

DIVIDED

1 Kings 12: 6-19

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 see much benefit for themselves. Even while David was king there was considerable discontentment among the ten tribes north of Judah. Though the people wanted a king, it took only about two kings for them to 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 who was an overseer of the half-tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim. One day as Jeroboam 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. We need to remember that our choices and actions have consequences.

After Solomon died, Rehoboam was accepted as king by the tribe of Judah. 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 fewer duties such as forced labor.

Rehoboam wisely took some time before he made a decision. When we encounter a new idea, we will have an initial reaction to the idea that originates in the part of our brains that trigger our survival instincts. This is usually a short-term benefit analysis rather than a long-term consequence determination that comes from reasoning rather than reaction. You have probably heard someone say that ideas may need time to incubate before they are accepted. People resisted the introduction of automobiles when they were first introduced. Now, it is difficult to imagine not having such transportation. A high-pressure salesman appeals to the short-term benefit of whatever he is trying to sell. In order to keep you from taking time to decide you may be told, this offer will expire shortly, so you must act now. Rehoboam can be given some credit for delaying making a decision. Since he did not have a lot of experience, he also realized that he needed some additional input.

Experience Speaks – 12:6-7

⁶ Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people?" ⁷ And they said to him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever." 1 Kings 12:6-7 (ESV)

Solomon, in his Proverbs, had advised the "wise to listen and add to their learning, and for the discerning to get guidance." (Proverbs 1:5) He had also said that the "wise man listens to

advice.” (Proverbs 12:15) In another place he had written, “he who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.” (Proverbs 13:20) 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 and 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.” (Matt 23:11)

Arrogance Reigns – 12:8-15

⁸ But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him. ⁹ And he said to them, “What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us?’” ¹⁰ And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, “Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, but you lighten it for us,’ thus shall you say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s thighs. ¹¹ And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’” ¹² So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king said, “Come to me again the third day.” ¹³ And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, ¹⁴ he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.” ¹⁵ So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat. 1 Kings 12:8–15 (ESV)

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.

Rehoboam refused to let the northern tribes have any input to how they would be governed. Instead of having a sense of cooperation and inclusion, he resorted to threats and intimidation. I found and kept a statement from an article I read many years ago that says “Many people pursue executive careers to obtain power over others as a way of compensating for real or fancied personal inadequacies or as a reaction to an unconscious sense of helplessness. Being neurotically driven, their single-minded, perpetual pursuit of control blinds them to their own subtle feelings and to those of others.”

The concept of “control” makes an interesting study. People will normally settle for **less** if they can have some **influence** in what they will receive. Conversely, people are seldom happy if even beneficial changes are made or rewards are received **if they** have no input to the decision. The difference is “control.” Basically, the American concept of “freedom” really does not center around absolute freedom as much as it does in having control of our choices. The choices may be limited, but most will be happy if they can make their own choices. I would even go so far to

assert that the accumulation of wealth is not usually related to materialism as much as it is driven by the sense of control it brings.

To some extent every person will establish a sphere of control in which he or she can exercise power over something or someone else. It may be parent to child. It could be one child over a playmate. Other possibilities include people and their pets. In the work place, supervisors attempt to control the workers. Workers will attempt to control each other. There will always be “power” issues in almost any situation. The significant question that each person should address is what will he or she do with the power or control he or she has? Even those who feel “powerless” will find they do have control in many areas. These areas are normally overlooked and considered insignificant by those who feel powerless. The possibility for misuse of their power is still there. Good stewardship of whatever power base we have is important even in the “little things.” As Jordan Peterson is often quoted as saying, “If you want to improve the world, start by cleaning up your room.”

Rehoboam, as well as his young advisors, was being driven by issues related to power and control. The most expedient way to achieve those objectives was through the use of force. The problem with any expedient approach is that short range decisions have a greater and opposite reaction on the long-range results. They wanted influence, power, and control but the results they expected did not take into account the fact that people will inevitably respond to oppression by fleeing and, if necessary, fighting.

The outcome of the negotiations between Rehoboam and Jeroboam was in agreement with the prophesied outcome that Solomon’s descendants would no longer govern all Israel. John Gill observed that the Lord suffered the counselors of Rehoboam to give him the advice they did, and gave him up to the folly of his own heart to take it. Things would have turned out differently if the Lord had intervened to prevent those young men who advised Rehoboam from giving bad advice or if He had given Rehoboam a moment of wisdom to accept the advice from the older men who had advised Solomon.

Division Ensues – 12:16-19

¹⁶ And when all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, “What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, David.” So Israel went to their tents. ¹⁷ But Rehoboam reigned over the people of Israel who lived in the cities of Judah. ¹⁸ Then King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was taskmaster over the forced labor, and all Israel stoned him to death with stones. And King Rehoboam hurried to mount his chariot to flee to Jerusalem. ¹⁹ So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day. 1 Kings 12:16–19 (ESV)

We could have predicted the results. It makes little difference if we are dealing with nations, employees, or family members. The harsher the approach, the more likely there is to be rebellion. On the other hand, when people have a voice in their future, then they will be willing to endure many hardships. If Rehoboam had dealt with the people in a fair manner and accepted their input, then they would have followed Rehoboam.

We see that Rehoboam had a choice between two alternatives. It was not that he was denied access to having a wise alternative. In his lack of wisdom, he failed to see that love is stronger than force. He failed to see that continuing success can result only from having a nation of people who are internally motivated rather than acting only from fear of reprisal. It was a very costly lesson.

During the days of David and Solomon, the people realized that sacrifices were necessary for investing in the future of the nation. Eventually, investments need to provide a return. The problem was that all the return was going to royalty and the ruling class and greater sacrifices

were being demanded from those who had sacrificed already. The people had lost the vision of “the light at the end of the tunnel.” The new leadership gave them reason to believe that the tunnel did not have an end. People do desperate things when they are faced with a hopeless situation. The ten northern tribes decided they’d had enough and they could do better on their own. They were willing to leave the “glory that belonged to Israel” since they could not see they had any share in it. The people of the tribe of Judah stayed with Rehoboam out of a sense of family or tribal loyalty.

D. A. Carson observed that Rehoboam’s tough, confrontational style was a show of strength which concealed weakness. Solomon’s wisdom had lapses, but Rehoboam displayed no wisdom at all. His attempt to regain the initiative was hopelessly mishandled, and Israel slipped from his grasp. The rallying cry which Israel had used during its earlier, failed rebellion against David was quoted to him in verse 16.

It is unclear why Adoniram was sent to talk with the leaders of the northern tribes. It could have been a show of force or to negotiate, but placing such affairs in the hands of the man who was in charge of forced labor was at best a highly provocative act. Not surprisingly, it resulted in Adoniram’s death. Jeroboam, meanwhile, was accepted by the people as king over Israel’s ten tribes.

As we look at the decision and control issues that Rehoboam faced, we can learn some important lessons that are applicable to the decisions we have to make every day. Each of us can learn from the mistakes of others. The pursuit of power and control is the cause of much of the misery that is in the world today. We would do well to heed the words of the elders of Israel and of Jesus if we wish to have influence on the world around us. “Those who would be greatest among you, must become servant of all.” This is the better way; this is the higher road and this is the way that honors God.