

THE MAN WHO DID TOO WELL

"The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2).

"I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit" (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

In 1958 the township of Upper St. Clair, which is on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, erected an attractive red brick Township Building to house its fire and police departments, offices, and meeting rooms. A few months after its completion, to the dismay of township officials and to the disgust of the taxpayers, the new structure began to show ominous cracks in the walls. Eventually, the building broke apart in places. Entire sections settled mysteriously into the ground. The trouble lay far beneath the surface. Mining operations far under the building had caused the earth to sink, gradually and quietly.

This is similar to what sometimes happens to people. Unsuspected causes will undermine a personality. Often these causes are out of sight. Gradually and quietly, these unseen factors will cause an attractive and useful personality to crumble into a shambles.

An outstanding example of this type of human ruin is King Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. Solomon was born a prince. He grew up in unrestrained ease and indulgence in a polygamous home, with his father having at least eighteen wives. There isn't any evidence that Solomon received any religious training in his early life in the royal palace.

Solomon was an entirely different sort of man from his father. David had come up through the ranks. He had made his own way, lived by his wits as an exile, and forged an empire out of the opportunities presented to him. His trials molded his strong personality, and gave him a deeply religious bent. These struggles and testings were denied to Solomon, who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, so to speak. In his early life he escaped hardship, self-denial, and struggle. He handled money and had influential connections from his youth. In the courts of his father, he had ample opportunity to observe many of the difficulties with which a king had to contend in the administration of the domestic affairs of his kingdom. There was spread before his fancy a choice of golden opportunities, as has been true of multitudes of young men. Would he be rich? Would he be powerful? Would he be famous?

It is not surprising that, while on his deathbed, David picked Solomon to be his successor. He was the obvious choice for the position of king. He had a keen mind, and was highly refined and cultured. To this day people refer to "the wisdom of Solomon." David was leaving him fabulous wealth. Among David's last words were these: "The spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in by tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain" (II Samuel 23:2-4).

This exceptionally capable, charming, and delightful young man became king at the age of twenty. When he ascended the throne, he came into possession of immense stores of wealth which had been laid up by his father. Among his advantages were his exceptional mental abilities, and the love and high hopes of his people. He seemed to have everything going for him.

At the beginning of Solomon's reign, God appeared to him and said: "Ask what I shall give thee" (I Kings 3:5). With the modesty of greatness, Solomon confessed his inefficiency as he prayed one of the most moving prayers that was ever uttered. His prayer is recorded in I Kings 3:6-9: "And Solomon said, Thou hast showed unto thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with thee; and thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. And now, O Lord my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" In other words, "Fit me for the great task to which Thou hast called me." He wanted the endowments which would give him the proper perception of what ought to be done, and make him a real benefactor to his people. What a noble purpose! What a worthy ideal! He wanted to have his life built up in goodness and made a blessing to the world.

Solomon did a very wise thing in frankly acknowledging his own inadequacy and his need of help. Instead of asking for wealth or for victory over his enemies, he requested an understanding heart to judge correctly his people and to be able to discern clearly between the good and the bad. What a wise request! Few things, if any, could have been more beautiful than the way in which he started his reign with that earnest cry to God for divine wisdom and help. Doubtless his life would have been beautiful and influential for good all the way through if he had only maintained that prayerful and dependent spirit.

Upon inheriting a strong kingdom, the door of opportunity stood wide open for the new king. Of him the Bible says: "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father" (I Kings 3:3). This reminds us somewhat of the beginnings of our own nation with our ancestors being determined to put their trust in God and to obey Him.

Solomon was fortunate in coming to the throne in a time of peace and prosperity. Taking his responsibility seriously and asking God for, and receiving from Him, the wisdom which he needed for the task that was committed to him, Solomon quickly became famous and beloved for his wise and fair ways. For example, two women were brought to him who were fighting over a baby, each of whom claimed the baby was hers. Solomon calmly called for a sword and announced that he would divide the baby in half and give each of the women a part. One woman immediately protested in such a manner that Solomon knew she was the real mother and he awarded the child to her.

Not only could Solomon solve tough, personal problems, but national problems as well. Due to his skill as builder, trader, and administrator, and with the favor of God resting upon him, Solomon soon led Israel to be widely known and highly respected among the nations of his day. For efficient administrative purposes he divided his kingdom into twelve districts. His wisdom and power so overawed the rulers of the smaller kingdoms, which were subject to him, that none of them attempted to shake off the yoke of bondage or to give him any trouble. He was a very shrewd businessman. He carried on extensive maritime and overseas commerce. His import-export trade was so prosperous that he had caravans and ships all over the Middle East, and even as far as India, Africa, and Spain.

Well-to-do from the start, Solomon soon began to make money in a big way. His annual income in gold alone amounted to the equivalent of sixteen million two hundred fifty thousand dollars. In addition, he received fabulous amounts in jewels, precious stones, costly woods, metals, cloth, and produce. Not only did the king and his close associates have plenty, but each man dwelt safely "under his vine and under his fig tree." Since all were enjoying satisfaction and security, they seemed to be quite happy to continue in subjection to Solomon, in order that they might share in prosperity.

Still remembering his obligations to God, ambitious and energetic Solomon inaugurated a tremendous building program by erecting a magnificent temple, which was something his father David had wanted to do, but was forbidden to do. The construction took seven years, and the temple was the most ornate, costly building ever known in those parts. We get an idea of the cost of that temple from the fact that Solomon used thirty thousand forced laborers out of Israel. He sent them to Lebanon at the rate of ten thousand a month, forcing them to remain in Lebanon for one month without pay, for the purpose of cutting the famous "cedars of Lebanon", and then to spend two months at home, after which the laborers returned to the forests for another month's service. In this way one-fourth of each year was spent in forced labor for the king, which was a very heavy burden on the people.

Not only did King Solomon spend seven years building the temple with its elaborate furnishings, but he took thirteen years to build a palace for himself and his harem. The difference in what he did for God and for himself speaks for itself, and it says a lot. In other words, it was about two for Solomon and one for God. That is a pretty good way of measuring the man. He put far more time and money in building his own house than he did in building the house of the Lord. His building projects cost approximately four billion four hundred million dollars.

In all of Solomon's inherited peace, prosperity, and power there was poison, just as there is in other great inheritances. With these tremendous riches, which he inherited from his father and obtained through forced labor and crushing taxes, luxury became the rule of Solomon's life, and every move that he made was part of a plan to perpetuate that luxury. He lived in staggering magnificence. Instead of being master of his tremendous wealth and power, he allowed them to master him. He began to use what he had for himself only, for the gratification of his own whims and pleasures. Slowly he lost all sense of responsibility.

Solomon failed to see that there had to be limits to his expensive building program. Although he was personally rich, his people were still peasants. The cost of his superb buildings, the expense of his lavish pageants, the upkeep of his huge staff, and the outlay to satisfy every personal whim were impossible burdens for his subjects. A day of reckoning was inevitable. Real trouble was bound to come sooner or later.

Very few people can stand unlimited prosperity without losing their judgment and doing foolish things. That was the case with Solomon whose character crumbled, and he deteriorated into a bored playboy-dictator. Being discontented with one wife, he took unto himself many wives. His harem finally numbered seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. That was a foolish and sinful thing to do, but what made it far worse was the fact that many of his wives were from the surrounding idolatrous nations, and God had repeatedly warned His people against taking to themselves wives from such places.

Although God had expressly forbidden His people to marry women who worshiped false gods, Solomon, in spite of his God-given wisdom and all of God's goodness to him, did so, and thereby sinned against God, others, and himself. Because he was disobedient to God, Solomon permitted his heathen wives to worship idols as did their fathers. He even assisted them in filling the country with idolatrous abominations. One can hardly understand how a man, who was noted for his wisdom and who had built the great temple and had solemnly dedicated it to God, could stoop to provide for the worship of forbidden idols.

It is sad and tragic when any person who has lived most of his life to the glory of God turns to vanity in his latter years. What a tragedy that Solomon loved "strange women," turned to heathen gods, and lost his zeal for Jehovah! His fall is a warning to all concerning the result of sin in a human life.

One cannot trifle with God and escape unscratched. He need not expect God's favor to abide upon him if he continues in the pathway of disobedience. Every child of God should be careful to walk in the pathway of obedience to Him all the days of his life.

In his desire for personal satisfaction, Solomon, who had embarked upon a most promising career, tried five paths, discarding each in turn until he cried over the grave of all his disappointed hopes, as his life's fair morning died in dark sunset, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." These paths, over which he traveled and found disappointment, are being traveled by many others today. They are the paths of wisdom, wine, wealth, works, and women. So great was his disappointment and bitterness that he was constrained to cry: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." Foolish indeed is any man who travels either of these paths, thinking that he can enjoy happiness and receive God's blessings. Those who attempt it have reached the point where they think they have outgrown God and do not any longer need His help, but they are merely proving their own folly.