it now, if he were alive.) (9: 11)—“I returned and SAW under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all.” (He knew no better. He thought so then. He could see no farther. He was a fool. He thought it was mere *time and chance* at that period, the period of distaste, which preceded his pious recognition of God.)

All these passages, and an abundance of others, prove to us,

that Solomon composed this Book as a man of observation : that he makes use of the things which his own eyes had "SEEN under the sun," to point the maxims and give strength to the arguments he utters.

We said it would be perfectly natural, that, while aiming to persuade young men to religion, he should tell them not only the facts which fell under his observation, but also his feelings in view of them at the time. He has done this—just as you would have done. Notice his account of some facts in the first verse of the fourth chapter, and his feelings in view of them in the second and third verses : "So I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter, and on the side of the oppressors there was power: but THEY had no comforter." (You may judge of the keenness of his observation by this last clause.) Then follows an account of the feelings he had in view of all this, when he noticed it at first : "Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead, more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun." So he thought *then*. He thought *the dead* were more to be envied than *the living*. He thought it would have been better still, never to have been born. Who would *not* think so, if he had only eyes to see earthly things ; and had no faith, the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen ?

A similar account of his feelings at that time, is recorded in the second verse of the ninth chapter, when he felt more like a Deist, than a believer : "All things come alike to all ; there is one event to the righteous and the wicked : to the good and to the clean and to the unclean ; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not ; as is the good so is the sinner ; and he that sweareth as he that feareth an oath." So he thought *then*. He knew no better *then*. Mere observers are apt to think so. He thought differently afterwards ; he extended his contemplation beyond visible things—things *under the sun*, as he calls *them* so often and so significantly. Though it may be true, as far as eyes can see, that "that there is one event to all," yet he did not therefore, adopt that pernicious maxim, "let us eat and drink for to-morrow we shall die." He came very near doing so ; he wishes young men to know it. But he avoided that rock on which so many make shipwreck of their faith and their philosophy at the same time. He said, "I know it shall be well with them that fear God ; it shall not be well with the wicked," (8 : 12, 13).

III. There is a third characteristic of the style of this Book, not necessary to mention indeed for the interpretation of this text, as the others *were*, but, considering the nature of this sermon,

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and to complete the ground-work for the interpretation of the whole Book, we mention it here.—It is Solomon's *keen irony*. He was aiming to persuade men, especially young men, to religion. No easy task! Their blood warm—their hopes ardent—death to them, apparently far-off, and the world dressed in such tempting smiles and splendor before their eyes, they will naturally cling to its gaiety and merriment. They will say they were made for it, and *it* was made for them; they do not see any harm in it, and they *do* see, there is “one event to them all, to the righteous and the wicked,” they are about alike in misery here, and they die alike.—Solomon responds to such sentiments in his keenest irony. He affects to agree with them. He takes up these sentiments and just preaches them back into the bosoms they came from—preaches just as these merry young men want him to preach. (9: 7)—“Go thy way; eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for now God accepteth thy works:” That is the way they want him to preach; and in irony, in cutting sarcasm, he does it: he yields to them, and tells them that their wine and merriment are acceptable to God, on their own principles. Then he goes on with the sermon for which they have furnished the text: carry out thy principles then: “let thy garments be always white, and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy VANITY, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy VANITY” (he cannot help repeating it): “for that is thy portion in this life,” (all you are good for), “and in thy labor which thou takest under the sun” (all you can get, on your own principles). “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,” (music, merriment, mirth, wine, no matter what foolery), “do it with thy might,” (now or never), “for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest.” What cutting irony! Their own principles, carried out, just about make beasts of them! (3: 18). They must labor here, for nothing but vanity, and die, but to rot. Go on, then, if that is all you were made for, eat and drink for to-morrow you shall die. (Isa. 22: 13).

The same species of irony may be found in the ninth verse of the eleventh chapter. The author is preaching back his own sentiments into the bosom of a young man, *expecting to live many years and rejoice in them*, and therefore indisposed to religion. With severe sarcasm, he reminds him that youth vanishes, as the young man wishes to live in pleasure, and neglect God. Go on then! carry out your principles! “Rejoice O young man in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth,” (they will soon be gone—haste in mirth or you cannot have it), “and walk in the ways of thine heart” (if you will), “and in the sight of thine eyes” (live as you list);—and then the preacher adds

a solemn idea of his own, for this merry youth to carry along with him in his pleasure;—"but *know thou*, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore, remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh;" fear nothing, care for nothing but pleasure, if you will, in this "childhood and youth," which are vanity:—and *because* youth is soon gone, and death soon comes, and the judgment after it;—be a fool and be merry; you say there is nothing better!—If Solomon was deep in experience and extensive in observation, he was also as remarkably keen in his irony.

The discussion of the text itself will come hereafter. These remarks on the style of this Book, lead me to utter some counsels.

1. Beware how you interpret its expressions. For example, when you read in the second chapter, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to hate; a time of war;" do not be so superficial as to suppose, that Solomon is enjoining or justifying war, and hatred, and dancing, and killing. Put the whole passage under its proper head. It belongs to the chapter of *observation*. He is only stating facts as they were; things he saw, and not telling how they should be.—Apply this advice to his expressions of experience and of irony also. Hence,

2. See what is the great drift and purpose of this Book; namely, to persuade, young men especially, to fear God, keep his commandments, and fit for the day of judgment. This is its sole aim. In accordance with this, all its particular expressions are to be interpreted. If you interpret them wisely, now, "in the days of your youth," they will give you an eye fixed on the judgment-seat of Christ.

3. Aim to copy Solomon's mode of reasoning—spread out his argumentation as wide as you will. *Be* observers. Look at the world—its life, death, gold, honor, merriment, wine, wisdom, labor, laughter, tears, all that is in it, all that is visible of the works of *God under the sun*; and then ask yourselves solemnly, if all this does not amount to an overwhelming argument, that there is something better for you *beyond the sun*, which you ought first and forthwith to seek after.—Add your own experience to Solomon's. He found the world vanity. What have you found it? He sometimes even hated life. So will you; if you do not employ it for the life to come. Have you not found it "vexation of spirit" already? Deeper vexations are in store for you, if you will not live unto God. Do you need any deeper ones? Have you not enough already to convince you, that your heart runs wrong, when it runs upon the world; and that your affections and purposes ought not any longer to lie supremely upon a world, which can only furnish you, as an unbeliever, two things—vanity and a grave?