

The Books of 1 and 2 Kings

Lesson 8: The Kingdom Divided -- 1 Kings 12:1–14:31

One foolish answer at the wrong moment, and a kingdom that had taken forty years to build cracked down the middle and never came back together. Rehoboam went to Shechem for his coronation, and the people came with a simple request: lighten the load his father had placed on us, and we will serve you. The young king had three days to think it over. He had the counsel of seasoned elders who had served his father. He also had the company of young friends who had grown up alongside him and who never said no to anything he wanted. He chose the young men. 'My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.' Within days, ten tribes were gone.

What followed was not merely a political catastrophe. It was a spiritual one of even greater proportions. Jeroboam, the man God had chosen to rule the northern ten tribes, faced an immediate problem: if his people kept traveling to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, their hearts might follow their feet back to the house of David. So he did something breathtaking in its audacity. He cast two golden calves, set one in Bethel and one in Dan, and announced: 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' In doing so, he did not merely create a political rival to Jerusalem. He created a counterfeit religion, a false worship, a system designed by human convenience and political fear rather than divine command.

The man of God from Judah who came to Bethel and cried out against the altar, the withered hand of Jeroboam, the torn altar, the bones of the dead priests: these are not incidental details. They are God's commentary on what Jeroboam had built. God did not treat unauthorized worship as a minor administrative error. He treated it as the covenant rebellion it was. And the subsequent chapters make clear that the calves at Bethel and Dan would become the defining spiritual disease of the northern kingdom for the next two centuries, until Assyria finally swept Israel away.

But God's word did not fail. The man of God from Judah announced exactly what would happen to that altar. Ahijah the prophet told Jeroboam's wife exactly what God was about to do to her son and her family. The death of young Abijah, the one good thing in Jeroboam's house, was not meaningless cruelty; it was mercy, taking the boy before the full horror descended. God's word governs even the most rebellious corners of human history. We worship a God who cannot be bypassed, cannot be reinvented, and cannot be domesticated by human convenience. That truth is as alive in this chapter as it is in the New Testament church.

Group Discussion: Why do you think Jeroboam's calves at Bethel and Dan were so spiritually dangerous, and how does the principle behind his error show up in religious life today?

Personal Reflection: Is there any area of your own worship or religious practice that you have accepted primarily because it is traditional, convenient, or familiar, rather than because you have examined it against what God has actually commanded? What would it look like to bring that before God honestly?

Read 1 Kings 12:1–14:31

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Kings 12:1–15. Rehoboam had access to two kinds of counsel: the wisdom of experienced elders and the flattery of his young companions. What does the text reveal about why he rejected the better counsel, and what principle does that establish about the relationship between pride, accountability, and foolish decisions?
2. Think about a decision in your own life, past or present, where you chose the counsel that told you what you wanted to hear rather than the counsel that told you what you needed to hear. What was driving that choice, and what did it cost you?
3. Read 1 Kings 12:16–24. The ten tribes' revolt fulfills Ahijah's prophecy from chapter 11. When Rehoboam prepares to fight to reunite the kingdom by force and Shemaiah the prophet says 'Do not go up or fight against your relatives the people of Israel, for this thing is from me,' Rehoboam actually listens. What does his obedience here, despite having just been spectacularly foolish, tell us about God's ongoing pursuit of His people even through their failures?
4. When you have made a serious mistake that has produced real consequences, how have you experienced God's continued presence and guidance in the aftermath? What helped you remain open to His direction even when you were dealing with the fallout of your own poor choices?

5. Read 1 Kings 12:25–33. Jeroboam’s reasoning in verse 27 is painfully transparent: ‘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.’ His religious innovations were driven by political fear, not theological conviction. What does this reveal about the specific sin of creating worship practices that are designed around human convenience and institutional self-interest rather than divine command?
6. Have you ever been tempted to shape your own religious practice around what is comfortable, familiar, or socially acceptable rather than around what God has actually required? What does it look like to examine your worship practices honestly against Scripture?
7. Read 1 Kings 13:1–10. The man of God from Judah arrives at Bethel, cries out against the altar, and performs three miraculous signs: the altar tears apart, the ashes pour out, and Jeroboam’s outstretched hand withers and is restored only through the prophet’s prayer. What does God’s response to Jeroboam’s unauthorized altar, and His willingness to restore Jeroboam’s hand even in judgment, reveal about the character of a God who takes false worship seriously but remains merciful toward persons?
8. What does the man of God’s initial obedience in refusing the king’s hospitality (verses 8–9) and his later disobedience when deceived by the old prophet (verses 11–22) teach you about the specific dangers of relaxing your spiritual guard after a moment of public faithfulness?
9. Read 1 Kings 12:28–33 carefully alongside Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, Ephesians 5:19, and Colossians 3:16. Jeroboam did not tell the people to abandon God altogether; he told them ‘Here are your gods who brought you up out of Egypt,’ set up unauthorized

places, appointed unauthorized priests, and established an unauthorized feast day. The text treats this as the gravest covenant sin. What is the timeless principle about authorized worship that this passage establishes, and how does that same principle apply to the New Testament church: what has Christ actually authorized for His church's worship, and why does worshiping in ways He has not authorized, no matter how sincere, constitute the same kind of error Jeroboam made?

10. Read 1 Kings 14:1–18. Ahijah's prophecy to Jeroboam's wife names the sin precisely: Jeroboam 'has done evil above all who were before him' because he 'went and made for himself other gods and metal images, provoking me to anger, and has cast me behind his back' (14:9). The death of the child Abijah is described as mercy for the one good thing in the house of Jeroboam. As you look back over the entire narrative of chapters 12 through 14, what does God's sustained, specific engagement through prophets, signs, warnings, and consequences tell you about what it means to live under the authority and care of a God who takes His own word with absolute seriousness?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Deuteronomy 12:1–14, where God commands Israel to worship only in the place He chooses, the foundation for understanding Jeroboam's sin; Exodus 32:1–8, the original golden calf incident whose language Jeroboam deliberately echoes in 12:28; Acts 2:42, the pattern of apostolic worship that defines the church's practice; Colossians 2:20–23, Paul's warning that human-devised religion has an appearance of wisdom but lacks divine authority; 2 John 9, where going beyond the doctrine of Christ means not having God

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