

1 Kings 10:14-11:43

Finishing Well

Most agree that the 2022 Kentucky Derby was one of the best races of recent memory. Not only did the underdog (underhorse?) win but managed to rise from the back of the pack to finish first. Hardly anyone noticed Rich Strike until the finish line. Life is similar. How we start the race matters less than how we finish that matters – a lesson the first three kings of Israel teach us.

In the final week of the 1980 presidential campaign, President Jimmy Carter debated Governor Ronald Reagan. The race was still close, but the most memorable moment of the debate came from a simple question from the governor. “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” President Carter answered, “no” sealing his defeat. If you were in ancient Israel under Solomon, no doubt you’d say yes. Life improved under Solomon and the people were at peace. From a distance, Solomon was an incredible success.

Yet, the Bible portrays Solomon as one who abandoned the faith and, thus, foolishly led Israel down a path that led to its division and demise. The greatest enigma of Solomon’s life was how the wisest of men could be such a fool. Wisdom is no protection from human frailty, and the temptations of Solomon are the same for us.

Solomon’s demise began with small compromises which slowly opened the door to full-fledged rebellion. It is rare suddenly abandons their faith or ruin their life. It is often gradual and, before long, you discover you have abandoned the truth of the gospel.

Solomon’s decline begins with the temptation of **riches** (10:14-29). The writer details the financial and economic achievements of Israel under Solomon. On the one hand, we see these as evidence of God’s special grace. Notice, however, these descriptions benefit Solomon and do not credit the Lord. The writer explains that the wealth was coming “to Solomon ... from the business of the merchants, and from all the kings of the west and from the governors of the land (vs. 14-15).

Consider the evidence. Solomon strengthened his army in looks and power (the shields, for example, were made of gold, vs. 16-17). He made his palace more formidable, he decorated his throne in ivory and gold (vs. 18), and included six ascending steps surrounded by a lions (vs. 19-20). Finally, he expanded his military power (vs. 26-29), much of which violated the Mosaic Law by importing chariots and horses from Egypt.

The criticism is not Solomon’s wealth, but how it consumed him. One can be righteous and wealthy, but often the pursuit of wealth drowns righteousness. Solomon foolishly fell for this temptation. Early in his leadership, Israel benefited from his wise leadership, but now only he is.

Solomon was also guilty of **revelry** (11:1-3). Not only did greed consume his heart, but so did lust. Most of his marriages were likely political in nature. Peace was a matter of a strong military and political alliances. Such alliances often came through marriages and Solomon had it in abundance. Foolishly, Solomon assumed he was securing peace when he was assuring his kingdom's demise. History is littered with men ruining their lives due to a lack of self-control. His lust led him astray and, as a result, Israel suffered.

Finally, Solomon's rebellion played out in false **reverence** (11:4-8). As Solomon surrendered to greed and lust, his reverence for the Lord declined. The writer explains, "For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father" (vs. 4).

This resulted in the Lord **rebuking** the king (vs. 9-13). God does not ignore sin including those of an anointing king. In his judgment, God split Solomon's kingdom shortly after his death with his son reigning in the southern kingdom.

God's rebuke led to **retribution** (vs. 14-40). Although the division of Israel was the ultimate judgment, additional retribution came in the form of political and military enemies both externally and internally. The first external enemy was Hadad the Edomite (vs. 14-22) who attacked from the South. The second was Rezon the son of Eliada (vs. 23-25) who was the king of Damascus and attacked from the South. Internally, Jeroboam of the tribe of Ephraim (vs. 26-40) became Solomon's greatest adversary. He worked within the administration, but rose to become the first king of the northern kingdom.

Ultimately, sin has consequences. No pill can protect us, and no army can guard us against it. Solomon started so well, but he failed to finish.

Regardless, the story of Solomon ends with the hope of **Repentance** (vs. 41-43). Before GPS and smart phones, I made a wrong turn in Louisville. I was convinced by my mental map that if I kept going straight, I'd still hit the interstate or a highway I was familiar with. Twenty minutes later, I discovered I was twenty minutes farther away from where I needed to go. It is not progressive or enlightened to keep going in the wrong decision. It requires turning around. It requires repentance.

Repentance sounds easy, but it will be the hardest thing you do in this life. Christ is asking us to leave behind what ruins us in favor of loyal love. Anything worth pursuing requires hard work and hard decisions. The good news is that Christ is willing to carry away our sin and liberate us from it. But we must believe in him and walk away from our sin.

"Can you believe what's come of the world?" It's tempting to constantly ask such a question about the world, but the conclusion of Solomon's life forces us to look at ourselves. "Can you believe what's come of the church?" Maybe you've held on to a pattern of behavior that is slowly corroding your life. Crucify it today. Abandon it today. Walk away from it today and be healed. Learn from Solomon. It isn't enough to start off well, we must finish well too.