

When excess replaces faith

Last week's study showed Solomon at the pinnacle of success. The exotic Queen of Sheba characterized him as the most amazing man she had ever



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seen, his wisdom greater than any other king on earth, with people offering him lavish gifts just to get in line for an audience and the possibility of winning Solomon's attention.

I noted there was an ominous undercurrent to this impressive scene. Such excessive wealth, power and acclaim inevitably produces dangerous pride and a fall. The result of such adulation often produces a sense of infallibility and the failure of moral judgment.

On my college campus a significant person made a very foolish decision that tarnished his reputation and ended his leadership role. While discussing this sad event, a friend said, "He's eat up with the dumb!" After that, whenever someone did or said something foolish we would recite, "He/she must be eat up with the dumb!"

But Solomon's tragic end is more complex, for it is the result of monumental excesses and abandoning his spiritual foundation. 1 Kings 10:23-24 summarizes the tragedy: "King Solomon far exceeded all the earth's kings in wealth and wisdom, and so the whole earth wanted an audience with Solomon in order to hear his God-given wisdom" (CEB).

What does it take to entice a person to turn away from God and become addicted to the flawed values and material things of the world? We can cite examples of politicians, athletes, actors and business moguls, but even Solomon's price of fame is astounding. Did Solomon really need a palace that took twice as many years to build as the Temple? Did he really need gold drinking cups because silver was not good enough? Did he really need 12,000 horses and 1,400 chariots? Did he really need 700 wives and 300 concubines?

When do you reach the level known as excessive? When do you begin to believe you deserve all this? When do you forget gratitude, the needs of the

world around you and the idea that you can make a difference for the oppressed and suffering?

Solomon can be described as having it all — prestige, power, wealth, wisdom and the love of God. The problem is that the first and most valuable gift on Solomon's list moved from first to last and became lost. The result became estrangement from God and a kingdom broken in half. This is not a simple moral tale; it is a tragic collapse of a man who elevated himself over all he knew was true, worthy and eternal.

Years of pastoral counseling have left me with some horrific examples of lives shattered by flawed decisions: the successful business man who broke the law because he could never have enough money and believed fraud was just a useful tool; the woman who became infatuated with a friend at church, was caught in adultery and lost her husband and children; the soldier and his wife who enjoyed spouse-swapping, were caught and lost career as well as reputation.

How does a person reach this stage of abandoning not only reality but also the basic spiritual truths of life?

Solomon had a spectacular beginning. He had the witness of Israel's history and God's constant love, the successes and failures of King David and the amazing promises of God. Read King David's advice to his son to love and serve God, to follow the laws God gave Moses and to live for God faithfully so God would maintain their royal line in the land of promise (1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12).

Solomon asked God to be his strength and give him wisdom. God said yes! (1 Kings 3:5-14).

It took two years for me to finally understand God was really calling me to be a pastor. I was afraid, felt totally inadequate and told God he was making a mistake. The process was a struggle, involving confirmation from unusual sources, Bible study, prayers, a miraculous dream and, finally, surrender to the God I knew I could trust. I have made mistakes and discovered God's faithfulness never lessened.

When I was too smart for my own good, God offered me a reminder that

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helped me straighten up and get back on track. None of us is infallible or wiser than God. Life is a matter of what you do with what you've got! When you have a relationship with God, that is the core of meaning and possibility.

Somewhere along the way Solomon quit asking himself about his relationship with God. He was smart, powerful, wealthy and consumed by self-delusion. His life became a tale of spiritual decline. Everyone needs to stop now and then, revisit their spiritual roots, examine their current relationship with God and others, evaluate what is truly worthwhile for the long haul and find out if they are making a difference for anyone else.

Nobody lives beyond the influence of society. It is not easy to escape the clutches of comfort, prosperity or social acceptance. Solomon appeared to have it all until he died and his world literally collapsed for his family and nation.

Can you tell the difference between success and failure when you view life from a spiritual perspective? Solomon could not! The spiritual life is not a system of rewards for good behavior or believing the correct doctrines or flawlessly observing traditions and rituals.

Solomon built the Temple, offered unbelievably impressive sacrifices, ruled in the name of God and came up empty. Life-transforming faith is all about a relationship with God — a life shaped by his love and grace and a life made complete as you love and serve God.

The Apostle Paul offers a worthy example as he approached the end of his life: "I have fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8, NAS).

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.