

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

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THE DIVISION OF THE KINGDOM

Reading: 1 Kings 11 v 26 to end of chapter

Background: Following the reign of Solomon, Israel fell into a sad decline, the glorious united reign in Israel was to be broken in pieces, it all happened in a natural way that God was behind, the events bringing judgement on Solomon's house.

We start today by looking at the man Jeroboam, he was a man of considerable ability and initiative and he was to make an indelible mark of evil in Israel's history and became known as the man who made Israel to sin. Solomon recognised his value and put him in charge of workers from Ephraim repairing the fortifications around Jerusalem.

Then in the chapter before us Ahijah the prophet was instructed by God to meet Jeroboam on his way from Jerusalem. Ahijah was wearing a new garment and as he met him, Ahijah tore the cloak in 12 pieces indicating God's intention to divide the nation. 10 of these he gave to Jeroboam while he retained two. He told Jeroboam that his act was symbolic of what God was about to do to Israel. The 12 pieces were the 12 tribes, 10 of which God was going to rend out of the hand of Solomon while one tribe (in addition to Solomon's own tribe of Judah) would be retained on account of the promise to David and because God loved Jerusalem which was situated on the border with Benjamin.

Jeroboam was greatly pleased with these words for he was ambitious and sought power. He thought that he could be King and have the 10 tribes, but Ahijah's message was potentially dangerous. If Solomon should find out then his life would be in jeopardy but instead of keeping the words to himself, Jeroboam foolishly told others. Solomon already had good cause for suspicion and vigilance, for God told him that he would raise someone who would divide the kingdom following his death (1 Kings 11:11-13). It is not surprising Solomon tried to kill Jeroboam and he had to flee into Egypt to Shishak King of Egypt and stayed there until the death of Solomon.

Then we come to the problem of Solomon's kingdom. He died after he had reigned 40 years. His son Rehoboam, whose mother was an Ammonitess, became king. The public coronation of the young king was to take place at Shechem and all the people had assembled for that occasion. However he was not a popular King of the world and glory of his father's kingdom had caused him to become a very spoilt young man.

Meanwhile some of the elders of Israel had called Jeroboam from Egypt and Jeroboam was only too pleased to come back and fulfil the promise he had been given. Now the problems in Israel were about to start.

There had always been jealousy and rivalry between the northern 10 tribes and the tribes in the South even in the days of David. Now the people were really grieved because of the heavy burden of taxes they had to pay in order to keep the riches of the kingdom.

Jeroboam was quick to sense the unrest in the land and he decided to represent the people before the King and to demand that things be made easier for the common people.

Read the message for yourselves in chapter 12 v 4... it was clear and to the point. If Rehoboam would lighten the taxes than the people would serve him, it was a reasonable demand and if Rehoboam rejected it then he would appear a tyrant and then the people would want Jeroboam as their king. It was a tense explosive atmosphere, Rehoboam could not argue against the reasonableness of such a request, so he told the people to depart for three days while he thought about it. I am sure you will remember the next events. Rehoboam asked advice from the old experienced councillors of Solomon and also from the young men with whom he had grown up. The older men knew it was important that the young king gain the favour of his subjects and were aware of the mood of the people and urged the King to accept the conditions of the people.

But Rehoboam forsook their advice. Perhaps he had made up his mind beforehand, perhaps it was the presence of his rival Jeroboam that hardened his attitude, so he took the advice of the impetuous short-sighted aggressive youth. Look at the folly of his reply v 13 and v 14. He said he would add to their taxes and "chastise you with scorpions". What did this mean? Scorpions were three armed with sharp points and called such because of the sting that they gave when used. So in other words the King was saying he would add pain to the suffering they were already receiving.

THIS WAS THE END..... the people could take no more, they were determined to have nothing more to do with Rehoboam and would certainly not serve him. The cry went out:-

"WHAT PORTION HAVE WE IN DAVID..... TO YOUR TENTS OF ISRAEL"..... it was the language of division, Jeroboam could see that things were moving in his favour. Now the realisation of what was happening came upon the King he sought desperately to quell the revolt. He sent Adoram to speak with the people, but what a terrible choice for he was in charge of taxation and his presence caused people to go wild and they stoned him to death. Rehoboam fearing the mood of the people fled to Jerusalem for his life and began to plot revenge assembling a great army to crush the revolt. However once more in seemingly natural events God intervenes. He sends the prophet Shemiah with a message to Rehoboam:-

"HE WAS NOT TO FIGHT AGAINST JEROBOAM... because... THIS THING IS FOR ME."... In other words God was behind the events of the revolt and it was the punishment on the house of Solomon because of disobedience. Rehoboam could do nothing, THE KINGDOM WAS DIVIDED, NO MORE TO BE ONE NATION UNTIL THE LORD JESUS RETURNS.

Jeroboam had 10 tribes from now on referred to as Israel or the Northern Kingdom.

Rehoboam had 2 tribes known as Judah or the Southern Kingdom.

Jeroboam was made King by the 10 tribes and made his capital city Shechem, he could have consolidated his position and maintained favour with God but the maintenance of his own authority was more important to him than the word of God. He knew that although Israel was divided into two kingdoms politically they still had one united worship centred in Jerusalem and he feared that this unifying influence would prove a strong force to bring the nation together again. This he did not want.

Knowing that the law required that all males should appear before God three times a year (Exodus 23:17) for this they would have to go to Jerusalem into the kingdom of Rehoboam and perhaps desire him as their king, how was he going to handle the situation? He came up with a solution

which revealed his cunning and unscrupulous ways. Under religious pretence he set up two golden calves in Dan and Bethel so that the people "did not have so far to go to worship". This appealed to the people. Man is lazy and any excuse to get out of the responsibility of the law but still let them feel at ease, thinking they were filling their religious need. They were quite unconcerned as to whether this form of worship was acceptable to God and so Jeroboam perverted the truth in a deceptive mixture of good and evil.

Let's examine the evil of the foundation of this false worship.

Open your Bibles and look at 1 Kings Ch 12 v 28-33.

1. v 28 Jeroboam told Israel that "these are the gods which brought you out of the land of Egypt..." look at your margin this was exactly the same phrase used when Aaron made the golden calf. Man has always wanted something to worship yet it broke two of the great commandments when God said, they were to worship no other gods or make any graven images. (Exodus 20:3-4)

2. v 31 he did not acknowledge the need for the priesthood, but changed to qualifications, instead of the priests being the sons of Aaron who had been instructed in the law he made priests from the lower class of people. Whereas God had forbidden this on pain of death. (Numbers 3:10)

3. v 32 he changed the days of the feasts and instead of keeping the Feast of Tabernacles on the 15th day of the seventh month Jeroboam's feast began on the 15th of the eighth month.

Can you see what has happened, their religious worship became the will of man not the way God required them to worship. Man must remember and that includes us today, we are the sinners and we cannot come to God on our own terms. It does not matter how we think we could worship to be acceptable, we must always search our Bibles to find what God really wants of us.

So we leave our lesson in sadness. God's land and people are divided. Israel had one evil king after another and it is recorded that they all followed the evil ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat who made Israel to sin. There was constant civil war between the 10 and the two nations.

Judah under Rehoboam did have a few good points, then followed other kings, some who tried to get back to the law and follow David's example, like Josiah and Hezekiah. However the people in general forgot the greatness of the God they served, they forgot their high calling as sons of God. They practised the law and the Commandments as rituals instead of letting them have effect upon them. How sad that a nation that had been so great, so well blessed could turn from their God as they did. Yet all through the history there were always a few, a prophet here and there, a faithful king, whose heart was right with God and therefore God worked through them bringing the message to repent to the people. God who is ever merciful always set out the offer of forgiveness and salvation.

Now to us. God has promised us great and wonderful things, he has given us his law and Commandments. He has set down rules for our lives. Do we listen to those Commandments and serve the God we love faithfully, or do we please ourselves and worship in the way we think is right. We must think carefully on these things and take the example from Israel of old.

Extra work

Find that verse which speaks of the uniting Israel as a nation when Jesus returns. (You'll find it in Ezekiel) You may find a concordance helpful.

Outline some of the lessons we can take from today's chapter, especially the actions of Rehoboam, and Jeroboam's calf worship.