

Succession | Good News from Bad Kings

“Faux Show”

1st Kings 12.25-13.1; 14.21-28
10.22.23

1 Kings 12.25 Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. ²⁶ Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will return to the house of David. 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." ²⁸ 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." ²⁹ He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. ³⁰ Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. ³¹ And he made houses on high places, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi. ³² 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. ³³ 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.

^{13.1} Now behold, there came a man of God from Judah to Bethel by the word of the LORD, while Jeroboam was standing by the altar to burn incense.

1 Kings 14.21 Now Rehoboam the son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the LORD had chosen from all the tribes of Israel to put His name there. And his mother's name was Naamah the Ammonitess. ²² Judah did evil in the sight of the LORD, and they provoked Him to jealousy more than all that their fathers had done, with the sins which they committed. ²³ For they also built for themselves high places and sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and beneath every luxuriant tree. ²⁴ There were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel.

²⁵ Now it happened in the fifth year of King Rehoboam, that Shishak the king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. ²⁶ He took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house, and he took everything, even taking all the shields of gold which Solomon had made. ²⁷ So King Rehoboam made shields of bronze in their place and committed them to the care of the commanders of the guard who guarded the doorway of the king's house. ²⁸ Then it happened as often as the king entered the house of the LORD, that the guards would carry them and would bring them back into the guards' room.

Last week, Phil spoke to us about *Legacy and Counsel* – Solomon's son, Rehoboam, takes counsel from the young-guns and not from the older, more experienced members of his cabinet and that rash, tough-guy-approach led to a civil war in ancient Israel that lasted for centuries.

Today, we look at the initial moves in this divided nation. Jeroboam, king of the North and Rehoboam, king of the South, BOTH implement political, religious initiatives to secure their reigns. Both are worried about

an issue also facing us. And this issue is something I've considered addressing for some time; it's the elephant in the room (as they say) but the elephant is NOT in the room – I'm talking about church attendance. Where ARE they?

You may be surprised to know that in the earliest period of American History, about 17 percent of colonial citizens were active in churches. Between 1776 and 1850 church participation jumped from 17 percent to 34 percent and Church attendance peaked in the early 1960s. (Martin Marty, "Church Attendance Wasn't Always Robust in Past"; Nov 7, 2012; Sighting, Univ of Chicago).

So, things have been much worse BUT what's especially troubling in our moment is the precipitous drop. The numbers in our society were falling *before* the pandemic but *now* we have to talk about the unchurched AND the dechurched – people who have left the Christian Church during the pandemic and have not returned.

So, let's talk about the elephant NOT in the room:

- 1) Unchurched and Dechurched**
- 2) Peccatus Interruptus**
- 3) Authentic Simplicity**

I have to interrupt us, *i.e., interrupt this previously scheduled program* to offer a few tips on reading this phase of Israel's History. For the next few centuries, the nation remains divided. The Southern part goes by Judah or Jerusalem. The Northern part of the kingdom – that has TEN of the twelve tribes – goes by Israel and sometimes by Samaria. You have to keep that straight or you'll get lost. JEROboam is king of the North (Israel) and REHOboam (son of Solomon) is king of the South (Judah and Jerusalem).

Now Jeroboam (in the North) realizes that REHOboam (Solomon's son in the South) has a real advantage in holding on to his tribes and that is the Temple. The Temple is a magnet and Jeroboam (North) fears that he doesn't have anything that can rival that attraction in Jerusalem. He fears that there will be a wholesale defection and that all his citizens will migrate to Jerusalem to attend the Temple. It's a well-founded fear (he could lose his head!)

So, he contacts some architects and some consultants and he builds a religious theme-park.

And the central attraction, the *Space Mountain*, of his religious theme-park is NOT ONE, but TWO golden calves.

And then, following his consultants (the experts), he lets all his citizens know: "Ya don't have to make that long, grueling, sweaty trip to Jerusalem to worship – you can avoid the crowds and the traffic and all the MANY inconveniences and stay here in Penuel because 'BEHOLD YOUR GODS, O Israel, that brought you from the land of Egypt!' Hooray!!"

Let's take note of a few things. Jeroboam (king of the North) fancies himself a new Moses. He makes reference to coming out of Egypt and sees himself as the savior God used to rescue them from the new Pharaoh – that taskmaster, REHOboam the slavedriver of Jerusalem.

BUT in reality, Jeroboam (in the North) is NOT a new Moses but a new Aaron. It was Aaron who made the golden calf when Moses was up on the mountain wasting time with God. And it was Aaron who'd said to the Israelites, "*Behold your god*". Jeroboam (whether he knows it or not) is imitating Aaron. In fact, Jeroboam even named his sons after Aaron's sons – Nadab and Abihu – Jeroboam names his sons, Nadab and Abijah (pretty close!)

And Jeroboam appoints priests – as if he has the authority from God to DO that. He's taking the place of Aaron and the writer wants us to see that.

Then, after he started one spiritual amusement-park in Anaheim CA he starts another in Orlando (Dan and Bethel). And he names the first shrine "Penuel" meaning "Face of God" i.e., where Jacob saw that face of God and wrestled with the angel, as if to say, "Bring the whole family – we can guarantee a real experience with God like Jacob had – come see the face of God!" Then he starts mini-parks like religious franchises – high-places (v. 31) so everyone can be included like universal theme-parks!

THEN, he sort of re-invents the calendar and starts a new holiday AND to be a good example to the people (to prime the pump) he himself worships ON the new holiday and AT the altar. And the key phrase in the whole scene is v. 33 "*which he had devised in his own heart*". This short first passage is riddled with words like devised, made, built, instituted, made, made, made (comp w 11.38 – build, give).

He was a master-marketeer, an innovator and a very successful politician, and he found a VERY effective tool to keep the people happy – religion! – a spirituality you can see, touch, control and do it yourself!

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, back in Jerusalem, in the South, REHOboam is NOT to be outdone! He's in *The City of God* (for real!). This IS the place that God Himself chose for David, for Solomon and for His people, "*Jerusalem, the city which the LORD had chosen from all the tribes of Israel to put His name there*" (14.21) but the king's people are actively, deliberately cheating on God.

They set up these shrines with phallic-symbols and they sleep around with other gods – they literally act out spiritual union, spiritual fornication with male cult-prostitutes AND they adopt the spirituality of the gentile tribes which included human sacrifice – babies offered to murder-gods in an attempt to get the forces of nature to make life a little easier and get more stuff. And Rehoboam (in Judah/Jerusalem) is allowing all this IN THE CHOSEN CITY.

Two insecure kings worried about church-attendance – well, worried about their own success, popularity and position. It's the faux show. It's counterfeit, novel, pragmatic, synthetic spirituality/religion. And it amounts to the worst, most blatant forms of spiritual adultery.

And then... it's Peccatus Interruptus... peccatus is Latin for sin... God interrupts the sin. We included only one verse of CH 13; let me read it again (second paragraph): *"Now behold, there came a man of God from Judah to Bethel by the word of the LORD, while Jeroboam was standing by the altar to burn incense."*

Sin is interrupted by the Word of the Lord. The whole CH 13 is a weird and wonderful interruption of death and sin. The man God sent` from Judah is NOT something WE devise or do or innovate or make or build or initiate or control. He comes by God's initiative.

If we read CH 13 (and please do) we'd find this man of Judah prophesying against and speaking directly to the ALTAR (a lifeless object) (QUOTE) *"He cried against the altar by the word of the LORD, and said, 'O altar, altar, thus says the LORD.'" What we worship is the clearest expression of our HEARTS, so he is speaking to the adulterous heart of the people!*

Rehoboam is literally in the act of committing spiritual adultery when he hears, "Ah-hmmm!" And the man of God from Judah says: *"Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you."* (13.2) Josiah is the child-king who appears in CH 22 (eight-years-old).

Then he says that there will be a sign: the altar, the bed of spiritual adultery, will be split in two. The king of the North, Rehoboam, offering incense to faux gods, caught with his pants down, is furious! He points at the man of God from Judah and says, "Arrest that man!"

But his arm *"became paralyzed in that position, and he couldn't pull it back"* (NLT) Just then the altar splits in two. And when Rehoboam begs to be healed, God gives him grace and heals him – it's a sign that he can repent and return to the God of grace... but he doesn't.

Later the man of God from Judah (in the South) meets an old prophet from the North and that prophet tricks the man of God into breaking God's command... and the man of God is then KILLED BY A LION. The prophet apparently feels bad about it and gives his own grave in which the man of God from Judah is buried... and he even asks that when HE DIES that he'd be buried in that same grave.

Weird.

But why is this whole interruption – this peccatus interruptus – why's it included in the Bible?

My guess is that God is showing us something about HOW His Word and His grace disturb, disrupt, break-up bold sin. Where sin abounds so does grace MORE abound (Rom 5.20). THIS IS NOT synthetic, do-it-yourself religion – this is the One True and Living God coming out from the behind the curtain to save us and stop the advance of sin.

The weird scene piles up a bunch of tropes and symbols and patterns God will repeatedly use in the Bible and that God will use supremely in Jesus Christ. HE, the Light of the World, is lurking in the shadows of this passage.

The prophecy of Josiah, the child king, reminds us of a similar prophecy, *“For unto us a child will be born, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace”*. (Isa. 9.6) Jesus Christ is the greater Josiah, the Perfect Child-King come to smash all altars and end all sacrifice and interrupt sin forever. He’s the great interruption.

Jesus Christ IS the Word from God – the mind/logos of God made flesh. He too is of the tribe of Judah and is, in fact, the Lion of Judah who puts an end to the prophets by making us ALL prophets (1 Cor 14.5; Acts 2.17 “and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...”) – HE is the Final Word (Heb 1.1-3) and when we speak HIM, we’re prophesying.

He is the innocent Man of God who’s punished – in fact, He is thē God-Man, who’s slain for the sins of His people. He too was buried in another man’s grave. And HE, crushing death by resurrection, His empty tomb becomes “the deeper magic”, the portal from this world of counterfeits to the Next World of substance and weight, of joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Peter 1.8). If our bodies are laid in His tomb then we TOO are raised to life.

Rehoboam saw the Temple plundered and tried to ignore that the glory days were GONE. He puts faux bronze-shields in place of Solomon’s gold. In a sense, he exchanged the glory and truth of God for a lie (Romans 1.23-25)... It’s like they still go through the motions but without the Creator who is ever blessing, ever blessed. Instead of exploring, adoring, receiving and believing the Creator – THEY become creators, innovators and then... they’re on their own. They’re without God and without hope in the world (Eph 2.12). They have to WORK IT! It’s all up to them – it’s the faux show – religion without God. And it’s exhausting.

So... what to do about OUR own crisis in church attendance...? Maybe there IS a shift taking place (though it’s not as bad as the Colonial Period).

Our impulse is to do something, make something, work it up; sort of generate the glory – if we can’t have the glory of the gold, at least we can have the appearance of it.

We’re tempted to rely on technology, OR political action (exert a little pressure on our elected officials). Use gimmicks and tricks to get people into our spiritual amusement park.

But remember, the Great Interrupter is here, the God-Man, the Lion of Judah. He wants to smash our altars and liberate us, restore us, renew us and satisfy us in a way the faux-show never can.

If we live in a state of repentance and faith – HE WILL BUILD US. He’ll build us together so that our lives are beautifully intertwined in love and mutual concern. He doesn’t want us to settle for old, stale

testimonies without present reality but instead to know (2nd Cor 11.3) the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ, to depend on Jesus again and again... looking to what HE made – peace with God (Rom 5.1).

It's ours to pray, to ask our Father to give us what's real, authentic, holy, beautiful and good. Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Grace received by faith and leading to love. Grace received by faith and leading to love.

Maybe God's grace, received by faith, leading to love will work the will in us to pray for and reach out to the missing parts of the Body. Maybe by the way we love one another in a new and different and authentic way...some of the exhausted will come and find us an oasis of reality in a world full of counterfeits. Let's pray that it's so.

Q U O T E S

What can churches do in such a context? In theory, the Christian Church could be an antidote to all that. What is more needed in our time than a community marked by sincere love, sharing what they have from each according to their ability and to each according to their need, eating together regularly, generously serving neighbors, and living lives of quiet virtue and prayer? A healthy church can be a safety net in the harsh American economy by offering its members material assistance in times of need: meals after a baby is born, money for rent after a layoff. Perhaps more important, it reminds people that their identity is not in their job or how much money they make; they are children of God, loved and protected and infinitely valuable.

The great dechurching could be the beginning of a new moment for churches, a moment marked less by aspiration to respectability and success, with less focus on individuals aligning themselves with American values and assumptions. We could be a witness to another way of life outside conventionally American measures of success. Churches could model better, truer sorts of communities, ones in which the hungry are fed, the weak are lifted up, and the proud are cast down. Such communities might not have the money, success, and influence that many American churches have so often pursued in recent years. But if such communities look less like those churches, they might also look more like the sorts of communities Jesus expected his followers to create.

– Jake Meador, “The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church” (in *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2023)