

1KINGS 12:1-11



ST GEORGE'S

This morning we are going to diverge from the standard hero expectations and look at someone who might be called an ante-hero. He was almost a hero. He stood right at the threshold of becoming a great king and a great leader. He was faced with a decision that literally would make or break him as a leader and a hero and would make or break the Israel nation. That man was Rehoboam, son of Solomon.

Yet, in a way, Rehoboam was a hero, (at least by our own culture's standards). He was selfish. He was self-centred. He was egotistical. He was self-absorbed, and was focused too much on power and privileges, and the pleasures that excessive wealth could bring. I say he was a hero because, basically, Rehoboam was not any different from us. Not really any different from the average human being. The heroes of today are those who live excessive lifestyles like sports figures and those in the entertainment industry.

For the follower of Jesus he was really the ante-hero. He stood at a turning point and could have made a simple decision to be a servant and probably would have propelled him to greatness, but he couldn't and wouldn't humble himself before others, let alone God. He was almost a hero, but even in this, Rehoboam points us to move toward God in areas he would not.

Throughout the Old Testament God has repeatedly said, "If you follow my commands and walk in my ways and do what is right then I will bless you and be with you." However, we know from our own experiences how hard it is for people to do this, and in today's reading we begin to see the consequences of not following God.

When Rehoboam and the Israelites met that fateful day in Shechem, everyone assumed that Rehoboam would become Israel's king. The people made a simple and reasonable request of Rehoboam, and after consulting with others, this would-be king arrogantly rejected it. The people renounced him as their king and went their way. Reconciliation might have occurred had Rehoboam not acted foolishly. The result was a divided kingdom. This unintended consequence would shape the history of the nation to this very day.

This is one of the great 'turning points' in the history of Israel, one that is crucial to our understanding of the Bible. From this point on the southern kingdom will be known as Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital and one of David's descendants as their king. The northern kingdom, composed of ten tribes, will be known as Israel. Samaria will eventually become its capital and its dynasties will frequently change. At times, the two kingdoms will be at war with each other, and at other times they will make certain alliances. The glorious days of the united kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon are gone. The northern kingdom will consistently have evil kings and behave wickedly. They will be the first to be scattered in judgement. The southern kingdom will have its good kings and its wicked ones, and eventually Judah will be taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

There are three major participants in the events which led to the division of the united kingdom: Solomon, Jeroboam, and Rehoboam.

When Solomon came to the throne, after David, he asked God for wisdom so that he might rule his people wisely and well. God not only granted Solomon wisdom but also power, fame, and wealth. He also made it clear that Solomon was to keep His instructions. Solomon's downfall came late in his life. He married many foreign wives and eventually he began to worship their pagan Gods. As a result of this, God told Solomon that he would lose his kingdom, but would delay this judgement until after Solomon's death.

I think that the saddest thing about Solomon's failure is that in spite of God's judgement he gives no evidence of repentance.

To compound Solomon's problems, Jeroboam, who was a member of Solomon's court, was told by Ahijah, who was a prophet, that he would be given ten of the tribes of Israel to rule as king and that the division of the kingdom was the result of Solomon's sin in worshipping the foreign gods of his many wives.

It would appear that Solomon learned of this prophecy and set out to kill Jeroboam, who was forced to flee to Egypt to seek refuge. With no indication of repentance for his sins Solomon sets the scene for the division of the kingdom following his death.

The division of the kingdom continues with Rehoboam, who was Solomon's son. It would seem that no one disputed the fact that he would be Israel's next king. So, as we have heard, all Israel, including Jeroboam who had returned from Egypt following the death of Solomon, gathered at Shechem to make Rehoboam their next king. The people had only one request to make of Rehoboam; they asked him to ease the burden of work that had been placed on them by Solomon.

Solomon's wealth and power had cost the people of Israel a great deal. Solomon had become what you might say, heavy handed, and at the beginning of Rehoboam's reign the people asked him to consider the burden of work his father had placed on them and to make proper adjustments.

Rehoboam told the people to reassemble in three days, when he would give his decision. During those three days Rehoboam sought counsel as to how he should reply to the people's request. His father's counsellors said to him, "If you will be a servant to this people, serve them, and grant their request, they will be your servants forever." This was not the advice Rehoboam wanted to hear. So he turned to his friends, the young men he had grown up with. Their advice was very different. They told Rehoboam to say to the people, "I am a lot tougher than my father. My father imposed heavy demands on you. I will make them even heavier. My father punished you with whips, I will punish you with scorpions." No doubt Rehoboam's friends had lived the high life and any thought of lessening the burden on the Israelites might affect their quality of life, hence their foolish advice to Rehoboam.

I believe that the people would have served Rehoboam, as they had done with previous kings, but his arrogant reply to their request was too much for the

people to swallow, and so the ten northern tribes walked out on Rehoboam and the united kingdom.

Personally, I think that there was still time for reconciliation, but it was God's will that the kingdom should be divided.

It is now that Jeroboam begins to play a significant role as king of the northern tribes. There is an irony about Jeroboam's reign. God had promised him that his kingdom would last and he would be successful, if only he obeyed God's commands. But Jeroboam listened to his advisors rather than God. He was frightened that he would lose his kingdom and, perhaps, his life. Fearing that the divided kingdom might re-unite, he establishes a counterfeit religion for the northern kingdom. He made two golden calves for the people to worship, telling them that they were the gods who brought them out of Egypt. Jeroboam also built temples and appointed men to serve as priests. He succeeded in turning the Israelites away from worshipping the one true God and by so doing becomes the standard by which other evil kings are measured.

Although the northern tribes retained the title of the kingdom of Israel the Bible sometimes refers to them as 'Ephraim' or 'Samaria.'

Israel is now a divided kingdom and from this point on it is all downhill and a very slippery slope that Israel and Judah will walk.

The Bible tells us that Israel was eventually conquered by the Assyrians and the ten tribes scattered, permanently disappearing from history. Later, still, the Babylonians conquered Judah, but they allowed the population to settle in a single area so that the Jews could set up a separate community and still retain their religion and identity. After a period in exile the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians whose King, Cyrus, gave the Jews permission to return to their homeland, to Jerusalem, the City of David and the location of Solomon's Temple. Accordingly, a number of Jews returned to Judah and began to build the Second Temple to replace Solomon's original Temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this turning point in Israel's history.

First there is Pride or Arrogance. Rehoboam was too proud to take notice of the petition of the people to lighten the load Solomon had placed on them. Secondly, Power. Rehoboam wanted to be in charge, viewing mercy and kindness as weakness. Thirdly, Rehoboam rejected the wise counsel of his father's advisors and, instead, listened to the foolish advice of his peers. Fourthly, Leadership. Rehoboam viewed his position as the opportunity to force others to do his will and to serve him, rather than an opportunity for him to serve others. Humility and servanthood would have saved his kingdom. Finally, there was a window of opportunity for reconciliation and Rehoboam did not seize it. We would do well to think about about the failures of Rehoboam, for divisions are still very much a part of the world in which we live.

This whole matter of servanthood and leadership is prominent in the Bible and especially in the New Testament. Jesus' disciples hoped for a kingdom in which

they would have power and authority, so that others would serve them. This is the way the scribes and the Pharisees exercised their power. In Matthew 23, Jesus talks about the heavy loads which the Pharisees and so-called experts in the law put on men's shoulders but they, themselves, do not lift a finger to move them.

The disciples were tempted to follow this path but Jesus taught them otherwise when James and John asked him if they could sit, one at his right hand and the other at his left hand in our Lord's glory in heaven.

If we move on to St. Paul's letters we find that the church at Corinth was plagued with divisions and arguments, and it had everything to do with pride, power, and arrogance.

The source of division is frequently pride and arrogance and a seeking for power. The key to unity is humility which is found in true servanthood. If you want to know what that entails read Philippians, Chapter 2 and verses 1-11.

To me, the cross of Jesus Christ is a constant source of wonder and amazement. Think of it, Our Lord was God incarnate. He created the heavens and the earth. He, above any other person who set foot upon this earth was, and is, sovereign. Yet the sovereign God of the universe humbled Himself by his death on the cross of Calvary. He bore the sinners guilt and punishment, so that all who believe in Him could have forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. For us it means, first of all, that we can be saved by trusting in Him and, secondly, it means that we should follow in His steps, for the glory of God and the good of others.

One of my heroes is the great Theologian and Medical Missionary, Dr. Albert Schweitzer. He said, "Whatever you have received more than others – in health, in talents, in ability, in success.... All this you must not take to yourself as a matter of course. In gratitude for good fortune, you must render some sacrifice of your own life for another life".

Rehoboam didn't get it. I hope we do. Rehoboam never connected with the people. He didn't listen to them. He certainly didn't care about them. JESUS calls us to love and serve one another.

We need to learn from others. Learn from their mistakes. Learn from their advice. Rehoboam was too self-centred to do that. He wasn't seeking advice as much as wanting people to tell him that what he was thinking was right. He didn't really want his father's advisors to help him as much as he wanted them to agree with him. Rehoboam remained

I encourage you to follow in the steps of our Lord and Saviour, to receive the gift of salvation by faith in His death, burial, and resurrection in our place, then, in obedience to His will for us, to set aside our own selfish interests, so that we are free to serve others.

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