

“A Bad Finish”
1 Kings 11:1-13
July 18, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

In our survey of the Old Testament, we’re looking today at the division of the unified kingdom into two kingdoms, one in the north and the other in the south. Perhaps it would be helpful to get a bird’s eye view of this event by locating it within Israel’s history. Israel’s history began with the call of Abraham, near the year 2000 B.C. His grandson, Jacob, led the family to Egypt in order to escape a severe famine. They stayed there about 400 years, the last part of which saw their enslavement by Pharaoh. Around 1400 B.C. Moses led them out of Egypt into the land God promised to give them. For about 350 years they were led by a series of Judges, such as Samson and Gideon. Israel then felt it needed a king like the other nations had, and in 1050, Saul was anointed king over the nation and reigned for forty years. His successor was David, and then David’s son, Solomon, each of whom also reigned about forty years. After only 120 years, the kingdom divided after Solomon’s reign, and that is the event before us today. We’re going to look next week at the long decline of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, leading to the exile of both kingdoms.

The passage before us today is a sad and frightening one. It is sad because it begins a long decline in the nation from which they will never recover throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Israel reached its political and economic peak during Solomon’s reign. This peak would last precious few years, and the decline that started after Solomon’s death would not stop until both the northern and southern kingdoms were exiled.

This is also a frightening passage, serving as a warning against leaving a bad legacy. Solomon accomplished so much in his lifetime, and started so well. But his legacy was one of great damage to the nation. He didn’t finish well. So as we look at this passage, let’s receive it as a warning and as instruction to us, that we might finish well.

I. Solomon’s Surprisingly Bad Finish

Beginning in verse 11, God speaks to Solomon unlike any of the previous times God had spoken to him. He had come to him with words of promise and blessing on several occasions. For example, God had appeared to Solomon in a dream early in his reign, and invited Solomon to make a request of the Lord. When Solomon asked for wisdom instead of riches and power, God was pleased and responded with words of promise. He told Solomon that he would give him

the wisdom he had requested, but also add what he had not requested, riches and honor (I Ki. 3:1-14). But now, toward the end of Solomon's life, God's speech to him is not so favorable. Because his heart had been turned from the Lord, God said, **"I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant"** (v. 11). That servant was a man named Jeroboam, who, because of his competence and abilities, had risen to the top of Solomon's large army of forced laborers. God goes on to say that he would not completely remove the kingdom from Solomon's heirs. One tribe, the tribe of Judah, would be left to Solomon's son, while the rest would be ruled by Jeroboam. Thus began the period of Israel's divided kingdom.

The result of Solomon's poor finish was a legacy of division and decline in the nation. From this point forward, both kingdoms enter a period of decline that won't end until they are both exiled. The larger northern kingdom would be known by the name Israel, and it would be conquered by the Assyrian army in the year 722 B.C., about two hundred years after Solomon's death. The southern kingdom, known by the name of the tribe of Judah, would be conquered by the Babylonians and carried into exile in the year 586 B.C., about 350 years after Solomon's death. It was because of Solomon's poor ending that the nation was launched on this trajectory of decline.

Solomon's poor finish was surprising in light of how well he started. We've already mentioned the dream in which he asked for wisdom instead of riches. Just before that dream, we read that **"Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father"** (3:3). Solomon was famous for his wisdom. It was legend throughout the ancient world, with monarchs such as the Queen of Sheba coming to inquire of him. He was also a builder, known most famously for the glorious temple he built in Jerusalem. His accomplishments are summarized at the end of chapter 10. **"Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind"** (10:23-24).

But this great king who started so well ended poorly. There is an irony in this. By earthly standards, Solomon's reign left a great legacy in Israel. At his death, the nation was rich and many could point to his accomplishments, both in building projects and in the books he had authored. But in God's perspective, Solomon was the one responsible for launching the long decline of the nation. Frank Thielman told me that his dad often quoted an Abraham Lincoln saying that a man was like a tree in that its true measure could only be taken when it was felled. Ironically, this king who had started well and done so much for Israel ends up being the one responsible for their decline.

It would be much better to start poorly and end well than the pattern we see in Solomon's life. Most of you know that Wendy's father passed away about three weeks ago. He had not started so well in his life. But by God's grace, he

was one of those unusual cases of someone converted later in life, in his 60's in his case. At the reception after his Memorial service and at other times too, many people came forward to say what a powerful and godly influence he had been in their lives. He started poorly, but ended well. Whether we start well or poorly, how can we end well? In order to answer that question, we need to look at the cause of Solomon's bad finish.

II. The Cause of His Bad Finish

The first paragraph of our chapter is clear in identifying the problem. Solomon's heart had drifted from the Lord. As verse 4 says, **"his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father."** The text is also clear in telling us why his heart had turned from the Lord. In defiance of God's clear command, **"Solomon loved many foreign women"** (v. 1). It's not hard to imagine how this could have happened. In Solomon's day, marriage was a common component of diplomatic relations between nations. In our day we set up embassies in foreign nations, while in Solomon's day a king would marry the daughter of another king with whose nation he wanted to maintain peaceful and profitable relations. It was just the way things were done. So Solomon could easily have told himself that he was doing this for the good of the nation. The problem occurred when these foreign wives wanted to continue worshipping the gods of their childhood. Wanting to please them, Solomon agreed to allow the worship of false gods in the land God had set apart as holy, the land in which he alone was to reign supreme.

The result of Solomon's marriages to foreign women and his allowing of their idol worship was that his heart began to drift from the Lord. His was not an overt and sudden renunciation of the Lord, but the slow drift that takes place over a long time. It was like the effects of the undoing of the mooring lines tying a boat to the dock. The boat doesn't immediately leave the dock. It begins to drift with the current, and over time, it can drift so far as to lose sight of the dock. That's what happened with Solomon.

There's a deeper cause of Solomon's heart being turned away from the Lord, and we can see it in the verses at the end of the previous chapter. We read there that Solomon acquired an abundance of two things during his reign, horses and money. He imported thousands of horses from Egypt, and silver was so abundant that it was **"as common in Jerusalem as stone"** (10:27). Significantly, Egyptian horses, excessive money and foreign wives are the very things Moses had warned Israel's kings not to acquire. In Deuteronomy 17, Moses gives this warning to Israel's future kings. **"He must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses... And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold"** (17:16-17). Why this warning, and how did Solomon's ignoring of it

contribute to his downfall? The answer is that in Solomon's culture, these three things represented power. We understand how money represents power, because it's the same in our culture as in Solomon's. Horses were the fastest means of transportation, and were especially important for a strong army. And powerful men were often measured by the number of wives they had. It's hard for us to understand this, but the more wives you had, the greater your status.

Why did Moses warn Israel's kings not to accumulate these various components of power? Because our use of and attitude toward power, probably more than anything else, reveals where we have put our trust. Israel's kings were not to accumulate power because it would tempt them to self-trust instead of trusting in God. When Solomon came to have power through accumulated horses, wives and money, he began to trust in himself rather than in the Lord. He didn't finish well because he finished his life trusting in himself rather than in the Lord. The very last recorded event of Solomon's life is telling. After God told Solomon that because of his sin the next king of Israel would be Solomon's servant instead of his son, Solomon had the opportunity to respond in repentance. Verse 40 of our passage records his response, and it wasn't one of repentance. As soon as the identity of this servant becomes known to Solomon, **"Solomon sought therefore to kill Jeroboam."** The last recorded event of his life was an act of self-trust in which he sought to exert his power, not one of repentance and faith. The reason Solomon didn't end well was because he trusted in his own power instead of trusting in the Lord. There is nothing more toxic to a heart for the Lord than self-trust.

III. The Answer to His Bad Finish

If the cause of Solomon's bad finish was that his heart was turned from the Lord because of his trust in his own power, then the answer to a bad finish is to trust in the Lord's power rather than our own. Let's explore this area of our attitude toward power. One of the titles Jesus gave to himself is the one who is **"greater than Solomon"** (Matt. 12:42). Jesus had greater wisdom than Solomon and was a better builder than Solomon, erecting the true temple of God. But we also see the greatness of Jesus in his use of power. Though he had great power, he never fell victim to self-trust.

I have benefitted from a survey of Jesus' use of power outlined in a book by James Davison Hunter called *To Change the World*. He finds in the New Testament four characteristics of Jesus' use of power. First, "his power was derived from his complete intimacy with and submission to his Father" (p. 188). For example, when Satan tempted Jesus to turn the stones into bread after forty days of fasting, Jesus could have done so. He had the power to do so, as evidenced later by his feeding of the five thousand. But to have done so on this occasion would have been an act of self-dependence instead of depending on the Father's will for him. Jesus was willing to be weak in order to

depend on his heavenly Father. A second characteristic of Jesus' use of power was "his rejection of status and reputation and the privilege that accompanies them" (p. 189). The clearest example of this was his washing of the feet of the disciples, voluntarily taking the lowest social position among them. The third characteristic of his use of power is that it was defined by his compassion for others. Jesus used the power he had been given in the context of showing compassion, healing and teaching others. Fourth, Jesus used his power among those outside the community of faith in a noncoercive way. The Samaritans were an example such outsiders in Jesus' day, and he reached out to the Samaritan woman at the well, and refused to allow James and John to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan village that had rejected Jesus.

Jesus is the opposite of Solomon in this regard. Though he had power greater than Solomon's, he never fell victim to self-trust. He was willing to give up that power and in weakness depend on his heavenly Father. He did this all the way to his death on the cross. It's time to apply this to ourselves. If you want to finish well, unlike Solomon, you will have to make a different use of power than Solomon. We must guard our hearts against the intoxicating effects of power and its tendency to lead us to self-trust. I think one of the prominent applications of this in our day is to be wary of the dangers of money, which is one of the clearest examples of power. Money gives power in our culture. That's why giving money, when given with a cheerful heart and without expectation of any return benefit for the gift, is such a powerful force against self-trust.

Another application of this can be found in the way we attempt to deal with our sin. So often, we respond by an exertion of power, seen in various ways. We may, for example, defend ourselves extensively. Or we may seek to compensate by trying to perform well and look good before others. Others exert power through denial of guilt or through lying about our sin. If we are to depend on God, we must be willing to be weak and confess our sin without any attempt at a human solution for our sin.

A third application is to be willing to be weak in submission to your heavenly Father and his rule of your life. Perhaps there are unpleasant things in your life that you would like to change. In many cases, there's nothing wrong with trying to make these changes. But if you've tried and it just hasn't happened, or if it's something that you really have no power to change, then accept this weakness as from God. Submit to him and trust him.

CONCLUSION:

Every stage of life is a good time to think about finishing well. In our younger years, we can guard against it through a humble use of power. The good news in this for those who are older is that until you're finished, it's never too late to finish well. May God help us to do so!