

## Chapter 13: Finishing Well

*If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land.*

2 Chronicles 7:14

*Now King Solomon loved many foreign women. Besides Pharaoh's daughter, he married women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and from among the Hittites. The LORD had clearly instructed his people not to intermarry with those nations, because the women they married would lead them to worship their gods. Yet Solomon insisted on loving them anyway. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. And sure enough, they led his heart away from the LORD. In Solomon's old age, they turned his heart to worship their gods instead of trusting only in the LORD his God, as his father, David, had done.*

1 Kings 11:1-4

### 1. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ .

*Drink water from your own well—share your love only with your wife. Why spill the water of your springs in public, having sex with just anyone? You should reserve it for yourselves. Don't share it with strangers. Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving doe, a graceful deer. Let her breasts satisfy you always. May you always be captivated by her love.*

Proverbs 5:15-19

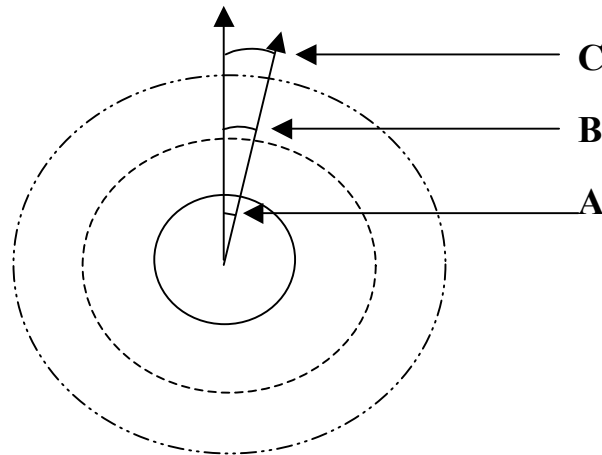
*The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.*

Proverbs 14:8

The wise think about where they're going.

*Israel is a nation without sense; they have no wisdom at all. They fail to see why they were defeated; they cannot understand what happened.*

Deuteronomy 32:28-29



Q: If you were doomed to live the same life over and over again for eternity, would you choose the life you're living now?

If the answer is no, then why *are* you living the life you are now?

2. **Keep** \_\_\_\_\_.

*Look, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great **hokmah**, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts. He is able to create beautiful objects from gold, silver, and bronze. He is skilled in cutting and setting gemstones and in carving wood. Yes, he is a master at every craft! Exodus 31:2-5*

## Today's Equipping Point

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### Paul's Equipping Point to the Corinthians:

*Keep your eyes open, hold tight to your convictions, give it all you've got, be resolute, and love without stopping. 1 Corinthians 16:13-14*

### Discussion Questions

1. Where have you chased after symptoms instead of core issues?
2. Who would've made a better impact on your life if they'd kept practicing?
3. How will you continue to seek wisdom, even after you have experienced success?

## Teaching Script

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Horatio Alger loved to write rags to riches stories. Stories about how down-and-out folks could achieve the American Dream of wealth and success through hard work, courage, and determination, like *Rocky*, or *Citizen Kane*, or *American Idol*, or even the Old Testament Joseph we studied in Chapter 3 of *The Story*.

But just as often, especially nowadays, you hear of riches to rags stories. You can't help but think of examples like O.J. Simpson, who looked so pitiful in court as he was sentenced for armed robbery. You think of Leon Spinks, who defeated Muhammad Ali to become the heavyweight champion of the world, who now works at a YMCA in Ohio for minimum wage. You think of Bernie Ebbers, once worth a billion dollars, now 63 years old and serving an 85-year prison term.

There are also spiritual riches to rags stories: Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Ted Haggard...and, perhaps, Solomon.

It's hard to deny that Solomon started out well—*really well*—and his reign began with a series of defining events. He married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, and ironically, the nation that had once enslaved Israel now sought the good graces of God's people. Then God appeared to Solomon in a dream and offered to grant his heart's desire. For all he could have had, Solomon asked for wisdom to lead, and God was pleased not just to grant his request, but give him wealth and honor as well.

Solomon's keen wisdom became the hallmark of his reign. He penned thousands of proverbs...and like Warren Buffett, the "Oracle of Omaha," people from around the world sought him out. And through him, Abraham's descendants became a blessing to the whole world. He had more wealth than Gates and Buffett combined, and more wisdom than Plato, Aristotle, and Mark Twain combined.

During Solomon's reign, peace prevailed in the Promised Land, so the time had come for Solomon to build a temple for God. The construction project was massive and followed the pattern of the tabernacle that had been used since the days of Moses. The end result was as majestic as one could imagine. With great reverence, Solomon had the ark placed in the Most Holy Place. The temple was filled with a cloud of God's glory, and Solomon humbly realized that even a magnificent temple could not sufficiently contain Him. This temple would become the enduring focal point of worship and life for God's people.

But following the dedication of the temple, God appeared to Solomon again and warned him of the consequences Israel would face if they turned away from Him. He promised,

*If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land.*

2 Chronicles 7:14

He also promised Solomon a royal dynasty if he remained faithful, but disaster if he and Israel followed other gods.

Well, as usual, God's timing was perfect. Because after all the grand ceremony around the dedication of the Temple, Solomon needed a reminder that all that pomp and circumstance was for naught without obedience—the daily grind of making good choices and rejecting temptation.

And so all of Solomon's insight and riches didn't make up for his bad choice to collect wives like gold. He married hundreds of women, many of them foreigners.

Here's what the Bible says:

*Now King Solomon loved many foreign women. Besides Pharaoh's daughter, he married women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and from among the Hittites. The LORD had clearly instructed his people not to intermarry with those nations, because the women they married would lead them to worship their gods. Yet Solomon insisted on loving them anyway. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. And sure enough, they led his heart away from the LORD. In Solomon's old age, they turned his heart to worship their gods instead of trusting only in the LORD his God, as his father, David, had done.*

2 Kings 11:1-4

This single decision shaped the future of his descendants and of the nation of Israel.

Solomon's story began with great promise, incomparable wisdom, and magnificent achievement. His two predecessors on the throne had also started out well. But the way each of them ended was disappointing to say the least. There are no final words of wisdom recorded for the wisest king of all time. Instead, his closing chapter reveals that the kingdom would be torn in two. Solomon spent his last days fighting off enemies and rebels. His splendor and his legacy were tarnished by disobedience and idolatry. What a sad ending for the king who had it all, but ultimately failed in the only thing that really mattered: finishing well.

Let's deconstruct the story of Solomon and glean a couple of key learnings on how we can avoid the same mistakes, and stay faithful. The first thing we need to do is this:

### **1. Root Cause Analysis**

Although Scripture is not specific, it's instructive to consider this question: exactly where did it all go wrong for Solomon? What was the "tipping point?" Precisely when did it begin to unravel?

When I managed the Quality Assurance function at MCI years ago, we were tasked with this root cause analysis when it came to the dashboard metrics, to figure out why on-time connections were under par, or private customer networks hadn't achieved their up-time objectives. Sometimes it was a field engineer cutting corners on testing procedures. Sometimes it was a supplier defect with Northern Tel or Raytheon equipment. Sometimes it was because the salesperson was writing checks that network engineering couldn't cash.

And although it's only speculation in the case of Solomon, we can hazard some guesses about when things got out of synch, when the train started to veer off the tracks.

- Maybe it started way back when he first married Pharaoh's daughter— maybe that alliance opened the door just enough to rationalize hundreds of marriages to foreign women later on.
- Maybe it was an out-of-control sex drive. Listen to Solomon's words in Proverbs 5:

*Drink water from your own well—share your love only with your wife. Why spill the water of your springs in public, having sex with just anyone? You should reserve it for yourselves. Don't share it with strangers. Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving doe, a graceful deer. Let her breasts satisfy you always. May you always be captivated by her love.*

Proverbs 5:15-19

Isn't it ironic that the man who wrote those words required 700 wives and 300 mistresses? Was it an overactive libido? Solomon certainly wouldn't be the last person to suffer long-term consequences from a misplaced sex drive.

- Or maybe Solomon's taproot decision that began his descent was one of commerce. Maybe it was development of a trade route or a large-scale NAFTA agreement that eventually led to an exchange of personnel, which led to intermarrying, which led his heart away from God.

I submit to you that root-cause analysis in our lives is absolutely necessary. We must undertake the excavation of the nucleus of our behavior, to break the cycle and keep us from repeating the mistakes of the past, or the mistakes of others. Here's an example:

I've talked before about my dad, and I think decisions he made 40 years ago led to his suicide last year. I'm convinced the bottom-line issue for him was this: ***He completely defined himself by his work.*** With all the one-night stands, the sexual escapades, the pornography, it would be easy to look at these symptoms and conclude he had a libido problem. But for him, it started in his professional career, where a series of promotions got him the attention he never had from his father and made him someone completely defined by his work. The only thing that mattered was the next rung on the ladder. When he lost a long-time job through a management change, it sent him on a downward spiral from which he never recovered.

He had more jobs in the next five years than he'd had in his entire career, and I think those one-night-stands were him acting out his frustration. After he divorced my mom, he never forgave himself for what he did, and the snowball got bigger and bigger. So, I believe this was the sequence: Professional turbulence led to infidelity, which led to divorce, which led to self-hatred, which led to more professional problems, which led to depression, which led to suicide.

Can I encourage you today that if you find yourself in a tough place, or a rut, or in a season of estrangement from God because of a besetting sin, or hurt pride from a job loss, that you stop and do some root-cause analysis? In Proverbs, Solomon gave us the key when he said:

*The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.*

Proverbs 14:8

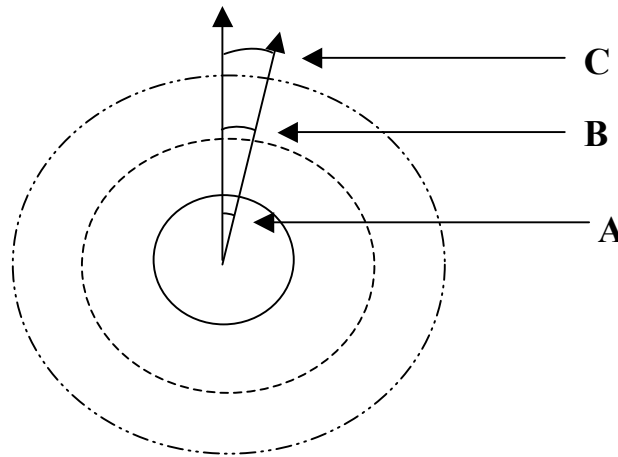
The wisdom of the wise is to give thought to their ways. In other words,

**The wise think about where they're going.** You may not realize it, but root-cause analysis is biblical. Here's how I know:

*Israel is a nation without sense; they have no wisdom at all. They fail to see why they were defeated; they cannot understand what happened.*

Deuteronomy 32:28-29

Translation: they just didn't get it. This is why we must continually recalibrate where we're going. Look at the diagram on your outline:



This is what Solomon failed to calculate—at Point “A”, a small deviation from true north may not seem to matter, but the further out you go, the further from center you become. Consider that Arc “C” is four times greater than Arc “A”. And how did Solomon wind up where he did, worshipping pagan gods? Very gradually: one decision at a time...one rationalization at a time.

Wise people think about where they're going. “Will the path I'm walking lead me to a place I want to go? If I keep heading this way, will I like where I wind up?”

You remember the movie “Groundhog Day” with Bill Murray? It's about a guy that kept living the same life over and over. Let me ask you a question (on your outline):

**Q: If you were doomed to live the same life over and over again for eternity, would you choose the life you're living now?**

This is an interesting question, but the kicker is the unspoken, potentially devastating follow-up: **If the answer is no, then why ARE you living the life you are now?**

I'm going to be quiet for a minute and let you re-read these two questions...

The first thing is to stop kidding ourselves and get to the core of what the issue is. But the second key is just as important:

## 2. **Keep practicing**

From our study of Proverbs two years ago, you may remember the most common Hebrew word for wisdom is “hokmah.” This is the word used to refer to the skill and experience of a craftsman.

In describing the skill required to build the tabernacle after they were delivered from Egypt, the Bible says:

*Look, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great **hokmah**, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts. He is able to create beautiful objects from gold, silver, and bronze. He is skilled in cutting and setting gemstones and in carving wood. Yes, he is a master at every craft!*

Exodus 31:2-5

If an artisan is called “wise,” then at least part of what wisdom means is “the art of living skillfully.” That means becoming a craftsman in loving our wives, raising our kids, handling our money, and living our lives.

This is why the second point is to keep practicing. What happens to a skill or a craft if you stop honing it? If you stop practicing? You know what happens: you lose your muscle memory, you lose your edge, you get sloppy.

This is why wisdom really has nothing to do with IQ, but has everything to do with living a practiced life. You may also remember that when Solomon talks about “sluggards” or “being lazy”, he’s not talking about someone in love with a remote control. He’s talking about a man of wasted potential—a man who has great possibilities, but squanders his gifts. It’s not about SAT scores—it’s about misspent promise.

Somebody that immediately pops to mind is John Daly. If you don’t know him, John Daly is a big, beefy golfer who, in the last ten years had enough talent to win two majors on the PGA Tour, but who has also blown through four wives and, by his own reckoning, between \$50 and \$60 million dollars. He drinks, he smokes, and he’s been in rehab more times than you can count. He’s been thrown out of multiple tournaments. And he brought it all on himself. You have to ask yourself, What if this guy had kept practicing? What if he hadn’t frittered away all that talent and all that money? What if he had “hokmah”?

Solomon says, *The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways.* The wise think about where they are going. They’re intentional...they practice.

And of course you know the supreme irony: this is exactly what Solomon failed to do. He had both wisdom and riches, but in the end, they were lost on a man who squandered his gifts on pagan women and gods.

Look at the diagram again: we must plot the trajectory of where we’re going. Where will the choices you have made land you? As you look at your life at the outer circle, what kind of life will you have five years from now? Fifteen? Twenty-five?

Solomon did not finish well. David's family melted around him. Saul was a master at rationalization and committed suicide. But Bob Bourland was different. Bob Bourland finished well.

At his funeral on Monday, his friends and family remembered a man who was a deacon at the First Baptist Church of Odessa for 50 years. They remembered a man whose children and grandchildren grew up to fear the Lord. They remembered how, at age 80, he learned how to cook so he could care for his wife who had developed Alzheimer's. They recalled how, even after he was no longer physically able to take care of her, he visited her three times a day at the nursing home until her death.

Bob Bourland was my grandfather. And on Monday at his funeral, I was remembering that almost every time I visited him in the nursing home, he'd ask, "You preaching this weekend?" And then when it was time to leave, and I'd lean over to kiss him goodbye, he'd grab my hand, look me square in the eye, and say, "I pray for you every day."

You and I can do that—we can finish well. We cannot afford to be clueless, like the Israelites, and wonder what in the world happened. Too much is at stake.

**And so our Equipping Point today is this:**

**Keep practicing.**

Stay in the Word. Be fervent in prayer.

This was Paul's Equipping Point to the Corinth church:

*Keep your eyes open, hold tight to your convictions, give it all you've got, be resolute, and love without stopping.*

1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Such could be said of Bob Bourland—such can be said of each of us.

Granddaddy finished well. And I'm happy to tell you that just in time for what would have been their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Bob and Grace Bourland are back together, celebrating and worshipping on what is no doubt their most extraordinary Christmas ever: sitting at the feet of the Christ child, to whom they gave their hearts every day of their lives.

May the same be said of us: those guys got to the heart of the matter...those guys kept practicing...those guys finished well.

*[Prayer]*

*So many cannot look in the mirror...*

*Give us an uncommon courage that digs beneath the surface, that roots out sin where it germinates, that discards anything not of the Spirit.*

*Help us to be craftsmen as we live our lives...sharpen the sword of the Spirit within us...give us spiritual stamina to practice, to train all of our lives, and in the end, to finish well. In the name of the One whose faithfulness set us free...*