

“Bad Choices”
1 Kings 12-14
March 12, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

There is a saying that goes, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” It is a saying that touches the desire of evil hearts to act selfishly without any consequences. It is also completely untrue, as is easily revealed with just a little thought. If you gamble away all your money, I don’t think there is anyone whose job it is to give back one’s gambling losses upon departure from the city. If you cheat on your spouse there, the memory of that unfaithfulness is not wiped clean upon leaving the city limits. It is certainly the case that the world the evil human heart wants is one where our choices have no consequences, but that is not the world we have. Human choices do have consequences, for good or for ill.

The drift of 1 and 2 Kings is toward the disintegration of the nation of Israel due to the poor choices made primarily by its kings. The three chapters we are looking at today, chapters 12-14, describe three bad choices that will occur repeatedly in these books. These are the same bad choices that still afflict us today.

I. To Seize Power

After Solomon’s death, it seemed to be a certainty that Rehoboam would take the place of his father, Solomon, as Israel’s king, **“for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king”** (12:1). But the certainty faded with a simple question instigated by Jeroboam, who had returned from his exile in Egypt when he heard of Solomon’s death. Jeroboam was a clever politician, and the question he posed, which was more of a demand than a question, tapped into a vein of discontent in Israel. **“Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you”** (12:4). It was a demand to reduce the forced labor Solomon had practiced.

Rehoboam asked for three days to make a decision on the request. During that time, he consulted with two groups. The men who had been with Solomon advised him to agree to the proposal, while the younger men who were obviously the companions of Rehoboam urged him to take the opposite path. They seemed to think it was a time for more discipline and hard work, and urged an increase of service rather than a decrease. Their answer, which was the one Rehoboam decided to give, promised an even heavier burden than the one imposed by Solomon.

Rehoboam's choice was essentially a choice to use power to serve himself rather than serving others. It was the opposite of what true kingship is all about, as in Jesus, the one who had all power but came as a servant. When power is used in this self-serving way, it almost always produces a negative reaction in the form of unintended consequences. That was the case here, leading not to the stronger nation Rehoboam intended, but a divided nation. The ten tribes of the north, all except Judah and Benjamin, renounced the authority of Rehoboam and chose Jeroboam as their king.

Authoritarian leadership uses power to impose one's will on others rather than using power to serve, and it never ends well. Parents who use their power in this way, seeking to impose their will on their children in order to meet a need within the parent, produce bitter, broken and rebellious children. Church leaders or political leaders may be able to produce quick results with such a use of power, but it always eventually backfires and brings harm to the institution, whether it's the church or the nation. Where has God given you power? Are you using that power to serve self or to serve others?

The main point of this story, though, isn't only about the proper use of power. It is also about God's sovereign purposes being realized. **"So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfill his word"** (1:15). This brings great comfort to us, because all of us are affected by those over us who may misuse power. I like what Ralph Davis says about this. "Contrary to our fears, human stupidity is not running loose but is on the leash of God's sovereignty. I think that bears a relation to my sanity."

II. To Use God

After the rebellion of the ten northern tribes of Israel, they made Jeroboam their king. As already pointed out, he was a shrewd politician, and he immediately realized that he had a problem. The problem was that Israel was required to worship God in only one place, the temple in Jerusalem. But now Jerusalem was in the southern kingdom of Judah, and Jeroboam feared that a Jerusalem-centered worship would lead eventually to the end of his kingdom and the reuniting of the nation under Rehoboam. So his solution was to make up a religion that would serve to unify his kingdom. I don't know if he was the first politician to use religion to serve his political aims, but he certainly wasn't the last. Historian Edward Gibbon said that in the last days of Rome, "all religions were regarded by the people as equally *true*, by the philosophers as equally *false*, and by the politicians as equally *useful*."

This is the difference between a man-made religion and a God-given religion. God had required that sacrifice be made only at the temple, in order to

preserve these sacrifices as an accurate picture of the salvation we have in Christ. Just as there is no salvation outside of Christ, so in the Old Testament there was no God-authorized sacrifice outside the tabernacle and later the temple in Jerusalem. But Jeroboam wasn't interested in religious truth, but in religious usefulness. It did not serve his purposes to worship as God had authorized, so he made up a religion. Like Israel's idolatrous worship in the wilderness, it featured golden calves. He ordained his own priesthood and established his own religious holidays. There is some discussion about whether Jeroboam was encouraging the worship of false gods or the worship of Jehovah by means not authorized by Jehovah. It almost doesn't matter, because both are sinful choices. Either one is an attempt to define God by our preferences and to use him for our purposes.

This choice to use God continues to be made by so many people. We define God as one whose purpose is only to help us achieve our goals in life. Or maybe he is just there to help us feel better about ourselves. Let me mention one recent example of this. Several years ago, author Paul Young wrote a novel that has sold over 20 million copies, called simply *The Shack*. It has now been made into a movie that began showing just this past week. The religion portrayed in the book and the movie is a made up religion that uses an invented God to feel better about ourselves. In another book he has written, a work of nonfiction called *Lies We Believe About God*, Paul Young identifies as lies most of the central truths of Christianity. Among the Christian truths he claims are lies are the sovereign control of God over affairs on the earth, the necessity of salvation through Christ and that the cross was God's idea. He is a universalist believing that everyone will be saved, and cites only himself as authority for these ideas. His is a man-made religion like Jeroboam's.

There is a closely related idea to using God through a man-made religion, and that is to make up your own truth. It makes sense that the two would be related. If we are fast and loose with the truth about God, we are going to do the same with truth in general. Jeroboam's relationship with the truth can be seen when his son, Abijah, fell sick. Jeroboam instructed his wife to disguise herself and go to the prophet Ahijah and ask him what will happen to their son. The inconsistency is readily apparent. Jeroboam thought he could fool a prophet through a disguise that he was looking to in order to see into the future. The foolishness of trying to deceive God's prophet is seen in dramatic fashion. It turns out that the prophet Ahijah is blind. But since he is a prophet, and God has already revealed to him everything about the visit of Jeroboam's wife, as soon as he hears the sound of her step at his door he says, **"Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why do you pretend to be another (14:6)?** Don't we often try the same thing? We pretend that reality is what we want it to be rather than what it is. We think we can even fool God about this. But all it ends up doing is to keep us from God's grace that could be ours. The truth is our friend, not our enemy. It is only when we humble ourselves and face the unvarnished truth about ourselves that we come to experience God's grace to us through Jesus.

There was a man who once got converted under the preaching of the great 19th century London preacher Charles Spurgeon and began attending Spurgeon's church, a Baptist church. The wife of this new convert was a staunch Anglican and strongly objected to her husband's attendance at this Baptist church. But she was curious to know what her husband had been hearing in church. So one Sunday evening in 1864 she decided to go and hear Dr. Spurgeon. Not wanting to be recognized, she wore a thick veil with a heavy shawl and sat at the back of the upper gallery. She had arrived late because she left home after her husband. Just as she walked into the sanctuary, Spurgeon was reading his text for the sermon. "Come in, wife of Jeroboam, Why do you pretend to be another?" Spurgeon made his application by telling the congregation that God will "search you out, and unmask your true character, disguise yourself as you may." But this is a good thing, because it opens us to God's grace through Jesus, the only thing in the universe that can cover the shame of our sin. That's what happened to this woman under the preaching of Spurgeon. In the words of the New Testament, she came to see that **"no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account"** (Heb. 4:13). Then she came in faith to the one who covers our shame, the Lord Jesus.

Let me encourage you to apply this by regarding the truth as your friend, no matter how ugly that truth may be. That's why the psalmist prayed that God would search him and know him. Will you make a commitment to the truth, no matter how painful it may be? You will never regret it. The truth may make you miserable at first, but then it will make you joyful because it takes you to the one who himself is the truth, our Lord Jesus.

III. To Ignore God's Word

One of the things happening in this book we are studying is the decline of the kings of Israel. Solomon started strong but declined in his heart for God. Now things are even worse after the division of the nation and the complete ungodliness of Jeroboam. But as the kings decline, the office of prophet increases. God does not leave his people uncared for, but raises up prophets to bring them his word. The three chapters we are looking at today feature several stories of prophets, and these kinds of stories are going to occur repeatedly in 1 and 2 Kings.

The first story is unique in that the prophet is actually listened to. Shemaiah was sent to Rehoboam when he was preparing to go to war against the northern kingdom for their secession from the south. 180,000 warriors had been mustered, and Shemaiah stopped them with a word from God. God said, **"You shall not go up or fight against your relatives the people of Israel. Every man return to his home"** (12:24). Uncharacteristically, they listened to

God's word and returned home. The word of God has power. One word from one prophet and a war was averted.

The next prophet on the scene comes in the next chapter when an unnamed prophet from Judah appears before Jeroboam to condemn his made up religion. He brings a word of judgment, saying that in the future a king by the name of Josiah will burn the bones of the priests Jeroboam has appointed on the altar he has built. Then the prophet gave a sign that it would happen by saying that the altar before them would immediately be torn down. When Jeroboam heard that, he pointed to the prophet and ordered him arrested. Immediately, his hand was paralyzed and the altar was torn in two. Jeroboam then asked the prophet to ask God to heal his hand, which he did, and the hand was healed. The prophet left, refusing Jeroboam's hospitality because God had told him to go straight back to Judah. But then a false prophet from Israel hears of the whole thing and finds the prophet from Judah and speaks to him a lie, saying that God had spoken to him and said that this prophet from Judah should stay with the false prophet from Israel. This was in violation of God's word to the first prophet, and the second prophet spoke an authentic prophecy this time, saying that since the prophet from Judah had not been careful to do everything God had told him, he would not make it back to Judah. This odd story is something a real parable. It is real because it really happened, but it is also a parable designed to teach a truth. The truth is that Judah must not let itself be corrupted by the false prophets of the northern kingdom of Israel.

We must do the same, choosing to pay heed to God's word and to God's prophet. We pay heed to God's word today by receiving the words of the prophets found in the Bible. We have even been given a sign to demonstrate its truthfulness and reliability. It is the sign of the resurrection of Jesus, a sign validating all that God has said to us through Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

We have considered three bad choices, but let us close with one good choice. It is the choice to tell the truth about yourself and to seek refuge in God's appointed sin-bearer, Jesus. It is a good choice because it is the only way for sins to be forgiven. And it reverses all bad choices. Isn't God full of mercy? One good choice can remove the stain of all the bad choices we have made in our lives. And if you have already made this good choice in the past, stay consistent with it by making a daily, even a minute by minute choice to humble yourself by telling the truth and to receive the life God has for you through Jesus.