

## "No profit" — "Great gain"

Ecclesiastes 1: 16-18: Ecclesiastes 2: 1-11. 1 Timothy 6: 6.

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I need not point out the contrast, for it lies upon the surface. Let me read once more the last verse read in Ecclesiastes and then our verse in 1 Timothy:

*"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.*

*"But godliness with contentment is GREAT GAIN.*

You do see the contrast of course, *and you can have either of these contrasted alternatives as the sum total of your lives.*

If you want to live a life which shall be of no profit, well, you can follow in the steps of Solomon; only it will be not merely at a respectful distance, but at a very great distance indeed. God gave that remarkable man the most astonishing opportunities of digging into every possible source of human enjoyment, such as you and I will never know. By position, by the especial wisdom conferred upon him, by his magnificent mental equipment, by the fact that he was a king, and that he entered into the kingdom made splendid by the labours and conquests of his greater father David; with wealth rolling in upon him from every side, with every possible luxury and opportunity for self-indulgence, the very world lay at his feet. You have been hearing his own words. He has put on record what he determined to do and how he found things. He was able to investigate every world that there is within this great world, as far as it existed in his day.

The mechanical world of his day was a very small affair, whereas our mechanical world is gigantic; but the intellectual world of Solomon's day and the worlds of wealth and splendour and luxury were very great.

No man, I suppose, has had such a marvellous mental equipment as Solomon. You may remember how his very songs were as many as a thousand and five. One is preserved for us in the Song of Solomon, but that is only one, though perhaps the chiefest, out of all that immense number. Then there are his proverbs, of which he spake three thousand! You have read his book of Proverbs. If any one of us in the course of a long life were to coin a pithy terse sentence of value, which captured the public imagination, and passed into a proverb in the English language — well, we should have done something. But, my friends, Solomon *kept on doing it over and over again*. He uttered so many that we find it most difficult to think of anything further to say! He rolled out proverbs like a mass-production machine! Then he spoke of trees, from the cedars of Lebanon to the hyssop upon the wall, for he was a great horticulturalist. Moreover, he was a great naturalist, investigating and speaking of "beasts and of fowls, and of creeping things and of fishes."

I do not intend to dwell upon the details of the passage from Ecclesiastes which I have read in your hearing, but you can see how he went into things most intellectual' connected with wisdom and knowledge. Then what was even more wonderful, he also had a knowledge of God. The queen of Sheba came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and there is a very significant word as to this in 1 Kings 10. When she "heard of the fame of Solomon" she came. But the fame she heard was not concerning

his poetic powers, his literary skill, his wide knowledge of natural history in all its forms, but "*concerning the name of the Lord.*" So she came down to see this extraordinary king raised up to reign over the people of Jehovah. She discovered he had an extraordinary knowledge of God, and he answered all her questions, which were not about natural history or horticulture or proverbs or poetry — but ABOUT GOD. When she had heard and seen "there was no more spirit in her."

So much for Solomon's wisdom. But then he said, I am going "to know madness and folly." If there is any pleasure in a thing, I am in for it. He turned to wine — a dangerous thing; he married wives; he executed great works; he gathered riches; he not only sipped but drank deeply of every sparkling cup. He tried every imaginable pleasure. He not only ruined his testimony, but very largely wrecked his kingdom. In all this self-gratification, in all this heaping to himself every delectable thing, making everything minister to himself, his aim was that he should be able to say, "So I was great."

Now in all this he landed himself into the flattest possible disobedience to the Word of God. Turn to Deuteronomy 17: 14-20 and you will find that the Lord, who knows the future before it arrives, had laid down instructions for Israel's kings. They were not to multiply horses to themselves, because that meant going down to Egypt again — re-opening communications with the land out of which they had been brought. Also the king was not to multiply wives and not to multiply riches unto himself. David multiplied riches, but he multiplied them for the glory of the house of God which was to be.

In 1 Kings 10 and 11 we are told all about Solomon's doings. He *did* send to Egypt and he *did* multiply horses. Apparently before his time a few horses, just stragglers, came into the land, but the ass was the ordinary beast of burden, and Absalom was only riding on a mule when his hair was caught in the oak. Solomon had his horses and his chariots. David won his great victories without horses since God was with him. Solomon had horses, and from that point Israel began to say goodbye to victory. He multiplied horses and wives and riches. He did most flagrantly the three things the king was told not to do. The consequence of all this self-aggrandisement, this idea that the way of life is to get everything possible for self-gratification, is a solemn one — you are entrapped into disobedience and you forfeit the support of God. Solomon did not act in ignorance of God's Word — it was simply staring him in the face, and consequently he did it outrageously.

I do not know, but perhaps Solomon had very plausible excuses for what he did, when he read that passage in Deuteronomy. He may have said — Ah! but those instructions from the Lord through Moses were written so long ago. Times have changed. All the other nations have horses. What are we going to do without horses when all those chars lots come against us? I can quite imagine the plausible reasoning that might have come in concerning each of the three prohibitions. But it was all *false*.

Thank God, ere Solomon ended his career his eyes were opened and he was led to write this striking book in which he puts on record the results of the experiment. He was not inspired in doing what he did, but he was certainly inspired to put on record the result of the experiment. Listen to what he says: — I have investigated on a grand scale — on a scale that others can never touch — others might have one per cent of it — I have had the whole hundred per cent, and the verdict is, there is not a bit of profit in it. There is "no profit under the sun."

Now we turn to the New Testament, and here is a much greater man than Solomon. He is getting near the end of his remarkable life. He has been through great sufferings. He too was a man who had a most wonderful mental equipment and a wonderful equipment also from a religious standpoint. He was the very highest grade specimen of his age — a Pharisee — an observer of all the rites and ceremonies of his most holy religion. He had a good conscience and an earnest desire to serve God.

A moment came when all these things were forgotten — he came into the light of Jesus, revealed

to him from the glory. He was blinded: and now he absolutely loses life as regards this world. You can read for yourself in 2 Corinthians 11 what he endured. Five times he was beaten of the Jews, receiving forty stripes save one. Thrice beaten with rods — that makes eight fearful floggings in all! Thrice was he ship-wrecked, and he had not been ship-wrecked, as recorded in Acts 27, when he wrote this. He must have been shipwrecked four times at least. A night and a day he spent in the deep — picked up by no one knows who out of the Mediterranean. Troubles, persecutions, trials, worries came upon him morning, noon, and best part of the night. But what marked him? Why, the very thing that he recommended to Timothy, in saying, "Godliness with contentment is great gain."

What is this godliness? someone may ask. I do not want to give you a theological definition, but I can say that godliness is very much connected with *God-consciousness*. A godly man is a man upon whose soul God is impressed. He acts, he lives, he thinks, in relation to God. The fear of God is upon his spirit.

You may remember what Nehemiah said after describing a great many things that went on in his day. He described the way in which the rulers were behaving how they oppressed the people, getting all sorts of things out of them to which they were not entitled; even their servants bearing rule and oppressing. Nehemiah said, "So *did not I*, BECAUSE OF THE FEAR OF GOD."

There are not a few countries today, where financial profit is the great end of politics. If you were a governor there you would find it so easy to feather your own nest and in a few years retire a wealthy person! But what of God? If God is to control, and if my life is to be lived under His eye, then that alters the whole matter. Now godliness — this God-consciousness, this living as under the eye of God, this having God as the trust and the glory of our hearts — with the contentment that flows from it, is great gain.

I have to ask myself — we cannot get away this time from these practical questions — Am I going to be content to accept as from the hand of God that which He allots me, not making it my great object to make myself something other than I am, or to attain to higher or greater things than I possess? If so, that is great gain.

I do not think the Apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote these words, though his captivity was near. Here he is, living his life in the fear of God — absolutely content, as he tells us in the Philippian letter, written when he was in prison — "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." Paul was a great gainer; he had Christ for his gain, and his eye is upon the coming glory, when his great gain will be manifested. Paul, rather than Solomon, is going to be crowned in that day.

If it is permissible to think of anyone other than our Lord Jesus Christ when we get to heaven, I hope I may be permitted to salute the Apostle Paul. I would like to say — and I think I should say it with tears on my cheeks — "Thank you, Paul, thank you a thousand times for being so devoted to the Lord Jesus and His gospel. Thank you for going through fire and flood; thank you for coming to Europe; thank you for the thrashing at Philippi, for the triumphant song in the jail; thank you for thinking of the regions beyond, where my ancestors were but poor savages. I thank you for the zeal which led you to carry forth the gospel, in the teeth of the greatest opposition, in obedience to that word of the Lord, 'Depart, for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles'; and for enduring that furious shout, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live.'"

Here, then, is Paul, who must have been amongst the finest intellects of his age; he had suffered the loss of all things. He had been living in the fear of God. God had dominated his life. Do you say, "It is all loss"? It is not: it is all gain — great gain. We shall never be Pauls, but we may tread in his footsteps, we may be imitators of him.

So I am going to close with an appeal. Let us yield ourselves to God in accordance with that word we have just been hearing. Let us go in for godliness; let us have God before us in this God-forgetting age. Today God is being put out of everything, out of the world's great scheme of things, especially Intellectual things. Men refuse to see God anywhere, they don't see Him in nature. They feel entirely independent of Him, and rule Him out of all their plans. Shutting God out, men fall a prey to superstition. Everybody wants his mascot — a polite word for a fetish. The more they forget God, the more the fetishes of the heathen come in.

But we are of those who "trust in the living God, who is the preserver of all men, specially of those that believe." We have God and His Word before us — the Word which bid us yield ourselves to Him, that we may be the servants of His pleasure. Depend upon it if we yield ourselves to God, we shall not be losers. We shall say, — Thank God, I have great gain, great gain even in this life — for godliness is profitable for the life that now is as well as for that to come.

In view of the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ, in view of the passing of the world system and of the things that dominate it, what great gain to be connected through grace and by faith with that great system of things to be brought in with the Lord Jesus Christ when He steps forth, God's anointed One, God's great Administrator for the coming age. Oh! my friends, when He comes, in His splendour,

"It will be glory then to say,  
That He's a Friend of mine."

Let me tell you, however, a little secret: — if you and I see things in their right light, it is equally glory to stand by His side in the day of His rejection and to say, after the language of one of the great men of David's day, "Thine are we, Jesus, and on Thy side, Thou Son of God!"