

Rehoboam

1 Kings 14:21-31

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If you are ready to quit, you're sunk, you have had it, then Rehoboam's story will be helpful to you. Rehoboam was the son of Solomon, his favorite son, and the one who succeeded him to the throne. Rehoboam's name mean's "he who enlarges the people," and you sense that Solomon felt toward Rehoboam as almost all fathers feel toward their children -- that they have nearly infinite possibilities. But his name actually belies the results of his life, because far from enlarging the people, he diminished the people of Judah. His life is another of the tragic stories told in the Old Testament, but one from which we still can learn a great deal -- at least by contrast.

It is necessary to know something of the history of Israel in order to understand Rehoboam's life. So, for those of you who may not have been following along in our studies of these kings, it might be helpful to review what has taken place prior to 1 Kings 14. Saul, as you know, was the first king of Israel. The nation was ruled earlier by judges. And though that worked for a while, the net result, according to Scripture, was that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The nation broke up into little warring factions which could not agree. So they sought a king.

It was God's purpose to provide a king for them, but it was to be a monarchy under the direction of the Lord himself, a theocracy operated through an individual who represented God to the nation and who was himself under the authority of God. The nation of Israel, because they ran ahead of God, picked the wrong man, at the wrong time, from the wrong tribe, who did the wrong things, and who really wrote his own epitaph when he said, "I have played the fool." He is a picture of the flesh in all of its manifestations in our lives. He was in himself eminently qualified to be king and had many regal characteristics. But he failed because he never learned to trust the Lord God of Israel.

Saul was succeeded by David, who was God's man. He was the right king. He was the man after God's own heart. And David reigned for forty years over Israel. The Scriptures state that David's reign was righteous. He did that which was right in God's eyes. It was David's desire to build a temple, a house for God. He says in one place in the Psalms, "One thing have I sought after that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire after him in his temple." But it wasn't the Lord's desire that David build a house for him. The Lord wanted to build a "house" for David a dynasty, the line of David, through whom Messiah would come. And he did build for David an enduring dynasty, one which will last forever, because it culminates in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, who is the seed of David, and who is seated on the throne of David and will rule forever.

Solomon followed David. He likewise reigned forty years, and it was Solomon's task to build the temple. That is perhaps the only thing he did of any significance, because in the waning years of his reign, since his heart wasn't wholly devoted to the Lord, he followed other gods. His political philosophy was to intermarry with the royal families of the nations which surrounded him. As he did this, his wives brought their idolatry into the nation. In order to keep them satisfied he had to build pagan temples and establish idols to their gods. Thus the whole nation caught "idol fever," and although outwardly the nation looked secure, inwardly it had begun to crumble by the end of Solomon's reign.

Rehoboam succeeded him to the throne, and frankly, Solomon didn't hand much over to him. When he passed the reins of government on to Rehoboam, the seeds of division were already sown. The people were in rebellion. In order to support his very expensive harem, Solomon had to engage in some pretty grandiose architectural projects, had to build houses and temples for them. In order to do this he taxed the people heavily and was very oppressive

in securing slave labor to build these large, impressive buildings in Jerusalem. As a result the people had had enough by the end of his life and simply refused to be oppressed and taxed any more as Solomon had done.

Then when Rehoboam went north to be anointed king over all of Israel, the ten northern tribes asked for leniency on his part, asked that he remove the heavy yoke and the taxation from them. The elder statesmen of the nation counseled him to be a servant to his people, said that if he served them they would love him and serve him. But he didn't follow their advice. He followed instead the advice of the younger men, his peers, who counseled him to use even harsher and sterner measures. This he did, with the result that the northern tribes rebelled, established their own kingdom, and appointed Jeroboam, who had been the son of one of Solomon's servants, as king of the Northern Kingdom.

This kingdom endured for two hundred years, through the reigns of twenty kings, until ultimately it was taken off into the Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C. The two kingdoms were never united again, and will not be, until the Lord returns again to unite his people. The Southern Kingdom became known as "Judah" because of its major tribe. It endured for 350 years after this division. It also had about twenty kings -- all of them of David's dynasty. Rehoboam was the first of this line of kings, Solomon's son, the first king to sit on the throne of Judah after the kingdom divided. His story is given to us in chapter 14 of 1 Kings, beginning with verse 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.

Naamah was one of the wives Solomon had brought from neighboring countries. She brought Ammonite gods with her, and must have had a very deep and lasting effect upon her son. We read that Rehoboam was forty-one when he began his reign, which means that he was one year old when Solomon himself took the throne of Israel. So he had an opportunity to observe Solomon throughout his reign and to see the causes of decline.

We are told in 2 Chronicles 10-12, where the parallel account is given, that when Rehoboam first came to the throne he did a number of things which were good. In fact, for three years he did that which was right in the Lord's eyes. First, he had a prophet in his court named Shemaiah, a crusty old prophet of the school of Nathan, who had been in David's court. Shemaiah wasn't afraid of anything or anybody and told the king what ought to be done, regardless of the consequences. He was a very useful individual in Rehoboam's court. At one time he averted what could have been a very disastrous civil war between Israel and Judah because he prophesied against Judah and told them not to go to war against their brothers. So Rehoboam had access to a prophet who was unafraid, who would speak the word of God to him. And for a period of time he listened to the word of God.

Secondly, he had a number of priests and Levites who had fled the Northern Kingdom and settled in Judah. They fled when Jeroboam set up his idol temples in Dan and Bethel, since they felt unwelcome from that point on. And 2 Chronicles says that they were Rehoboam's main source of support. They supported him in all of his policies and ministered to him. So there was a climate of genuine spiritual life in the nation. They were teaching and counseling the people and the word of God was spreading abroad. Abuses were being corrected. Idolatry was being weeded out.

The third thing Rehoboam did was to establish a number of cities along the northern border in order to protect the nation against an invasion from the north. He placed his sons over these cities and garrisoned soldiers there to provide security.

But at the end of the account of this three-year period in 2 Chronicles a cryptic statement is added: "And he also sought other wives." The account tells us that he had 18 wives and 60 concubines. He followed Solomon's pattern of marrying outside the nation of Israel in order to establish political alliances. You wonder where he learned that! And the same thing which happened to Solomon, happened to Rehoboam. Idolatry sprang up again. People began

to worship the gods of other nations, and Israel began to do what was evil in the sight of God.

Rehoboam had a very hopeful beginning, but he didn't endure. I see this pattern occurring over and over again in the kings of Judah, and elsewhere in the Old Testament. It has impressed me that good beginnings don't count, that God is not really impressed by good beginnings. This is somewhat like learning how to fly and taking off on your first solo flight. You might make a beautiful takeoff, do everything according to the book during your flight, and come in toward a perfect touchdown. If you then crash, it somehow destroys the quality of the whole flight! Though Rehoboam had three years of obedience, somehow it didn't matter, because he undermined everything he did during those first three years by fourteen years of disobedience. He did not endure. He didn't receive the promises because he didn't endure. Scripture says that it is through faith and patience that we inherit the promises.

Abraham is used in Scripture as exhibit "A" of faith and patience which endured to receive the promises. When Abraham was 75 years old, God promised him that he would bless him and make his name great. That is, God would make possible in his life, would make true in his life, all the righteous desires which Abraham had. And all of God's desires for him would be worked out in his experience. God would give him everything that he wanted for him. And God would multiply him. In Abraham's case this was literally fulfilled in the seed through whom God has blessed the whole world and from whom he has caused a great multitude of people to grow. Do you know how long it took before Abraham received this promise? Abraham was 100 years old when that promise was fulfilled. For twenty-five years he patiently endured.

At times people come to me and say, "It just doesn't work. I have tried. I have habits in my life which I have been trying for years to uproot. It doesn't work." My question is always, "How long have you worked it?" Until we have worked it for at least twenty-five years we don't have any right to say that it doesn't work. Abraham patiently endured for twenty-five years and he received the promise.

There are two things I want in my life above all else. I have a lot of other sins I am concerned about, but there are two things which bother me most of all, and those are what I am praying about. One is that I will be a stable man, and no matter what happens around me, no matter how adverse the circumstances will be, that I will be rooted and unmovable and stable. I think sometimes that I am attaining this, and then something happens and I do some bizarre, weird thing which shows how unstable I really am! And I think, "It doesn't work!" But it does work. I just haven't worked it long enough.

The other thing that I want above all else is to be a sensitive, loving person. But I find that I am extremely callous and insensitive to people. And if I think, "I am seeing progress there!" I then do something to hurt someone. And I think, "It doesn't work!" But I just haven't worked it long enough. It is through faith and patience that we inherit the promises. And none of us can say that it doesn't work until we have been willing to endure as Abraham endured. He was strong in faith, hoping against hope. From any practical standpoint his situation was hopeless, and yet he hoped against hope. He based his life on the promises of God, and he received the promises because he endured.

There is another illustration in Scripture which always strikes me. It is the story of the conquest of Jericho. Jericho sat athwart the entrance into the promised land. The Israelites had to take Jericho in order to get into the land. But there was this impregnable fortress. God instructed them to march around the city once every day and seven times on the seventh day. That was his way to bring the fortress down. It occurred to me one day that the thirteenth time they circled the city, that wall was just as strong, that city was just as impregnable, as it had been the first time they made the circuit. There was not one crack in the wall. The inhabitants were still shouting taunts at them from the top of the wall. I am sure they must have been discouraged, and thought, "It doesn't work." But the next time around, the wall fell down!

And Jericho stands in our experience for those dreadful, deep-seated habits which are so difficult to uproot and tear out of our life. Again, it is through faith and patience that they are dealt with. You may have worked, and worked, and worked to apply faith to that situation but not seen any progress. The tendency is to give up and quit and be disappointed. But you haven't worked it long enough. The Scriptures say that it is by faith and patience --

endurance that we receive the promises. It is certain that it will occur - but not immediately.

Now, this was Rehoboam's problem. He believed for awhile. But when the chips were down, he didn't endure. In verses 22 through 26 we read:

And 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. For they also built for themselves high places and sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and beneath every luxuriant tree. And 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. [This is something Solomon never did. For all of his excesses he never did these things. This was an advance on the idolatry which was practiced during his reign.] **Now it came about in the fifth year of King Rehoboam** [this would be two years after he turned away from the Lord] **that Shishak the king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. And 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.**

Because Rehoboam would not give heed to the voice of the prophet the Lord sent Shishak against him. He is known in history as Sheshonk, a powerful Pharaoh in one of the most powerful dynasties in Egypt's history. He was the pharaoh with whom Jeroboam had stayed, and I am sure Jeroboam had something to do with this campaign. Jeroboam was now king of the Northern Kingdom, and was at war with the Southern Kingdom. Shishak invaded the land of Palestine. And archaeologists have found in Karnak, Egypt, a temple which records the progress of this campaign and lists in order the number of cities he destroyed in Judah. There were 150 of them. He ravaged Judah. He came right up to the gates of Jerusalem, and it was only by paying heavy tribute that Rehoboam was able to avert disaster. The whole city could have been destroyed. And so he allowed Shishak to clean out the treasury.

Shishak took all the treasure which had flowed into the coffers of Judah since the time of David. He took everything. All the treasures were gone. But what seems most significant -- it is mentioned here -- he took the golden shields which Solomon had made. Solomon had 500 golden shields made, which he placed in the house of the Lord and in his own house. They were intended to be symbols of the glory of God in the midst of Israel. Shishak took them. They have found Shishak's sarcophagus. It is solid gold. And I can't help but wonder if that isn't the gold taken from Solomon's temple.

And you know what Rehoboam did? This loss was a disaster, and evidently it was arranged without the knowledge of the people. So he had to take some steps to cover up, verses 27 and 28:

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. 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 guard's room.

Rehoboam fabricated bronze shields which looked like the gold shields. And on state occasions they were brought out and used in the royal parade when he went up to the temple to worship. Then they were taken back and hidden in the guards' rooms. Solomon had displayed his shields openly in his house and in the Lord's house. Rehoboam hid these shields in the guardhouse. Do you know why? Because bronze tarnishes. They would start to turn green, and anyone who would look at them would think, "What has happened to the gold shields?" Then the cat would be out of the bag and they would realize that Rehoboam had sold out, and that the glory of Israel was gone. So the guards would get out their "Brasso" and polishing cloths and they would polish these things up and bring them out for certain occasions. But they kept them very carefully hidden away because they did not want Israel to know that the glory had faded, that the life of God was gone.

You see, in the Old Testament gold stands for the character of God, for what God is. The fact that there were 500 of these shields, I believe, indicates something of the multifaceted character of God. He is love, he is justice, he is mercy, he is faithfulness, he is loyalty, all these things, and these shields symbolized all that God was in the life of

Israel. But now they were gone replaced by fakes.

You know, the same thing is true in our lives. We too carry golden shields, illustrations of the character of God in our life. But it is only true when our relationship with the Lord is right. God's glory flows out of a right relationship with him. It is when we walk by faith and trust, and we continue to cling to him, that we can manifest the glory of God in our lives.

What happens when for some reason or other we turn our back on the Lord and that relationship is marred? Well, he doesn't leave, because we have invited him to be Lord in our life and he takes up permanent residence there. But the glory begins to fade. We begin to feel ourselves becoming irritable and irresponsible and hard to live with. We start yelling at the kids and at our wives, and we get anxious and troubled and worried and negative and frustrated. We rub people the wrong way.

It occurs to us that we ought not to be that way, and we certainly don't want to give that impression. So we fabricate the righteousness of God. We make a cheap imitation. We try by self-effort to be patient and kind and loving. We drag out our bronze shields. But do you know what happens to bronze shields? They tarnish. They corrode. We get them out every morning, and we buff them up so they are all shiny, and we walk out into the environment we live in, and the shields begin to corrode, because we can't sustain by self-effort the righteousness of God. I can't and you can't. We try by gritting our teeth and clenching our jaws to be righteous, but the righteousness fades.

This passage is the Old Testament counterpart of a passage in 2 Corinthians 3 in which Paul refers to an incident in the life of Israel when Moses went up to the mountain to receive the Law, and because of his contact with the Law Giver, his face began to shine. There was a glory, a reflected glory, which emanated from his face because he was in the presence of God. And when he went back down to the foot of the hill where the nation of Israel was gathered, they couldn't look at his face because the shine was too glorious. So he placed a veil over his face so that the people of Israel wouldn't be blinded -- a gracious thing for Moses to do - except, Paul says, that he kept the veil there in order that they might not see the end of the fading glory. He was embarrassed because the glory faded away.

The glory of the Law always fades away. The Law speaks of self-effort - this tooth-clenched determination to do what is right and to try somehow to produce the righteousness of God by self-effort, by trying harder, by backing off and taking another run at it. And it looks good initially. The glory is there. But it is a fading glory, because the flesh cannot sustain that effort. It fades. And Moses, because he knew the glory was fading, kept the veil on his face long after the glory had passed away. He was faking. He was pretending that the glory was still there, but it wasn't.

But Paul says that we aren't like Moses. "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." The mirror refers to the Word. We with "unveiled face" -- with no pretense, without self-effort, without trying to fake it, to make a sham presentation of the righteousness of God -- with unveiled face we look into the mirror of God's word and we see there the likeness of Jesus Christ. And our heart yearns for that, and we are changed from glory to glory by the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God takes the attributes of Jesus Christ and begins to work them out in our lives as we patiently walk by faith. We grow from glory to glory, i.e. from one degree of likeness to Christ to the next, from one attribute to the next, as the Spirit of God begins to reproduce in our lives the likeness of Jesus Christ. But that comes only as we patiently endure. Rehoboam tried to produce it upon his own. He couldn't endure. It only endures as we see the likeness of Jesus Christ in his word and by confidence in the Spirit of God we let him work out that likeness in our life.

Father, we are grateful that you have begun this work in our lives, that it is your desire to see your glory expressed in our lives, and that in due time this will be the result. And so we ask for strength to endure patiently, to let you work out your program in your own time and in your own way, and quietly to trust in the Spirit of God to make the glory real in our lives. We ask these things in Jesus'