

CHAPTER 14, A KINGDOM TORN IN TWO

TIMELESS TRUTH: LEADERSHIP ALWAYS HAS ITS CONSEQUENCES.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Solomon, whose name means peace, found peace slipping away during the final years of his reign. His son Rehoboam was to take his place as ruler over the 12 tribes of Israel. A large party of disgruntled leaders led by Jeroboam showed up at Rehoboam's coronation ceremony requesting that he grant relief from the heavy burden of taxation and forced labor that Solomon had placed on them. Rehoboam rejected the counsel of the experienced elders and took the advice of his immature peers who theorized that bullying and intimidation were better leadership tactics than servanthood. Rehoboam promised even heavier taxation and more forced labor. With one decision, the nation divided and its fate was sealed.

Only Rehoboam's tribe of Judah remained loyal to him. The other 10 tribes to the north seceded, took the name of Israel and made Jeroboam their king. Instead of appreciating the gracious gift of God, Jeroboam, like Aaron centuries before, set up idols of counterfeit worship, leading Israel into idolatry. God sent a prophet who warned of judgment for their idolatry and predicted that someday a king named Josiah, a descendant of David, would destroy their pagan worship sites (this was fulfilled 290 years later). As a sign to authenticate his message, the pagan altar split in two and Jeroboam's outstretched hand turned leprous.

This did little to curb Jeroboam's pagan practices. When his son became ill he sent his wife in disguise to the prophet Ahijah to inquire about their son's fate. Though blind, Ahijah's spiritual sight was 20-20. He not only saw through the charade, but gave Jeroboam's wife a message of doom predicting that her husband's dynasty would soon end and Israel would one day be carried away into captivity. The message of doom was to be authenticated with the death of their son as soon as her footsteps crossed the entrance to the palace. And so it came to pass.

God's chosen people were now committing the same idolatrous and immoral practices that compelled God to purge the land of its Canaanite inhabitants in the first place. God's righteousness and covenant loyalty moved Him to jealous anger. Rehoboam allowed Judah to fall into the same idolatry as the North. The golden years of peace faded further when God judged Judah by using Shishak, king of Egypt. He attacked Judah and carried off the all of the gold and silver treasures. Rehoboam replaced them with bronze, but the decline in moral and spiritual values was even sharper than the drop in value from gold to bronze.

The Lower Story is primarily a list of idolatrous kings who lead both Judah and Israel further and further away from God. Abijah son of Rehoboam became the next king of Judah. His tenure was short and sinful like his father's. No good kings reigned in Israel after the split of the kingdom. Things went from bad to worse with the house of Omri. His evil son King Ahab and her royal wickedness Queen Jezebel drove Israel to new lows in idolatry.

We see two things: First, those who reject the LORD will reap His grim judgment. But second, this judgment is always designed to redirect His people and produce repentance back toward the God who still relentlessly pursues His people, through prophets like Ahijah and kings like Asa who forged a path for people to find their way back to Him. The era of the kings, despite their terrible freedom, inaugurates a path to the King of Kings, who would redeem not just this era of division and strife, but every age from everlasting to everlasting.

I. Idolatry in Israel

- A. God could not have been clearer. If there was one thing that the Israelites were to understand, it was that YHWH alone is God. There is no other, and His divine jealousy requires exclusive devotion to Him alone.
- B. The LORD demonstrated to Israel and Egypt that He alone is God when He struck Egypt with plagues that were directly connected to their gods. (*See Ch.4 lesson plan for details.*)
- C. The LORD put this jealous exclusivity in stone when He gave the Law to Moses and the people of Israel. The Covenant of the Law was predicated upon the redemptive work of God on behalf of Israel, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." THEREFORE, the redeemed were—and are—to maintain an undivided devotion to Him. The First Commandment states, "You shall have no other gods before Me." The second forbids the worship of any idol (Exodus 20:1-5). God's jealousy is a good thing!
- D. Israel experienced the judgment of God when they got involved in Baal worship in Moab just before entering the Promised Land. High Priest Phinehas stopped the heinous acts but 24,000 still died as a result (p. 81-83).
- E. Israel began following after other gods after Joshua died. Their sin of apostasy inevitably led to other kinds of sin as well (Judges 8).
- F. King David understood well that the leader of God's chosen people had a unique privilege and responsibility to keep the Law. His commission of Solomon included the admonition to be obedient to the LORD (p. 176) if he hoped to keep the throne. **Sadly, Solomon did not heed the warnings of his father, and toward the end of his life he followed after the gods of his many foreign wives. This ignited the angry wrath of God (p. 192). God will always fulfill His word. He said He would take the kingdom from the king who failed to follow him, and so He did (p. 192).**
- G. After the kingdom divided, all of northern Israel's kings followed after other gods. Jeroboam, the first king of the north, created a counterfeit cult that looked remarkably like YHWH-worship as prescribed by the Law. That is the insidiousness of idolatry: it takes turns a whole truth into a half-truth so that it is untruth. A counterfeit of the truth is much more dangerous than an idea or practice that openly sets itself up in opposition to the truth.
 1. The calf is reminiscent of the golden calf that Aaron made while Moses was on the mountain.
 2. Priests were appointed to replicate the Levitical priesthood of the true faith of God.
 3. Offerings, sacrifices, and festivals provided worshipers a false sense of security.
- H. Jeroboam became the standard of evil by which all other kings were measured. Notice that accomplishments (as we would define them) are *not* the measurement of a good or evil king. *Nothing else mattered much except one's relationship with the LORD.* This truth never changes!
 1. The object of one's worship will inevitably determine one's way of life. This truth can be seen throughout the whole history of Israel.
 2. In nearly every case of idolatry, there was also sexual immorality. There is a relationship between the two sins.
 3. **Israel's idolatry did not end with this chapter. But neither did God's redemptive mission!**

- a. He deposed evil leaders who continue to lead His precious people away from Him.
- b. He loved them enough to send prophets to proclaim His truth – the truth that life can be found in Him alone.
- c. His ultimate act of redemption came when Jesus took on flesh and pointed all nations to the only God and Father.

II. Idolatry in the New Testament Church

Jesus made it clear that faith in Him is required for salvation. “Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24).

- A. As the gospel spread from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), new churches emerged from pagan, idolatrous cultures. Their newfound faith required a change in worldview and a resulting change in their way of life.
- B. The church in Corinth emerged from a culture that worshiped all kinds of Greek gods, and which placed a major emphasis upon “higher knowledge” and being very “spiritual.” Paul told them, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10:14).
- C. Idolatry is listed among the deeds of the flesh that are at enmity with the Spirit (Galatians 5:20). The one who is walking in the Spirit will not carry out the deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).
- D. The church in Colossae was reminded that their identity was bound up with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of the new self in Christ, their old way of living should be put away. But notice Paul’s comment about idolatry. “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and **greed**, which amounts to idolatry” (Colossians 3:5).
 1. The word for “greed” means covetousness, or the greedy desire to have more.
 2. Paul identifies covetousness as idolatry. Thus, greed puts something or someone ahead of God.
 3. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when He said on the Sermon on the Mount, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24).

III. Idolatry Defined

- A. Greed amounts to idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

–Paul (or God)

- B. *Greed places something or someone ahead of God. It is the longing for something that belongs to someone else or placing supreme value on something not (yet) possessed.*

–Richard Melick

IV. Idolatry in the American Culture and the Church Today

- A. *Is there idolatry in our American culture today? Is there idolatry in our church today?*

- B. Idolatry in our culture and church is evident in at least **two ways**:

1. **GREED** If “**greed**” amounts to idolatry which is defined as “putting something or someone ahead of God” then we must honestly answer *yes!* Perhaps it is not likely to be done blatantly as often as it is subtly.
 - a. *What does “serving wealth” mean? What does it mean for it to be one’s master?*
[Leaders: add some thoughts here appropriate to your particular class.]
 - b. Greed is not synonymous with wealth. The Bible never condemns wealth, but it does condemn any ill-gotten gains by which someone fails to “love his neighbor.”

- c. Jesus made clear that the whole Law could be summarized thus: **love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37). Anything act that is not loving God toward God or toward my neighbor is covetousness and idolatry.**
- d. Greed or covetousness leads us into all kinds of other sins, including the sexual immorality that was associated with idolatry in the life of Israel.
- C. The Apostle John's warning applies to believers of all times and places, but if greed is idolatry, how badly his words needs to be heard today. **"Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).**

V. Applications and Implications

- A. I will learn from the mistakes of the kings in Israel and Judah and not turn away from God.
- B. I will not let other religious beliefs creep into my understanding of Who God is.
- C. Greed is idolatry. Therefore, I will become more self-aware of covetousness in my own life, repent of it and receive God's cleansing.
- D. God is jealous and will not tolerate idolatry indefinitely. He will judge it.
- E. I will prayerfully ask God to reveal to me any idols in my life that I put before my devotion to Him.

Questions:

1. Rehoboam sought counsel to make an important decision (p. 194) and so did Jeroboam (p. 196). What criteria did each seem to use in evaluating the counsel of others? What makes for wise counsel?
2. Jeroboam "counterfeited worship" by redirect Israel's attention away from the temple in Judah to local idols. What did he gain from this?
3. The split of Israel and Judah led to continual warfare for hundreds of years. What issues divide God's people today? Share with your group practical ways to promote unity at our church and unity with believers from other churches.
4. Does the prophecy from the man of God, the sign of the altar, and the leprous hand represent acts of grace or acts of judgment toward Jeroboam (p. 196-197)? What should Jeroboam's response have been?
5. Jeroboam recognized that Ahijah spoke the truth, even when he did not like it. How do you respond when you hear a truth you do not like? How can you be different from Jeroboam and use these as opportunities to change?
6. Have you had an occasion when someone asked you for advice and counsel because he or she respected your integrity and truthfulness? What happened?
7. Under King Rehoboam, the people of Judah "*engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.*" The idolatry in the culture had become the idolatry of God's people. In what ways are God's people today similar to the non-Christian culture all around us? How are we different?