



A KING CROWNED: THE DIVIDED KINGDOM

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Peace is the English word normally used to translate the Hebrew word *shalom* in the Old Testament. However, the English word isn't quite up to the task. Peace usually describes an absence of conflict. *Shalom* speaks of essential wellbeing—a world in which things are as they ought to be at a deep level and are not likely to change. *Shalom* denotes a condition that is much beyond a “cease fire.” It means that war has ended. At a personal level, *shalom* is the opposite of worry, restlessness, conflict, agitation, and dissatisfaction.

In this study we continue a journey through the Bible that we have titled *EPIC*. We are now at the end of Israel's united monarchy and at the end of Solomon's story. In a woeful irony we note that the name Solomon is a form of the word *shalom*. Sadly, in his 40 years as ruler, King Solomon saw his people experience a shattering of peace. At his death, this nation that once had offered hope to the world, became characterized by bitter antagonism and civil war. Peace was replaced by terrible alternatives.

1 Kings 11:4-8:

⁴As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. ⁵He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁶So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.

⁷On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁸He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.

Note the adjective “detestable” in this paragraph. The worship of Molech and Chemosh required the sacrifice of one's children by placing them alive in a fire. Solomon chose to placate the desires of pagan wives in place of obeying the voice of God, and the influence of these wives opened the door for the people of Israel to become idolaters

themselves. Jerusalem became a home for abominations.

In addition, Solomon squandered the nation's wealth on these foolish and iniquitous building projects. He began to conscript his own people as forced laborers to carry out his broken vision. *Shalom* had been replaced by immorality and a battle for the throne at the same time Solomon's death had become inevitable.

Two men fought to succeed Solomon: Rehoboam, his son, and an official in Solomon's court named Jeroboam. They both were shaped by the corruption and misuse of power that characterized Solomon's final years.

Rehoboam assumed he would follow his father to the throne. As he began to do so, some of the older royal advisors called on Rehoboam to reject his father's policies of forced labor and economic deprivation.

1 Kings 12:8-11:

⁸But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. ⁹He asked them, “What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, ‘Lighten the yoke your father put on us?’”

¹⁰The young men who had grown up with him replied, “Tell these people who have said to you, ‘Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter’—tell them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. [a euphemism for boasting about genital size] ¹¹My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.”

Rehoboam's tough guy rhetoric was rebuffed immediately by the people. He had to quickly retreat for safety as most of his subjects rose up against him. Would-be tyrants are often fools who assume authority where none exists and imagine that brutal suppression is a sufficient alternative to peace.

We might note before moving on that this text is

sometimes taught as a warning against the recklessness of youth, as if older counselors should always be listened to in place of those who are young. But that is not the case. The older advisors in this account would have been contemporaries of Solomon who did him no good in the years of his decline. The important question, rather, is ‘who will speak with divine wisdom’? Both the older men and the younger men advised Rehoboam from the perspective of political expediency. Rehoboam had no one who spoke of God’s purposes for the nation and he had no interest in seeking such a person.

Rehoboam’s rival, Jeroboam, was first praised because of his effective leadership and early on we observe him speaking out against Solomon’s wasteful building projects. A majority of God’s people, ten of the twelve tribes, began a civil war and chose Jeroboam as ruler in defiance of Rehoboam. From that point the nation was divided with no hope of reunification.

A prophet named Ahijah offered Jeroboam a chance to rule Israel (the breakaway tribes) as God’s servant but he refused, determined to have royal power on his own terms.

1 Kings 12:26-32:

²⁶Jeroboam thought to himself “The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. ²⁷If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me [Jeroboam was driven by his fears] and return to King Rehoboam.”

²⁸After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” [this phrase recalls the rebellion Aaron led at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Exodus.32:4] ²⁹One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. ³⁰And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there.

³¹Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites. ³²He instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the festival held in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. This he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves he had made. And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made.

Whereas Rehoboam threatened brutality as his alternative to peace, Jeroboam favored manipulation in refusing to trust God. Jeroboam styles himself as a new Moses and a new Aaron. He invents priests out of thin air, makes up festivals, builds high places, creates idols—using Israel’s historic memories and spiritual sensibilities for his own purposes.

However, God will not be mocked and religious manipulators will always fail. In the end, Jeroboam is known as a man who led Israel to sin. The line of his descendants was snuffed out and before long Israel was conquered, dispersed, and lost forever.

As we will discover in the next study, the southern kingdom, Judah, retains its sovereignty for a bit longer but only as a vassal state. It will never again have the stature and influence that unified Israel commanded during the time of David and Solomon.

The corruption of Solomon’s later years shaped Rehoboam and Jeroboam, the men who fought over his throne. *Shalom* was a distant memory. From this point the people of God are an insignificant remnant, trampled and ignored by the great powers which surrounded them. But the light had not gone out.

There is one source of hope left for the faithful—God keeps his promises! God promised Adam and Eve that their son would destroy the serpent. He promised Abraham he would become a great nation. He promised Moses that wanderers would be established in their own land. He also promises David:

2 Samuel 7:11-16:

¹¹“The Lord himself will establish a house for you . . . ¹²When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom . . . ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

And God keeps his promises. A son of David will be born some day and he will establish an enduring kingdom—*shalom* has not been forfeited forever. There are more dark days ahead for God’s people. They will need prophetic reminders to wait in faith.

And their faith will be rewarded: first with the birth of Jesus in a Bethlehem stable, next with the victory won in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and finally on the day

when the Prince of Peace (*shalom*) returns to banish sin and death forever.

A familiar text from Isaiah:

Isaiah 9:6-7:

**⁶For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.**

**And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

**⁷Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.**

**He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.**

**The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.**

A final word about *shalom*. The New Testament makes clear that peace in relationships and peace of heart can be our experience no matter what circumstances of history we find ourselves in.

Philippians 4:4-7:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Hard and confusing life circumstances stir up anxious thoughts, which can grow to life crippling worries. The *shalom* alternative is to pour out our hearts to God in petitions that are anchored in thanksgiving. The peace of God descends in response to the prayers of the saints.

Philippians 4:8-9:

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Here we are called to make decisions about both our thoughts (think about such things) and our actions (put into practice). The universe is filled with excellent and praiseworthy matters for reflection. Jealousy, lust, and self pity offer nothing in comparison. Following the pattern of godly men and women is surely superior to repeating the bad choices that occur to us naturally.

The God-who-is-shalom will be our companion in the effort to renew our thinking and change our behavior.