

## Failures and Faithfulness: Jeroboam

LaGrave Church Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Kings 12:25-13:5

When we read this passage about King Jeroboam this morning, we run the risk of defining his character based on some of the worst moments of his life. He looks terrible in this passage. But it's important to know that once upon a time, people really liked Jeroboam. If he had ever run a political campaign in ancient Israel, his supporters would have shown up carrying signs.

From humble beginnings, Jeroboam had nevertheless distinguished himself when he was young. He worked his way up through the ranks to become "a man of standing," 1 Kings 11:28 says. And in recognition of his skillful and loyal service Solomon had promoted him to oversee the whole labor force of the house of Joseph. Not only does Jeroboam enjoy the favor of King Solomon, he also enjoys the favor of his God. As Jeroboam works under Solomon, God's prophet Ahijah comes to him with an object lesson. Ahijah tears a new cloak into twelve pieces and gives ten of them to Jeroboam. Because of Solomon's idolatry, Ahijah says, God has made a new plan for the monarchy. He says God will "tear" the unified kingdom away from Solomon's family after his death, because Solomon has rejected God. "Jeroboam," he says, "God has chosen you as the next king. You will rule ten of the tribes of Israel. God will give you everything your heart desires if you obey and follow him." And so begins a bitter rivalry between Solomon's house and Jeroboam. Solomon ultimately tries to kill Jeroboam. Jeroboam flees to Egypt, where he lives in exile until after Solomon's death.

The story we read today takes place as this "tearing" of the kingdom is happening. Solomon has died. His son Rehoboam has been crowned king in the mountains of Israel 40 miles north of Jerusalem at Shechem. And Jeroboam returns from exile in Egypt. He arrives in Shechem to see what comes next now that Solomon's reign has ended.

Crowds assemble for Rehoboam's coronation. They have come with existential questions: What kind of King will Rehoboam be? Will he use the same harsh measures to enforce labor policies that Solomon had? Or will the king's son ease up on their quotas and long hours? They appoint Jeroboam as their spokesperson and he presents their concerns to the king. Rehoboam deliberates for three days. Ultimately rejecting the advice of his elders, Rehoboam establishes his authority with an iron fist. In turn, ten of the tribes reject his leadership. Rehoboam runs for his life back to Jerusalem to rule Judah and Benjamin and muster his troops for war against the north. And Jeroboam is crowned King by God's promise and the people's choice. The day he is crowned, Jeroboam has inherited two solid pillars on which to build his reign: God's pledge of faithfulness to him and his family if he walks in God's way; and the people's respect and loyalty. But then something happens. Almost immediately a crack starts to propagate those two pillars. The crack begins with Jeroboam's fear. Faced with a very real threat of civil war with Rehoboam, Jeroboam's first act as king is to fortify Shechem, his new capital city. That makes sense. But then he goes a step farther. He decides to fortify the nation's spiritual boundaries too.

He thinks to himself, "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord Rehoboam King of Judah. They will kill me and return to Rehoboam." So Jeroboam consults his advisors and sets up worship centers complete with golden calves at the edges of his borders. From Bethel in the south to Dan in the far north, everyone living in the ten tribes of Israel can access a place of worship within friendly territory. It's possible that in doing this, Jeroboam means to communicate geographically that the LORD is God over the whole territory of Israel. From north to south, Yahweh is enthroned above these two calves like he is enthroned between the cherubim at the temple in Jerusalem. But the narrator of 1 Kings says this breach of the first two commandments is no good for Israel. It marks a decisive turning point.

Jeroboam's fear, that the people's hearts will turn to Rehoboam, blinds him to a far more significant threat: that by his actions people's hearts will turn to idols and away from God. Blinded by his fear, Jeroboam sacrifices love for Yahweh expressed through faithful worship in Jerusalem. In exchange, he seeks to protect his own limited, merely human kingdom. "And this thing," the narrator of Kings says, "became a sin."

The king by popular choice appeals to the Israelites' comfort and convenience. In that way it is easy to sell his new national program of worship. One thing leads to another and soon Jeroboam is appointing priests of his choice to high places of his choice and instituting a new religious festival of his choice. He ends up

leading people far afield from the living God. This sin becomes so notorious in the memory of Israel that Jeroboam's whole legacy is summed up by it. The writer of Kings refers to it frequently through the reigns of other kings as "Jeroboam's sin" or "the sin of the house of Jeroboam." Though Solomon's idolatry paved the way for Jeroboam's failures, the writer of Kings lays the sin of a nation squarely on the shoulders of Jeroboam.

200 years after the time of Jeroboam, the Assyrians carried off the Israelites into exile. 2 Kings 17:21-23 comments on the reason for the exile: "Jeroboam enticed Israel away from following the LORD and caused them to commit a great sin. The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them until the Lord removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets...." What a legacy. It's really hard to imagine a leader called and appointed by God setting out and intending to lead a whole group of people away from God. But we know that it happens now as it did back then, so it gives us pause. How can such a thing happen?

Jeroboam makes a series of bad decisions in reaction to the threats facing him and his people. He stewes and he ruminates and he thinks in increasingly catastrophic terms. His decisions are not based in the promises of God but in his perception of reality as he sees it. This is a very human problem. People don't make good decisions when we're reacting under threat.

This week a small group of Council members and I met with an international crisis response expert and Christian therapist named Bob VandePol. Bob comes into communities both in the United States and internationally when there are largescale tragedies or natural disasters that need crisis response support. We asked Bob to help us understand on a human level what happens to people and communities when they experience ongoing challenges. What factors and habits can help us cope and adapt?

One of the things we talked about was psychology: how the human brain responds to perceived threats. We pictured the brain as a fist, like this, with the decision-making center of the brain in our prefrontal cortex, represented by our fingers. The amygdala is the reflexive part of our brains, the deep brain part of us that makes flight, fight, or freeze decisions based on how it senses danger.

When our fears go on high alert, our brains take a shortcut to help us survive. Our thoughtful, reasoned decision-making centers shut down and we react instinctively. This happens without us thinking about it. It's become known as an amygdala hijack. It's incredibly helpful if we need all our energy to run away from a bear in the woods or escape rising floodwaters. It's much less helpful when it happens under the stresses and fears of daily modern life that don't involve bears or floods.

Many of the fears we face are better addressed by responding thoughtfully rather than reacting instinctively. When we feel anxiety rise, we can look around and see where the threat lies. If no bears and no floods are around, we can take a breath and slow our reactions down. We can see that we aren't in imminent mortal danger, and respond in better ways.

Have you ever made a bad decision in a moment of fear? A decision that ended up leading you away from God? I know I have. You felt fear; you reacted; and words or behaviors you wished you could take back were released into the world. Sometimes we live to really regret the effects of such reactive moments. I wonder if that's where Jeroboam's bad choices got their start. And then once he went down a path of idolatry and away from God, it was pretty hard to turn the whole nation back around.

In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller names possible idols even devout people can turn to, sometimes gradually and without our notice. "An idol is something that we look to for things that only God can give. Idolatry functions widely inside religious communities when doctrinal truth is elevated to the position of a false god. This occurs when people rely on the rightness of their doctrine for their standing with God rather than on God himself and his grace. It is a subtle but deadly mistake. Making an idol out of doctrinal accuracy, ministry success, or moral rectitude leads to constant internal conflict, arrogance and self-righteousness, and oppression of those whose views differ. (181-182)

What idols call to you when you are afraid? Control? Passivity when you might have some agency? The pursuit of security? Peace at any price? Something calls to all of us. And so we watch ourselves for this. We ask God in his grace to show us where we may be blind. Little turns in our hearts away from reliance on the grace of God through Jesus Christ can lead us down a path strewn with idols. It's possible to find ourselves quite far from where we began or where we hoped to end up. Sometimes the path originates with our fears.

Our God knows how our brains and bodies work. He made them. He knows our tendency to rely on what we can do rather than on what he can do. And maybe that's why he commands us. Do not be afraid!

This command shows up more often than any other in the Bible. I learned that this week talking with Peter, and yesterday my husband told me he's known this since college. Somehow this fear-riddled human either forgot or just learned that important truth. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 75 times, in 24 books from Genesis to Revelation, God commands his people not to be afraid! Very often the command comes at times when fear is an instinctive human response. Do not be afraid, God says to a childless Abram in Genesis 15. Do not be afraid, Moses says to the people at the edge of the Red Sea. Do not be afraid, Mary, the angel says. Do not be afraid, little flock, Jesus says, for the Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Do not be afraid, Jesus says, I am the First and the Last. "Don't be afraid" is not just a command. It's also a reassuring promise. We don't serve fear all the time because our Crucified Emmanuel is with us. And we serve him.

After reading what the man of God says in 1 Kings 13 today, you might expect to turn the page over to 1 Kings 14 and hear that the promised Davidic King, Josiah, has been crowned and is starting his work to rid the land of idols. But God works in his own perfect and mysterious timing. 200 years after the time of Jeroboam's original sin, the king foretold by the prophet comes to the throne. Josiah will reform the nation's worship practices. God will turn the hearts of his idolatrous people back to himself, even if it's through the harsh realities of exile. Josiah's kingship anticipates another.

This King takes the sin of Jeroboam that echoes down through the ages on his own shoulders. This King will face down the fear of suffering and abandonment that could tempt him to turn away from the living God to worship a counterfeit, and he will respond with faithfulness and trust. And ultimately this King will ascend the wooden altar of the cross, which should split open at the injustice of such a sacrifice. This King is called Jesus, because he saves his people from their sins. This King's grace destroys all of our idols. This King's perfect love casts out our fear.

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