

WHEN POWER IS MISUSED

We have heard it said that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” We likely have known people who were perfectly reasonable individuals until they found themselves in positions of authority or power and then they, because of any number of reasons, wanted to prove to everyone they were “in charge.”

We tend to concentrate on the misuse of power that are of epic proportions. We can point to such characters in history as Nero, Genghis Kahn, Hitler, or Idi Amin. We, also, can turn to the Bible for examples of such misuse. The Egyptian Pharaoh of the Exodus, King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, and Herod the Great are well-known examples of the “bad guys.” But even King David had occasion to misuse his power in the case of Bathsheba and Uriah. Solomon was blessed with great wisdom and wealth and still went awry in laying heavy burdens on the back of the people to support the lavishness of his lifestyle. Both David and Solomon are viewed in a good light. But things were deteriorating generation-by-generation. After Solomon passed from the scene, his son Rehoboam was faced with a choice of how he would handle the power that went with the office of king.

1 KINGS 12:1-5 After David died and Solomon became king, he started many building projects. We are familiar with the temple that David had wanted to build. He also increased the fortification around the city. Solomon had many wives and concubines and it was necessary to have places for them to live. Many of the wives were foreigners and worshiped idols, so Solomon built temples for these false gods. To carry out all these building programs required a lot of taxes and conscripted labor. By the time Solomon’s reign was coming to an end, the people were tired of all these projects with the heavy tax burden and the forced labor. The main groups to object were from the northern tribes. Most of the projects were in and around Jerusalem and they didn’t much benefit for themselves. Even while David was king there was considerable discontentment and revolt. Though the people wanted a king, it took on about two kings for them have misgivings about the idea. By the time the third king had completed his reign the nation was on the verge of civil war.

Toward the end of Solomon’s reign, two men were to figure prominently in the future of the nation. One was Solomon’s son Rehoboam and the other was Jeroboam. Jeroboam was an overseer of the half-tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim. One day as he was leaving Jerusalem he was stopped by the prophet Ahijah who pronounced that God was going to give him ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. This was an accurate prophecy. Solomon, because of his introduction of idol worship into the country and because he built temples to strange gods had lost (for his descendants) the privilege to govern the entire nation.

After Solomon died, Rehoboam was accepted as king by the tribe of Judah and he then made a trip to Shechem expecting to be accepted by the other tribes. Representatives from the other areas weren’t quite ready to endorse him. These believed Solomon had treated them unfairly and want promises of changes. Specifically, they wanted lower taxes and less duties such as forced labor.

1 KINGS 12:6-7 Solomon, in his Proverbs, had advised the “wise to listen and add to their learning, and for the discerning to get guidance.” He had also said that the “wise man listens to advice.” In another place he had written, “he who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.” Rehoboam took a good first step by seeking advice from the elders who had advised his father. These men had been able to observe what had happened in the reign of Solomon and were able to offer some very wise counsel. In fact, their idea was so radically different from the prevailing ideas of the relationship of kings to subjects that it was likely inspired by God. They suggested that the king establish a government that would actually help people rather than misuse and

abuse them. They suggested that the king in his government encourage people and reinforce the good things they did. This idea was revolutionary. The next time we hear such an idea expressed in the Bible, we find it coming from the lips of Jesus. He told His disciples “He who would be greatest among you must be servant of all.”

1 KINGS 12:8-11 Most people are wary of taking a bold step in a new direction. We are not comfortable with change. When Rehoboam heard the advice of the elders, he did not recognize the wisdom and value of it. So he checked with some of his contemporaries. One advantage of seeking advice from people who are no longer involved in government or business is that they can consider the alternatives apart from how it may affect their personal ambitions. The younger people who were still a part of the “system” found it difficult to separate what was good for the nation with what they considered to be good for themselves. We have these same conflicts of interest in our government. Everyone can agree that our government spending programs must be cut back, BUT few want to cut the programs that help them. Therefore, we should not be too surprised with the advice the young men gave Rehoboam.

1 KINGS 12:12-15 To the world, the idea of power over people or things is very appealing. It is considered risky to relinquish power to others and so either through fear or an unhealthy desire to control, people hold on to whatever power bases they have they seek to extend it.

The prophet of God had predicted that Jeroboam would be king and the decisions and actions of Rehoboam (and his young advisers) sealed the decision.

We can contrast the words of Rehoboam with the words of Jesus. Rehoboam wanted to add to the yoke of the people to make it heavier. Jesus said,

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. Mt 11:28-29

Rehoboam is an example of an earthly leader who tries to operate without wisdom from God. Just having wisdom is not enough. One must also apply the wisdom available. The trouble started with Solomon who did not apply the wisdom he had. As a consequence, God did not allow his descendants to rule all of Israel. The trouble continued with Rehoboam who made a bad decision to go the way of the world rather than follow the advice of those who wanted to show compassion on the people.

In the world in which we live, we can see the consequence of those in positions of authority choosing to follow worldly advice rather than doing what they know to be God’s way. It almost seems as if many deliberately choose against God’s way just to show Him they can. Because judgment is not immediate, many continue to defy God by making wrong choices.

In our system of government, we bear a great responsibility as we vote for those who would govern. If we do not choose people on the basis of moral character and Christian values, then we will find that we are defying God. This is the way of secular humanism and the nation that practices such “worship of false gods” will pay the price of coming under the judgment of God.