

7. Talking to deaf ears

January 31, 2008

I heard a great story of President Ted Roosevelt. He realized that people didn't pay attention to what he said when he greeted them at the frequent White House banquets. So one of those banquet nights, he decided that he would do something different. Whenever he shook the hands of the dignitaries at his reception line, he said, "I murdered my mother-in-law this morning," with a big smile.

Everyone replied to the president, "That is great," "I am so glad that you did," or "That is wonderful," with the exception of one foreign ambassador, who said, "Oh, how terrible! But I am sure that she had it coming."

People in general don't listen carefully. They don't make a whole lot of effort in listening to God, either.

In the last chapter we learned that God was raising up Jeroboam to take over the northern 10 tribes from the reign of Rehoboam, one of the sons of the late king Solomon. The Lord told Jeroboam to follow His law and serve Him only, then God would give him a lasting kingdom. It sounded easy enough and simple enough.

But in this chapter we find that what the Lord told Jeroboam fell into a deaf ear. At the same time Rehoboam who was dumb in taking a right advice from his father's elders actually listened to the Lord for a change.

A. A STUCK UP KING WHO TURNED HIS DEAF EARS TO A SOUND ADVICE

1 Kings 12:1-17 And Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had gone to Shechem to make him king. 2 So it happened, when Jeroboam the son of Nebat heard it (he was still in Egypt, for he had fled from the presence of King Solomon and had been dwelling in Egypt), 3 that they sent and called him. Then Jeroboam and the whole assembly of Israel came and spoke to Rehoboam, saying, 4 "Your father made our yoke heavy; now therefore, lighten the burdensome service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you." 5 So he said to them, "Depart for three days, then come back to me." And the people departed. 6 Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who stood before his father Solomon while he still lived, and he said, "How do you advise me to answer these people?" 7 And they spoke to him, saying, "If you will be a servant to these people today, and serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever." 8 But he rejected the advice which the elders had given him, and consulted the young men who had grown up with him, who stood before him. 9 And he said to them, "What advice do you give? How should we answer this people who have spoken to me, saying, 'Lighten the yoke which your father put on us'?" 10 Then the young men who had grown up with him spoke to him, saying, "Thus you should speak to this people who have spoken to you, saying, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you make it lighter on us'--thus you shall say to them: 'My little finger shall be thicker than my father's waist! 11 And now, whereas my father put a heavy yoke on you, I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!'" 12 So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had directed, saying, "Come back to me the third day."

13 Then the king answered the people roughly, and rejected the advice which the elders had given him; 14 and he spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!" 15 So the king did not listen to the people; for the turn of events was from the Lord, that He might fulfill His word, which the Lord had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat. 16 Now when all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, saying: "What share have we in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Now, see to your own house, O David!" So Israel departed to their tents. 17 But Rehoboam reigned over the children of Israel who dwelt in the cities of Judah.

Shechem was located about forty miles north of Jerusalem, a good central city for such an important meeting. Abraham worshiped there. Jacob built an altar and purchased land there. Joseph was buried there.

Ephraim, and Manasseh, the descendants of Joseph, considered themselves the leading tribes in Israel and openly expressed their resentment of the leadership of Judah. But somehow Rehoboam thought that being crowned at Shechem would be a step toward peace and unity between the north and the south, but it turned out to be just the opposite.

Solomon's successor Rehoboam occasionally made a shrewd decision but for the most part was a foolish ruler. His daddy wondered about it, too.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. 19 And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.

Rehoboam's grandfather king David was a king who loved his people and risked his life for them. But Rehoboam was a king who ignored the lessons of the past and turned his ears away from the voices of the suffering people.

Even though Solomon was a wise king, he took a lot from the people. The people of Israel wanted relief from the heavy taxation and forced service of Solomon's reign, and they offered allegiance to Rehoboam if he agreed to this.

God warned Israel about this in 1 Samuel 8:10-19, when through Samuel He spoke of what a king would take from Israel. After the warning the people still wanted a king, and now they knew what it was like to be ruled by a king who takes so much. Contentment only comes when God's will is more important than our wants.

Note what it said in v8, please. Rehoboam had already made up his mind before he asked the elders who served his father Solomon. When he heard the advice that he didn't like, he moved on to someone else who would give him the one he liked.

This is not uncommon today, either. People come to seek counselling or advice from pastors or Christian counselors. In many cases, they don't want to hear what God wants them to do, rather they want the pastors or counselors to agree with what they want to do. What they really want is God's blessing for their sinful decisions. No godly pastors and Christian counselors are going to agree with them, so they shop

around until they get to hear what they want to hear from one of the liberal pastors or counselors or even non-believers. It is unwise, dangerous and actually an ungodly way to get counsel.

When we hear the wise and godly counsel from the Lord through godly people or from the Word of God in contexts, we must obey at all cost. Turning deaf ears to God's instructions has a terrible consequence that we will regret for a long time.

Obviously, Rehoboam didn't read his father Solomon's Proverbs:

Proverbs 15:1 A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.

His leadership was motivated by pride, not humility. And pride knows nothing of gentleness and kindness.

B. THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH OBEYED THE LORD

1 Kings 12:18-24 Then King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was in charge of the revenue; but all Israel stoned him with stones, and he died. Therefore King Rehoboam mounted his chariot in haste to flee to Jerusalem. 19 So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day. 20 Now it came to pass when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had come back, they sent for him and called him to the congregation, and made him king over all Israel. There was none who followed the house of David, but the tribe of Judah only. 21 And when Rehoboam came to Jerusalem, he assembled all the house of Judah with the tribe of Benjamin, one hundred and eighty thousand chosen men who were warriors, to fight against the house of Israel, that he might restore the kingdom to Rehoboam the son of Solomon. 22 But the word of God came to Shemaiah the man of God, saying, 23 "Speak to Rehoboam the son of Solomon, king of Judah, to all the house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people, saying, 24 'Thus says the Lord: "You shall not go up nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel. Let every man return to his house, for this thing is from Me.'" Therefore they obeyed the word of the Lord, and turned back, according to the word of the Lord.

Rehoboam sent his tax man Adoram after he treated the ten tribes harshly. This guy was not thinking through. It is no wonder they stoned the IRS man. I guess not liking a tax man is universal and ageless.

Rehoboam had followed the wrong counsel, used the wrong approach, and chosen the wrong errand boy. What else wrong could he do? He declared a war!

By the way, from this point on in the history of Israel, the name "Israel" referred to the 10 northern tribes and the name "Judah" referred to the southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah.

Here is a prophet Shemaiah, we've never heard of him before, perhaps we will never hear of him again. He appeared once in this history to declare what the Lord told him to tell the king of Judah and then he vanished.

While priests speak for people to God, prophets speak to people for God. Priests were loved by people because they spoke for them. But prophets were often hated, even killed because they didn't like what they heard from God through those prophets. In spite of that kind of danger, this prophet Shemaiah spoke the words of God to the king and had him call off the war.

For a change, Rehoboam didn't turn deaf ears to God. Like his father, he wasn't a military man and he couldn't be sure of winning. It was God's plan there be two kingdoms, and that settled the matter. At least he submitted to the Word of God.

C. ANOTHER KING WHO TURNED DEAF EARS TO GOD

1 Kings 12:25-33 Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and dwelt there. Also he went out from there and built Penuel. 26 And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: 27 If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah." 28 Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" 29 And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. 30 Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. 31 He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi. 32 Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And at Bethel he installed the priests of the high places which he had made. 33 So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense.

Did Jeroboam trust God's promise to him and obey His commandments? No, he was fearful and started depending on his own strength and cunning to keep his people. One of the first evidences of unbelief is fear. We get our eyes off the Lord and start looking at the circumstances.

Please note the word in v26 "And Jeroboam said in his heart," and v28 "Therefore the king asked for advice." Jeroboam committed two great sins here:

1) He consulted with himself rather than God.

I remember the exact incident by another king, David. While he was chased like a dog by king Saul, he spared Saul for a second time one day. It was a great spiritual victory for David. Right after that, he committed a serious sin against the Lord by joining with the Philistines.

1 Samuel 27:1 And David said in his heart, "Now I shall perish someday by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape to the land of the Philistines; and Saul will despair of me, to seek me anymore in any part of Israel. So I shall escape out of his hand."

As long as we choose not to seek God's instructions, the devil will do anything to accommodate our excuses.

2) He sought after the advices that would confirm his own decision

Just like Rehoboam, he was shopping for the advice to justify his wrong and ungodly decision.

His idolatry was the starting point of idol worship of the kingdom Israel after Solomon's death until they ended up in Babylon.

The fact of the divided kingdom did not mean that the northern tribes were exempt from their covenant obligations. They were under the Law of Moses as much as the southern tribes, but Jeroboam feared that his people's hearts might be changed because of yearly trips down to the capital city of the southern kingdom of Judah.

To accommodate their spiritual needs, this gracious and generous king Jeroboam provided them easy access to God in the northern kingdom close to where they live. Not only that, he provided them a couple of golden calves that were something tangible for the people to see and worship as well as a priest from every tribe. It sounds like Jeroboam was really caring. Not!

Jeroboam turned his back on the most important message given at Mount Sinai: Israel's Lord Jehovah is a God who would be heard but not seen or touched. Hearing His Word is what generates faith, and faith enables us to obey. But most people don't want to live by faith. They want to walk by sight and gratify their senses.

This kind of attitude is still the same. The desire of most people is for a religion that is convenient, not too costly, and close enough to the real Christian faith to be comfortable for the conscience. We live today in an age when "People's Choice religion" is popular, approved and accepted.

I read an article of a nurse named Sheila Larson who sums up the attitude toward the majority of people's faith in God:

"I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It is 'Sheilism.' Just my own little voice." This "pick-and-choose-as-I-go-along-according-to-my-inner-voice" approach is the modern version of Jeroboam's religion. And it is in opposition to the faith in one true God.

No matter what people do, our God reigns and there is only one way to salvation through Jesus Christ.

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) We need to learn to recognize the voice of our God through the Word of God.
- 2) We have to ask ourselves, "How often do we turn our deaf ears to our God because we don't like what we hear from Him?"
- 3) When we hear the wise and godly counsel from the Lord through godly people or from the Word of God, we must obey at all cost. Turning deaf ears to God's instructions has a terrible consequence that we will regret for a long time.