

Avoiding Solomon Syndrome

How did the wisest man who ever lived manage to finish so badly?

This is the question that confronted me recently in teaching a series of Bible studies on Solomon in 1 Kings and Ecclesiastes. Solomon got off to a great start with a humble prayer for wisdom. The Lord gave him that wisdom plus great wealth, power, and territory. His reign became the golden age of Israel. He built the magnificent temple in Jerusalem upon which the Lord placed his name. His success was unparalleled due to God's blessing.

But by the end of his life the nation was rupturing, idolatry was rampant by Solomon's own hand, and he was beset with enemies, one of whom the Lord appointed to reign over most of Israel after Solomon's death. The old king could find no joy in life. Even his vaunted wisdom became a source of distress to him. "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

Solomon's successful life ended in unhappiness and failure. How did this happen? What can ministry leaders learn from it?

The primary lesson we should take to heart is this: *Success is always both a blessing and a test.*

Young King Solomon realized he was in over his head. His request for wisdom so that he might reign well over Israel came from a place of humble self-awareness (1 Kings 3:7). The Lord was so pleased that he promised to make Solomon the wealthiest, most glorified king of his day (3:13). And the Lord certainly made good on that promise. The surrounding nations flocked to Solomon's court to pay him homage (4:21).

Solomon's success was a result of the Lord's favor. That is important to remember. But we should also remember the condition God set on both occasions in which he promised that favor. The condition was the king's continued and exclusive faithfulness to the Lord God of Israel (3:14; 9:4). The condition meant that Solomon's success was a blessing from God and a test of faithfulness to God. Success is always both a blessing and a test.

How many of us ministry leaders will survive the success God gives us? I am thinking of success in worldly terms – growing ministries, numerous accolades, material rewards, prominent positions. How many of us will succumb to *Solomon Syndrome: When success becomes the stumbling block that keeps us from finishing well?*

Solomon tripped over a number of stumbling blocks that came with his success. First, there was good old-fashioned *lust*. Solomon had a thing for the ladies, particularly exotic pagan ones (11:1ff). He indulged himself in sensual pleasure. He worked hard and could afford it, so why not? And *pride* was at work here, too. The size of the king's harem was an ostentatious display of wealth. It was a statement

of his glory and power to his own people and to all the surrounding nations. It was the king's way of saying, "Hey, look at me!" (Imagine what Solomon's Facebook page would have looked like!)

Solomon's lust and pride paved the way for his most serious transgression. He wanted to make those pagan wives happy, so he supported the worship of their deities (11:4ff). He became the chief promoter of *idolatry* in Israel, all in the name of domestic tranquility. He built pagan places of worship and participated in that worship. In so doing he showed that he had forgotten the word of God. He forgot where blessing came from. He forgot the conditions and the warnings. He forgot what was most important. *Forgetting* is also one of the stumbling blocks of success.

Brothers and sisters, we will not reach Solomon's heights of success. But it is quite possible that at some point, by the Lord's favor, we will experience elements of worldly success in our ministries. Things will go well. Others will hear about us. We might get asked to be on a conference program or serve on a prestigious board. Maybe some financial rewards come our way. The ability to influence decisions and churches and communities and other people's ministries could land in our laps. It won't be Solomon size stuff, but the blessings will come with their own tests. The stumbling blocks will be unique to each of us.

So consider these practices to help avoid Solomon Syndrome.

1. *Flee lustful passions.* The opportunity to indulge destructive sensual pleasures increases with worldly success. As Paul advised Timothy, run *from* these things, not toward them (2 Timothy 2:22). Consider the implications of that statement for your eyes, ears, hands, feet, and mind.
2. *Maintain a vibrant spiritual life.* This includes a lively remembrance of the moments when God made himself, his calling, and his directions clear in your life. Don't be a forgetful success. Go back to those touchstone moments and refresh them.
3. *Humble yourself in service.* At some point in Solomon's life, he went from serving God and God's people to serving himself. Don't forget that you labor under the authority of One who wrapped himself in a towel and washed feet.
4. *Travel light.* Worldly success allows us to own more worldly goods. At some point they start owning us. Fight the tendency to accumulate what you don't need.
5. *Be accountable to someone.* Make sure there is a person or group in your life to whom you must report. It is healthy for us to give an account of ourselves. It promotes self-discipline.
6. *Define success as faithfulness.* This above all else: Success means doing what God has called you to do in a way that honors him all the way to the finish line. Worldly success will come and go, but faithfulness will take you to the end of the race and into the arms of your Savior. Renew that vision often in your soul.

Fellow ministry leaders, give thought to the example of Solomon. Consider what kind of finish your present course is likely to bring. When you experience the blessings of God's favor, make sure you don't fail the test. When you experience disappointment or discouragement, remember the One who is always faithful. He will never leave you or forsake you. Make sure that faithfulness to him is always your measure of true success.