

## ECCLESIASTES.

### CHAPTER II. VERSES I—II.

1. *I said in mine heart, Go to now, let me prove thee with mirth, and take thy delight in pleasure : and behold, this also was vanity. 2. I said of laughter, It is mad ; and of mirth, What doeth it ?*

3. *I purposed in my heart to yield my flesh unto wine, whilst my heart held its course with wisdom ; and to lay hold on folly, until I should see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven.*

4. *I engaged in great works ; I builded me houses ; I planted me vineyards ; 5. I made me gardens and parks, and I planted in them all manner of fruit-trees ; 6. I made me pools of water, to water therewith the forest luxuriant with trees ; 7. I purchased me men-servants and maidens, and had slaves born in my house ; also I had possessions of herds and flocks in abundance, above all that were in Ferusalem before me ; 8. I gathered me also silver and gold, and the treasures of kings and the provinces ; I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, concubines of all sorts.*

9. *So I was great, and was increased more than all that were before me in Ferusalem : moreover my wisdom remained with me.*

10. *And whatsoever mine eyes desired, I kept not from them ; I refused not my heart any joy ; for my heart rejoiced because of all my labour, and this was my portion for all my labour.*

11. *Then I looked on all my works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do : and behold, it was all vanity, and a striving after the wind, neither is there any profit under the sun.*

THE first experiment of the Preacher has failed. He had entered upon his self-imposed task with ardour, he had tried to read the riddle of the world, he had hoped to sketch out some bold theory of life that should give a loop-hole of escape from the dull monotony which

stretched its leaden sceptre over the universe ; but he had been baffled. The task was all too hard for him. He had gained nothing from it but a sense of weariness. The disappointment was naturally the more acute and mortifying in proportion to the nobleness of the investigation and the eagerness with which he had pursued it. Perhaps he has been sage before the time. The next experiment shall be in a different vein. It is no use breaking one's heart over the follies and miseries of the world ; better forget them, better try another course, and taste those pleasures which seem to yield the bulk of men satisfaction.

It is necessary to remark here, as this is a point which has been missed by several interpreters, that in what follows, to the end of Verse 11, we have an account, not of one, but of three, or at least two, different experiments. First, the Preacher is allured by pleasures which have a certain refinement and delicacy of flavour. Then (Verse 3) the coarser gratifications of the senses exercise their influence. And then (Verse 4) he turns from these to more serious pursuits, to occupations which, like mirth and pleasure, divert him from anxious and fretting thought, but which are more worthy of a rational being.

*Verse 1.*—*I said in my heart*, or perhaps, “I spake with my heart:” it is a dialogue like that of Tennyson’s *Two Voices*. *Let me prove thee*: it is an experiment which he will try. *And take thy delight in pleasure*. The literal rendering is, “And look thou upon good;” to look upon a thing being a common Hebrew idiom for finding delight and satisfaction in it, as, for instance, in the phrase, “Mine eye shall see its desire upon mine enemies,” which is, literally, “Mine eye

shall look upon mine enemies ;” and “good,” which has a large sense, being here defined by the context to mean pleasure. Then follows the conclusion from this experiment, as from the last, *behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad* (literally, “it is a madman,” laughter being personified), *and of mirth, What doeth it?* “What is the use of it? What good comes of it?” In the very midst of the festive merriment, when the revel was the loudest and the song the gayest, there came that strange sudden darkening of mirth in the midst of it, that going out as of a light in a moment, when all seems brightest and most joyous, which makes a man wonder that he should ever have sought for happiness in such scenes. A similar strain of feeling is expressed by the Latin Epicurean poet, many of whose lines remind one of Ecclesiastes.

Hoc etiam faciunt, ubi discubere, tenentque  
 Pocula sæpe homines, et inumbrant ora coronis,  
 Ex animo ut dicant, “brevis hic est fructus homullis  
 Jam fuerit, neque post unquam revocare licebit.”

LUCRETIVS, iii. 912-15.

So far, the experiment is of a general kind. The Preacher has laid aside his study of man and his pursuit of wisdom, with the deliberate intention of finding satisfaction in a course the very opposite to that on which he first set out.

*Verse 3.*—*I purposed in my heart*, or rather, “I made search in my heart,” the word being one which, as we have already seen (Chap. i. 13), is used of the spies sent to spy out the land of Canaan. The expression denotes, especially when compared with that at the beginning of Verse 1, a new experiment. It implies also that this was no hasty careless resolve, no obedience

to a sudden impulse, no yielding to the strong tide of sensual passions, but the deliberate determination to make a fair trial of all that life had to offer. What was the purpose in this instance? The words that follow are confessedly difficult. Of the older interpreters, the LXX. completely misunderstand them, and the Vulgate affixes a sense to them which is exactly the opposite of the true sense, and in defiance of the plainest requirements of grammar: "I thought in my heart to withdraw my flesh from wine (*abstrahere a vino carnem meam*), that I might transfer my mind to wisdom, and avoid folly," &c. Jerome is much nearer the mark. He renders: *Ut traherem in vino carnem meam*; and he paraphrases: "I wished to give my life up to sensual enjoyment, and to rid my flesh of all anxieties, and to lull it with pleasure as with wine; but reflection and natural reason, which God has implanted even in sinners, drew me back, and led me to seek wisdom, and to trample folly underfoot." Jerome is so far right that he sees that wine is here put for sensual enjoyment of all kinds, and that Qoheleth means to assert that the higher nature still retained the mastery in the midst of pleasure. But he has not caught the exact sense of the passage. Our Authorized Version gives a paraphrase, and cuts the knot of the difficulty by rendering: "to give myself unto wine." But this entirely misses the important word "flesh" (used here in its ethical sense, as denoting the region of the appetites and passions), and hence obliterates the contrast so obviously intended between the animal nature and the spiritual. The literal rendering of the words is: "I made search in my heart (thinking) to draw my flesh with wine, whilst my heart guided it

[or held the reins] with wisdom." The phrase, "to draw my flesh with wine," has been very variously interpreted. It has been explained (1) "To draw out, to continue, and so to confirm, strengthen," &c., this sense being supported by such phrases as those of *drawing out* loving-kindness or anger (Jer. xxxi. 3; Psa. lxxxv. 5); or (2) with a modification of this meaning, "to cherish my flesh with wine," as though the verb were equivalent to the Latin *tractare*, in the phrase, *Se benignius tractare*; or (3) to entice my body with wine; or (4) to draw my body with wine, wine being the moving, inspiring element by which it is drawn, as a chariot is drawn by the horse.<sup>1</sup>

This last sense appears to me to be the most probable. The flesh—*i.e.*, the senses—is the chariot; the wine—pleasure, sensual indulgence—is the fierce horse by which the chariot of the flesh is drawn; the heart—here, as so frequently in Hebrew, the understanding, or the higher nature at large—is the charioteer which guides and restrains the senses and appetites. Of course, it may be urged against this explanation that, in strict propriety of speech, it is the flesh, and not the wine, which is the unruly animal. No doubt, in Plato's exquisite myth,<sup>2</sup> which has been compared with this, there is this difference. In that wonderful picture of the charioteer with his two horses, the flesh—the sensual nature, with its lusts and appetites—is compared to the wild horse, following blindly its own impulses, strong-necked, black, with bloodshot furious eyes, violent and reckless, shaggy-eared, deaf, hard-

<sup>1</sup> Several other interpretations have been given, but they hardly deserve notice. Hengstenberg renders the latter clause of the Verse, "and my heart led wisdom," *i.e.*, took wisdom for its companion in sensual enjoyment—kept it by its side.

<sup>2</sup> *Phædrus*, 54 f.

yielding to whip and spur ; the gentle horse, for which a word is enough, is the pure feeling, the love which knows no admixture of earthly dross ; and the charioteer is the *νοῦς*, or Reason, exactly corresponding to the Hebrew "heart," which guides the chariot with wisdom. But this does not justify us in putting a forced and unnatural meaning upon the passage in Qoheleth, and rendering, as Professor Tayler Lewis does : "I sought, when my flesh was furiously driving on *in wine* or pleasure ('in wine' here denoting, not the instrument or figurative chariot, but the state or condition), to draw it, to restrain it, to bridle it, to keep it in the path of temperance." It is sufficient to observe that here we have no elaborately wrought-out figure, as we have in Plato ; the comparison is merely suggested by the use of metaphorical terms, and then dropped. The general sense is clear. The Preacher did stoop to the pleasures of the senses, but his prudent self-control never forsook him. Even in the midst of sensual indulgence there was no sensual excess. The passions were not let loose to do their own bidding : discretion held the reins. Hence it is that he adds, "and to lay hold of *folly*." So he calls pleasure : he knew it to be folly. This was a part of the strange charm of the experiment. He was lord of himself, only stooping to pleasure that he might learn, if possible, the secret of its fascination, but never suffering it to win the mastery of him for a moment.

The expression, "to lay hold on folly," goes further than that on which we have already commented in the previous chapter, "to know wisdom and folly." Qoheleth would grasp it, make it his own, force it to give up its secrets. The principle is the same. "Things are

best known," says Jerome, "by their opposites" (*Contraria contrariis intelliguntur*). How could a man "see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven the brief number of the days of their life," if he had only had experience of one side of that life, if he had not sounded all its depths, penetrated all its disguises, made himself master of all its secrets? Here, then, we have Qoheleth's second experiment sketched briefly in its two main stages; of genial mirth, of unrestrained gaiety, on the one hand, and of sensual enjoyment on the other. But here let us retrace our steps for a moment.

The failure of that first experiment is instructive. We can conceive a man feeling deep sympathy with all that human nature which he had set himself to study, with the joys and sorrows, the cares and passions and struggles of everyday life, longing and striving to help, to guide, to comfort the beings among whom he moved; we can imagine such a man, weary, no doubt, sad at times, when he thought of evils that he could not alleviate, of burdens that he could not bear, yet brave and cheerful withal, like St. Paul, "sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing." But this would be a *Christian* mood. The mood of Qoheleth is very different. His is the temper of the critic. There is the irritation and the bitterness of the man who is sagacious enough to see what is wrong, to fasten his thoughts upon *that*, but who finds the frame of the world too stubborn to be moulded by his touch.

How natural the recoil! How natural to listen to the whisper which says, Snatch the pleasures of life, "crown thyself with roses before they be withered, and let no flower of the spring pass by." It is Solomon's history

which we are reading. How true, therefore, is the *order* in which the two experiments suggest themselves: not pleasure first, and then the calmer, more philosophic mood, but first the attempt to bring the world within the domain of the capacious intellect, "the large heart," and then the reaction. Sensual enjoyment was not the first attraction in his case. It could not be in the case of any man of "large heart." But the very disgust at finding the first experiment fail drives him with a kind of cynical bitterness into trying the other. Goethe, in his *Faust*, shews the same knowledge of human nature. Faust is no mere sensualist. Faust has been a hard student; he is a man of cultivated mind; he has explored many avenues of knowledge; but he has found satisfaction nowhere. He is tormented by desires which he cannot satisfy. "The Great Spirit," he exclaims, "has poured contempt upon me; Nature is closed against me; the thread of thought is broken asunder; I have long turned away with loathing from knowledge in all its forms: now let me plunge deep in pleasure, and still thus the burning throb of passionate desire!" It is the same recoil which we have in Ecclesiastes from the pursuit of wisdom, the same determination to shake off the weary weight of thought, and forget it in the wild tumult of dissipation and folly.

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