

Rehoboam: The King Who Divided a Nation

Text: 2 Chronicles 10:1-19

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We're going to take a break from our theology study. We finished a theology of salvation and later in the year we will come back to a theology of the church and of the end times. But first we're going to work our way through the second half of 2nd Chronicles and do a series on the Kings of Judah.

This is a section of the Bible that is probably less familiar for most Christians. We know about David and Solomon, who ruled when the nation of Israel was at the height of its glory. But what happened after this? This period of history, (from around 931-586 BC) is called the divided monarchy because people of Israel actually split into two separate nations. There was a series of kings in the North and the series of kings in the south, and for the most part they didn't get along. The northern ten tribes broke away when Solomon's son, Rehoboam took the throne, and we'll look at the reasons for that in a few moments.

The northern kingdom kept the name Israel, and eventually the capital city was moved to Samaria. There was a total of 19 kings who ruled over the northern kingdom, none of them from the line of David. They came from different families, and different tribes. When the crown is passed down from a father to his son we call that a dynasty. A successful dynasty will last for many generations, but there weren't many of those in the northern kingdom. In all, there were 9 different dynasties who ruled in the north, most of them only lasting for a generation or two. If we were to evaluate their rule, from a political standpoint, some of them were successful in building a strong army or building up the wealth and infrastructure of the nation. But from a spiritual perspective, all of these kings were wicked men who led the people further and further away from the Lord. The most infamous king of the northern tribes was King Ahab, who was constantly confronted by the prophet Elijah. The northern kingdom fell in 722 BC to the Assyrian Empire, and the tribes were scattered throughout the region.

The southern kingdom became known as the nation of Judah. It was composed of two tribes. As you might have guessed, Judah was the dominant tribe, and they were joined by the neighboring tribe of Benjamin. Also the Levites, who lived throughout the country, migrated to the south to remain close to the temple. Jerusalem remained the capital of the nation. There were 20 kings who ruled over the land of Judah, all from the lineage of David. The Davidic dynasty continued on, unbroken, just as God had promised. Some of them were good kings who followed the Lord. They walked in the ways of their father David. Others were wicked kings who led the people into idolatry. They did not follow the ways of their father David. The southern kingdom fared a little better than their neighbors to the north. The nation continued until 586 BC, when the Babylonian empire conquered God's people and carried them away into exile. Of course, God was faithful to his people and brought them back after 70 years in captivity, but that's a different chapter of history.

It is important to understand this information, because if we don't much of the OT will be confusing to us. We will wonder why there are two sets of kings... why the capital of Israel has

moved to Samaria... and why some of the tribes are no longer worshipping in the temple. We will wonder why the people of Judah and the people of Israel are in conflict with one another. There are passages in the prophets that predict a day when the Messiah will reunite the tribes as one, but that promise won't make sense to us if we don't know the background. As we study the OT prophets, this was the background of their ministry. Some of the prophets were sent to the northern kingdom, like Elijah or Elisha or Jonah or Amos or Hosea. That was their primary focus, to call the tribes of Israel to repent and return to God. Other prophets were sent primarily to the south, like: Isaiah or Jeremiah, or Joel or Micah or Habakkuk. There was certainly some overlap. Sometimes God directed a prophet to address different groups of people. But if we are to understand their ministry, it is helpful to know if this is this a northern prophet or a southern prophet.

There is a lot of overlap between the books of 1 & 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. The author of kings alternates between the kings of the north and the kings of the south. Chronicles doesn't do that. The book largely ignores the kings of the north, because it is only concerned with the line of David. And this will be the focus of our study in the coming weeks. We're going to work our way through chapters 10-36 of 2 Chronicles examining the reign of the kings of Judah. There is important history recorded here, helping us to make sense of the chain of events that led to the Babylonian Captivity. But there is more to be gained from this book of the Bible than a history lesson. We learn from the failures and the victories of these kings, about the qualities God desires not just in a leader but in all of his people. We learn about trusting in God through difficult times. We learn not to place our faith in earthly rulers, but to look to the King of kings and Lord of lords. Ultimately, the most important message from the book of Chronicles is that the Kingdom of God will not be established by sinful men. One day, a Messianic King will arise who will govern with perfect justice, bringing peace on earth, leading humanity to worship the Lord. He will be greater than all who came before him, even David. We should long for his coming, honor his rule in our lives, and give him glory.

Rehoboam: First King of the Divided Monarchy

I'm not a very good artist, but pretend this drawing is a portrait. It might be a family photo, or the picture of a church congregation huddled together after a potluck, or it might be a snapshot of neighbors standing shoulder to shoulder in their community. It is something that might be hung on a wall, representing the shared relationship that unites these individuals. What if someone were to come along and tear this portrait in two? That would be heartbreaking. The photo would be ruined. You could try to glue the pieces back together, or maybe stretch a line of scotch tape down the middle, but you're going to have hard time repairing the damage. It's easier to tear things apart than it is to put them back together. That's also true when it comes to our relationships with others, which is why Scripture constantly urges God's people to avoid division and strife.

As we look around our world, I think you would agree that people are more divided today than they have been for a very a long time. Whether we are talking about our country, or our political leaders, or our local communities, or our families, or even churches... the events of the last twelve months have put a strain on many relationships.

Just think, about some of the headlines or images you have seen in the news over the last year. We have seen our government leaders viciously attacking one another, refusing to work together to accomplish the most basic tasks. We have seen racial tensions boiling over in cities across the country. Buildings have been burned to the ground by angry protestors, while white supremacist groups have marched through streets carrying weapons. We have seen how the covid pandemic has divided communities. This was a picture that became infamous taken from the capital building in Michigan. In our own community, we saw people divided at the start of the school year about how the classroom should look. There were two opposing groups arguing back and forth in the newspaper about what precautions should be taken if any. I remember reading all the letters to the editor when the sign in someone's yard was vandalized. Even churches have been affected by all of this. I think our congregation has held together pretty well, because of the love we share for one another. But I know of other churches where people have left for one reason or another. If there is one word that sums up 2020, it might be the word division. And so it is appropriate to begin the year with a message of unity.

In our passage this morning, we read about a nation that was also divided. The trouble began when Solomon died, and the crown was passed to his son... Rehoboam. As you probably remember, Solomon was one of the greatest kings in the history of Israel. Under his rule, the nation had grown into a powerful empire. The borders were expanded in every direction. It was a time of peace and prosperity. Jerusalem was built up into an impressive city. Delegates came from far and wide to gain an audience with the wise king of Israel. But after 40 years, Solomon's reign came to an end and it was time for his successor to be announced.

Leaders from each of the twelve tribes assembled in Shechem, a city that was centrally located. They came to meet their new king and pledge their support. It was supposed to be a formality. He would show up, give a rousing speech to unite the people. They would pledge their loyalty and endorse him as their new king. But things didn't go as planned. Before the people were willing to proclaim their loyalty to Rehoboam, they had a few concerns they wanted him to address. In 2 Chronicles verse 10, the people told him, *"Your father made our yoke hard; now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you."*

It was a reasonable request. Solomon accomplished many great things, but it was the people who had to carry the load. He built the temple, and palaces, and many other impressive structures throughout the country. All of that takes resources which meant heavy taxes. There was a financial burden, but the people were also enlisted to work in the stone quarries and lumber yards. They not only worked in their own fields, to support their families, but they were also expected to join the national workforce and serve the king. It was an unsustainable situation. The people were ready for a break, so they approached the new king with a simple request: "Lighten our load, and we will serve you."

How would Rehoboam respond? One test of leadership is how well you handle conflict, and this was his first test as the new king of Israel. Sadly, it became obvious that he did not share the wisdom of his father Solomon. It was the king's foolish response that divided the nation.

The passage is a warning to us today. It is easier to divide than mend divisions, so God's people must guard their unity

In order to guard our unity, God's people should remember what holds us together.

Look at verses 5-6.

He said to them, "Return to me again in three days." So the people departed. ⁶ Then King Rehoboam consulted with the elders who had served his father Solomon while he was still alive, saying, "How do you counsel me to answer this people?"

It's not so much what he says here, that is the problem, but what he doesn't say. He doesn't refer to them as "my people," or "our people." He doesn't say "my brothers and sisters" or my our fellow countrymen. He calls them "this people." I imagine him saying this with a derogatory tone in his voice. What are we going to do about this people? In other words --Who do they think they are? Don't they realize I'm the king? What a bunch of ungrateful peasants.--

He forgot that these people were not merely subjects to be commanded. They were his own flesh and blood. Consider all that they shared in common: They shared the same heritage, as the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They shared the same faith. They worshipped the one true God who brought their ancestors out of Egypt. Together, they were the people of God. But they weren't acting like it. Instead of focusing on the things that brought them together, Rehoboam was too busy dwelling on their differences.

There is an important lesson here for God's people today. The Lord has brought us together in a special relationship, but if we forget that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, it won't be long before petty differences will divide us. That's why the apostle Paul was constantly reminding the churches that we are one body in Christ. In **1 Corinthians 1:10 (NASB95)** he writes,

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

It's not that we're always going to see things exactly the same way. We have different perspectives, different passions, and different ways of doing things. That's part of the beauty of the church, how God brings together a diverse people from various backgrounds and joins us together as one. But we have to be careful not to let those differences divide us.

Again in **Romans 15:5-6 (NASB95)** we are told,

⁵ Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Issues will come up, where believers will be tempted to take sides, but instead of treating one another as enemies we need to remember that we are allies. There is so much that we share in common, as followers of Christ. We are fellow members of God's family. We are united by the Holy Spirit who dwells within our hearts. We are guided by the same authority: the Word of God. We have a common mission: to share the good news of our risen Savior. We gather together for the same purpose: to lift our voices in praise. If I consider all that unites us, I will realize that our differences are really quite small by comparison.

Think of a sweater, knitted together from various strands of yarn. They might be different colors, or make different designs, but they are joined together to form one article of clothing. If you pulled the individual strings apart, the sweater would unravel. But together, though they are many, they are one. So it is with us. We might be different and unique, but the Lord holds us together, and that is greater than all of our differences.

In order to guard our unity, God's people should consider one another.

Look at verses 6-8,

⁶ Then King Rehoboam consulted with the elders who had served his father Solomon while he was still alive, saying, "How do you counsel me to answer this people?" ⁷ They spoke to him, saying, "If you will be kind to this people and please them and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever." ⁸ But he forsook the counsel of the elders which they had given him, and consulted with the young men who grew up with him and served him.

At first, it may have seemed as if the king was trying think through the issues. He asked for three days to make a decision. Imagine if he had used that time to sit down with representatives from the different tribes, listening to their concerns, asking questions. He could have walked through the worksites where the young men had been part of the building projects. He could have visited the homes of average citizens to learn about their struggles. But he didn't do any of those things. He wasn't interested in understanding the issues. The king spent those three days in the royal palace, far away from day-to-day experience of his subjects, thinking about what was best for him.

The royal advisors, who served his father, urged Rehoboam to listen to the people, show them that you care about their problems, that you are on their side. "If you are willing to be a servant to these people today and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your loyal subjects." (1 Kings 12:7 NLT). But the king ignored their wise counsel, and turned to the younger officials who grew up with him, who told him what he wanted to hear.

We should learn from Rehoboam's mistake. One of the best things we can do, when conflict arises, is take the time to listen. Our first impulse is to dig in, defend our position, and make ourselves heard. But if we are willing to sit down with the other person and hear them out, it can go a long way toward disarming a tense situation. When we seek to understand, to walk in their

shoes, to consider their point of view, they realize that we care. There is more at stake than being right. What good is winning the argument if the relationship is ruined?

We need to take time to listen. It might be that we're missing something, and that they can help us see things from a different perspective. We'll never know unless we consider what they have to say.

Philippians 2:4 (NASB95) “...do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

A person who puts himself first thinks that life is all about “me”: my interests, my agenda, my desires. But a person who puts others first has a completely different outlook. He realizes that he is not the center of the universe. God placed me here to be an encouragement to others, to build others up. The Lord is at the center of the universe, things work better when I realize this.

In order to guard our unity, God’s people should choose our words wisely.

Rehoboam failed to do this. Look at verses 12-14.

¹² So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day as the king had directed, saying, “Return to me on the third day.” ¹³ The king answered them harshly, and King Rehoboam forsook the counsel of the elders. ¹⁴ He spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to it; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.”

The king rejected the sound advice of his elders, and chose to listen to the younger officials who had lacked wisdom and experience. “Don’t give in,” they told Rehoboam. “Show them who’s boss. Flex your muscles and convince them that you’re not someone to be trifled with. If you give them an inch, they’ll take a mile, so tell them how it’s going to be.” That’s what the king did. The passage tells us that he answered the people harshly. His words were not kind or soothing. They were filled with bitterness and animosity. “You thought my father was tough? Well you ain’t seen nothing yet! He beat you with whips when you got out of line, but I’m going to beat you with scorpions!”

This isn’t the way to resolve conflict. It was only going to make an already tense situation even more volatile. How did expect the people to respond? Did actually believe they would hear his words and go cowering back to their homes. “Sorry your majesty, we’ll do whatever you say.” He might have expected them to fall into line, but it didn’t happen. His words added fuel to the fire and ignited a rebellion.

The people responded to his words with harsh words of their own. How dare he treat them this way? They wouldn’t stand for it. He could go back to Jerusalem without their support. They would choose their own king and form a nation of their own. Verse 16 says,

¹⁶ *When all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them the people answered the king, saying, "What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. Every man to your tents, O Israel; Now look after your own house, David." So all Israel departed to their tents.*

We see how quickly conflict can escalate when careless words are unleashed. One guy unloads on another. The other person doesn't let it go, but responds with his own scathing comments. Back and forth it goes: one cutting remark after another. The argument keeps building and building until it explodes.

But we don't have to let that happen. We can think before we speak. Before opening our mouth, we can ask, "what effect will these words have?" Is it helpful, or harmful? Does it accomplish God's purpose, or hinder our witness? Will these words build up or divide? It's not that we shy away from every controversy. Sometimes difficult truths need to be spoken, but we can do so prayerfully, and in a way that seeks what is good for the other person. And when we're on the receiving end of harsh words, we don't have to retaliate. It isn't easy, but we can choose to bite our tongue and let it roll off our back.

Scripture has a lot to say about how we use our words. **Proverbs 15:1 (NASB95)** tells us, "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.*" What if Rehoboam had offered gentle words that day, expressing care and concern for the people of Israel? How differently things might have been. But instead his harsh words provoked a rebellion.

Proverbs 29:22 (NASB95) says, "*An angry man stirs up strife, And a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression.*"

Proverbs 12:18 (NET) "*Speaking recklessly is like the thrusts of a sword, but the words of the wise bring healing.*"

Illustration – teaching kids to whittle, rules they need to follow to handle pocket knife safely, blade has to be respected, tool that can be very useful, but when handled carelessly can cause injury, may not think about it but words can be just as destructive, capable of doing great good but when used carelessly can cause injury or provoke conflict.

We need to be much more careful than we often are with the things that we say. Before you open your mouth, stop. Give yourself a moment to calm down. Words can be destructive... they can inflict wounds, they can cause division between friends. But our words also carry the potential for good, to heal, to bring people together. A gentle answer can make peace. What type of words will we speak?

A Divided Nation –

This was a critical moment in Israel's history. The passage tells us that there several factors that played a part, going back to the reign of Solomon. But Rehoboam was the king who divided a nation.

We don't have to let that happen in our relationships. The world around us is incredibly divided, but we serve the prince of peace, the one who brings reconciliation between God and men. And we are to be agents of peace. The church should be one place in all of society where there is unity, and a oneness in the Lord, where we stand together as brothers. God has brought us together in Christ, but we have to guard these relationships. Always remember what we share in common. If we bear that in mind, so many of our disagreements will seem so small and not worth fighting over. Consider others. Resist the urge to dig in and become defensive, but try to understand where the other person is coming from, and from there you can work together towards a solution. Choose your words carefully, offering words that build up and not tear down.