

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER NINE

Solomon's Lonely Heart

IN THE INTRODUCTION to the King James Version of the English Bible of 1611, there is a very curious and significant reference to Solomon. We give it in its quaint style and spelling:

"Solomon was greater than David, though not in virtue, yet in power; and by his power and wisdom he built a Temple to the Lord, such a one as was the glory of the land of Israel and the wonder of the whole world. But was that his magnificence liked of by all? We doubt of it. Otherwise, why doe they lay it in his sonnes dish, and call unto him for easing of the burden. Make, say they, *the grievous servitude of thy father, and his sore yoke lighter*. Belike he had charged them with some levies and troubled them with some cariages; Hereupon they raise up a tragedie, and wish in their heart the Temple had never bene built. So hard a thing it is to please all, even when we please GOD best, and doe seeke to approve ourselves to every ones conscience."

Solomon's life and writings present us with a portrait of one highly favored, prosperous, rich and powerful; but of a man with a lonely heart.

"A King dwelt in Jerusalem:
He was the wisest man on earth;
He had all riches from his birth,
And pleasures till he tired of them:
Then, having tested all things, he
Witnessed that all was vanity." [1]

It was Solomon who wrote that most intriguing proverb which might be called a key to his own character:

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness and a stranger intermeddleth not with its joy"
(Proverbs 14:10).

It is a synopsis of his wisdom and a witness to his knowledge of psychology. It can be put by the side of that other saying in Jeremiah:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart. I try the reins (conscience) even to give every man according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:9, 10).

Great men are lonely men; and Solomon, on the testimony of history, was a great man. He is noted for his wisdom and wealth in the Hebrew Scriptures, both in the New Testament and in the Koran. So to the followers of the three great theistic faiths his name has become proverbial and Tradition has embroidered its fancies on the ancient records.

Our Saviour spoke of His great ancestor according to the flesh (Matthew 1:7) as celebrated for his wisdom (Matthew 12:42), his glory (Matthew 6:29) and greatness (Luke 11:31). Yet the glory of Solomon could not be compared with the beauty of a lily of the field, and a greater than Solomon walked in Solomon's porch (John 10:23) when He spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd. And it was in that very porch that the Jews took up pieces of broken marble to stone Him (John 10:31) because He said, **"I and my Father are one."**

In the book of Acts, also, the disciples proclaimed the gospel in the porch of Solomon; and Stephen in his defence mentions the name of this great temple-builder (Acts 3:11; 5:12; 7:47).

So marvelously the Bible weaves the story of the Old into the New - one Author and one texture.

The Koran of Mohammed makes much of Solomon and six chapters are filled with stories of his wisdom and greatness (Surahs 21, 27, 28, 34, 37, 38).

Through this source (largely based on Jewish legends) the fame of Israel's great monarch and his name have become household words throughout the world of Islam from Morocco to China. Solomon even comes to life in the Arabian Nights again and again.

But the true story of his long reign is found in the books of Kings and Chronicles (I Kings chapters 1-10; II Chronicles chapters 1-9).

Here is the summary, for we do not attempt a biography but a character sketch. In his life and in his writings Solomon was the man of the lonely heart.

The tenth son of David and the second of Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, Solomon was the third king of Israel. He knew the sad story of Saul and Jonathan and the chequered career of his great father.

- He was crowned king at Gihon by the direction of his father when aged and infirm;
- Offered sacrifices at Gibeon;
- Chose wisdom in preference to all other things;
- Judged wonderfully between two harlots;
- Increased in power and wealth;
- Had gold in abundance, and weapons of war,
- Had a throne of ivory,
- Had scientific knowledge of botany, etc.;
- Was congratulated by Hiram, king of Tyre,
- Was prepared for building the temple,
- Prayed at its dedication,
- Sacrificed on that occasion;
- GOD appeared to him, warned him, covenanted with him;
- He built his own house, and the house of Lebanon for Pharaoh's daughter,
- Appointed the courses of the priests,
- Sent ships to Ophir,
- Received the queen of Sheba,
- Gave some cities to Hiram,
- Had numerous wives and concubines,
- Countenanced idolatry, and was threatened for it,
- Opposed by Hadad the Edomite, and by Rezin the Syrian, and by Jeroboam an Ephrathite of Zereda; died, and
- He was buried in the city of David, after a reign of forty years.

One can read the whole story in less than an hour as it is related in Kings and Chronicles. But one must read between the lines to realize what Solomon felt in the midst of all his glory and luxury.

His was a schizophrenic mind.

He loved and served the GOD of his father David.

He doubtless knew many of His Psalms. But from his earliest youth he must also have known the tragedy that broke David's heart and home and caused the death of his own baby brother. He must have had a passionate nature. The poet recalls the magnificence of his palanquin, his escort and his extensive harem (Song of Solomon 3:6-11).

He was an Oriental monarch in his home life (I Kings 11:3) although political reasons, as in the case of Mohammed, may have prompted his many marriages. This laxity is condemned in the record without question but it provoked him to share in idolatry.

Two prayers of Solomon are given as a key to his character. His prayer for divine wisdom (I Kings 3:7 ff) proves his humility. And his prayer at the dedication of the temple (I Kings 8) is recognized as "one of the grandest devotional utterances to be found in pre-Christian devotional literature."

It is really a prayer of four dimensions. It has length, breadth, depth and height. Here are brief selections from the longest prayer in the Bible that show his **"largeness of heart even as the sand that is on the sea-shore"** (I Kings 4:29).

But there is also sadness of heart - the loneliness of leadership (I Kings 8:22-53).

"And Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven: And he said,. Lord God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart: Who hast kept with thy servant David my father that thou promisedst him: thou spakest also with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day" (I Kings 8:22, 23, 24).

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?"

"What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house: Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men;) . . . Moreover concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name's sake; (For they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm;) when he shall come and pray toward this house; Hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as do thy people Israel; and that they may know that this house, which I have builded, is called by thy name."

Again and again in this royal and priestly prayer Solomon pleads for the sake of **"thy servant David my father"** that GOD will forgive His people. Can we not use our imagination and ask whether Bathsheba had told Solomon the story of the death of his baby brother? Or whether David had read the fifty-first Psalm with Solomon and told him? Had he not witnessed the hatred and rebellion in David's household and been with him when he fled across Jordan from Absalom the usurper? Solomon ascended the throne at the age of twenty and the events summarized in his life before and after the crowning-day were big with tragedy. Read the story and you will understand Solomon's words: **"The heart knoweth its own bitterness and a stranger intermeddeth not with its joy"** (Proverbs 14:10).

Here was a king who inherited his father's love and his kingdom, increased its boundaries by his sagacity; made commerce to flourish by extensive voyages of his ships to Ophir and India (I Kings 10:22,23); a man noted for his literary pursuits and scientific curiosity **"from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall; who spake also of beasts and birds and creeping things and fishes"** (I Kings 4:32). The splendor of his court, the magnificence of his table, his pomp and wealth became proverbial; distinguished men and women came from afar to hear his wisdom and seek his counsel (I Kings 10:1-25); and yet the question he himself raises is that he is an unhappy monarch, a restless soul, and a lonely lover.

Whether we follow the critics and deprive him of the authorship of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs and of most of the Proverbs, or follow the Bible text and ancient tradition which ascribes these and more besides to him as his literary legacy - we have enough to judge his view of life and his dissatisfaction with himself and circumstances. **"Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity and vexation of spirit."**

Christina Rossetti has a thirteen stanza poem entitled, *A Testimony*, which interprets Solomon's inmost heart, and we quote one more stanza:

"I said of laughter: it is vain.
Of mirth I said: what profits it?
Therefore I found a book, and writ
Therein how ease and also pain,
How health and sickness, every one
Is vanity beneath the sun." [2]

The Book of Proverbs contains not merely the wisdom of Solomon. It is part of the inspired record and is GOD's word to us today. A proverb is the wit of one embodying the wisdom of many. This collection of proverbs and epigrams contains germs of New Testament truth; the command to love our enemies is found in the Book of Proverbs although with a different motive.

"If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink; for thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee."

And we are told of the **"friend that sticketh closer than a brother."**

Was Solomon thinking of David and Jonathan? Are the warnings against the supreme folly of adultery and the description of the strange woman and her allurements in her latticed window or walking the street, pages from Solomon's diary?

Who can read words like these, **"Hear the instruction of thy father and forsake not the law of thy mother . . . for I was a son unto my father, tender and beloved in the sight of my mother,"** without thinking of David and Bathsheba and why he was their choice for the succession?

- **"Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out."**

- **"Yet there is a wisdom not of man,"** and,

- **"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing but the glory of kings is to search out a matter."
"The heaven for height and the earth for depth, and the heart of kings is unsearchable."**

- Yet again, **"He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool, but whoso walketh wisely shall be delivered."**

There are cameo pictures of the disturbed life in the royal harem.

Striking similes are piled up to describe a contentious woman.

She is like "continual dropping from the roof on a rainy day; to restrain her is like grasping the wind; and to use force is like fighting slippery oil."

Four things were too wonderful for Solomon: "**The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid.**"

Three hundred and seventy-five of these sententious sayings are grouped together in one section and Richard G. Moulton remarks:

"It may well happen that proverbs which seem the coldest in the mere reading may glow with wisdom if the reader himself happens to pass into the experience they describe. No special information is given by the familiar saying that the heart knoweth its own bitterness. But those who have had to suffer some pang of disaster have realized how this and other proverbs attain the very perfection of adequacy." [3]

Ecclesiastes, with its pessimistic and ever recurring "**vanity of vanities,**" is also by Solomon or about "**the Preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem.**"

Even the critics admit that it portrays the life of the monarch whose heart was heavy and sad in the midst of pleasure and plenty. We believe his pen wrote it, and that the saddest book of the Old Testament gives us a portrait of Solomon's divided heart. Thackeray closes his great novel, *Vanity Fair*, with the same cry, all is vanity. Omar Khayyam, the Persian poet, too, says that life is only a chequerboard of nights and days where Destiny plays with men as pieces, and one by one lays them back in the closet.

Jeremiah's Lamentations, in places, echoes the pessimism of Ecclesiastes. His heart also knew its own bitterness. The hero-prophet and martyr for truth was plunged into such depths of hopeless agony that we stand astonished. Yet he kept his faith in GOD.

Listen to the man of sorrows:

"Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger He hath led me to walk in darkness and not in light Against me he turneth his hand again and again all the day Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through."

Christina Rossetti has two short poems with the title, *The heart knoweth its own bitterness*. The first tells of hidden grief, the second of a poignant open grief too deep to be understood by the nearest and dearest- "who only scratch the surface with a pin" when they "should pierce, nay probe, nay dig within and sound my depth."

Whatever the Song of Songs may be as drama of earthly love or type of the Bride and Bridegroom, we cannot read it as from Solomon's pen without seeing there also a commentary on his lonely and discontented heart.

"I sleep but my heart waketh" (Song of Solomon 5:2), so the bridegroom says and Tyrrell comments:

"I can only hope that one may in some sense say, *Ego dormio sed cor meum vigilat*; that there is a deep self that never sleeps and never dies; and that He who sees that watchful heart and not merely the slumbering eyes will judge us (as we should judge one another) by what we say and do when we are at our best, not when we are at our worst." [4]

When, in reading the Bible, we step out of the closet of David into the palace-porch of Solomon we must judge both of these men by their best and not by their worst.

It was Solomon who learned at last what he wrote: **"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding . . . The path of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day"** (Proverbs 3:5; 4:18).

He learned by bitter experience to keep his **"heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life"** (Proverbs 4:23).

Philosophers, as well as poets, have found delight in the writings ascribed to Solomon.

Matthew Arnold wrote in 1877: "I have read my chapter in Proverbs,- what a delicious book! . . . After breakfast I must read Ewald's commentary on the chapter."

Thomas Carlyle, commenting on the words, **"laughter is mad"** (Ecclesiastes 2:2), wrote: "True laughter is as rare as any other truth - the sham of it frequent and delectable, like all other shams. I know nothing more wholesome but it is rarer than Christmas which comes but once a year." [5]

And we may well conclude this brief study of Solomon's lonely heart with his own words:

"And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:12-13).

We cast our burden on Thee, O Lord, this day, with all the bitterness of our lonely hearts. Amen.

1 Christina Rossetti, last stanza of *A Testimony*.

2 *Poems of Christina Rossetti*, p. 28.

3 *The Modern Reader's Bible: The Proverbs*, p. xviii.

4 Jane Stoddard, *The Old Testament in Life and Literature*, p. 375.

5 *Correspondence of Carlyle and Emerson*, Vol. 1:350.

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