

Succession| Good News from Bad Kings

“Solomon, the Divided”

First Kings 11.1-13; Philipians 4.12-13

10.8.23

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, 2 from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the sons of Israel, "You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods." Solomon held fast to these in love. 3 He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. 4 For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. 5 For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. 6 Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not follow the LORD fully, as David his father had done. 7 Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. 8 Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

9 Now the LORD was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, 10 and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the LORD had commanded. 11 So the LORD said to Solomon, "Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant. 12 "Nevertheless I will not do it in your days for the sake of your father David, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. 13 "However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son for the sake of My servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen."

(Phil. 4.12-13) I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

We're looking at King Solomon in ancient Israel's "Age of the Monarchy" (app 1,000-600BC). King David set up his son Solomon to succeed. And the son of David did indeed succeed in every way. He responded to God's carte blanche, open invitation, by requesting wisdom (could've asked for ANYTHING!) and God was pleased to make Solomon the wisest king ever. Solomon, the Wise.

He built the walls of Jerusalem, palaces and the "Center of the World" – the Temple! Solomon, the Builder.

Last time we saw the gravity, the glory of his greatness as the Queen of Sheba came 1,500 miles to see if the rumors were true and what she saw knocked the wind out of her – he received tribute from kings (25 tons of gold in one year). He was the Prince of Shalom. Solomon, the Great.

Today we look once more at Solomon – this time a case-study on the topic of success, prosperity and affluence to the point that his heart is torn. Solomon, the divided.

I want to look at the Bright Side of Success, the Dark Side of Success and the Prospects of Success FOR YOU.

We saw the zenith of Israel as a nation last time as the Son of David builds on his father's gains and becomes the greatest leader of all Israel's kings. He becomes the ruler of the City on a Hill and the

Kingdom of Shalom. His reign foreshadows the Kingdom of God, the central feature of Jesus Christ's teaching (Mark 1.15; Luke 8.1).

Solomon was a light to the nations. People were coming from near and far to see what the grace of God could do. They were drawn to the beauty, the peace, the order, the wisdom and truth and the glory of God in Solomon's rule.

Solomon was a success... and success is a good thing. I don't have to prove that or convince anyone. We're all pro-success. No one wants to fail (even if you DO want to fail – if you actually fail you will have succeeded at failing).

Whether it's financial success and economic prosperity or managing your health or expertise and recognition in one's field or educational success or relational success or marriage and family – WE ALL WANT TO FLOURISH.

No one thinks, "I'd rather be sick than healthy – I'd rather be detested than popular... I'd prefer to be behind in my bills and have tension and discord in my marriage."

And you may be thinking this is a preacher trick, like I'm trying to reel you in... like if you nod your head I'm going to say, "Ah-HA! How dare you be so selfish that you want to succeed... YOU CAN'T HANDLE FAILURE!"

No. In a famous sermon by John Wesley ("The Use of Money" – delivered in 1760) has three points: #1 – Gain ALL You Can (He goes on to say #2 – Save All You Can and point #3 – Give All You Can). You may not like points two and three but point one calls for success, "Gain All You Can".

I'd say the will to succeed is a desire implanted in us by God. Success is good and we should want it. If you get to choose (or have to choose) between success and failure – hands down – we'd rather succeed... success is GOOD.

What's NOT so clear is that success also has a dark side. And THAT is due in part to the fact that the human heart has an almost unlimited capacity to convert good things into ultimate things, indispensable things, essential things.

Here's how it happened to Successful Solomon: he found himself surrounded by brightness and by MUCH and by personal COMPETENCE. And THAT word, "competence" is really close to the meaning of the Hebrew concept of wisdom. It's not just facts or theoretical knowledge and intelligence (not simply "I.Q."). It's the ability to make decisions and to function with skill, discernment and competence.

And Solomon had ALL THAT going for him and going on around him and all the visitors to his capital city SAW it. It was very impressive – breathtaking! His organization, his administrative skills were all testimonies to his wisdom!

And he knew that it didn't originate IN him but that it was a gift from God. It wasn't due to the fact that David taught his son sooooo well (though I think he did). But Solomon knew that ultimately his wisdom, his competence and success came from God. It came because God had entered into a covenant with David and his descendants – of whom Solomon (son of David) was first. "For David's sake..." (12-13) Solomon was no atheist. He was thoroughly religious or spiritual. He wrote thousands of spiritual sayings, teachings and songs. He worshiped God daily. He didn't look at all the amazing stuff, the gold and the wisdom and the kings and queens who sent tribute to him – Solomon didn't look at the signs of God's blessing and shalom and say, "WOW! What a good boy am I! I'm a self-made man." He knew better than that. He knew about God and grace.

But ... soaking in this success and surrounded by such abundance and unique wisdom (10.3) ...he began to accumulate. He gathered horses, chariots, soldiers, trade-routes. He amassed gold by taxes and tribute (lit TONS of gold).

He enslaved the Canaanites who were still in the land (a common practice among ancient kings). And he collected exotic animals and wines and foods and clothing (even his servants dressed well! – 10.5). More stuff like all the great kings did (1st Samuel 8.11-18). Samuel had warned them that THIS is what their kings would do – accumulate. And now Solomon, the Wise is trying his hand at diplomacy – wisdom in his foreign policy and alliances with other kings and lands. Those alliances were usually sealed by marriages. So, Solomon, the wise, learns how to do the Royalty Dance. He gains a harem... like all the cool kings on the block!

And these foreign wives are obviously not worshipers of Israel's God (YHWH)... Solomon's wives worshiped a variety of gods and they convinced Solomon to join them in the worship of these idols (SOME OF WHICH were worshiped by human sacrifice – babies). And now, at the height of his success and at the peak of his fame – with everything going for him... Solomon... self-destructed.

I wish I could say it's uncommon... but it's not. In fact, it happens all the time and at ALL different levels. It could be that a person with a brutal life-destroying addiction shocks everyone and gets clean and sober – SUCCESS! And then for some inexplicable and maddening non-reason, some people self-destruct.

I think of celebrities – Michael Jackson, Prince, Tom Petty, Lisa-Marie Presley in recent years and the list goes on and on and on and on... We can only conclude that there's something almost unbearable about success (Matthew 19.23-26). People at the top of their game... celebrities... CEOs... mega-church pastors (we have local examples) – at the pinnacle of success and they just LOSE IT... freak out...develop eating disorders, addictions, get sexually twisted or mean and abusive to others, leave their families – self-destruct.

AND the public likes it. Maybe it's "schadenfreude" (pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune) or jealousy at someone else's success. It's why tabloids continue to sell.

And WE may look at celebrity success-tragedies and think, "Well, THEY ought'a be listening to this sermon ... NOT me! I'm just sort of schlepping my way through life – don't think I'll be a king or a superstar any time soon! I'd like to face the dangers of wild success, but I don't run that risk."

But IN REALITY – as modern South Floridians – we are ALL living in a kind of phenomenal abundance never known in all of human history. We have this thing in our house that turns the hot air cool! Can you imagine that?! Solomon, in all his glory never even imagined air conditioning!

And the scary thing for US is that we may be far wealthier and more privileged and full and satisfied than we know AND the very fact that we DON'T live in that awareness is probably a prime indicator that we're already being blinded and destroyed by success. Solomon didn't know he was self-destructing (the results wouldn't land until he was dead). He wasn't living on the streets. And that reminds us that most people being ruined by their own prosperity or success probably don't know it. Ebenezer Scrooge thought all was well. Solomon was still healthy, wealthy and wise.

So we ask the question, "How can I avoid the self-sabotage that often accompanies success/achievement?"

The first part of the answer is to realize that I'm probably wealthier and better off than I think I am. AND the success I've already enjoyed may have already had a negative and harmful impact on me that I haven't even recognized.

Maybe something we can gain from our modern celebrities and their failings is that THEY only magnify on a grand scale our own flaws. They attend private clubs and private parties, and they only hang around their own kind of private people... and are we any different? They're obsessed with appearance – often a

symptom of destructive success but are we so different? Don't we judge people, select people, exclude people on the basis of appearance?

Or in the way the fallen celebrities use people as tools like nameless appliances – the stories of tantrums when they are mistakenly served shrimp-salad instead of crab-salad. Maybe we should see these celebrity indiscretions as only our flaws amplified. How do YOU treat the people who serve you?

But after we're at least OPEN to the possibility that our abundance and privilege MAY have toxic effects on our souls, how do we address things?

Well, we could use guilt. Mom says, "Honey, you didn't eat your Brussel sprouts – did you know children in Bangladesh don't even have food?" (Of course, the child's first thought is, "Mom, could we send these Brussel Sprouts to Bangladesh?") It's possible to live in a constant state of low-level guilt for having enough and having extra but that rarely if ever rescues a person from self-destructive success... It may lead a person to shun success or fear success and think that the problem is in the money or the fame and think that mediocrity is the virtuous goal.

Another ineffective approach is to get a little "Machiavellian" – "you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs – there will always be haves and have-nots... I've worked hard for everything I've earned and if I'm proud of my achievements, I'm not gonna apologize!"

Of course THAT'S a non-solution and it only makes room for arrogance in nest of our lives/hearts and when that egg hatches it will be a monster...WE will become monsters. (James 1.14-17)

Or we can just tell ourselves, "Stop It!" And that's better than allowing arrogance to take root but it's a little like telling a person with a bad chest-cold to just stop coughing. The Gospel approach is different – it says to the believer: FIRST, success is a good thing but NOT the highest thing. And I don't have to live in a slavish fear of losing success OR of (at all costs) gaining success. Success can be used to point me to God and to point others to God and as a manager of God's resources I'll aim at excellence and hope to succeed – success is good.

But I also see that FAILURE can be used by God – and if I lose money or position or health or recognition or freedom I can do that in a redemptive way to point myself and others to God. Because in a sense, God's ultimate good – God's good and highest purpose was realized out of failure and loss and defeat. In the destruction of Jesus Christ, in HIS being crushed – God brought forgiveness, blessing, new life to everyone who believes. Jesus Christ took the fangs out of failure AND takes the fear and guilt out of success. That's why the Apostle Paul was able to write, "I've learned the secret of being filled (i.e., success and prosperity) OR going hungry of having a lot or suffering need – I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil 4.11-13)

Success is not an accurate gauge of God's love for me and failure is an infallible indicator that God NOT happy with me – If I want and need a gauge/indicator, it's always the same – NOT my success in finding a parking space, but the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – THAT tells me that I'm securely and eternally loved by God.

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" i.e., I can succeed OR I can fail in a way that is pleasing to God THROUGH Christ.

Second, the core message of Christianity is not simply interested in behavior but more so in the motives under the behavior. Solomon's heart (vv. 2, 3, 4 and 9). It's a little unnerving to think that Solomon was the wisest man around and still somehow got LOST. He even wrote truths about the heart ("Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD" [Prov. 16.5]) but his own heart... went after other gods.

It's unnerving because all the wisdom you have... and you can still be led astray by your deepest desires and hidden motives. Solomon's wisdom was overwhelmed by his own pride. God appeared to him TWICE – real encounters with God. But Solomon stopped trusting the God he couldn't see and trusted instead in the 1,000 women and the gods he could see. His hubris conquered his heart.

Had he only heeded his own words Prov. 4.23, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

The NT Sermon to the Hebrews issues a warning and then answers this problem of the slippery, fickle heart first at the start of the book and then at the end: "Take care, BROTHERS, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. (3.12) and then the answer (Heb. 13.9a): Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be established by grace...

Only God's grace can really keep and establish our hearts. Only He can GRANT us to see "our inherent spiritual poverty" (Brennan Manning) – that whether we're dressed in silk or burlap, WE ARE TOTALLY DEPENDENT on God and His undeserved grace. We're NOT independent, self-made people!

The illusion of independence deadens and divides our hearts. Only humble trust and repentance (receiving Christ anew) can restore us from that self-deception. The Good News is – God loves to give that gift to those who ask. So, we look to Him daily with that sense of simultaneous desperation ("prone to wander") and security ("All I have needed THY Hand hath provided") and the vision of grace – the bloody Cross, the empty Tomb – THIS is what keeps my heart in the midst of success or failure.