



Jeroboam: The Tragedy of Spiritual Pragmatism

Lesson 6

Whereupon the king... made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much [too hard] for you to go up to Jerusalem: 1 Kings 12:28

“Whatever works” is the battle cry of the pragmatic. There may be certain times in life when “whatever works” is an appropriate approach to an issue. But when it comes to spiritual matters, “whatever works” is a dangerous and damning philosophy. Jeroboam is a chilling example of someone who decides that they will do “whatever works” when making crucial spiritual decisions, rather than having the faith to follow God’s Word even when it was tough and didn’t make sense on a human level. Sadly, many Christians take a “whatever works” approach to their own spiritual lives, making dangerous compromises rather than trust God.

The Background of Jeroboam

I. Jeroboam’s family – a proud Ephraimite¹ (1 Kings 11:26)

When we discuss the tribes of Israel, do you ever find it odd we never talk about the tribe of Joseph? This is because Joseph got a double portion and it was divided between his

¹ This point and the following explanation is adapted from John Whitcomb, *Israel: From Conquest to Exile: A Commentary on Joshua-2 Kings*.

sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim was the younger of the two, but received the blessing over his brother (Genesis 48:8-20).

The history of the nation of Israel shows the importance of the tribe of Ephraim. Joshua was an Ephraimite (Numbers 13:8, 16). The important cities of Shiloh, where the tabernacle originally resided (Jeremiah 7:12), and Bethel, where Abraham offered sacrifices (Genesis 12:6-8), were both located in Ephraim. When the land was divided up, Ephraim wanted more land given to them because of their large size (Joshua 17:14). Twice in Judges Ephraim is upset that they are not included in victories over foreign enemies (8:1; 12:1), once even going to war over the issue. Ephraim was a proud and influential tribe. It is no wonder that the challenge to David's line came from this mighty tribe descended from Joseph.

II. Jeroboam's failure – a rebel against the King (1 Kings 11:26-28, 40)

Solomon had put the northern tribes under forced labor. Now he put an Ephraimite over them, and their complaints resonated with their relative. Scripture says that Jeroboam "lifted up his hand against the king." While Scripture doesn't state exactly what Jeroboam was up to, it sounds like he was going to Jerusalem to challenge Solomon. When Solomon discovered what Jeroboam was planning, and what the prophet had stated concerning Jeroboam, he attempts to kill him. Jeroboam ran off to Egypt and to the Pharaoh Shishak, implying that the new Pharaoh was less friendly to Solomon.

***Should Jeroboam have “lifted his hand against the king?”
Why or why not?***

III. Jeroboam’s future – a prophecy of future success (1 Kings 11:30-39).

Jeroboam was told that he would be given the northern ten tribes for a kingdom. God was going to be the one who performed this, and if Jeroboam followed God, God would establish his kingdom as he had established David’s.

Why would Jeroboam not follow God if God promised to give him an everlasting dynasty?

How do you think Jeroboam was able to look past all God did for him and rebel against God?

How might we make the same mistakes today?

The Apostasy of Jeroboam

Jeroboam’s sin becomes an epidemic that never leaves Israel. For the next two hundred years of the nation’s existence, his idolatry is never abandoned. In the book of Kings, the author will refer 21 times to the fact that Jeroboam “made Israel to sin.” It can be easy to miss what the exact Jeroboam got wrong here, so we will take a few minutes to look at the institution of this new form of worship and ask some uncomfortable questions about what this has to teach modern day Americans.

I. Jeroboam's problem (1 Kings 12:26-27)

Jeroboam now sat as the king over 10 of the tribes of Israel. His territory was larger than that of Judah, and his population greater. As a result, he and the kings who would follow him in the north would be stronger and more powerful than the southern kingdom. But Jeroboam was nervous that his subjects might execute him and remerge with the southern kingdom and king Rehoboam if they went down to Jerusalem 3 times a year to worship at Jerusalem.

Why do you think this concerned Jeroboam?

How real of a threat would this be?

How might Israel have been persuaded to go back to the southern kingdom?

II. Jeroboam's solution (1 Kings 12:28-33)²

Jeroboam needed a way to keep the people from going down south to worship the Lord. He came up with a plan that both solidified his power and doomed his dynasty – a new twist on the worship of God.

A. A new symbol (12:28)

When we read about Jeroboam setting up his golden calves, many wrongly assume that Jeroboam was trying to worship a new god. But Jeroboam clarifies that these

² See *The Glory Due His Name* by Gary Reimers, pages 70-87 for a detailed discussion of the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the issue of Jeroboam's worship.

calves were meant to represent the God/gods that brought them out of Egypt.

Why do you think Jeroboam chose to symbolize God with a calf?

Jeroboam actually had a precedent for what he did. In Exodus 32:1-6 we read of Aaron making a calf for the people to worship. Jeroboam introduces these new calves just as Aaron had introduced the calf in the wilderness (Exodus 32:4, 1 Kings 12:28). Note that in Exodus, Aaron then goes on to say that the next day is a feast to “the LORD” (Exodus 32:5; Hebrew *Jehovah/Yahweh*). In other words, in Aaron’s mind, the people were not worshipping a new god, they were still worshipping the Lord, the God who brought them out of Egypt.

If Jeroboam really was taking a page out of Aaron’s playbook (and it seems he was), then he likely didn’t view himself as worshipping a new god. If you asked him who his calves were meant to represent, he probably would have said, “Why, the Lord! Of course!” Jeroboam’s sin wasn’t worshipping the wrong god. His sin was worshipping the right God the wrong way.³

³ In other words, this is a violation of the second command (“don’t make graven images”) not the first command (“no other gods before me”). The temptation for Israel was to represent their God visually just as the nations around them. Not only were they to worship only God, they were only to worship him in the way he wanted to be worshipped, meaning you couldn’t make an image of him.

In what ways can we worship the right God the wrong way today?

B. New centers

Here we get to the real heart of what Jeroboam was up to. *“If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam king of Judah” (1 Kings 12:27).*

Jeroboam had to get people to buy into the new religion. His sales pitch? Worshipping God his way is too hard. For those in the northern part of Israel, the journey to Jerusalem would have been 100 miles. Even for those in Bethel, only 10 miles away, the trek up to Jerusalem went up a steep mountain and was a difficult journey.⁴ Instead, Jeroboam sets up two conveniently located worship centers at the far north and far south portions of his kingdom. This would have made worshipping God much easier.

How can the temptation to make Christianity easier still be a problem today here at Colonial?

C. A new priesthood

Obviously, those who commissioned by God to lead Israel in worship would not accept all of these changes. This meant they had to go. Rather than following the

⁴ Jerusalem is 2,300 feet above sea level. Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, often refers to “going up” to Jerusalem, whether you are coming from the north or the south.

law's standards for who should be serving in the worship of God (Levites and priests), Jeroboam took whomever was willing and made them priests.

D. A new calendar

Jeroboam sets up a new calendar for the feast days, a calendar that seems roughly based on Israel's original calendar.

Jeroboam's feast was "like unto the feast that is in Judah." Why do you think that he tried to mirror what Judah was doing

What Jeroboam is proposing here is called syncretism – mixing different religions. Jeroboam did not propose this as wholesale abandoning the worship of God. It was a combination of the worship of God with some elements from the culture around him and a few of his own ideas thrown in, which Jeroboam then pitched it as an easier and more innovative form of the true worship of God.

How can the church today engage in the dangerous practice of syncretism? How can we mix the worship of God with the culture around us?

The Doom of Jeroboam

Jeroboam receives not just one, but two denunciations from God for his wicked behavior. These sections take up two whole chapters, emphasizing to us the importance the author of Kings places on God's anger with Jeroboam's religion.

I. God sends a prophet to pronounce judgment on Jeroboam (1 Kings 13).⁵

1 Kings 13 is a strange story. It begins with a strong pronouncement of judgment on Jeroboam, and ends with a prophet being killed by a lion. We don't have time to work through the details of this story, but the main point of the whole story is that what God says will happen is going to happen. God gave Jeroboam a miraculous (and terrifying) sign that the prophet was speaking on behalf of God. God had also threatened the prophet that if he disobeyed he would be severely punished, and prophet disobeyed and paid the price. If God's Word was supernaturally fulfilled in this instance, with a donkey and a lion standing next to each other beside the dead prophet, then God's Word would be fulfilled against Jeroboam.

Why do you think Jeroboam continued in his sinful ways after this supernatural performance, both when confronted by the prophet and by the prophet's own unusual demise?

II. Jeroboam seeks out a prophet who pronounces judgment Jeroboam (1 Kings 14).

Jeroboam's son falls ill, and Jeroboam in desperation seeks out the prophet who initially gave him God's message that he would become king of the north after Solomon.

Why do you think Jeroboam went back to Ahijah? Why did he go back to the prophet he ignored?

⁵ Having your table read this whole story might be a bit much, but it would probably be good to at least read verses 1-6, and the point of the story of the prophets demise in verses 31-32.

Jeroboam's wife tried to be someone else, but to no avail. The prophet knew who she was, and he gave the message she dreaded hearing – the son would die. God sent yet another warning to Jeroboam about the wickedness of the path he was on, and yet we never hear about Jeroboam confessing and turning from his wrong ways.

Jeroboam started off down the road of spiritual pragmatism – “Well this just makes the most sense.” In the process, he ignored God's Word and God's will. The path of least resistance, however, exacted a heavy toll on the king, and the easy way was far harder than he could have imagined. Sadly, many today follow the path of Jeroboam. Unwilling to make tough sacrifices, they do what is easy in their spiritual lives, mixing God's Word with the thinking of the world around them, seeking to make living for God and worshipping God easy and convenient.