

“Jeroboam: Who Caused Israel to Sin”

1 KINGS 12:25-33

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This morning, I would invite you to think with me about one of the most evil men who ever lived. In fact, when I put this man's name in the Bible program on my computer, the program gave me 22 passages where this man's name is used in conjunction with the word ***“sin,”*** and a vast majority of those references point out that this man ***“caused Israel to sin.”*** In other words, not only did HE sin, but the scriptures very clearly indicate that his influence also led the nation of Israel down a path of sin and destruction for several hundred years after his own death. I am referring, of course, to Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

For a little bit of background, I would invite you to turn with me to the first part of 1 Kings 12. We know that Saul, David, and Solomon were the first three kings of Israel. Jeroboam was a young man who worked under King Solomon, and yet when King Solomon died, the kingdom went to his son, Rehoboam. When Rehoboam took over, the people wanted him to ease up a little bit on the taxes. And so at that point, Rehoboam faced a decision: Should he continue with the oppressive policies of his father, or should he give the people a little bit of a break? Well, he went to the elders, and the elders said, ***“Ease up a little bit – let the people serve you out of love, not out of fear”*** (paraphrased). Well, he really didn't like that answer, so Rehoboam went to his younger friends, to his peers, and his young advisors said, ***“No, you need to put your foot down on this situation. You need to up those taxes. You need to show them who's boss.”*** That sounded good to the young king, so Rehoboam dropped the hammer. In 1 Kings 12:14, Rehoboam called an assembly of the people, and the king said, ***“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.”*** That, of course, did not go over well, so (starting in verse 16) we find that a vast majority of the nation basically said, ***“No! We will have no part of this!”*** And so the northern tribes pulled away. As we might say here in the United States, they ***“seceded from the Union.”*** Here in the United States, at the time of the Civil War (back in 1861), the South rebelled. But in ancient Israel, it was the North that pulled away, and they pulled away over the issue of taxation. If you remember: Saul, David, and Solomon reigned for a total of 120 years. Rehoboam, then, destroyed in one day what it had taken 120 years to build. There are some amazing lessons here for the church. Over decades, faithful men and women can labor and sacrifice, and all of that hard work can be undone by one or two false teachers who come in destroy a congregation with some off-the-wall doctrine. And what has taken decades to build can be brushed aside with one or two rather rash decisions. That is basically what happened under the leadership of Rehoboam. He refused to listen to wisdom, and instead decided to take the low road, dividing God's united kingdom.

Well, at this point, Jeroboam steps up – he is already respected by the people of the North – and so the northern tribes made him their king. It is interesting to me that (starting in verse 21), Rehoboam (king in the south) started getting the army together to go up and beat the north into submission. However, at that point, God steps in and basically says, “No, that’s okay – this thing is from Me – let the north do their own thing.” And so apparently, God had some kind of a plan. Perhaps the Lord saw some potential for good in Jeroboam.

However, as we know from history, that is not how things turned out. Jeroboam had the freedom to choose, and Jeroboam chose to go in the wrong direction. Jeroboam’s sin was turning Israel away from God’s law to follow a course of idolatry and self-guided worship.

The question for us this morning is: Why? Why did he do that? What caused Jeroboam to squander his potential? What caused this king to lead God’s people down a path of destruction? Since we live in a time when people continue to turn away from God, and since people continue to want to worship in any way they please, there is something to be learned from asking, “Why?” Why did Jeroboam turn away from God? If we can answer this question, then perhaps we will be able to strengthen our own resolve and to avoid turning down the path of Jeroboam. This morning, as we try to answer this question, I would invite you to turn with me to 1 Kings 12:25-33 (p. 568).

Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and lived there. And he went out from there and built Peniel. Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom will return to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will return to their lord, even to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.” So the king consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.” He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. And he made houses on high places, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi. Jeroboam instituted a feast in the eighth month on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast which is in Judah, and he went up to the altar; thus he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves which he had made. And he stationed in Bethel the priests of the high places which he had made. Then he went up to the altar which he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised in his own heart; and he instituted a feast for the sons of Israel and went up to the altar to burn incense.

As we look at this paragraph of God’s word, I would suggest three reasons why Jeroboam did what he did.

- I. **First of all, I would suggest that Jeroboam led the nation down the path to idol worship because HE FEARED LOSING HIS POWER AND POSITION.**

Today we might say that he feared losing numbers. He feared losing his followers. Here he was: In charge, put there by God with the support of the people, and yet once he got the position, he feared losing it. And so, from the very beginning, King Jeroboam felt insecure and decided that he needed to do whatever was necessary to avoid losing his position.

And to illustrate the problem that King Jeroboam was facing, I want to show a map of the division between the northern and the southern kingdoms. The southern kingdom was headquartered in Jerusalem, and the

northern kingdom at this time was based out of Shechem. You see where that dividing line is, the line between the yellow and the pink, the line between the north and the south. Right away, King Jeroboam also saw that line, and right away, King Jeroboam saw that he had a huge problem. Every year, all Jewish men were required to make at least one trip (and preferably three trips) to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to God. Notice what he says to himself in verse 27, ***“If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will return to their lord, even to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.”*** And so we find in this verse that Jeroboam feared losing power, he feared losing numbers, he feared losing control of the people. So, what does he do? Notice verses 28-29, ***“So the king consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.’ He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.”*** So notice what he did. First of all, the Bible says that he ***“consulted.”*** I can’t help but think of those congregations I know that have had so much trouble in the past. Often, it has started by bringing in consultants. I can think of several congregations who hired a number of so-called “church growth experts” to come in and to tell them what to do. And these people did all kinds of demographic research, and they came to the conclusion, “This is what the people want,” they make those suggestions, they write it all up in a huge report with charts and graphs, the plan is presented to the congregation, the plan is implemented, but often the result is nothing more than spiritual death and destruction.

That is what King Jeroboam did. He ***“consulted,”*** and then he tweaked the worship to reflect the findings of the consultants. We find in verse 28, that the King set up these calves in Bethel and Dan – all because he feared losing control. He feared losing those numbers. And from an earthly point of view, as we look at the map, it makes perfect sense. King Jeroboam was making worship much more convenient. We will get into this more in just a moment, but for now, we find that he changed the place of worship because of fear. He feared losing his people. And so instead of traveling to Jerusalem, the people could now go to Bethel and Dan. Bethel certainly had a rich spiritual history. Bethel was the place where Jacob had the dream about the angels going up and down the ladder with God at the top. In the morning, Jacob made an altar and poured out oil on top as a sacrifice to God. Bethel, then, already had a rich spiritual history, and it was right there just north of the southern border, “Don’t go to Jerusalem! Stay up here! We have a rich spiritual heritage! We have a deep spiritual tradition!” Dan, of course, was way up north and would certainly be a lot easier for those who lived in the northern half of the northern kingdom – much easier than traveling all the way down to Jerusalem.

But I want to emphasize here: The motivation for this part of it was FEAR – fear of losing control, fear of losing the numbers. Fear caused him to change worship, even if it meant violating the word of God in the process. Those who love power are driven to keep it (or get it) no matter what. Nothing, not even violating God’s law, will stand in their way. What Jeroboam forgot was that he was king – not because the people put him there, but because God put him there! In other words, his fear of losing control caused him to forget who was really in charge. Like Rehoboam in the south, Jeroboam also went to the wrong people for advice, and his fear of losing control caused him to turn away from God. And really, everything he did from this point on was focused not on God but on self-preservation. Each decision was made in light of how many people he might lose.

And to me, it seems that the application to modern times is rather obvious. Yes, numbers are important to God. God wants as many people saved as possible. And yet numbers are not why we make decisions in the church. Our number one goal as a congregation is to be pleasing to God. Like Jeroboam, if we start making decisions based solely on how many people we might gain or lose, we have already lost in God’s eyes. Instead, as Tyler read for us from 2 Timothy 4 a little bit earlier, our mission is to preach the word of God. As a friend of

mine from South Africa has said, “We are to preach it when the people are smiling, and we are to preach it when they are not smiling.” Fear of losing numbers is not to be a factor.

II. As we go back to our text for this morning, we find a second reason why Jeroboam did what he did, and that is: HE FAILED TO TRUST GOD.

I know we didn’t look at this earlier, so I want us to go back and just notice God’s promise to Jeroboam back in 1 Kings 11. In the last half of 1 Kings 11, the prophet Ahijah met up with Jeroboam before any of this happened, and through Ahijah, God made a promise – please notice 1 Kings 11:37-38, where God said, ***“I will take you, and you shall reign over whatever you desire, and you shall be king over Israel. Then it will be, that if you listen to all that I command you and walk in My ways, and do what is right in My sight by observing My statutes and My commandments, as My servant David did, then I will be with you and build you an enduring house as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you.”*** I would point out here that God’s promise was conditional. God said, I will do all of these things for you ***“IF you listen to all that I command you and walk in My ways, and do what is right in my sight.”*** That is how easy it could have been. Think of how God had blessed King David. Jeroboam could have had that if he had only followed God’s law. Jeroboam, though, failed to trust God; so instead, he put his trust in himself. Unlike great heroes of faith like Abel, and Noah, and Moses, and David, King Jeroboam failed to put his trust in God, so he put his trust in himself.

Did you notice the first thing Jeroboam did when he became king? Back in our text for this morning, in 1 Kings 12:25, we find that he built Shechem in the hill country and also built Penuel. In other words, he built up these fortified cities as he tried to stay in power. And then, of course, he went on to make those other changes. So, not only did he fear losing power and numbers, but he failed to put his trust in God.

Maybe we could turn this around just a little bit: Since God had promised to give Jeroboam a mighty kingdom if he would only follow God’s commandments, did Jeroboam really think that he would lose his kingdom by encouraging the people to travel to Jerusalem as they obeyed God’s commandments? Do you see the lack of trust there? In his mind, following God’s commandments would CAUSE him to lose power! In other words, Jeroboam failed to trust God. Instead of trusting the One who put him on the throne, Jeroboam disobeyed the One who put him on the throne in an attempt to avoid losing the throne. Jeroboam failed to trust God.

And again, there is a lesson here for the church, and the question is: Do we trust God? Do we trust that God’s plan is best? Do we have the courage to follow God’s plan? This past Wednesday we started looking at the book of Joshua, and we looked at how God had to keep telling Joshua to be ***“strong and courageous.”*** During that discussion, several of our members had some good comments about the need for elders and how as that time gets closer, we will also need a good dose of courage. Again, the question is: Do we trust God? Do we trust that God’s way is the best way? Or do we keep on trying to make a plan work that was never really God’s plan in the first place? In hindsight, King Jeroboam could probably give us some advice in this area.

So, he was motivated by fear (first of all), but another reason things fell apart was that he failed to trust God.

III. As we come near the end of our study this morning, I would point out a third reason why Jeroboam failed as a leader, and that is: JEROBOAM FOLLOWED HIS HEART INSTEAD OF FOLLOWING GOD’S WORD.

Down in verse 33, we find that these things ***“he had devised in his own heart.”*** Jeroboam, then, was following his heart instead of God. Jeroboam was doing whatever felt good to him, instead of doing what felt good to

God. One of the most popular and spiritually disastrous ideas we see in the religious world around us today is that we can worship God as we please. “Sure, God said this, but why not do this, this, and this? After all, if it feels good, if it looks good, if it sounds good, then surely God will be just as happy as we are about it.” I want us to keep that in mind as we think about what Jeroboam did here, as he devised this new way of worship in his heart. As we look at this passage of scripture, we find that Jeroboam made four basic changes.

First of all (as we noticed earlier), Jeroboam changed the PLACE of worship. And again, instead of making the tough decision to do something maybe a little bit difficult (and again, motivated by fear), Jeroboam simply tweaked the word of God just a little bit and made a slight revision. He took the command and made it just a little bit easier. He made it more convenient. He didn’t ask, “Is this right?” but he asked, “Is this easy?” He appealed to personal comfort and convenience, ***“It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem.”*** It is too far, the trip is too expensive, the journey is too dangerous. Ultimately, Jeroboam was only interested in pleasing himself. How different from King David who on one occasion refused to offer a sacrifice to God that cost him nothing. Remember that? In 2 Samuel 24 (near the end of his life), a man offered to give David the animals that were needed for the sacrifice, but David refused the offer and insisted on paying – the sacrifice had to be a sacrifice, a lesson that Jeroboam had not yet learned.

What a difference between the convenience offered by Jeroboam and the offer made by the Lord Jesus himself. You might remember that when the Lord first met his first disciples, most of them were poor, and he left them poor. He offered nothing in terms of financial security or reward. He did not emphasize how easy the Christian life would be; instead, he offered them suffering and a cross. Jeroboam, though, wanted to make worship as easy as possible, even violating God’s word in the process.

Secondly, we also notice in this passage that Jeroboam went on to tweak the OBJECT of worship. In verse 28, he set up calves of gold. In fact, he went even further, ***“Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”*** He claimed that these golden calves were responsible for bringing the people out of Egypt. The calves had produced the Ten Plagues. The calves had parted the Red Sea. The calves had provided food and water in the wilderness. We call this “blasphemy,” ascribing to something other than God the glory that only God deserves.

But what I notice here is that Jeroboam did not try to keep the people from worshiping, and to me, that is interesting. He didn’t say, “No more worshiping,” but he tweaked it. And I think this goes back to what we discussed several weeks ago: As human beings, we have almost an instinctual need to worship something. If Jeroboam had simply told the people that they could no longer be religious, the people would have rebelled. And so instead of totally whacking worship, he simply made a few adjustments. He steered them away from God and toward these golden calves. Does that sound familiar? Very rarely will someone get up and say, “From now on, we will no longer follow the Bible here at this congregation.” Yes, it happens (as some of you know), but usually apostasy is not sudden, it is gradual. By the way, did you notice that situation with the golden calves seems a little familiar? This is pretty close to what Aaron did as Moses was up on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments several hundred years earlier. At that time, Aaron made a golden calf and said, ***“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”*** (Exodus 32:4). Jeroboam came pretty close to quoting Aaron almost word for word. He was using his heart as a standard instead of God’s law. As Jeremiah said, ***“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?”*** (Jeremiah 17:9).

In verse 31, we find a third change based on the king’s heart, and that is: He opened up the priesthood to those who were not from the tribe of Levi. This, of course, would have made a lot of people happy;

specifically, those who were not from the tribe of Levi who had always wanted to serve as priests. However, this change obviously did not make God happy. Jeroboam lowered the standard for those who would lead in worship. He opened it up to those who were not qualified according to God's law. I would also point out here: The Law never said that you could not have a priest from all of the other tribes; instead, the Law said that the Levites were the priests. There is a lesson there on God's law of silence. The Lord doesn't need to tell us all of the thousands of ways that we are NOT to worship; instead, he only needs to tell us what he wants, and we do it, without adding to it or taking away from it. Jeroboam, though, added priests from tribes other than Levi. I can see people from outside the tribe of Levi asking, "Who do you people think you are? We have people outside of Levi who are highly education, skilled in leadership, with much experience in business and in the educational world. Why can't WE be priests?" Does this sound familiar?

And then, in verse 33, we have a fourth little tweak to worship as Jeroboam changed the TIME of worship. He changed it from the seventh month (as God had directed) to the eighth month (as Jeroboam **"devised in his own heart"**). Is one month as good as another? Not, of course, if God has specified the month! If God says, "Do this in January," and we do it in February, we have disobeyed the Lord. If the Lord says, "Do it on Sunday," and we do it on Monday, we have disobeyed the Lord. If the Lord says, "Do it on the first day of every week," and we only do it on Christmas and Easter, we have disobeyed the Lord. And that is what happened with Israel. King Jeroboam changed the date of their worship.

So, Jeroboam changed the place of worship, the object of worship, the leaders of worship, and also the timing of worship. Looking back over these changes, I would point out that there are only two kinds of worship: Man-pleasing and God-pleasing. Man-made worship is concerned about how WE feel. God-pleasing worship is concerned with what God wants out of worship. There is a terrible danger in basing worship based on how WE feel as opposed to using the word of God as our guide.

Conclusion:

As we close, I would point out that one of the worst things about Jeroboam is that he not only messed up his own life, but he also got hundreds of thousands if not millions of others to follow in his footsteps – not just during his own lifetime, but for at least 200 years into the future, from 931 BC when the kingdom divided, to 721 BC when the Assyrians finally came in and destroyed the nation. Even in death, the evil influence lived on. Jeroboam got the ball rolling, and the nation followed that path for several generations. Jeroboam's son reigned for two years before being killed himself, and the man who overthrew Jeroboam's son ended up destroying the entire family. In fact, the Bible says in 1 Kings 15:29-30, that this man, **"...struck down all the household of Jeroboam. He did not leave to Jeroboam any persons alive, until he had destroyed them, according to the word of the Lord ... because of the sins of Jeroboam which he sinned, and which he made Israel sin, because of his provocation with which he provoked the Lord God of Israel to anger."** What a tragic end for a family to whom God had made a promise, **"...if you listen to all that I command you...then I will be with you and build you an enduring house as I built for David..."** (1 Kings 11:38). That promise was conditional. God was willing to build this man an **"enduring house,"** but as it was, Jeroboam turned away from God, and his family was completely wiped off the face of the earth.

And then, even after the death of Jeroboam's son, Jeroboam continued to be known as the one who **"caused Israel to sin."** Jeroboam was the one who sent the Northern Kingdom of Israel down that path of destruction. And really, from that point on, just about every time we read a reference to Jeroboam in the scriptures, that little qualifier is tacked on – we read about some king who walked in the steps of Jeroboam...who caused Israel to sin. His life stands as a warning. Every time he is mentioned in the Bible: Do not be like Jeroboam!

That phrase, ***“Jeroboam, who caused Israel to sin”*** (or something close to that), is found more than 20 times in the Bible. Over and over again in the Northern Kingdom, we read about kings who did evil, and the Bible says that they, ***“did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin which he caused Israel to sin”*** (1 Kings 15:34, and so on), over and over again. Jeroboam’s ongoing influence, in fact, is a leading cause of the Assyrian Captivity, the destruction that was continually and graphically and lovingly warned about in the book of Hosea (the book we just finished studying in our Wednesday evening class). Jeroboam was the first in a long line of evil kings.

Why did God decide to tell us about King Jeroboam? Why is this chapter in the Bible? I would suggest that we are told about his life as a warning. He was given a conditional promise of great power, but 1.) He feared losing that power, 2.) He failed to trust God, 3.) He followed his heart instead of God’s word, and as a result, God saw to it that he was destroyed. The kingdom split nearly 3000 years ago, but the account is there for a reason. The lesson is: We must listen to and obey the word of God. For us, it gets very practical. If the Bible tells us to do something, we need to do it. If the Bible tells us to avoid something, we need to stay away from it.

Thankfully, when we fall, we don’t need to continue down that road as the Israelites did, but the Lord allows us to turn back. In fact, the Lord offers complete forgiveness. To be forgiven of our sins, we must turn away from sin, and we must obey the Lord in baptism. Baptism is a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins. When we are baptized, we are born into God’s family. Once we are in the family, we might slip and fall from time to time, and to be forgiven then, we have to confess our sins to God and keep on turning back to the right path. If you have something we need to pray about, let us know. But if you are ready to be baptized right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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