

A Dangerous Rebel and His Deadly Religion

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[0 : 00] Well, we are going to have another big read now, and we're going to turn to our Bibles, and we're going to be reading together from the Old Testament, from 1 Kings, and from chapter 12.

Last week, Phil Copeland was looking at this chapter with us, and looking at the division of the kingdom of Israel and Judah, the new king in the south, Rehoboam, and some of his folly.

And now we're going to read from verse 25 of 1 Kings, chapter 12, about the exploits of King Jeroboam, who was the king in the northern territory, the ten tribes of Israel.

And it's a fairly sad and grim story. Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and he lived there. And he went out from there, and he built Penuel.

And Jeroboam said in his heart, now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their Lord, to Rehoboam, king of Judah.

[1 : 19] And they will kill me, and return to Rehoboam, king of Judah. So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold.

And he said to the people, you've gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold, your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

And then this thing became a sin. For the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places, and appointed priests from among all the people who were not of the Levites.

And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah. And he offered sacrifices on the altar.

So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made.

[2 : 26] He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day, in the eighth month. In the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel.

And went up to the altar to make offerings. Amen. May God bless to us his word.

Well, good morning, and please keep your Bibles open to 1 Kings chapter 12. Well, throughout history, certain names have become synonymous with extreme evil.

A historical figure has done something so bad that their name is forever associated with the wickedness that they've done.

And I'm sure you can think of many, just off the top of your head. Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin. Well, this morning we're going to hear of a name that will forever be associated with sinfulness and idolatry.

[3 : 51] Because of what he did. The name is Jeroboam. The king who led all Israel into sin. Now, 1 Kings 12 could really be entitled, Bad Beginnings.

For the two main sections of the chapter, they tell us about two kings getting off to the start of their reign. And both of them are terrible starts. Really bad starts.

Last Sunday morning, we saw King Rehoboam, Solomon's son, kick off his reign by making some seriously stupid decisions. And as a result, the vast majority of his people rejected him as king.

And the consequence was a disaster. The kingdom of God was ripped in two. And in the south, down here, you've got Judah, the kingdom of Judah, ruled over by Rehoboam, the Davidic king, the king in the line of David.

And up in the north, you've got ten tribes, dissident tribes, who've rejected the house of David. And their king is now this, Jeroboam. And it's a heartbreaking and frustrating read.

[4 : 57] But, remember verse 15. This was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord, that he might fulfill his word, which the Lord had spoken.

In other words, what we're seeing in 1 Kings 12 is really the Lord's sovereign and just judgment working itself out in Israel. And it's all in response to the sinfulness and the unbelief that we saw in the heart of King Solomon back in chapter 11.

This isn't out of the Lord's control. This is the Lord's sovereign plan working its way out. And knowing this keeps us from despair. All human leaders, even the foolish ones, are only little servants of the Lord's sovereign word.

Human stupidity, remember, is not running loose. The Lord has it on his leash. And he uses it to fulfill his own plans and purposes.

As stupid as Rehoboam was, ultimately, the future of the kingdom lies in higher hands. We should keep all of this in mind, friends, as we turn to look at this next section.

[6 : 08] Because this is also a deeply heartbreaking and tragic read. In fact, I think what we're about to see here is an even worse start to a reign than Rehoboam's.

Let's look at this passage in three points. Here's the first point. The security Jeroboam sought. The security Jeroboam sought.

Please look at verse 15. Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel.

So Jeroboam begins his reign by building up what was most likely two key royal and military defense posts. In Shechem and Penuel. And there was nothing wrong in this.

Nothing wrong in this at all. Jeroboam's initial want for security is fine. It's sensible. But he starts to get into trouble when he starts talking to himself.

[7 : 07] Please look at verse 26. Then Jeroboam said in his heart. Now again, there is nothing wrong with this type of self-conversation.

But it all depends upon what one says to oneself. And as readers, the mention of the heart here, coming fresh from chapter 11, when we hear about a king making decisions in his heart, it gets us really nervous.

It gets our own hearts racing. Because in chapter 11, we were told four times, King Solomon rejected the Lord in his heart. And here in verse 26, as we listen to Jeroboam's inner heart monologue, we find out that tragically, his heart is just as spiritually sick as Solomon's was in the end.

Look at verse 26 again. And Jeroboam said in his heart, Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their Lord, to Rehoboam, king of Judah.

And they will kill me and return to Rehoboam, king of Judah. Here is a man who is rife with fear, full of fear of losing his kingdom, his autonomy, at least he thinks his autonomy, his position of power and status.

[8 : 36] You see, whilst the kingdom was currently torn in two, divided physically, the kingdom was not supposed to be divided spiritually. Both the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south were still to worship the Lord their God in the same way, as they had done under the golden days of Solomon.

They were to worship the Lord, in other words, his way, according to what he had revealed. And that meant worshipping in the one exclusive place that he had set apart, the temple.

Now years before this, way back in Deuteronomy 12, before Israel had even entered into the promised land, the Lord had spoken to his people about this. Let me just read to you some words from Deuteronomy 12.

Again, before the people had entered the promised land, the Lord said, You shall surely destroy all places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains, and on the hills, the high places, and under every green tree.

You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars. You shall chop down their carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of the place. You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, but you shall seek the place the Lord your God chose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there.

[10 : 03] There you shall go. There you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes, your contributions. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God. You shall feast there, rejoicing you and your households and all that you undertake in which the Lord your God has blessed you.

Fast forwards in time, and the exclusive place, as I say, where the Lord had chosen to put his name was, the temple. So in the days of Jeroboam, the people of Israel in the north were rightly leaving the kingdom of the north and still coming down to Judah to worship and feast and praise the Lord before him in the temple.

They were obeying the Lord, and yet this is the thing that is causing Jeroboam great fear. In verse 27, he says to himself, when my people travel down there, when they go down there, down south, when they go to worship at the temple, oh, they're going to turn away from me in their heart, and they're going to submit instead to King Rehoboam, and then they'll come, and they'll kill me.

In his heart, Jeroboam is deeply insecure, and friends, really, the root of this insecurity is unbelief. Foul unbelief.

How so? Well, please just turn back to chapter 11, verse 37. And let me read to you from verse 37 here.

[11 : 33] This is the Lord making a promise, remember, to Jeroboam. He said, And I will take you, Jeroboam, and you shall reign over all that your soul desires, and you shall be king over Israel.

And in context, the Lord has made it clear that Israel here denotes these ten tribes. And the Lord goes on to say, If you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, look, I will be with you.

I will build you a sure house, as I built for David. And I will give Israel to you. You know what the Lord had done? He'd given these awesome, colossal promises to Jeroboam of lasting security and stability.

All Jeroboam needed to do was walk by the obedience of faith, walk as a believer, turning away from sin, seeking to do the Lord's ways more and more, trusting in his grace.

If he did that, he had nothing to fear. But this is obviously something that Jeroboam has completely rejected. He wants none of that.

[12 : 48] And that is why he's so full of fear, insecurity, back in chapter 12. Please turn back over to that now. Because in his heart, he is a real unbeliever. And what we're hearing in verse 27 of chapter 12 is the inner monologue of a dangerous rebel.

And you know, whilst on the one hand, he has this deep insecurity, notice please, at the same time, he also has this deep arrogance in his heart. Jeroboam actually believes he can save himself and get security through his own cunning.

And that's what we'll see in just a moment. He's going to launch into a scheme. His sinful attitudes will lead to sinful actions. And he will launch this scheme in an attempt to secure his throne.

And it will be a disaster for everyone. Well, before we look at that scheme, let's just pause and think about the implication of these verses. I think these verses, friends, they show us what will inevitably happen to hearts that reject the Lord and assure certain promises.

They will be hearts that are deeply insecure and full of fear and anguish. for to reject the Lord is to reject the one whom we've just been singing about.

[14 : 10] The Lord of all the ages. The sovereign Lord of history. The only one who can give any of us real and lasting security that will stretch on forever. Not just in this life, but forever.

Even after death. And also, such unbelieving hearts, whilst they're full of insecurity, they will also be full of arrogance.

And that they will still try to save themselves through their own schemes. People who reject the Lord will inevitably live as though they themselves have to save themselves.

It's quite a paradox, isn't it? Insecurity and arrogance at the same time. And we saw this weird mix a few weeks ago, didn't we, when we looked at Genesis 11 with Willie and we looked at the people of Babel in Genesis 11 in the way that they wanted to build a tower to make a name for themselves, make themselves look great.

And yet are also at the same time to try and bring security so that they wouldn't be scattered over the whole earth. And friends, don't we see this mix of insecurity and arrogance today in our unbelieving society that we live in?

[15 : 24] I think so. I think it manifests itself in many ways. For example, there are folks, I even have close friends, friends who have utterly rejected God and His Word.

I think of one friend in particular I had a conversation with recently that I was friends with at school. And he's utterly rejected the Lord Jesus. And he's completely petrified that the world is doomed and could end at any moment through some sort of a climate catastrophe.

And yet at the same time, my friend also believes, deeply believes, genuinely believes that somehow we all really have the ability to save ourselves from it, to combat it, to rescue the created order through all our efforts.

Or another example of this mixed heart attitude today is seen in the way that our unbelieving society is petrified of death. People know that they are not safe from it.

It's coming for us all, for every one of us. And yet at the same time, loads of people arrogantly think that they can fend it off with their own actions, living a healthy lifestyle or receiving good health care.

[16 : 42] Just listen to the words of Dr. John Wyatt. I've read this before, but it's such a helpful quote, I think. John Wyatt was a special medical professor who cared for newborn babies.

And this is from his excellent book, Matters of Life and Death. He says this, The growth in health technology today shows the extreme measures we are prepared to undergo in order to provide or improve our chances of survival, to buy an extra year or two of life.

The billions of pounds spent every year on health care and on medical research tell their own story. Why do the public pour money into medical research? Is it an altruistic desire to help mankind?

Or is it the public support for research at least partly motivated by fear? Fear of disease, fear of death.

The way we spend our money is revealing. He then goes on to quote a theologian who teaches at Duke University in North Carolina who says this, I sometimes point out to my students that people from the States now flock to Europe to see the great cathedrals wondering what kind of people would build such things.

[18 : 04] Someday in the distant future I think people may well come and see our major medical centers like the one we have at Duke University and ask themselves what kind of people would build such things.

If they are astute they will think the builders certainly must have been afraid of death. Friends, it is only when our hearts are trusting in the promises of the Lord that we will know true and eternal security.

And of course key to trusting the Lord is and receiving that gift of security is walking in His ways. Walking by obedience of faith. looking to His grace.

Walking by repentance. Trusting in Him. And as a church today friends, is it not the case that so often in our lives the times when we have strayed from the Lord the times when we have sinfully wanted to walk in our own stubborn ways are they not also the times when our hearts have been gripped by this sort of fear and security?

Instead of looking to the Lord Jesus for our security we've gone to look to other things for security and comfort and hope for the future. Is that true of your life?

[19 : 23] It's true of my life. It might not be true of your life because maybe you're not as perverse as I am. But I think if we're honest with ourselves as a church then this is also so true of our lives today.

As Dale Ralph Davis says, so often even the people of faith end up being disciples of Jeroboam for a time. Well that's the first point this morning the security Jeroboam sought.

Here is the second the sinfulness of Jeroboam's scheme. And from verse 28 onwards Jeroboam he launches into this scheme to try and keep himself secure and protect his rule and what he does here is deeply sinful both for himself and for his people.

So in order to stop the people going down to Judah to worship the Lord in the temple in order to stop them from turning away from Jeroboam in their hearts to go under the house of David again what Jeroboam does is he creates his own man-made religion that's based firmly in the north.

And notice please verse 28 just look at verse 28 he is not alone in his scheming I didn't notice this before Jeroboam is not alone here in this plan he takes counsel.

[20 : 43] Other Israel leaders are involved they have a planning meeting and then all is decided and the king cracks on making northern worship centers that will rival the Lord's true and exclusive place of worship in Jerusalem.

And we will look at the specifics of these rival worship sites in a moment but just look at what the king says in verse 28 what he says to his people just look at how he begins to introduce this rival religion verse 28 and he said to the people you have gone up to Jerusalem long enough do you hear what he's doing?

He is trying to deceive his people into believing that going to the Jerusalem temple for worship was nothing more than a burdensome chore a colossal pain it is a total contrast to what the Lord had said back in Deuteronomy 12 which is why I read it earlier the Lord had said going to this place of worship was a blessing a colossal privilege being at the place where the Lord had put his name in amongst his people in that special way where they can come and worship the Lord in that special way the place of sacrifice and atonement where forgiveness was to be found a place of great rejoicing for the Lord's people a place of feasting where they got together and ate enjoying the Lord glorifying him together in his special presence going to Jerusalem was a joy but in verse 28 Jeroboam he twists God's word he twists God's word he says going to Jerusalem oh what an arduous chore for you you have endured that hardship long enough

I'm going to save you from that inconvenience I'm going to make life so much easier for you friends isn't that very much like the tactic of the serpent in Genesis 3 I think it is twisting God's word and therefore twisting God's character making God out to be some sort of a cosmic taskmaster with unbearable demands I think it's clear who is the one that lies behind Jeroboam well having sown this seed of unbelief in his people's hearts the king unveils his solution ta-da two golden bull calves that he had made and he cries out to the people verse 28 behold your gods oh Israel who brought you up out of the land of Egypt and if you're thinking to yourself I recognize that phrase I've heard that phrase before in the Bible you are correct it is almost word for word a match with what Aaron said back in Exodus 32 when he created the golden calf and told Israel to worship it as the image of the Lord God who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt he says here we go here's your gods

Jeroboam is repeating the evil idolatry that happened there and he doesn't even seem to realize it or if he does know about Aaron's passage and what Aaron had done he is totally not bothered about repeating it now friends when Jeroboam presents these calves to be worshipped did he intend for these calves to represent the Lord and be visible if you like signs of the Lord well if he did he was blatantly breaking the second commandment and he was wanting the people to break it too but and I think this is actually what the text is saying if Jeroboam is presenting these two calves as an alternative to the Lord God of Israel as different gods for Israel to worship he is breaking the first commandment and he's encouraging the people to break it too either way he is leading everyone into grotesque lawlessness and idolatry and remember it is all because he's trying to save his own throne it is all because he is an unbeliever a truly wicked king let's just notice some of the other details about this deadly man-made religion verse 29 notice the locations where he puts these two golden calves

[25 : 03] Bethel and Dan why these locations? well they were chosen I think because of where they were situated in the kingdom Dan was up in the north and so if you lived in the north you could go up to the north Bethel was in the south and if you lived in the south you could go down there they're very accessible for people but another reason that these places were chosen to be the homes of these calves I think is because both played a significant role in the history of Israel and Jeroboam may well have preyed upon these details into using them to deceive his people into following his scheme Bethel for example was the place where the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob had repeatedly worshipped and encountered the Lord in fact Bethel itself do you know what his name was?

the house of God it was given that name by Jacob after he had that extraordinary vision remember the vision and the dream of the ladder coming down from heaven in Genesis 28 that's when he named it Bethel and you can just imagine Jeroboam's spin doctors standing up in the presbytery or in synod and giving all of this detail and saying of course in the past these sites were used as places to encounter God why can't we use them this way today?

How can Abraham and Jacob's descendants go wrong worshipping in a place where their ancestors worshipped and encountered? Again if he did use the scriptures like that that is a total deceptive way he is twisting the scriptures and what about Dan?

well in the past during the time of judges we're told that alternative worship had been established there at that time with no less than a grandson of Moses as a presiding priest you can read about it later in Judges 18 and again you can just imagine Jeroboam's spin doctors drawing on that history in order to deceive his people into accepting this new scheme this new religion as being orthodox and in verse 31 to 33 we're told about the way Jeroboam carried out further building work in order to make his northern religion seem more and more credible verse 31 he built temples on the high places it could be that he built temples all over the place could be but I think in context it seems likely he's referring to building a temple in Dan and Bethel for these bull calves Jeroboam gave both these new gods their own temple each with their own altar for sacrifices looks very legitimate also verse 31

Jeroboam appoints his own priesthood and true to form he again rejects the word of the Lord the Lord had previously said in his law priests should only come from one specific branch of the Levites the sons of Aaron and again Jeroboam disregards that and he appoints priests randomly from all the tribes just willy nilly just as he wants and in verse 32 he ensures that his man-made religion even has its own festival which will take place on the 15th day of the 8th month like the feast in Judah the big feast in Judah at that time of year down in the south was the feast of booths and it was really held on the 15th day of the seventh month and again I think Jeroboam is being very sneaky here in his scheme he made sure his religious program was close enough to the real thing down in Jerusalem to claim that it was a genuine substitute but it was different enough to draw his people away from Jerusalem and its ways and do you know it all works it all works the people of

[29 : 05] Israel the people of these ten tribes in the north they are absolutely captivated by this Jeroboam cult they fall for it completely there is not even a hint in the text of any of the people of God ever questioning him or challenging him for example when Jeroboam spoke those Aaron like words in verse 28 none of the people said hold on a minute are you seriously suggesting we bow down to false gods isn't that the same terrible thing that Aaron and our fathers did centuries ago the thing that greatly angered the Lord Jeroboam are you seriously suggesting that we break the Lord's commandments and provoke him to wrath there's none of that none of the people pushed back against Jeroboam's fake temples spoke out about the fact that Deuteronomy 12 warned the people against worshipping the Lord in the ways that the Canaanites had done previously worshipping in the high places in other words the people of Israel seem to have completely forgotten about the word of the Lord and about what the word of the Lord actually says and as a result they lack discernment and they are completely captivated by this dangerous rebel and his man-made religion it's heartbreaking and friends what the king and the people do here it will plague the nation for generations to come or let me put it like this the northern kingdom will never recover from this there is no recovery from this as we read on through the book what they do here has set the spiritual trajectory of the nation well what is the implication excuse me of this for our lives today as the people of God well let me just say we are absolutely not to read this passage and think oh look how dreadful they were back then but you know what

I am so thankful that this sort of thing could never happen today I am so thankful this sort of thing could never happen today with our church leaders I am so thankful this could never happen today with our church family I am so thankful that this could never happen to me and to my heart friends the church in every age is always at risk always at risk from turning away from the Lord and his true the true God given religion he has given us through his word to instead follow man made religion maybe even man made religion of our own making this is another sobering word for us as the people of God today as Bob Fowle says in church life there is an ever present danger of substituting our own ideas of what is sensible and appealing instead of following scripture and that is really the heart of the matter here that is really the great problem in Israel in the days of Jeroboam the king abandons the word of God maybe even abuses the word of God twists it to suit his own means to suit what's appealing to him and his people do not even bat an eyelid they go along with everything he proposes and as I say the effects are disaster not just for them but for their children as well and that seems to be the great problem really at the heart of the massive apostasy that we've seen happening today in many of the major denominations in the UK denominations that at one time were faithful to the Lord and to his word well they've rejected that now so many and set aside his word many church leaders who do not know the

Lord they just follow what suits their own heart and they've deceived many and led many into false worship of their own invention the spirit that was alive in Jeroboam is alive and kicking today especially in the church the professing church causing all sorts of damage please brothers and sisters do not think it couldn't happen here today it could and how are we to safeguard ourselves from this sort of thing happening here well I take it the answer is actually found when we can read this section in light of what's just come before when we read the whole chapter I think there's a great contrast here we safeguard our hearts by shunning the ways of Jeroboam and instead walking in the ways of Rehoboam in verse 24 as we saw last week at the end of verse 24 remember we're all the people of Judah

Benjamin and the king of Judah they were going off in their foolish ways the word of the Lord came to them confronted them pulled them up called them to repent and immediately that's what they did immediately they humbly submitted themselves to the Lord's word of truth they walked by the obedience of faith friends that is how we safeguard our hearts from drifting into man-made religion as a church and just think about this isn't this wonderfully simple isn't it wonderfully uncomplicated you defend the church today by walking by the obedience of faith of faith in the word of truth we will stand firm in Christ and we will be shielded from the lives of the evil one by loving God's word and letting it master our lives and our hearts not simply doing that as a solo activity but together as a church with one another and one of the specific things that the word of God does when we study it to help us shun man-made religion is the word of

God repeatedly mocks man-made religion holds it in derision and exposes it for what it is stupidity and that brings us on to the final point this morning and a very very briefly point let's notice the stupidity of Jeroboam's scheme and I take it that is one of the things that the author of the book of kings is saying to us here it isn't completely obvious in our English translations but there is one verb that is repeated again and again by the author throughout this whole section but especially in verse 31 to 38 it comes up eight times in just those three verses alone it is the Hebrew verb that is translated made appointed devised the author uses it again and again to describe Jeroboam's religion the religion that all the people are following he made the bull calves he made the temples in the high places he made the priesthood he made the festival he made the altar he made it all he made it all up made it all up in his own heart his own sick and sinful heart as I take it the author here isn't simply reporting rather he is ridiculing as he does all this as one commentator puts it the author has dipped his pen in acid here

[36 : 52] Jeroboam's religion he says is Jeroboam's concoction and such concoction should not be taken seriously Jeroboam's religion it is sheer invention why lend it any credence at all worship either rests on the prescriptions of divine revelation or on the petty preferences of the human heart it sounds so simplistic but it is scriptural friends the author of first kings pleads with us to view man-made religion today in just the same way true true god-given religion is found only in god's word of truth and any other religion any other religion whatever it is found is what Dale Ralph Davis calls bootleg religion mere human invention and thus it's stupid and is to be shunned well that is the disastrous start of

Jeroboam's reign that's first kings 12 and as we come to the end of that chapter we're supposed to hold in our heads a key question and it's this how will the lord respond to all of this what is the lord going to do in light of all of this well we'll find out next Sunday when god willing we'll look at chapter 13 but now let's bow our heads and be quiet for a moment and then I'll pray for us let's pray our gracious heavenly father we pray that you will be our guide and you will rule us truly deep in our hearts by your word keep our hearts from wandering from you from leaving you the god that we love and from looking to things that are lesser than you for security things which cannot save us things which will only fail us in the end father help us to stand firm in the lord jesus christ against satan's lies with shield of faith and belt of truth may we always be a people who hear your word and do it and help each other to do those things more and more we thank you that your word assures us the religion which comes from the heart of man is a nonsense it's not something to be intimidated by it is something to be shunned may such passages as first kings twelve move our hearts to walk in this way and to walk faithfully all our days in the obedience of faith to walk all our days trusting in your truth which is found only in your word and we pray this in jesus precious name amen amen amen amen