

Sermon 18, Idolatry Brings Down a Dynasty, 1 Kings 14:1-20

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Intro: I recently read a book by a man who first quoted the NT passages about how God will answer prayer, and then said, "Let's pray to God that He would regrow the limbs of all the Iraq war veterans." His point, of course, was that if someone doesn't regrow a limb, then God is a liar.

Now, what's wrong with that kind of thinking? Every Christian should know the answer. Those kinds of prayers and verses don't prove anything because you can't manipulate God! The hidden premise here is, "God, if you don't do what we want, we're going to be mad at you. We aren't going to believe in you." But God is not afraid of that kind of threat. Indeed, far from it.

Proposition: God cannot be tricked. His word judges you, and not vice versa.

We see this in how Jeroboam attempted to manipulate God, and in God's response to Him.

I. Jeroboam Attempts to Manipulate God (vv. 1-4)

A. The Occasion: Abijah's Sickness (v. 1)

For those of us in this room who are parents, the way this chapter opens is guaranteed to strike fear into our hearts. Night and day, a single question tends to burn itself into our brains: "Is it well with the child?" Though the narrative doesn't say so explicitly, we know who sent this sickness. We know where it came from. God made Abijah sick. And He did it "at that time"--i.e., in the era when Jeroboam was continuing to worship the golden calves he had set up. Certainly for any parent this is a terrifying development. And when the going gets tough, the tough forget about their stupid golden calves and turn to the true and living God. It's true--there are no atheists in foxholes, or idolaters with sick children.

B. The Plan: Fool Ahijah into a Favorable Oracle (vv. 2-4)

But Jeroboam's plan doesn't include full-scale repentance. Rather, he wants to trick the prophet Ahijah into giving a favorable oracle. Thus, he tells his wife to disguise herself. He tells her to take a ordinary-size gift, not a royal-size gift. The big idea was that if Ahijah didn't know that he was prophesying about the son of the chief idol-worshipper in Israel, he could be manipulated into giving a favorable oracle.

Now, does this sound familiar? Do you ever treat God's word this way? Dale Ralph Davis put it like this: "Jeroboam wants the help of the word in the emergencies of life, but not the rule of the word over the course of life. He desires only the occasional word of God. He wants the word of God for his crisis but not for his routine or practice. He craves light in his trouble but not on his path. He doesn't want to live with the word but only to visit it--like one does a whore. Is that your portrait?"

Brothers and sisters, how important is the word of God for your everyday life? Are you interested in following it all the time, or only when you're in trouble? By extension, do you pray when things are going well, or only when you need something? Is the Scripture a reference book or a love letter? Is it a theological arsenal or a personal communication? Don't try to manipulate God. You can't fool Him. His word is not a way of getting messages for the future. It is a way of knowing Him. If you don't use it for that purpose, but for some other, it will turn on you and tear you apart.

The text gives us a little detail here in verse 4. Ahijah has black cataracts. He can't see hardly at all. In between his blindness and her disguise, Mrs. Jeroboam is all set. Right?

II. God's Word Indicts Jeroboam's Evil Way (vv. 5-18)

Well, the text tells us that Mrs. Jeroboam went on to Shiloh, where she found Ahijah. Now, who dominates this conversation? Does Jeroboam's wife have much to say? Not really. In fact, as you notice, the word of the LORD through Ahijah dominates the chapter. Mrs. Jeroboam says nothing at all. And everything that Ahijah declares from God tells us something about God's word.

A. It Exposes Trickery (vv. 5-6)

You see, if you're trying to get help from an omniscient God, He knows everything. There's no such thing as censoring the information you feed to God. He doesn't know only what you want Him to know. Far from it. And so, God tells Ahijah that Mrs. Jeroboam is coming to speak to Him.

Do you think you can fool God? Do you think that if you can rationalize a particular sin so that it's not a very bad form of that sin, God will be fooled? "I only gossip on Tuesday from 4-6 p.m. I only lust after women who are practically fully clothed. I only disrespect my parents in my mind; I never say out loud what I'm thinking." Do you genuinely believe that God will be taken in by these kinds of pretenses?

B. It Proves God's Faithfulness (vv. 7-8a)

Further, the word proves God's faithfulness. Listen again to this rehearsal of everything God did for Jeroboam. He exalted Jeroboam from among the people. Jeroboam didn't have royal blood;

God blessed him with the kingship! He made him ruler over most of Israel. In fact, to do so He deprived the house of David of the rulership that He had promised would abide with David's line forever. In effect, God is telling Jeroboam, "You received no ordinary blessings. I went way out of my way to do good to you." We know this is true. The thing is, you, as an outward participant in the New Covenant, are even more blessed than Jeroboam. He ruled Israel; you get to rule the nations. He was exalted to royal status; you too are called the sons and daughters of God. He had temporal blessings — but he didn't have air conditioning, refrigeration, medical science, free two-day shipping, transportation across the country or around the globe in a matter of hours, and instantaneous communication to any place on the surface of the planet. In other words, in terms of creature comforts, your house may not be as big, but it's a lot more comfortable than Jeroboam's. And that's just the physical blessings. Think of all the spiritual blessings you have. You don't have Ahijah to go and consult — but you have the completed word of God! You have theologians and recorded sermons and enough theological material that you can never hope to read everything worth reading in English alone! You have a pastor who has taught you faithfully from the word of God. These are the benefits that you have. In effect, this word to Jeroboam is, or may be, a word to you — because you are in a position analogous to his. Your God has not changed, people of God.

C. It Lays Bare Jeroboam's Unfaithfulness (vv. 8b-9)

And guess what: He demands exclusive worship. Jeroboam is judged for not being like David. More than that, he is worse than Saul and Solomon. Saul may not have been sincere in his worship of the true God, but aside from a single visit to a witch, he was not an open idolater. Neither was Solomon, though he allowed and sponsored idolatry. Jeroboam, though, is the worst king of Israel to date.

Making images provokes God to anger. It is a way of needling Him, of deliberately trying to enrage Him. In fact, Jeroboam threw God behind his back — or, as we say today, he turned his back on Him. So, despite everything God had done for him, Jeroboam deliberately and callously turned his back on God.

This is all part of the prophetic denunciation of Jeroboam. This is not exactly what he and his wife were hoping to hear! But it is what they deserved to hear. Take note, people of God: God does not take the sin of idolatry lightly. He doesn't have a tolerant attitude toward other gods. He hates them, and He destroys those who worship them. He is a jealous God, as unfashionable as that is today. Our culture doesn't like deities who demand exclusive worship. But our God demands exclusive commitment and loyalty. Friendship with the world is enmity with God.

D. It Judges Idolatry (vv. 10-11)

God was provoked to anger by Jeroboam's idolatry, and he promises a judgment in general terms. The whole family will be cut off and killed. The Hebrew of verse 10 is graphic. Everyone who pisses against the wall will be cut off, and burned up like dung. In short, the family is so much dung and piss to be flushed away down the toilet of history. There will be no burial for the

family. In other words, at their deaths no one who cares about them will be around. They will be eaten by dogs and vultures.

This is God's attitude toward idolatry--in this case, not the open worship of false gods, but the worship of the true God in a wrong way. Those who worship Him by means of pictures and statues, and teach others to do the same, will meet this fate. Those who prefer money, sex, power, and security to the true God will meet this fate. It may not be as gruesome as Jeroboam's, but it will be the same harsh judgment.

E. It Controls History (vv. 12-16)

Well, not only does God (and hence His Word) penetrate disguises and judge idolatry. He also controls history. In effect, this next section gives the overall view of the rest of the history of Northern Israel.

1. In the Death of Jeroboam's Son (vv. 12-13)

The death of Jeroboam's sick son Abijah indicates that his entire family is in trouble. Once again, the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. Yet at the same time, this judgment is tempered with mercy. In earthly terms, Abijah will receive a burial. In other words, at his death he will still be surrounded by people who care about him. Further, something good toward Yahweh has been found in him.

Now, to high-octane Calvinists like ourselves, such a statement is troubling. Doesn't the Bible clearly say that we are saved for nothing in ourselves, but only for the free grace and pleasure of God? Of course it does. All being justified freely by His grace have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, as the sentence in Romans 3 runs in English order. But the text doesn't say that God saved Abijah because something good was found in him. It says that God blessed him in one particular way: he alone of all the family would be buried. In other words, in the midst of the wretched wickedness of Jeroboam's family is found one good person. God didn't save him because he was good, but God did give him a particular blessing.

This is true more broadly. Though God does often let the righteous feel the curse of living with the wicked, and though He sometimes chastens the righteous while He is punishing the wicked, He also rewards righteous people. God is good to those who are good. He's good in His own way and on His own terms, but nonetheless, He is good. We may not think that it's very good of Him to let Jeroboam's child die. But God gives a reprieve because He honors those who honor Him (1 Sam. 2:30).

Are you from a wicked family? Do you live in a wicked nation? Are you afraid of the rightful judgment of God against idolatry? You should be. But more than that, you can take comfort from the fact that even if you die in the judgment coming upon our wicked American church and wicked American nation, God will show you mercy. If you honor Him and walk with Him, you will not die under His curse. You may experience temporal chastening, but you will be spared from eternal judgment. God doesn't save you because you are good; He saves you and makes you good in His sight.

2. In the Destruction of Jeroboam's Dynasty (v. 14)

Well, Jeroboam's dynasty will be cut off by a new king, who is not descended from Jeroboam. If you look across the page at chapter 15, you will see that this prophecy was soon fulfilled. Again, remember that behind this judgment stood God's promise to preserve Jeroboam's dynasty if Jeroboam would obey. Jeroboam disobeyed. God destroyed his dynasty.

3. In the Permanent Exile of Israel (vv. 15-16)

But worse than that--far worse, God promises to destroy the entire nation. They will go into exile beyond the Euphrates. And guess whose fault it is: Jeroboam's. He is the single person most held responsible for the destruction of Israel. He worshipped idols and he taught Israel to do so too.

The most obvious application of this is to church leaders. If the session and I teach you to worship idols, we are first and foremost responsible for the death of this church. If it happens at a bigger level, then not only an individual congregation but also the denomination is responsible. If our official policy demands that you worship the idol of sexual permissiveness, then we will be judged by God. If we demand that you worship God in the form of a crucifix or a piece of bread, then we will be judged by God, and so on. The promised land is a type of heaven. What will get you excluded from heaven? False worship. Anything that loves and makes a lie is excluded from God's dwelling in heaven. And if you love and make a false god, then you love and make a lie. As we will see, Israel was exiled from the promised land, and they never returned. When God says here that He will give them up, He meant it. Permanently.

So leaders, beware: do not allow idolatry, much less require it from your people. People of God, beware idolatry! Do not worship your spouse, your grandkids, your favorite TV show or your golf game or your bank account. On account of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the children of disobedience.

F. It Comes to Pass Right on Schedule (vv. 17-18)

Well, Mrs. Jeroboam heard the message without a word, turned around, and headed home. Right on schedule, Abijah died--just like Ahijah and God had said he would. In effect, God was underlining His promise. The fact that part 1 of a three-part curse had been fulfilled indicated clearly that parts 2 and 3 were on their way and unstoppable.

So Jeroboam wanted a horoscope reading that would somehow reassure him that everything would be okay with his son. He got just the opposite. The prophet instead assured him that his sick son would die, that his entire family would be wiped out, and that his nation would perish from the face of the earth.

So what do we do with a message like this? How should your life look different this week because of what Ahijah said to Jeroboam's wife?

Well, first of all, you should live your life by the word of God, rather than simply resorting to it in times of trouble. God's word must be the centerpiece, not buried under a stack of remote controls on the nightstand. If Jeroboam had lived in light of God's word from the beginning, his wife and Ahijah never would have had this conversation.

Secondly, you must live in confidence that God always keep His promises, and His threats. This means banking on His promises and fearing His threats. It means doing what He says because He says it.

Thirdly, you must deliberately set up your life so that you worship not idols, but the true and living God. Step 1 of this process is planning and scheduling to be here in the church worshipping whenever we are here worshipping God. Step 2 is scheduling family worship and private worship into your daily routine. Step 3 is mentally engaging while performing your scheduled worship. Planning to do it is not enough; you must actually do it.

Finally, you must rejoice that God cares more about His own glory than He does about your comfort.

III. God's Word Exposes Jeroboam's Priorities (vv. 19-20)

We see this truth highlighted in this summary of Jeroboam's reign. His wars and how he reigned--these things are not important to the narrator. What is important is whether he worshipped God. Now, do you think this way? Do you honestly care more about the worship and glory of God than you about the affairs of this life? Geopolitics are sort of important. But at the end of the day, what matters about any particular person is not what treaties he engineered, but whether God was his God. That's what God cares about. He seeks His own glory, because His priorities are in order. He knows that He is the only one worthy of all worship and praise. His word judges you, and not vice versa. His glory is the measure of all things. So rejoice that He reigns, that He punishes idolaters, that He keeps His promises, that His word cannot be manipulated.

God cut off Northern Israel, but He will never cut off those who put their trust not in golden calves, but in the merits and righteousness of Jesus Christ. Don't worship idols. Worship the true God, and you will be blessed forever. Amen.