

A Kingdom Divided

1 Kings 12:1-24

As Tom has indicated before in sermons, the movie *Tombstone*, a Western released in 1993 starring Kurt Russell as Wyatt Earp and Val Kilmer as Doc Holliday, is one of the most quotable movies of all time. It seems there is a suitable *Tombstone* quote for every situation. One of my favorites comes near the end, where Doc is in his final moments, dying of tuberculosis. Wyatt is sitting next to his bed as they are both reflecting on the past. At one point Doc says, “What did you want?” Wyatt answers, “Just to live a normal life.” And then Doc replies, “There is no normal life, Wyatt. There’s just life. Now get on with it.” Hearing that line hits me every time. We all have a template in mind for what we would regard as a “normal life,” but in truth this fallen world is not normal, our hearts are not normal, and our circumstances are often not normal. The messiness of life is what is really “normal,” if you want to put it that way.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it is so strikingly honest about that truth. You don’t have to look far into the stories of the great heroes of the faith—Abraham, David, Peter, Paul, etc.—to find the messiness. And the same is true for the nation of Israel, a people chosen by God to represent himself to the world. Here in 1 Kings 11, on the heels of the glorious reign of King Solomon, we see the nation of Israel fracturing very quickly under Solomon’s son Rehoboam. As Old Testament scholar Paul House summarized this story, “One incredibly poor decision tears down in a few days what David and Solomon labored eighty years to build.”¹ But just because Israel is falling apart doesn’t mean God’s plan for the salvation of the world is falling apart. And that’s what I want you to understand about your own life. Just because you may not have the “normal life” you wanted doesn’t mean at all that God’s purpose to give you unfathomable joy in his Son forever has been derailed. God loves to work through the messiness of his people, and a messy story like this one can give us tremendous hope in that.

Coming on the heels of Solomon’s fall into idolatry and God’s pronouncement of judgment against his kingdom, 1 Kings 12 tells us of a new king, Rehoboam, a terrible mistake he made leading to a terrible mess, and through it all God’s purpose being fulfilled. You can divide this story into two main sections, and from each one I will seek to draw out instruction for our lives.

A first word of instruction from this story is this:

1. Let us trust that, in all the messiness of life and in the church, the Word of God will not fail (vv. 1-15).

If you read this story carefully, you can see that the main driver of events is the prophetic word of the Lord. The house of David is not the main actor. The nation of Israel is not the main actor. Above them both stands the infallible Word of God, as it stands above all institutions constituted of men. One of the greatest tragedies of both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox teachings is that these two churches regard themselves as the main agents of God’s work, standing even above Scripture. But as this story makes plain, leaders will fail, institutions will fail, God’s people will fail, but the Word of God will never fail. The infallible Word of God remains worthy of our trust no matter how much the people of God fail.

This story makes that point clearly. King Solomon has now died, and his son Rehoboam is next in line for the throne. But interestingly, the ten northern tribes of Israel summoned him away

from Jerusalem to Shechem, saying they would officially recognize him as king there. That act alone shows that the northern tribes already have some grievances with the house of David, and so instead of joining in a coronation ceremony at the capital city, Jerusalem, they summon the son of King Solomon to Shechem, where they intend to have a negotiation with him. Meanwhile, Jeroboam, who had previously rebelled against King Solomon and then fled to Egypt, returns to Israel when he hears that Solomon is dead, and the ten northern tribes make him their lead negotiator. Their demand for Rehoboam is that he lighten the burdens on them. Their claim, whether fully accurate or possibly somewhat exaggerated, is that King Solomon had imposed a heavy burden on them through his forced labor policy, and they wanted relief. If King Rehoboam would show willingness to be easier on them, they would gladly serve him. Hearing this demand, Rehoboam asked for three days to consider before he answered them, so they left.

The new king needed wisdom, so he turned to two sets of counselors. First, he went to a group of older men who had served in Solomon's administration. These men had been around the block a few times, and they all had real-life experience in the political world. Based on their wisdom, they urged Rehoboam to grant the request of the ten tribes and ease the burden of forced labor that Solomon had put on them. Verse 7 encapsulates their advice: "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*.'" Rehoboam, humble yourself today, and it will pay dividends for you the rest of your life. First win the hearts of the people, and then you will be able to lead them effectively. These older men knew how leadership works.

But then Rehoboam turned to his peers, the "young men who had grown up with him and stood before him" (v. 8). These were not men who had served in his father's administration. They had grown up alongside Rehoboam himself, so they naturally wouldn't have much wisdom to share with him beyond what he already knew. Verses 10-11 report their counsel: "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. 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.'" It's an arrogant, hot-headed response. In the Hebrew, part of it comes across as a vulgar statement. And the term "scorpions" there doesn't refer to the bugs with stingers that we all hate to encounter. It refers to whips with jagged barbs embedded in them to tear the flesh off your back. The old men told Rehoboam to win the people's hearts first and then lead them. The young men told him to thump his chest, speak with vulgarity, and intimidate the people into submission.

Let me pause for a moment to say a word especially to young men. I know that young men in our society feel like they have been left behind in many ways. Women by far outnumber men in college enrollments. For many young men, home ownership seems like a far-off dream, marriage prospects seem weak, and the goal of raising a family seems for many very difficult to attain, far more difficult than it was in previous generations. In every generation, the young men tend to have some legitimate grievances, and ours is no exception. But I want to caution you who are young men, as you face the challenges that confront you in our society, not to become arrogant in yourself and your peers by assuming that the wisdom of older men can simply be written off because they don't face the same challenges you are facing right now. The fifth commandment

tells us to honor our fathers and mothers. Interestingly, it doesn't say, "Obey your father and mother," although that is implied for a child still living under his parents' authority. The duty to honor our parents extends beyond our childhood years, as we gratefully receive and hold in high esteem the wisdom of our elders. And even where you might come to disagree with the wisdom of older men, don't ever fail to honor them. When I look back on the men and women who nurtured me in the faith at First Baptist Church of Atlanta, Texas, I thank God for them. There are many things that church did that I have come now to see differently, including my understanding of the best method of preaching, of how church membership works, and many other things. But I will always honor my fathers and mothers in the faith who first taught me the gospel. Young men, don't ever let arrogance cloud your ability to revere the wisdom of your elders.

So Rehoboam had two sets of counselors who laid out two very different pathways for him. Which one did he choose? He chose the counsel of the young men over the old. He sided with his peers instead of with men who actually had real political experience. And when the people gathered again on the third day, he let the harsh, vulgar words fly, and he pledged even greater oppression to come. Rehoboam sounds more like an Egyptian Pharaoh who wants to enslave the people than a faithful Israelite king who wants to seek their good. This is such a striking contrast to the wisdom of his father Solomon that you might think it almost unbelievable that Rehoboam was such a fool. But the author tells us exactly why this happened in verse 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." Remember that the Lord had sent word to Jeroboam in chapter 11 through the prophet Ahijah, that the Lord would tear ten tribes away from the house of David and make Jeroboam king over a new kingdom. Why? Because King Solomon had engaged in the worship of idols, and this was God's decree of judgment against his kingdom. The author is telling us that Rehoboam acted like a complete fool because it was a turn of events brought about by the Lord to fulfill his word. Of course, that doesn't mean Rehoboam is a mindless puppet. He acted out of his own sinful desires, and he is fully responsible for his decision to listen to his idiot peers. But God's sovereignty and human responsibility are never at odds in Scripture. God's plan is fulfilled *through* the messes we make of things.

Life in this fallen world is messy. Maybe you have made messes in your own life by your foolish decisions, and you continue to live with consequences of that. Maybe you have been sinned against by other believers in ways that have left you wounded. Maybe you have found your faith shaken by messy situations in a local church, or by the exposure of hypocrisy in a church leader you respected. Let this story remind you that through all the mess, the Word of God never fails. His promises are true, and his plans are certain, and he will bring many sons to glory in the end (Heb. 2:10). When Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth, he addressed them as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1:2) and then gave thanks to God for his grace among them (vv. 4-9). Do you want to know what was going on at the church in Corinth when Paul wrote? There were factions divided against each other, with some saying, "I follow Paul," "I follow Peter," "I follow Apollos." There was a man sleeping with his own stepmother, and the church refused to discipline him. Some believers were bringing lawsuits against other believers in court. Some of the men were still visiting temple prostitutes like they did in their pagan days. Some married couples were avoiding sexual intimacy because of a bad theology of

marriage and the body they had adopted. Their celebrations of the Lord's Supper, which was part of a church-wide feast, were divided along class lines, with the wealthier members eating up all the food, even getting drunk, and the poorer members left with nothing to eat. Many of them used spiritual gifts, not to love and serve others, but to draw attention to themselves for how spiritual they were. And to top it all off, some even denied that there would be a future resurrection of the dead. The church at Corinth was a complete mess. And yet, Paul said they were sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with the grace of God clearly evident among them. Through all the mess, God is always at work through his Word. It is an act of faith to believe that, but that faith is entirely warranted.

King Rehoboam was an utter fool to listen to his arrogant peers instead of wiser old men. But the real driver of this story is the Word of God, running its course to fulfillment. The remaining verses show us what happened after Rehoboam gave his harsh answer, and that brings us to a second word of application:

2. Let us submit ourselves to the mysterious purposes of God, which are for his glory and our good (vv. 16-24).

So now what? How will the ten northern tribes respond to Rehoboam's foolish answer? Verse 16 tells us: "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." There was no coronation of Rehoboam that day. The ten tribes did not recognize him as their king, but the tribe of Judah (and Benjamin, joined to Judah) did, exactly as the prophet Ahijah had foretold in chapter 11.

The rest of the passage relates two attempts Rehoboam made to bring the kingdom back under his authority. The first attempt was to send Adoram, the head of the forced labor, to try to bring them back into submission. He must have assumed that Adoram was intimidating enough to put down this rebellion against the house of David. Rehoboam was spectacularly wrong about that. Not only did they not submit to Adoram, they actually stoned him to death! At this point Rehoboam knows he is in danger, so he immediately flees back to Jerusalem to try to regroup. And as verse 20 indicates, the northern tribes, now lacking a king, installed Jeroboam as king, exactly as had been foretold through the prophet in chapter 11. So now, officially, the once great kingdom of David and Solomon has divided into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah.

But Rehoboam was not finished. He decided to try the Abraham Lincoln strategy, which is to raise an army and unite two nations into one again by force. Verse 21 records his mustering of 180,000 troops from Judah and Benjamin in preparation for a civil war, and my goodness, what a slaughter that likely would have been on both sides. But in his great mercy, God intervened, and no more blood had to be shed beyond Adoram. Another prophet, this one named Shemaiah, brought word from the Lord to Rehoboam recorded in verse 24: "Thus says the Lord, You shall not go up or fight against your relatives the people of Israel. Every man return to his home, for this thing is from me.' So they listened to the word of the Lord and went home again, according to the word of the Lord." Rehoboam doesn't come off looking good in this story, but he did do one thing right here: he submitted himself to the word of the Lord, recognizing that this turn of

events was God's doing. He ended his plans for war and allowed the northern kingdom to go its own way.

Now, on one level, this is all very tragic. The once mighty house of David has been cut down to a much smaller kingdom in one fell swoop. You might think that God is undermining his own promises. He promised the house of David an everlasting throne, and here he is ripping away a large portion of the kingdom from David's grandson. But a closer look shows that this is right in line with what God promised David. In 2 Samuel 7:14, God said to David concerning his son, "I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men." Solomon had committed iniquity, and now Solomon's once great kingdom has been torn in two. God has kept his word and defended the holiness of his name. But what about the promise of an eternal throne for the house of David? How does that cohere with what God has done here?

I grew up in the 80's and 90's watching Michael Jordan play basketball. He is without doubt the greatest of all time. If you say LeBron James is the greatest, I don't think we can be friends. In the days of my childhood, the Chicago Bulls had a specific play they would run when the game came down to the wire. Here's a description of that play: get the ball to Michael Jordan, and everybody else get out of the way. That was it. And it worked over and over and over again, game after game, year after year, championship after championship, until Jordan won six total. By the way, LeBron James has won four, just FYI. Give Michael Jordan the ball, give him a clear lane to the basket, and watch him do what he does.

What is God up to in tearing down the kingdom of the house of David, when he had made such a grand promise to David about the future of his house? He's working on getting all the other sons of David out of the way so that one Son of David can show up and do what he came to do. He is ultimately going to take the house of David through death so that he can bring it to life again. The pathway to get there is messy, painful, and mysterious, but it will come to God's appointed end. And that end is the glory of the Incarnation, the obedient life, the substitutionary death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Type must give way to antitype. The once glorious kingdom of Solomon must give way, eventually, to the kingdom of God. By submitting himself to the hard reality that he could not win the northern half of his kingdom back because this was from the Lord, Rehoboam submitted himself to the mysterious purpose of God.

And maybe in your life there are mysteries that you don't understand. Maybe you had certain dreams that never panned out. Maybe you have been deeply wronged and wounded by someone you love. Maybe you were hopeful that your circumstances would turn out one way, but instead they went the opposite way. Let a story like this one teach you to read your circumstances with this question in mind: Is this turn of events from the Lord? What is he up to? I never would have planned things for myself this way, but in his wisdom he has chosen this path for me. Now what does he want to teach me through it? How can I take this messy situation and make sure it is not wasted on me? There is a freedom that comes with a submissive rest in what God is doing.

Trust, and submit. Through all the messiness of life and in the church, trust in the Word of God that will not fail. And then submit yourself to the mysterious purposes of God, knowing that his purposes are for our good and his glory.

As Andrew Peterson put it, “David, he had Solomon by dead Uriah’s wife. Solomon, well you all know him, he had good old Rehoboam.”² But Rehoboam really wasn’t “good old” Rehoboam. He was an arrogant, Pharaoh-like king who promised to lay a heavy yoke on the people, until God denied him that opportunity. In striking contrast, another Son of David would one day come who was not arrogant, but gentle and lowly, and whose invitation came with these words: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).³ So let us bring our messes with us once again as we come in faith to his table. Amen.

¹ Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, vol. 8 of *The new American Commentary* (Brentwood, TN: B & H, 1995), 182.

² From Andrew Peterson’s song “Matthew’s Begats” from the album *Behold the Lamb*.

³ I want thank pastoral apprentice Michael Tankersley for bringing to my attention this verbal connection between Rehoboam and Jesus.