

JEROBOAM (2)

A RELIGIOUS SINNER

Text: 1 Kings 11:26–39; 12:1–14:20

History testifies that one man has often set the course of human affairs, for good or ill, for families, cities, and nations.¹ “That’s unfair,” you say. “One person should not be given so much influence. Each human being should be permitted to determine his or her destiny without interference from others.” You are right; that is the way God created us. Nevertheless, men and nations passively and thoughtlessly yield to the trends, lifestyles, and resolves of those in power without soul-searching investigation of God’s Word and without making their own decisions. Consequently, they often become puppets on the strings of their leaders by default. The path of least resistance makes crooked rivers and disobedient people. We voluntarily send ourselves into bondage to someone else’s agenda by not using rightly the freedom of choice God has given to us.

The people of Israel must have congratulated themselves on selecting Jeroboam as their king. After all, he possessed all the qualities a man would need to be a good king—talent, charisma, confidence, and natural leadership skills. A better choice could not have been made for the new kingdom! With young Jeroboam, their future was bright and inviting. So they thought.

Little did they realize that Jeroboam, their proud choice, would send them down a path

from which the kingdom would never recover. Jeroboam would reign for twenty-two years (931 to 910 B.C.),² but those years were fatal to Israel.

Instead of the shining success everyone anticipated he would be, Jeroboam was a full-fledged failure. The one thing for which he is remembered is that he led his nation into sin. In this sense, he was the devil’s hero. He was a contradiction, an oxymoron. He was a religious sinner. Usually, if one is religious, he is not thought of as being a sinner; and if one is a sinner, he is not thought of as being religious. Jeroboam, however, was both, and that is what made his life so detestable before God. Twenty-five times it is said of Jeroboam that he sinned and caused Israel to sin. What a horrible epitaph for anyone to have over his or her life!

To be more specific, what was his sin? What exactly did Jeroboam do? Why was he such a total failure?

THE SIN DEFINED

Before we answer that question, perhaps it would be helpful for us to divide sin into two broad categories: moral sins and religious sins. The Bible nowhere makes such a distinction. We are only attempting to do it here to clarify the sin of which Jeroboam was guilty.

Moral sins are those sins that are wrong because they hurt others or hurt us. They are not harmful because they are prohibited; *they are prohibited because they are harmful*. God, as our loving Father, has looked out for our best inter-

¹Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), a German Nazi dictator, and Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), a Soviet Union leader, would be prime examples.

²See 1 Kings 14:20.

ests by prohibiting attitudes and actions that injure and mar the mind and the conscience, the body and the person. Our limited reason, when used purely, concludes that anything that harms or corrupts a human being should be regarded as sin.

Religious sins are those sins that are wrong because they break God's clear commandments. *They are harmful because they are prohibited*; they are not prohibited because they are harmful. God is sovereign, and He tells us how He is to be worshiped, served, and represented. He may not always choose to give His rationale for His instructions, but He requires us to obey Him. For example, He told Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10 what kind of fire to use in their worship in the tabernacle. They knew His law, but they discounted it, disregarded it, and discarded it. Their failure to follow His instructions brought disastrous results.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1, 2).

Nadab and Abihu were not guilty of murder, theft, or gossip, the sins commonly thought of as moral sins. They just ignored God's instructions. They set aside His guidelines. They refused His requirements. They committed a religious sin, not a moral one. "What harm would there be in using a different fire than God commanded?" someone might argue. "After all, it didn't hurt anyone. It was an innocent innovation, a change of pace, a new style." Their actions went much deeper than matters of judgment. They committed the sin of rejecting God's will. They were disobedient. They put themselves in the place of God. "We will make the decisions on how to worship God," they said with their actions.

The difference, then, between a religious sin and a moral one is obvious. The rationale of not harming others or ourselves is behind the prohibition of moral sin, while the rationale behind avoiding religious sin is that God must be respected and obeyed.

Jeroboam's grave mistake was religious, not moral. He did not kill innocent people as did

Manasseh (2 Kings 21:16); he did not commit the immorality of David (2 Samuel 11:1-5); and he did not break his promises the way Saul did (1 Samuel 15:17-22). Nevertheless, he rejected the law of Moses; he wrote his own religious laws and led the people to obey them.

THE SIN DESCRIBED

Shortly after ascending to the throne, Jeroboam flaunted the warning that had been given him and plunged headlong into religious disobedience. First of all, he instituted new centers of worship in Bethel and Dan. Bethel was within eight miles of Jerusalem, in the southern part of Israel, and Dan was in the northern extremity of Palestine.

... He said to them, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem"; ... And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan (12:28, 29).

When the kingdom split, the Southern Kingdom retained Jerusalem, the scriptural place of worship. Three times a year, God's people were to go to Jerusalem to worship Him (Exodus 23:17). Thus Jeroboam had to ask himself a question: "What about the people going to Jerusalem to worship? If they go to Jerusalem to worship, they may want to stay. I may lose my kingdom." How would he handle this question? Would he urge the people to go to Jerusalem in obedience to God, or would he make void God's law and arrange a new system of worship that did not require the people to go to Jerusalem? It was an important decision. A whole nation awaited his guidance. It would require righteous integrity, conviction, and courage to make the right decision. In complete disobedience to God, Jeroboam set up new centers of worship under the guise that it was too far—too much trouble—to go to Jerusalem to worship God.

Jeroboam went even further and set up new objects of worship: golden calves.

So the king consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, "... behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt" (12:28).

This kind of action was unthinkable to a faithful worshiper of Jehovah. Jeroboam and Israel should have known the error of such a tactic

because of what had happened at the foot of Mount Sinai as Aaron led the people in constructing and worshipping a golden calf (Exodus 32:1–6). Before Moses could get down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, Israel had already broken several of them. It could be that Jeroboam wanted these calves to be visible symbols of the worship of Jehovah, not a substitute for the worship of Jehovah. Even if this was the case, building such calves was wholly unauthorized and a violation of the second of the Ten Commandments.

Jeroboam was not through with his innovations. He faced an altar problem. Ingrained in the Israelites since the days of Noah, Abraham, and Moses was the necessity of offering sacrifices to God. Israel would insist on offering sacrifices to God. If Jeroboam erected new centers of worship but did not set up new altars for sacrifice, this would not satisfy his people in Israel; they would still want to go to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices.

Another complication with his problem was that God had specified Jerusalem as the place of sacrifice for all Israel. Setting up new altars would be direct disobedience to God. Jeroboam was facing a dilemma: Should he set up new altars and disobey God, or refuse to set up new altars and run the risk of losing his people to Judah when they went to Jerusalem to make sacrifices? What did he do? He chose to set up new altars. His new centers of worship are seen later as being complete—having everything that Jerusalem had, even new altars. “Then he went up to the altar which he had made in Bethel. . . .” (12:33). He had gone too far in his new religion to turn back; he set up new altars, regardless of what the will of God was. One sin had led to another.

Fourth, Jeroboam set up a new order of priests. “And he made houses on high places, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi” (12:31). God had ordained that only Levites from the household of Amram could officiate as priests (2 Chronicles 13:10). Jeroboam would have a problem getting true priests to serve at the new centers of worship. Why would they? If they respected God’s Word, they would draw back in horror at the thought of submitting to such flagrant error (2 Chronicles 13:9). Jeroboam, therefore, set up

his own class of priests, men taken from the eleven tribes who would do the bidding of the king regardless of how sinful it was.

Fifth, he set up a new annual feast and changed the religious calendar.

Then he went up to the altar which he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised in his own heart; and he instituted a feast for the sons of Israel, and went up to the altar to burn incense (12:33).

The law of Moses set aside the seventh month as a significant part of the religious year: the first day was the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23–25), the tenth day was the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27), and from the fifteenth day to the twenty-second day was the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33–36). Jeroboam simply moved the religious calendar forward one month, to the fifteenth day of the eighth month. The Bible says that this was the month “which he had devised in his own heart” (12:33).

The result of all this changing and rearranging was Jeroboam’s religion, not God’s. Jeroboam was not seeking God’s will; he was following his own heart. He had totally failed as a leader of the nation. He was to be a representative of God, leading the people to do God’s will—but he had become a demigod who was leading the people do his own will.

Satan does not really try to do away with religion; he seeks to persuade men to accept substitute religions of man for the religion of God. Jeroboam was likable, seemingly reasonable, and apparently practical. Just one thing was wrong with what he was doing—he was replacing God’s will with his own!

THE SIN DENOUNCED

Jeroboam’s sin of devising his own religion and leading the people to follow it was clearly denounced by the Lord. In fact, the Lord denounced that His Word should be obeyed in three dramatic episodes which followed.

Through Public Rebuke

Jeroboam went to Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month to keep the feast day he had designated. In brazen disobedience and irreverent arrogance, he went up to the new altar to burn incense upon it (12:33). To his surprise, out

from the crowd stepped a man of God, a rugged prophet of Judah, with a judgment sentence on his lips. With solemnity that brought a hush over those gathered and a deathly silence to those in charge, the prophet pointed an accusing finger at the altar and announced God's condemnation of it:

O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, "Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you" (13:2).

Jeroboam's altar would be the place where the bones of the false priests who offered sacrifices upon it would one day be burned. Josiah was mentioned by name in this prophecy. Hence, we call this a "name prophecy," a prophecy in which a specific name of a specific man is predicted during whose reign the altar will be desecrated. This prophecy was fulfilled three hundred years later during the reign of the good king Josiah (2 Kings 23:20). The prophet gave a sign, saying, "This is the sign which the Lord has spoken, 'Behold, the altar shall be split apart and the ashes which are on it shall be poured out'" (13:3). The prophecy had its own authentication. Proof of it would be given immediately.

Jeroboam raised his hand and said to those around him, "Seize him!" His outstretched hand froze, "dried up" (13:4), as a testimony that the prophet was God-sent, that he had spoken the truth, and that Jeroboam was being rebuked by God. Immediately, the altar split asunder, and the ashes fell out. Stricken with the crippling power of God's judgment, Jeroboam pleaded for the healing of his paralysis. As a display of the wonderful mercy of God, the prophet asked God to restore his hand and arm. His request was granted (13:6). God has always been the God of the second opportunity. Jeroboam was being invited by the circumstances to repent. In a moment of "almost conversion," Jeroboam asked the prophet to come to his palace for food and refreshment. The prophet replied that he was not allowed to eat with anyone in the city and had been commanded to return to his home a different way from which he had come. Here is a rare gem—a prophet who turned down dinner with a king! No doubt, Jeroboam thought about his disobedience, but his leanings toward a

righteous resolve must have been short-lived. The prophet's rebuke was only God's first denouncement of Jeroboam's religious sin.

Through the Prophet's Death

Another kind of denouncement came later that day. The prophet of Judah was tricked by an older prophet. He violated the divine instruction he had been given, ate with the old prophet, and was killed by a lion (13:23–26). (This is something we will study in greater detail in our next lesson.) A seemingly small mistake became the reason for his death. He was found dead on the road beside his donkey and the lion that killed him. Through this action a truth was being announced: God's Word must be followed. Even a prophet will not be excused from obeying God's will. God makes it unmistakable that He intends for His directives to be carried out. The death of the prophet was an "object lesson in disobedience" for Jeroboam as well as all others. We have no indication as to how Jeroboam was affected by the prophet's being slain.

Through Painful Grief

A third denouncement came. Jeroboam had a son (14:1–20). While Eli—a righteous man—had ungodly sons (1 Samuel 2:11–17), Jeroboam—a wicked parent—had a godly son. His name was Abijah. One day this boy became critically ill. Jeroboam and his wife did not know whether he would live or die. They were sick with sorrow. In desperation, Jeroboam asked his wife to disguise herself and go to Ahijah, a prophet whom Jeroboam hated, to ask about the fate of his sick son. She disguised herself and went to the prophet, taking ten loaves of bread, some cakes, and a jar of honey. Ahijah lived at Shiloh and, being up in years, was blind. As Jeroboam's wife approached, Ahijah was told by revelation who was coming and what to tell her. He said, "Come in, wife of Jeroboam, why do you pretend to be another woman? For I am sent to you with a harsh message" (14:6). Trembling, she timidly came in and was told that the child would die as soon as she returned to her house. The death of the boy was not an expression of judgment. The expression of judgment was given later. His death was to be an act of mercy:

". . . for he alone of Jeroboam's family shall come to the grave, because in him something

good was found toward the Lord God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam” (14:13).

John C. Whitcomb wrote,

God’s way of honoring this lad was to permit him to die of sickness and be buried in a grave! . . . So horrible was the judgment awaiting the royal family (1 Kings 14:10, 11) that to avoid it by dying in bed would be a great blessing!³

Jeroboam’s wife was also told that God would raise up a king who would cut off the house of Jeroboam, and all the males in his household would die by violent deaths. This was God’s expression of judgment upon Jeroboam. Ahijah closed his announcement of judgment by mentioning the first prophecy concerning the Assyrian captivity (14:15, 16). Jeroboam had started his people on a course of sin from which they would never repent, so God declared during the reign of the first king that the nation would one day be destroyed because of its sin.

“For the Lord will strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water; and He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the Euphrates River, because they have made their Asherim, provoking the Lord to anger. And He will give up Israel on account of the sins of Jeroboam, which he committed and with which he made Israel to sin” (14:15, 16).

The woman, because of her complicity with Jeroboam in evil, was given specific instructions concerning the time of the child’s death.

“Now you arise, go to your house. When your feet enter the city the child will die. And all Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he alone of Jeroboam’s family shall come to the grave, because in him something good was found toward the Lord God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam” (14:12–14).

Can you imagine what was going on in this woman’s mind? She knew that when she arrived home her son would die. Surely, she tried to conceive of a way to go home and save her son’s life. No way could be found. Her mind must have been spinning with confusing thoughts of what to do. Finally, she wandered home to face the inevitable judgment of God. His

judgments are sure and steadfast; no one can set them aside—not even a mother. As she arrived home, her son died. How much clearer could God have been? Three times His judgment upon Jeroboam’s sin had been announced. Did Jeroboam get the point and repent? No. He continued in his sinful ways.

One final message of condemnation is given for us concerning Jeroboam’s sin—Jeroboam’s death. God expects us to listen to His warnings. Finally, our opportunity to serve Him or repent of our failures will pass. The Holy Spirit takes us behind the scenes and shows us what happened when Jeroboam died: “. . . *the Lord struck him and he died*” (2 Chronicles 13:20b; emphasis mine). He did not just die a natural death. His twenty-two-year reign came to an end as God placed His hand of judgment upon him and brought about his death. His reign ended the same way it had started—in disobedience to God. Jeroboam never repented. His life was spent leading people to receive, believe, and live error, not the truth of God.

CONCLUSION

Is there an application in these events for us? Certainly. These divine narratives declare, “God requires obedience!” Who could study Jeroboam and not be convinced by his self-serving approach to God and life that disobedience does not pay? One is reminded by Jeroboam of our Lord’s words in Matthew 7:22, 23:

Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

Religion is not enough! Jeroboam had a religion, but it was the wrong religion. If having a religion were sufficient to being pleasing to God, Jeroboam would have received God’s approval. God does not want you to have *a* religion; He wants you to have *His* religion. This lesson Jeroboam never learned. He lived his life as king being a religious sinner.

You say, “I wonder why Jeroboam did not repent. He was publicly rebuked for his sin. The prophet who warned him died because of disobedience to God. Jeroboam’s good son died. Jeroboam was told that all of the other male

³John C. Whitcomb, *A History of Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1971), 362.

members of his household would die violent deaths because of his sin. He was rebuked by Abijah, the southern king, for his sin before their civil conflict (2 Chronicles 13:4–12), and yet he never repented. He never took to heart the rebuke of God. That is amazing.”

Stop and think. Is this any more amazing than what we see today? God has outlined in the New Testament how we are to live before Him and worship Him, yet numerous denominations have been set up, none of which are found in the New Testament. God has told us that we are to come to Him by faith (John 8:24), repentance (Luke 13:3), confession of Jesus (Romans 10:10), and baptism into Christ (Romans 6:3); yet modern Jeroboams have come up with their own plans of coming to God. Has not God told us to worship Him through the study of His Word

(Acts 17:11), singing (Ephesians 5:19), prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17), partaking of the Lord’s Supper each Lord’s day (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20, 21), and contributing on the first day of the week as we have prospered (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2)? Man, however, has restructured God’s religion to suit his likes and dislikes.

What ever happened to humble obedience? Will we learn the necessity of obedience, or will we become twentieth-century Jeroboams? ■

*Lesson to be learned:
Man’s religion,
regardless of how appealing
and attractive it may be,
is rejected by God
and must be rejected
by men.*

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