

The Vileness of Sin

1 Kings 14

This past semester it was my privilege to attend the Crabtree Lectures at Union, delivered this year by Rosaria Butterfield, a former lesbian activist and now a pastor's wife and grandmother. Rosaria is known for her bold, uncompromising adherence to biblical truth, and it was truly a blessing to hear what she had to say to the students. In one of her lectures she made reference to James 1:14-15: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." She pointed out that desire for sin is itself sin in its embryonic form, and we must kill sin while it is still an embryo—meaning we must repent of sinful desires—rather than waiting for sin to grow up into a giant before we attack it. We wage war against sin, not primarily at the level of action (though that is important!), but at the level of desire that originates in our hearts.

But how exactly do we do that? How can we kill sin in its embryonic form? How can we fight, not merely against acts of sin, but against the desire for sin? Romans 12:9 speaks to this question: "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast what is good." Did you hear that? Don't merely *avoid* what is evil. *Abhor* what is evil. Cultivate a holy hatred of sin because you hold fast to what is good, and you recognize that sin is an ugly perversion of all the good that you love and cherish. Yes, if you find in your heart a desire for sin, you fight tooth and nail to avoid carrying that out. But don't settle for sin avoidance. Pursue sin abhorrence.

Biblical stories like these from 1 Kings 14 help us in the task of renewing our minds to hate sin. They do that by showing us plainly and forthrightly how vile sin is in its nature and effects. It is worth meditating on what the author of 1 Kings tells us here as we pursue the fight to kill the very desire for sin in our hearts. This chapter comes in the wake of chapters 11-13, which record for us Solomon's fall into idolatry and the subsequent splitting of the kingdom in two at the time of his son Rehoboam's succession to the throne. So now there are two kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel, ruled by King Jeroboam, and the southern kingdom of Judah, ruled by Solomon's son Rehoboam. How did these two kings do? What trajectories did they set their respective kingdoms on? Quick spoiler alert: both kings did poorly, setting their kingdoms on a course of idolatry that would culminate in exile. Let's look carefully into these accounts and note four observations about sin that show us up close how awful it is.

First,

1. Sin distorts our view of God.

We begin with King Jeroboam in the northern kingdom of Israel. Let's recall what he did at the beginning of his reign, as recorded in chapter 12: he set up a rival religion, complete with golden calves, so that his subjects would no longer travel to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. He was afraid of losing his kingdom to the house of David, so he tried to seize control of the situation with complete disregard for the word of God. The prophet Ahijah had told him that the kingdom would be torn from David's house and given to him, and that if he obeyed the Law of God, his kingdom and house would be secure (11:31-39). But he disregarded Ahijah's words. In chapter 13 an unnamed prophet from Judah foretold judgment on Jeroboam's altar and even showed miraculous signs that his word was from God. But Jeroboam paid no attention and went full steam ahead into his golden calf worship. Now, all of a sudden, in chapter 14 we see that

Jeroboam's son Abijah has become sick, potentially threatening his life, and now in a moment of desperation, Jeroboam wants a favor from the God he has long disregarded, which means he wants a favor from the very prophet whose words he has long ignored, the prophet Ahijah.

What should Jeroboam have done when his son fell ill? He should have fallen on his face in repentance. He should have fasted and put on sackcloth. He should have torn down his idols and told his people he was wrong to direct them away from the temple of the Lord. He should have come before the prophet Ahijah with utter humility and a complete change in his actions. But he did none of that. Instead, he sent his wife in disguise to Ahijah. She was dressed as a commoner, and she brought a modest gift to the prophet, like a common person might bring. Why do it this way? Because Jeroboam didn't want to face the prophet he knew would confront his sin. He wanted to get a favorable word from the prophet about his son, but he wanted to do so without the prophet even knowing that it was Jeroboam asking. After all, the prophet Ahijah was blind. Couldn't Jeroboam's wife travel to Shiloh in disguise, present her distressing situation to the prophet without disclosing her identity, and get a word of healing for her son without ever letting him see the full picture? Maybe, in this time of distress, Jeroboam could pull one over on the prophet, and thus pull one over on God.

But a moment's reflection will show how ridiculous that idea is. In his book on 1 Kings Roger Ellsworth points out that it is ironic that Jeroboam wanted the prophet Ahijah to see into the future about his son, but assumed he wouldn't see the truth about his wife's identity.¹ He thought he could manipulate God into doing a favor for him without ever having to face the entrenched pattern of idolatry he had pursued in his kingdom. What that reveals is that Jeroboam had a very small view of God. To him, the God of Israel is a God from whom we can hide, even while we manipulate him into giving us what we want. Why would he ever assume such a thing about the Creator of all things? The prophet Ahijah's words in verse 9 tell us why: "but you have done evil above all who were before you and have gone and made for yourself other gods and metal images, provoking me to anger, and have cast me behind your back." By this point, Jeroboam had gone headlong into idolatry, and that could not help but reshape the way he viewed the true God. Worshiping like a pagan reshaped his theology into a transactional pagan theology, with limited deities who are subject to our manipulation. Jeroboam's golden calves made him lose sight of who God really is.

Unrepentant sin diminishes God in our minds. It can't help but do so. The more comfortable we are with sin, the more we must ignore the holiness, the transcendence, the beauty, and the wonder of who God is. The more we sin, the more our consciences become hardened to the truth about our sin, rationalizing our behavior in the only way we can: by making God seem smaller and smaller and smaller. The first step in hating sin is to see clearly and plainly what it does to your vision of God when left unchecked.

The story reveals how foolish Jeroboam was. Verse 6 tells us that the moment Ahijah heard the sound of the feet of Jeroboam's wife at his door, he said, "Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why do you pretend to be another?" Blind Ahijah could see very clearly what was happening, because the word of the Lord who sees all had come to him. Jeroboam could not hide from God and could certainly not pull one over on God.

If you have struggles with sin in your life, and you are fighting to avoid sin, that's all well and good. Don't stop. But as you fight to avoid sin, you must also strive to hate it, and the first step to hating your sin is enlarging your vision of God. See God for who he is, in his holiness, his supremacy, his transcendent beauty. Don't let sin distort your vision of who he is.

Sin, when not followed with repentance, will distort our view of God. But that is not all that makes it abhorrent. Second,

2. Sin harms our children.

Both accounts in this chapter make this point, but in different ways. In the account of Jeroboam (vv. 1-20), we see that his son Abijah suffers a terrible illness and even dies as a result of his father's idolatry. Abijah dies at a young age, not because of his own sin, but as a disciplinary act against his father. His own innocence with respect to idolatry is made clear in the prophet Ahijah's words in verses 12-13: "Arise, therefore, go to your house. When your feet enter the city, the child shall die. And all Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he only of Jeroboam shall come to the grave, because in him there is found something pleasing to the LORD, the God of Israel, in the house of Jeroboam." This is the only time a member of the royal house in the whole history of the northern kingdom is commended as pleasing to the Lord. Abijah the son of Jeroboam was apparently not a worshiper of false gods. He feared the true God of Israel, and yet he suffered and died as a result of his father's sins. Our sin often harms our children when they have no complicity in it at all. Every child from a broken home has experienced that, and examples could be multiplied.

The picture is a bit different in the account of Rehoboam's reign (vv. 21-31). It is common in 1-2 Kings for the author to mention the queen mother when he gives an account of a king's reign. But it is not common for him to mention her twice, and that is what he does here at the beginning and at the end of Rehoboam's section. Note verse 21: "Now Rehoboam the son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city that the LORD had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, to put his name there. His mother's name was Naamah the Ammonite." Now look to the end of this section, verse 31: "And Rehoboam slept with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the city of David. His mother's name was Naamah the Ammonite." Rehoboam's mother is identified twice, like bookends to the story, and both times the author points out that she was an Ammonite, not an Israelite. That is unusual, and it seems the author is drawing our attention to the fact that Rehoboam was born of the sinful intermarriage of his father Solomon with the Ammonite pagan Naamah (see 11:1). What was the result? Verses 22-24 paint a dark picture: "And Judah did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and they provoked him to jealousy with their sins that they committed, more than all that their fathers had done. For they also built for themselves high places and pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel." Rehoboam, the first king to rule after the height of the kingdom under Solomon, set Judah on a trajectory of idolatry that eventually made them look just like the pagan Canaanites that they had driven out of the land. One of the author's points seems to be that Rehoboam's character was shaped by his pagan mother's influence over him, a woman whom his father Solomon never should have married. Rehoboam's sin was inherited from his parents.

What we see in this account and in many other places in Scripture is that sin in one generation leads to ingrained habits that spread to the next generation. Our children learn from watching us. They learn from our lives what they should prioritize and pursue, how they should react to stressful situations, how they should treat their future spouses. They learn from us how to live and how to worship. And if we show them patterns of sin, guess what they will learn to walk in. So what is it that our children most need from us? Do they need us to go to any length necessary to set them up for worldly success? Do they need us to take them to every sporting event all over the country every weekend as we hold out hope that missing church all those Sundays might be worth it if they get a scholarship? Do they need us to get them into the right school, to set them up for the right career path, to get them connected to the right people? No, what our children most need from us is our holiness. They need to see that we walk with the Lord, that we fear him, that we worship him, and that when we sin we own it and repent. One of the most humbling experiences of my life as a parent has been those occasions when I have had to repent to my children and seek their forgiveness. That can be hard to do because it is so humbling. But if I am not willing to do that, what am I teaching my children about sin?

So whether it involves bringing suffering on them though they are innocent, or whether it involves leading them into the pathways of sin themselves, our sin has the power to wreak havoc in the lives of our children. Remember that truth, and for the sake of your children (or future children), hate what is evil.

Sin distorts our view of God. Sin harms our children. But we're not done yet. Third,

3. Sin warrants severe judgment from God.

How did God respond to the sins of these first two kings of their respective kingdoms? He judged them both, and he did so with severity. For King Jeroboam in the north, judgment came with the death of his son Abijah, hitting Jeroboam where it hurt most, just as the Lord had done to the Pharaoh in Egypt at the time of the exodus. No parent should ever have to bury a child. That may be the most contrary-to-nature experience in this fallen world. But as Ahijah foretold, the moment Jeroboam's wife set foot back in her home, their son succumbed to his illness, and Jeroboam lost not only a son, but an heir to his throne. His sin warranted severe consequences.

The Lord's judgment on Rehoboam was of a different nature. According to verses 25-26, Shishak the Egyptian Pharaoh plundered the temple in Jerusalem and the king's treasury. What that probably means is that Shishak harassed Rehoboam's kingdom by ordering raids on various cities until Rehoboam paid him off to stop. And he paid dearly, even handing over the shields of gold that had adorned the walls of the House of the Forest of Lebanon that Solomon had built as part of his palace complex. But note how Rehoboam tried to save face after this event in verses 27-28: "and King Rehoboam made in their place shields of bronze, and committed them to the hands of the officers of the guard, who kept the door of the king's house. And as often as the king went into the house of the Lord, the guard carried them and brought them back to the guardroom." No more shields of gold. They had shields of bronze to replace them. And the shields no longer hung as decorations in the state house. They probably weren't large enough or numerous enough to cover the walls as Solomon's shields had once done, and the risk of losing them was enough that Rehoboam kept them under lock and key. But he would bring them out whenever he would go to the temple so that he could add a little pomp to the procession. It all must have seemed so pathetic by comparison to the glory of Solomon's kingdom. Rehoboam's

splendor was nothing compared to that of his father, because it was the Lord who shamed him and his kingdom for their sins of idolatry.

But what is most important for us to understand about both acts of judgment from God is that they were not final. They were both signs, and small signs by comparison, of a much greater judgment from God to come that would bring destruction. As Ahijah prophesied to Jeroboam's wife, the tragic death of their son was but a foretaste of the coming complete destruction of Jeroboam's house. Verses 10-11 speaks of a coming day when every male descendant of Jeroboam will be violently killed, and so thorough will be the humiliation of his house that not one will receive a dignified burial. Those who die in the city will be eaten by dogs, and those who die in the country will be eaten by birds. This prophecy will be fulfilled in the next chapter of 1 Kings.

But God is not finished. There is even greater destruction beyond the house of Jeroboam still to come, and that is the destruction of the entire northern kingdom. Verses 15-16 read, "the Lord will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water, and root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their fathers and scatter them beyond the Euphrates, because they have made their Asherim, provoking the Lord to anger. And he will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, which he sinned and made Israel to sin." Jeroboam could have secured his kingdom by obeying the Lord. Instead, he set up his golden calves at Dan and Bethel, and that set his kingdom on a trajectory of perpetual instability, like a reed in a river that shakes with the motions of the currents. The northern kingdom will become, after Jeroboam, a kingdom in which kings are assassinated repeatedly and the throne changes hands. One dynasty will rule for a short time, followed by the next, then the next, etc. And it will all culminate with Israel's uprooting from the land itself. The death of Jeroboam's son is a sign of a terrible future to come for Jeroboam's house and the kingdom over which he rules.

But what about God's judgment on Rehoboam's kingdom in the south? Pharaoh Shishak plundered the temple and the king's treasury, but he left the city and temple standing. That won't always be the case. Almost 350 years later, another king will come, this time from Babylon, and he will lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. He will inflict horrifying suffering on the people inside the city, remove their king from the throne, raze Solomon's temple to the ground, and carry the people back to Babylon. The book of 1-2 Kings will go on to tell the story of how both kingdoms formed in the wake of Solomon's idolatry will meet their end in destruction and exile.

These judgments are not light. They are severe and horrifying, yet even they are but faint echoes of the coming final judgment. The ultimate form of exile is Hell, a permanent exile from the presence of God, the ultimate and irreversible frustration of the purpose for which we were created, plunging us into ever-increasing misery. Recently, Kirk Cameron (actor and Christian believer) caused a stir in the evangelical world by endorsing a view of Hell known as "Annihilationism." This view states that in the end, God will judge unbelievers by annihilating them from existence. According to annihilationists, Hell is not eternal suffering, but rather a state of going out of existence forever. That view is not only at odds with Scripture and the whole history of Christian teaching, but taken to its logical conclusion it would have the practical effect of causing us to fear God's judgment less. Think of it this way: I was born in the year 1980. For all the ages of humanity, the earth, and the universe that passed prior to my birth in 1980, I

experienced absolutely no suffering. If annihilationism is true, the practical effect would be for me that if I fell under the final judgment of God, it would simply be like he turned the clock back to the pre-1980 world, and that really doesn't threaten me. In a sense you could say I was just fine for all the ages of the universe prior to 1980, and I can be just fine again if God annihilates me. Annihilation is not judgment. It is the *end* of judgment, and as a doctrine it cannot help but cause people to fear God's judgment less.

But one of the main points of this passage, and many others in Scripture, is that we should fear the judgment of God. Ultimately, we should fear it because it will result, not in our annihilation, but in our eternal destruction, the utter frustration of our created design as we are left in exile from God and all that is good. And every moment that passes in Hell will be another moment to contemplate how vile and destructive sin is. God is holy, and he will, therefore, always remain true to himself. Therefore, his judgments on idolaters who belittle his name warrants a punishment sufficient to answer the gravity of their crimes. If sin seems appealing to you, take a moment to reflect on what lie it is telling about God and how God, in his holiness, will most certainly give a definitive answer to that lie in the form of severe judgment. Jeroboam and Rehoboam only barely tasted the horror of what would come, because God will not be mocked.

Sin distorts our view of God, harms our children, and warrants severe judgment from God. Finally,

4. Sin makes our lives small.

The accounts of both kings end with summary statements. For Jeroboam, look at verses 19-20: "Now the rest of the acts of Jeroboam, how he warred and how he reigned, behold, they are written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel. And the time that Jeroboam reigned was twenty-two years. And he slept with his fathers, and Nadab his son reigned in his place." The reference to the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel" is not a reference to the biblical book 1-2 Chronicles. It is another historical record. The author of 1-2 Kings could have told us any number of things Jeroboam did and accomplished. He alludes to the details of the wars he fought and the way he reigned over his kingdom. But from chapters 12-14 we really only get details about one thing: Jeroboam's rival religion and idolatry. Note the similarity with Rehoboam in verses 29-31: "Now the rest of the acts of Rehoboam and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah? And there was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam continually. And Rehoboam slept with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the city of David. His mother's name was Naamah the Ammonite. And Abijam his son reigned in his place." Again, there are so many things the author could have told us about Rehoboam's reign. In fact, some of those things are recorded in 2 Chronicles 11-12, and some of them are good. He built fortified cities, he welcomed the Levites who came to his kingdom from Jeroboam's realm. He even led his kingdom in obedience to the Law of Moses for the first three years. But the author of 1-2 Kings is focused on one question: how did he worship?

In the end, the author tells us that what matters most about these two kings is not anything they accomplished. It is the fact that they bowed down to idols instead of the one true God. Nothing else they did even begins to compare to that. So his account of their reigns is fairly short and to the point. These are two kings who, in spite of everything else they did, failed at the one thing that was most important.

Imagine you met a wealthy man who set up an orphanage at his own expense. Imagine that he has poured millions of dollars into building a nice facility with comfortable accommodations, hiring qualified and caring staff, providing food, clothing, medical care, and other necessities, ultimately finding and placing orphaned children in loving homes. Imagine you see him interacting with the children, and you can see in how he talks to them that he genuinely cares for them. You would probably be impressed. Now imagine you discovered that this same man had abandoned his wife and five children hundreds of miles away and left them to suffer in poverty. That would change your entire picture of him, wouldn't it? Suddenly, it wouldn't seem like being there for orphaned children mattered that much when he didn't show up for his own children. That realization would suddenly make him seem very small to you.

That is what sin does to us. In the end, it's not your accomplishments in this world that will matter. It is your worship. Countless people who altered the course of history with their lives will find themselves completely inconsequential in the world to come, where the first will be last and the last will be first.

Left unchecked, sin will distort your view of God; it will bring harm to your children, either in their innocence or in their complicity; it will bring down the severity of God's wrath upon you; and it will make your life utterly small in the end. Although Satan desires to keep you hypnotized by the appeal of sin, I charge you to renew your mind in the truth by thinking correctly and soberly about it, in light of what Scripture teaches us.

In Romans 8:13, Paul writes, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Note that it is only "by the Spirit" that we put sin to death. That is, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Christ dwelling in us. Taking hold of Christ by faith, we are completely forgiven of our sins and made right with God. And it is from the place of security in his acceptance of us in his Son that we are empowered by his indwelling Spirit to fight sin effectively. As Charles Wesley wrote in that wonderful hymn, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing":

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.*

It is only cancelled sin that loses its power over us. So look to Christ to cancel your sin by his atoning work and then to deliver you from its power. Abhor what is evil; hold fast what is good, by the power of Jesus Christ for you and in you. Amen.

¹Roger Ellsworth, *From Glory to Ruin: 1 Kings Simply Explained* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2000), 146-47.