

# A KINGDOM TORN IN TWO

## "A Fallen Kingdom"

A sermon by  
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**TEXT: 1 Kings 12:1-5, 12-19**

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*Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. <sup>2</sup>When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard of it (for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. <sup>3</sup>And they sent and called him; and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, <sup>4</sup>'Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you.' <sup>5</sup>He said to them, 'Go away for three days, then come again to me.' So the people went away.*

*<sup>12</sup> So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day, as the king had said, 'Come to me again on the third day.' <sup>13</sup>The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him <sup>14</sup>and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, 'My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.' <sup>15</sup>So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfil his word, which the LORD had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.*

*<sup>16</sup> When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king, 'What share do we have in David?*

*We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.*

*To your tents, O Israel!*

*Look now to your own house, O David.'*

*So Israel went away to their tents. <sup>17</sup>But Rehoboam reigned over the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah. <sup>18</sup>When King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was taskmaster over the forced labor, all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam then hurriedly mounted his chariot to flee to Jerusalem. <sup>19</sup>So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.*

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A man decided to wallpaper his bedroom. He had no idea how many rolls of wallpaper he'd need. Fortunately, he knew that Murphy, the Irishman who lived next door, had recently done the same job. Since the both lived in a flat with identical rooms of identical size, he decided to ask his neighbor.

"Murphy, how many rolls of paper did you buy for your bedroom?"

"Ten," said Murphy, happy to be of assistance.

The man bought his ten rolls of paper and did the job. The walls looked fine. When he finished, he was astounded to discover that he had two rolls of wallpaper left over.

"Murphy," he said. "I bought ten rolls just like you said for the bedroom. But now I have two rolls left over."

"Oh, dat's funny," said Murphy. "So did Oy!"

Be careful of whom you seek advice. Not all advice and counsel are equal. Bad advice leads to bad choices. Bad choices lead to destruction.

Last Sunday we considered the folly of the world's reputedly wisest man. King Solomon allowed his heart to be directed away from God and toward the false gods of his many wives. Solomon was without excuse. God warns his people when Israel first becomes a nation. *"When the Lord your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, take care that you are not snared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, 'How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.' You must not do the same for the Lord your God, because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it." (Deuteronomy 12:29-32)*

Yet, this was the very thing that Solomon did in his old age. His many wives turned his heart from God. As a result, this is what God said to Solomon, *". . . since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. Yet, for the sake of your father David I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son." (1 Kings 11:11-12)*

Already, the seeds of rebellion and division are sown in Israel. From the outside, everything looks wonderful. The economy is roaring. Trade with other nations is at its pinnacle. The Temple is complete. The priests and Levites are very busy. The palace is adorned. The defensive wall that encircles Jerusalem is secure.

However, Jerusalem is like a Potemkin village. The façade looks great! Behind the facade, there is opposition and rebellion is brewing. In order to accomplish all his public works and building projects, Solomon levies high taxes on the people. Then he demands that his people "volunteer" a certain amount of time each week in heavy labor to accomplish his grand designs. Conscripts are brought into Jerusalem from the surrounding regions to labor or serve in the army that protects Jerusalem. In an agricultural economy, this is a double whammy! Time spent serving the king means neglecting your own vineyards, fields, and flocks. Then, the king requires each family to pay increasingly burdensome taxes on diminishing income. For the people, it is a lose-lose situation.

They make less. They must pay more. They get squeezed from both sides.

The people resent the king. They resent this forced labor. So, God raises up adversaries against Solomon. Three are mentioned in Scripture. The one who gets the greatest attention is Jeroboam. He was an effective and able leader. Solomon put him in charge of rebuilding part of Jerusalem's fortifications. Jeroboam experiences Solomon's heavy hand. More importantly, he hears the groaning and complaints of the people.

Most of the workers in Jerusalem are imported from the north. They are from ten of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jeroboam is leaving Jerusalem. He is troubled by what he has seen and experienced. He sees a man. It is the prophet Ahijah coming from Sidon in the northern part of Israel. He is wearing a new garment. The two are alone. Without a word, Ahijah takes hold of his outer garment and tears it into twelve pieces. I don't know about you, but if I were in Jeroboam's sandals, I would be thinking, "Who is this crazy man and how do I get away from here?" Ahijah speaks. Ahijah tells Jeroboam that judgment is coming for Solomon's unfaithfulness in worshiping false and foreign gods. God is going to tear the nation of Israel apart and give Jeroboam ten of the tribes. God will leave Judah and its capital of Jerusalem alone for King David's sake.

David had been faithful. Solomon was not.

This is what God says to Jeroboam through the prophet Ahijah, *"I will take you, and you shall reign over all that your soul desires; you shall be king over Israel. If you will listen to all that I command you, walk in my ways, and do what is right in my sight by keeping the my statutes and commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you, and will build you an enduring house, as I built for David and I will give Israel to you." (1 Kings 11:37-38)*

Solomon gets wind of what Ahijah has told Jeroboam and moves to have him eliminated. Jeroboam seeks refuge in Egypt.

Solomon dies. Jeroboam returns.

This brings us to today's Scripture passage.

There is an old saying attributed to Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish steelmaker. The saying is this, "It is only but three generations from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves." The paraphrase is, "The first generation builds the business, the second makes it a success, and the third generation wrecks it." David built the Kingdom. Solomon made it a success. Rehoboam will destroy it.

The apple doesn't fall very far from the tree. Solomon started wisely and ended foolishly. Rehoboam starts foolishly. Where can you go from there?

Rehoboam goes to Shechem to be crowned as king. Jeroboam is invited back to represent and negotiate with the new king on behalf of the ten northern tribes. Jeroboam and the northern tribes ask for an easier yoke. The taxes and forced labor are burdensome. Jeroboam makes an offer. Lighten the yoke and we will serve you faithfully. Jeroboam knows well the prophecy that has been declared over him. He offers an olive branch. He rebelled against Solomon, but if the new king will cut his subjects some slack, the Kingdom can continue intact.

Rehoboam needs some time to think about the offer. He tells Jeroboam and his entourage to come back in three days.

In the meantime, Rehoboam consults his older advisors. They have been around for a long time. They have seen the decline of King Solomon from God-fearing wise man to idolatrous old fool. They were likely more faithful to the God of Israel, because they remember the early days of Solomon's reign, when there were no idols, were no shrines, and where the people were not conflicted in the religious allegiance. They watched as Solomon sought through his many building programs to make a name and reputation for himself. That had happened, but it had come at a heavy price. He succeeded. His subjects suffered.

The older advisors recommend moderation. "Ease their burden. Serve them. Speak good words to them." Good advice. Don't expect them to serve you. They have been doing that.

The king gets a second opinion. He asks his friends. These are the people he grew up with. They are entitled. They are likely the sons of the older advisors. They grew up in luxury. They have been supported by this heavy taxation. They never had to work, always had money to spend, and enjoyed their lifestyle too much to face potential budget cuts and belt-tightening.

*"Thus you should say to this people who spoke to you, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you must lighten it for us'" thus you should say to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. Now whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.'" (1 Kings 12:10-11)*

What is a yoke? It exists to allow domesticated draft animals to work together as a team. These young men, and ultimately Rehoboam when he follows their advice, see these constituents, these citizens, these subjects as nothing more than exploitable draft animals, no different than an ox or a mule.

A man was on the practice golf course when the club pro brought another man out for a lesson. The pro watched the fellow swing several times and started making suggestions for improvement, but each time the pupil interrupted with his own version of what was wrong and how to correct it. After a few minutes of this interference, the pro began nodding his head in agreement. At the end of the lesson, the student paid the pro, congratulated him on his expertise as a teacher, and left in an obviously pleased frame of mind. The observer was so astonished by the performance that he asked, "Why did you go along with him?" "Son," the old pro said with a grin, as he carefully pocketed his fee, "I learned long ago that it's a waste of time to sell answers to a man who wants to buy echoes."

Rehoboam wanted to buy echoes, and he did. Rehoboam had likely been raised in the harem. Solomon apparently gave little thought to the son who would succeed him. Thus, Rehoboam had the years of a man and the heart of a child.

Having received Rehoboam's answer, Jeroboam leaves with the representatives of the ten tribes. Abijah's prophecy comes true. The kingdom is torn in two. Jeroboam sets up his own kingdom in the north. He builds a shrine and religious center at Shechem. He has two golden calves fashioned for the people to worship. He tells them, *"You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."* (1 Kings 12:28)

Have we heard this story before? What could possibly go wrong?

Like Pharaoh with Moses, where it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, there is little God must actively do. If God gives us enough line, given our direction and intention, we will set our own hook. God's

judgment often is nothing more than an act of removing blessing and protection, allowing us to experience the consequences of our own actions.

Could this have ended differently? Possibly, but the function of prophecy is twofold. It is to call people back to where they need to be. That is the first part. The second part is to reveal what happens if the people refuse to return to God and God's way.

That is when division and strife happen. Rehoboam is not terribly different in his reign than we are in our relationships. He was raised to believe that his subjects existed for his benefit. They were there to maintain his lifestyle and the lifestyle of his friends.

How many marriages fail because one or both partners in the marriage believe that their spouse exists to make them happy? How many friendships end because there is much pride on one or both sides and little humility? When you put yourself and your wants, needs, and demands first, you sow seeds of division and resentment.

Solomon at the end of his reign ruled with an iron rule. Rehoboam doubled down. He was an even more tyrannical ruler. Jesus talked about a different kind of rule. Jesus talked about what has come to be known as the Golden Rule. *"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."*

Remember where all of this started. God's people were to be reflections of God, made in his image, to show the nations who God is and what God is like. In the end, selfishness, foolishness, self-serving, brokenness, and division continue to enter our Lower Story.

The amazing thing is that God's purposes are still being worked out. God is sovereign and is using human frailty and failure to usher in His Kingdom. God does this by helping us to understand that outside of a relationship with Him, seeking His way, and following His word, we so often settle for second or third best . . . or worse.

Solomon lacked wisdom. He asked for it. God gave it. He strayed from it. Rehoboam had no wisdom. He sought advice. He ended up two rolls short on his wall-papering job because he followed bad counsel.

He bought echoes, not godly wisdom.

In the Book of James, James the half-brother of Jesus writes, *"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (James 3:17) James also writes, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you." (James 1:5)*

I read about a photographer for a national magazine who was assigned to "shoot" one of those big Western forest fires. He was told that a small plane would be waiting at the airport to fly him over the fire.

When he got to the airport, sure enough, he found a little Cessna waiting. He jumped in with his equipment and yelled, "Let's go!" The pilot, the plane, and the photographer were soon in the air.

"Fly over the north side of the fire and make several low passes," the photographer shouted.

"Why?" the nervous pilot asked.

"Because I'm going to take pictures! I'm a photographer, and photographers take pictures," was the reply.

After a long pause, the pilot tensely asked, "You mean, you're not the instructor?"

The pilot and the photographer both trusted someone to do something they could not do. Luckily, in this case, thanks to communication by the air traffic control, they were able to get back to the airport and land the plane safely.

In life, trust is often put in places, people, and things that are not worthy of such trust. People have entrusted friends, advice columnists, talk shows, spouses, astrology chart, organizations, and a host of other people and things - even their own feelings - to direct them. Unfortunately, many people do not learn until it is too late that their trust has been misguided and misplaced. Many decisions lead not to safety but to destruction!

Where do you seek wisdom? From whom do you seek counsel? Where do you glean advice?

No advice is better than bad advice. No counsel is better than bad counsel. However, repeatedly God's word tells us that best guidance we can receive is from God's word. Godly wisdom is what we always need. It will never fail us.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. AMEN

