

THE APOTHECARY ... who had flies in his ointment
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(ECCLESIASTES 10: 1)

King Solomon was a very observant man. This fact is proved by the great number of object lessons mentioned in his writings. His parables and proverbs were based almost exclusively upon the happenings of everyday life, and sometimes the wise man had the ability to see the sublime in the ridiculous. His statement concerning " the flies in the ointment " has become famous, and belongs to every man's vocabulary. When the king heard of the event in the shop of the royal perfumer he probably smiled, but even he could not have guessed that his musings on the matter were to become internationally famous in all ages. The needs of the palace made great demands upon the apothecaries, for Solomon delighted in an abundance of female companions!

The Ointment Unspoiled

The supplier was very pleased with himself. He had spent much time on the preparation, and now he was satisfied. This was a present fit for the king. Its aroma was captivating and irresistible ; its fragrance superseded anything previously known. The quivering nostrils and shining eyes of all his friends told him that he had succeeded at last. He had perfected fragrance. He paused to enjoy his triumph ; possibly he sat down and became reminiscent of all the efforts which led to this supreme achievement. Was he called away unexpectedly? Did some other external problem precipitate itself into the mind of the satisfied apothecary? Surely something of the sort happened, for no fly could get into the ointment unless the lid had been left off the box.

The Ointment Unguarded

In a land where flies were, and still are, bred by the million where the winged nuisances succeed in annoying everybody, it would not be long before these "flies of death" were attracted to the box of loveliness. Their spidery legs would venture on the spongy sea of color ; their twitching heads would revel in the attracting aromas; their wings would drag in the clinging mass. This was a dreadful anti-climax ; the ruination of a king's delight. Why didn't that stupid man put the lid on the box? He should have known that enemies abound in this world ; and that all presents for royalty must be well guarded.

The Ointment Unexamined

Now, we could forgive the perfumer if an unexpected call interfered with his work ; if some momentary forgetfulness intervened. But, alas, we cannot forgive the inexcusable. A fly going into the ointment is not sufficient to make it stink! And if the word seems unpleasant, blame Solomon, for after all, it was the word he used. No ointment can deteriorate instantaneously. If the ointment be revolting, then the flies were permitted to stay in the ointment. The satisfied apothecary did not come back to examine his precious concoction until the dead flies had ruined it. Had they been extracted from the imprisoning substances, the perfume would have retained its bewitching qualities. Alas, this was not done, and fragrance was superseded by foulness. Probably this kind of thing had happened before ; it has certainly happened since. Dead flies can spoil any ointment.

The Ointment Unattractive

THE APOTHECARY ... who had flies in his ointment

What a shame! That illustrious box might have graced the boudoir of the Queen of Sheba. Its contents might easily have enhanced the charm of Pharaoh's daughter. Its irresistible power might have secured immortal fame for the man whose ingenuity brought it into being. Instead, it found a place in the refuse bin, and the apothecary had to begin all over again. Mr. Perfumer, why didn't you put the lid on the box? Yes, we know what you are thinking-why don't we do likewise when our best gifts are ready for the King of kings? Ananias and Sapphira had a rare gift, but they went away to sell a house when they might have been killing flies. David, Judas, Demas, also suffered grievous loss because flies ruined their ointment.

The Ointment Unsurpassed

" Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment " (John 12: 3). Obviously Solomon's apothecary tried again, and his noble art was handed down through the generations until finally the product of his trade was produced somewhere within reach of Bethany. We do not know how Mary obtained her treasure ; we only know she was careful to keep the lid on the box. She did this with all her lovely perfumes. Yet every time the Lord drew near, she hastened to display her treasures, and the world was enriched by her deeds. A Ministry of Health notice gives the command, " Swat that fly." It's not a bad ideal Flies and perfume are not ideal companions.

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