

Lessons from the Life of Rehoboam

A Study in 1 Kings 11:26 — 12:16

First Kings begins where Second Samuel leaves off—at the end of King David’s reign. In First Kings, Solomon was anointed king of Israel. The nation was at its peak in size and in power. Wealth was pouring into Solomon’s treasure houses. An impressive royal palace was constructed, and a magnificent temple was dedicated in the days of Solomon. But the original united kingdom of Israel—which began under Saul and David, and continued under Solomon—was soon divided into two separate monarchies.

The nation Israel divided into a northern region known as Israel (or sometimes “Ephraim,” named after the largest tribe), and a southern region known as Judah (also named after its largest tribe). After the division, Samaria (earlier called “Shechem”) was the capital of the North, and Jerusalem was the capital of the South. The division was followed by a period of more than two hundred years of injustice and oppression which led to moral decline—and finally to capture by an enemy nation.

There are some sobering parallels between this early civilization and our own. Human hearts today (unless changed by the power of God through the new birth) are inclined toward the same actions and behaviors that occurred in the days of the divided kingdom in ancient Israel. In these records, we are given lessons that are intended for our benefit.

At the height of its power, the nation Israel under David and Solomon included all of Palestine. Governing and protecting the land required lots of laborers and soldiers and a variety of staff officials. All this required more and more tax money.

Solomon had engaged in massive building programs, including the Temple in Jerusalem and his own palace. To accomplish these massive undertakings, he had pressed large numbers of people into forced labor gangs (1 Kings 9:15,17,22). Non-Jews were slaves to do the building, and Jewish citizens were often made captains, commanders, and overseers of various kinds.

The key person in the division of the kingdom of Israel into two parts was Solomon’s son, Rehoboam. (It is interesting to note that even though Solomon sinned against God in taking many wives, Rehoboam is the only child of Solomon named in the Scriptures. Rehoboam was likely Solomon’s oldest son. We have no other record of Solomon’s family, nor does the Bible speak of Rehoboam before this time.) Our study deals with the controversy that led to the dividing of God’s chosen people (in the days of Rehoboam) into two nations—Israel in the north, and Judah in the south.

1. Background Leading to the Division (1 Kings 11:26-40)

By the time Solomon had died, many of the people were agitating for relief from the tax burdens and the forced labor gangs. Solomon’s kingdom was outwardly rich, prosperous, and thriving—but there were internal evidences of growing discontent. When Solomon’s death occurred, his son Rehoboam was set to be the next king of the nation Israel. But the unrest among the ten northern tribes was deep and

intense (1 Kings 11:26-40), and they made a special request which was not honored by Rehoboam. As a result, they seceded from the larger body and formed a separate nation.

Actually, the nation Israel was not totally united even in the days of David, when the kingdom was supposedly united. People in the North did not accept David's reign at first. David had reigned *only over Judah* for the first seven and one-half years of his reign. After that, he became the leader of the northern tribes too, and then reigned *over all Israel* for thirty-three years. And then when Solomon came along, it seems that he had treated the northern tribes more harshly than he treated Judah in the South. But now Solomon was dead, and Rehoboam (Solomon's son) was seeking acceptance by all twelve tribes.

Solomon had earlier been warned by the prophet Ahijah that the kingdom would be divided. Ahijah had taken his outer garment, and torn it into twelve pieces—which symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel. Ten of the pieces were given to a man named Jeroboam, signifying that he would become the leader of the ten tribes (1 Kings 11:29-40). Jeroboam was a talented servant whom Solomon had chosen as an officer over some of his labor gangs (1 Kings 11:28). When Solomon somehow learned about Ahijah's prediction, he tried to kill Jeroboam, but Jeroboam fled to Egypt where he remained until Solomon's death.

When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam was to be the next king of Israel, but when he was about to ascend the throne, there was trouble. Rehoboam sensed the unrest among the people in the North. To help ease the tension, he went to Shechem (a town about 35 miles north of Jerusalem) for the coronation, rather than to Jerusalem, where the new kings were generally crowned.

In First Kings 12, verses 1 and 2 explain that the ceremony for installing Rehoboam as king of Israel was to be held at Shechem, and that when Jeroboam heard about it, he returned from Egypt and was present at Shechem when the crowning of Rehoboam was to have taken place.

2. The Request of the People (1 Kings 12:3-4)

When Rehoboam (Solomon's son) was about to be crowned, there was dissatisfaction among the people. Jeroboam and the leaders of the ten northern tribes asked Rehoboam to lighten the burdens that were causing so much hardship for the people. They were calling for some relief from the heavy tax burdens, and from the drafting of men into labor gangs.

The people from the North did not produce a long list of grievances, nor did they threaten to secede. These folks were not refusing to pay taxes, nor were they refusing to volunteer for some service projects, but they wanted Rehoboam to make their heavy yoke lighter. If he would do so, they would continue to function under his leadership.

3. The Advice Given to Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:5-11)

Rehoboam responded to the request for relief by saying that he needed three days to consider their request, and to evaluate the situation before he made a decision (verse 5).

Verses 6-8 of the lesson tell how Rehoboam sought advice from the older men of the community. These older advisors urged Rehoboam to give a favorable response to the people. They agreed that the concern of the people was valid, and that they should be given a break from their heavy tax and labor burdens. However, verse 8 already informs us that the arrogant and immature Rehoboam disregarded the advice of the older men.

There are no doubt several reasons why Rehoboam rejected the counsel of the elders.

- 1) Their words criticized the action of his father for the levy of heavy tax burdens, and perhaps he resented that.
- 2) If the taxes would be reduced, no doubt Rehoboam would have to do without some of the tax-paid luxuries he was enjoying.
- 3) It could be that Rehoboam turned to the older men simply out of courtesy, and may never have intended to heed their advice.

Verses 9-11 in First Kings 12 tell about the advice given by the younger men whom Rehoboam contacted. Rehoboam turned to younger men who he thought might give counsel more to his liking. The younger men advocated a tough, no-nonsense approach.

They acknowledged that Solomon had placed a heavy burden on the people, but they apparently wanted to flatter the king by supporting his vanity and greed. They told Rehoboam to say, “my little finger shall be thicker than my father’s loins” (verse 10). The meaning of that little quip is this: *Rehoboam’s weakest actions will be more severe than his father’s strongest actions*. They also told Rehoboam to say, “my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions” (verse 11). Solomon sometimes used whips on his labor crews, but Rehoboam would use special whips called “scorpions” because they were especially painful whips (straps in which pieces of metal or bone were embedded).

Rehoboam is to be commended for seeking advice from others, but he really should have used some part of the three-day time period to seek God’s will in prayer. James 1:5 says, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” God does not scold or discourage us from coming to Him for help.

4. The Choice Rehoboam Made (1 Kings 12:12-16)

When the three days had expired, Rehoboam and all the people again assembled to hear Rehoboam’s response to the people’s request.

Instead of accepting the sensible advice of the senior advisors, Rehoboam brazenly chose to listen to his arrogant younger cronies. To those people who were appealing for an easing of the heavy tax burden, Rehoboam recklessly answered that he would make the conditions even more harsh. He would not only use the typical leather whip on the work crews, but he would discipline with scorpions (verse 14)—that is, with the whips that were especially painful.

Verse 13 says that Rehoboam answered the people “roughly” (that is, with harshness in his voice). A gentle answer may not have satisfied the people, but the harsh answer served only to fan the flames of discontent even more. Rehoboam’s decision shattered any hope of further unity (verse 14), and so the people in the ten northern tribes chose to break away and form their own nation. They felt there was nothing to be gained by remaining under Rehoboam’s leadership. From that day on, there were two kings, two capitals, two administrations, two armies, and two systems of priesthood among God’s chosen people.

In verse 15, the writer of First Kings draws back the curtain for just a moment, and shows us that behind the scenes God was working. God used the decision of Rehoboam to fulfill the prophecy uttered by the prophet Ahijah sometime earlier, when he said that only Judah would remain for Solomon’s heir to rule over.

Verse 16 says that Rehoboam’s rejection of the request of the people led to a call for them to return to their homes.

Rehoboam’s answer to the people of the northern tribes lacked tactfulness and compassion. His foolish choice had several tragic consequences:

- 1) The nation split, and hostilities between the north and south persisted for many years. For two hundred years, Israel (in the North) and Judah (in the South) went their separate ways, always suspicious of each other, and filled with hostility toward each other.
- 2) Rehoboam was left with a diminished southern kingdom of Judah. According to First Kings 14:23-24, Rehoboam’s reign overall was an evil period, a time when the people fell into idolatry and set up images, and permitted perverted persons (sodomites) to prosper in the land.
- 3) Jeroboam, the new king of the North, insisted on setting up a rival religion that would keep his people away from worshiping Jehovah in Jerusalem (which was in the South). So Jeroboam set up two calves for their worship, one in Bethel and the other way up north in Dan, and said, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28).

Rehoboam made a bad choice, and there were bad results. Just so, our choices have ramifications for us and for others. Every day we are bombarded with dozens of messages advising us what to buy, how to be successful, where to find fun and pleasure, etc. By way of advertisements, newspaper articles, sermons, seminars, and conversations with friends—we are pushed to follow certain lines of conduct. We must determine to choose wisely.

There are some practical applications from the lesson:

- 1) It is wise to ask qualified advisors for their help when we have difficult decisions to make. Try to find someone who demonstrates godly character and wisdom in daily life. If possible, find someone who has handled well some situations that were similar to yours.

2) The lesson in First Kings 12 should remind us to heed the voices of the oppressed. The Bible message repeatedly emphasizes the need to remember those who are in desperate situations. We must not neglect those who are suffering and forgotten.

3) Sometimes when we seek advice from others, some of our friends will tell us only what they think we want to hear. Sometimes we are asked to recommend (or not recommend) persons who are applying for a job, or are seeking entry into a college program. One college president said that some of the glowing evaluations he gets from people who serve as references for those seeking admission—are so adulatory (so flattering), that you would think the person being recommended must be a fourth member of the Holy Trinity! We should seek advice (and recommendations) from people who will be unbiased in their judgments.

4) The counsel of Rehoboam's young friends says something about Rehoboam's character. He was a crony (close friend) of the arrogant young men. Note that in First Kings 12:6 (to the older men), Rehoboam asked, "How do ye advise **that I** may answer this people?" But in First Kings 12:9 (to the younger men), Rehoboam asked, "What counsel give ye **that we** may answer this people?" The use of the plural "we" indicates that Rehoboam was a close friend with the snobbish and haughty young men. Wrong company corrupts good manners (1 Corinthians 15:33).

5) Just as Rehoboam's response to the people of the northern tribes lacked careful tact and compassion, so our generation is more and more caught up in using crude "in-your-face" kinds of words. Some of the radio and TV talk shows thrive on abrasive and heartless responses to each other's points of view. Crude and heartless language should not be part of our vocabularies.

There are some Bible characters, who, when making choices, chose wisely. Moses, for example, had to choose between suffering ill treatment by aligning with God's people, or enjoying life in a king's palace in Egypt (Hebrews 11:24-27). On one side, he could be part of the most civilized nation on the face of the earth; on the other side, he could join a downtrodden nation of Hebrew slaves, whose only riches were the promises made by an invisible God. Moses looked ahead to the future reward (Hebrews 11:26), and chose to suffer affliction with the people of God.

The decision of Moses stands in stark contrast to the decision made by Rehoboam. Rehoboam looked to his own welfare in the present; Moses was concerned that he may be among the saved when the world is someday judged by Jehovah God. Moses looked far into the future and fixed his gaze on the coming reward. He looked beyond time into eternity. He looked beyond earth into Heaven. He looked beyond the visible to the invisible. By faith—Moses saw the rewards of eternity. If you say that there is no eternity and no God and no judgment and no hereafter—then of course the matter of making a wise choice doesn't seem to be so nearly as crucial.

Victor Frankl was a psychiatrist who lived through the horror of a concentration camp during World War 2. He concluded that no matter what happened to a person, one thing could not be taken away. That one thing is the freedom to choose our responses to the circumstances of life. Even when our circumstances are not good, we still have the power to choose. We make choices about how we will use our time and money. We decide which jobs we will take at various stages in life. We choose whether we

will marry and whom we will marry. We decide how we will relate to family and friends and even our enemies.

Making proper choices is an important activity in life. Most of us have made choices which we wish we could make again. Most of us have said about a choice that was made: "If only I had taken this step instead of that step."

A critical moment comes in every life, when each person must make a choice that will have eternal consequences. Every human being must choose between the narrow road that leads to heavenly bliss, and the broad road that leads to eternal destruction. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

Remember that life here on earth for any one of us may soon be over. It could be that the coffin in which your body will lie is at the undertaker's establishment already this minute. Five minutes after you die, if you die outside of Christ, you would willingly crawl to your nation's capital building and back (on your hands and knees) if you could get an offer like you are getting today. Each of us has to choose between life and death, between sin and holiness, between the world and Christ, between fellowship with the children of God and friendship with the offspring of the devil. May God help each reader to make wise choices in light of eternity.

One of these days "the heavens, being on fire, shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat" (2 Peter 3:12). It will be too late then to decide for Christ.

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