

ABIJAH

Some people do not like history. They don't spend much time on stories because they don't believe anybody learns from observing others. They would agree with the famous statement: "The only thing we learn from history is that nobody ever learns from history." This cynical statement is clever, and indeed it carries much truth. But it is far from the whole truth. We do have learning curves, however flawed. I do not argue with my wife like I used to. I do not burn myself on the stove very often anymore. I do not stay up until three o'clock in the morning very often anymore either, and when I do, I don't drink. I do learn some things from history. On the other hand, it looked for a long time like I was never going to. Do any of you make the same mistake over and over? Sometimes history is not enough.

David was the greatest king that Israel ever had – at least the greatest king that Israel ever acknowledged. David was, of course, the prototype of King Arthur: the wart (the shepherd boy) who comes out of nowhere to pull the sword from the stone (kill Goliath), and unite all of England in a golden age of prosperity, chivalry, and justice. David was anointed king by Merlin, whose Hebrew name was Samuel, and magic flowed around him for the rest of his life. Most of the magic, as always, was grounded in his faith in God. And no matter how grievous his mistakes, when he would go back to God, the magic gathered around him again.

With a combination of magic and valor, David conquered the unconquerable old Jebusite fortress city and turned it into Camelot. The Gihon spring supplied it with water, and when David was finished with the walls, spies from all the enemy nations around him returned to their kings and said, "Don't even try it. You cannot conquer Jerusalem."

Like the knights of Arthur's round table, David's mighty men loved him without jealousy or rancor. They risked their lives – fought and died for him – with willing and eager devotion, and often before he even asked it. It was part of the magic, often called "charisma," and it was inspired because David was that way with God. David was arguably the greatest warrior who ever lived. From a little boy tending sheep and up until the day he died, David fought the enemies of his people and his God, and always from the forefront of the battle. We win some and lose some, but not David. He never lost a fight. With enemies on every side, David

gathered a beaten, demoralized, quarreling rabble and turned them into the most successful nation of his time. By the time of his death, David ruled the entire corridor between the desert and the Mediterranean Sea, from the Euphrates River to Egypt. It was “the impossible dream” – the promise of God to Abraham and Moses: the Promised Land. This was no Don Quixote; this was the real thing. And David made it happen – he brought it to reality. Maybe there was a God after all! At least David thought so. God was the light and reason and purpose of his life.

I will not bore you with David’s private life, or with the parallels between Bathsheba and Guinevere or between their sons. We never learn from history, but history does repeat itself. Some say history *only* repeats itself – until we learn from it. I believe the phrase is: “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

David’s own dearest dream was to build a temple for his God. Moses did not get to go into the Promised Land; David did not get to build the temple. Forgiveness does not mean there is no penalty – no cost – to our sins. We are not punished *for* our sins. We are punished *by* our sins. They throw us off track, waste time and life, and delay and sometimes destroy the things we love. We cannot sin and accomplish God’s will for us at the same time. Why is that so hard for us to grasp? Sin does not hurt God, except for the fact that it hurts us – keeps us from our true identity and purpose.

David’s dearest dream was to honor his God by building a great temple in Jerusalem. But he was faithful enough to ask permission in prayer and to check with his spiritual mentor, Nathan the prophet. He was told it was too late. David was to leave the project to his son. It was a great sorrow but David obeyed, and he contented himself with gathering materials that would be needed and used when he was gone. It was a great sorrow but David obeyed, and contented himself with gathering materials that would be needed and used when he was gone. History is not the only thing that repeats itself. Sorry, I was afraid some of you might have missed it.

David’s son Solomon, as his name implies, was a man of peace. His father was a great warrior. Solomon tried to be different from his father in every way. In this he succeeded. Success, in fact, was Solomon’s god. He inherited a great kingdom from his father, and during his lifetime Solomon lived in great luxury, pomp, and splendor. David never did. It was Solomon’s strategy to look so strong and rich – yet nonaggressive – that nobody would seriously consider attacking him. He maintained a huge

army of chariots (fourteen hundred chariots, twelve thousand horsemen) that never fought. He built a magnificent temple, and a far more magnificent palace for himself. (It took seven years to build the temple; thirteen years to build his own palace.) Solomon loved the arts and culture, and he made a great show of everything, including religion. He had seven hundred wives and only three hundred concubines, to show he honored family values. You are picking up that I do not like Solomon? I tell you only what I think is true – but watch out for the prejudice.

Solomon's wives were princesses from all the world around him: the marriages were peace treaties. "You don't want to fight me; your daughter and her people live here. We are friends – relatives – you and I." Solomon was a master of plurality and inclusiveness. He had no values or morality of his own, except for his desire to be successful, wealthy, and known throughout the world for his wit, wisdom, and opulence. Only, Solomon's "wisdom" had nothing to do with being wise. It meant he was cultured, had a lot of information, and loved music, poetry, riddles, and intellectual conversation. It was all for show. He did not love truth, just the trappings of truth, like a person who does not love knowledge but adores college degrees.

Soon Jerusalem was filled with shrines to foreign gods. Solomon's wives were not converts; they were peace treaties. You had to honor them or their fathers would get angry and the very purpose would be undone. Thus Solomon sowed the seeds of apostasy that would break the Covenant, destroy identity, and obscure the purpose of Israel. Israel would never fully recover. In return for earthly success in his own lifetime, Solomon bequeathed ruin to his children, his nation, and his religion for all the generations to follow. Next to Solomon, Faust was a rank amateur. But Solomon did it in the name of "peace" – he was a "man of peace."

By the time of his death, Solomon had bankrupted the nation. He had impoverished the people with impossible taxes, turning more and more of them into slaves because they could not pay. He had traded many of his country's cities for money and supplies. He had enraged some of his strongest allies by lying and cheating – trading them worthless little villages for money and building supplies, while claiming they were prosperous cities. Upon Solomon's death, it all crumbled overnight. There was civil war. The nation split – North and South fighting each other, each fighting their neighbors – losing more and more, getting weaker and weaker, until all was destroyed – once ... twice ... three times. Everything David had fought for was rent asunder, and the world has seen only glimmers of the ancient dream ever since. I do not like Solomon.

All generalities are false, including this one, but early in the history of our people, our spirit was reminiscent of David. We had nothing, and we came, as it were, out of nowhere. We fought hard, worked for unity, and called everybody to one dream: one nation under God. We took incredible risks, and more than one Goliath hit the dust – against all odds and expectations. We made some grievous mistakes and there have been enormous prices to pay for them, but we also knew about repentance because we really wanted to be a holy nation – a New Israel. A lot of modern historians try to minimize our religious heritage, and they claim that our Calvinist/Puritan background was just a minor thing and not really part of our country’s identity or purpose. But they do not want to see any religious conviction because they have so little of their own.

And they fit in very well today, when American culture is reminiscent of Solomon. We honor plurality and deify inclusivity. We are so very proud of the fact that we do not believe anything enough to make an issue of it. It doesn’t matter much what we leave to our children or to future generations, as long as we can be rich and comfortable in our own time. We act very religious, but we take God with a grain of salt. We build great temples and are fascinated with megachurches, but we seem more impressed by their size than we are by faith or devotion or obedience. It’s hard not to suspect that a lot of it is for show, especially if it helps us look good and be successful – so we can go on spending twice as much on our own palaces as we do on God.

I am not really working up to hellfire and brimstone. I am not even in a bad mood. I love you, and I like a lot of what I see going on around here. I even like a lot of what is going on “out there” – good medicine, better computers all the time, endless possibilities and developments, and lots of people working with conscientious integrity for a better world. I wish I didn’t think that so much of it was built on a house of cards. I wish I thought more of it was being done for God.

Whatever we think about history, and however much it repeats itself, whatever does not serve God and his Kingdom – whatever is not in tune and in harmony with the will of the Creator – cannot last. It is a chimera, a mirage. Solomon’s kingdom was a magnificent fraud. It served Solomon for a few years, but it was a disaster. There are no words to describe such a disaster.

Jeroboam was not a logical contender for the throne, but he saw the oppression of Solomon and became so contentious for the people that

he had to flee to Egypt to save his life. When Solomon died, Jeroboam came out of exile and rallied the people to him. He did not represent God or the Covenant or their true destiny, but people flocked to him because he had opposed Solomon. There was a civil war and Jeroboam fought Rehoboam, Solomon's son and heir. Jeroboam became the first king of Israel's Northern Kingdom. Rehoboam was also king, but only of the southern part of David's kingdom, then called Judah. Rehoboam was the son of an Ammorite mother. So an Ephraimite sat on the northern throne and an Ammorite sat on the southern throne – of a divided kingdom. They tore at each other's throats while their enemies gathered on the borders to gobble up the pieces. Thank you, Solomon!

Eighteen years later, Rehoboam died and his son Abijah came to the throne of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. *“There was fighting between Abijah and Jeroboam.”* Abijah was in David's line, and God had promised that the throne of David would last forever. (I Kings 2:45; Isaiah 9:7; Jeremiah 17:25) You hear about it every Christmas time, usually from the prophet Isaiah. Abijah, then, was the proper king of all Israel – of God's Chosen People – a kingdom that was supposed to thrive and last perpetually by God's own promise and protection.

With new leadership, the boundaries always get tested. Nobody really wanted a divided kingdom. Why must Judah and Israel remain apart and be enemies? They certainly were not short of enemies all around. Why must brother fight against brother? In any case, somebody needed to reunite the kingdom. But how? *“There was fighting between Abijah and Jeroboam.”*

Jeroboam was the old and seasoned king of a much larger kingdom (nine tribes versus two tribes). Jeroboam represented the new: the break from David's line; the break from thinking God had a plan, or that there was some special destiny or purpose they were supposed to be following. Abijah was young and zealous and fervent, but he represented the traditional view.

So the armies lined up, with twice as many soldiers on Jeroboam's side, and Abijah made his appeal: “Come back to God and let's do it right – live God's way – so we can all be blessed.” He was talking to his fellow countrymen, appealing to them in the name of their common dream, their religion and traditions and hopes, and their Covenant with God. Meanwhile Jeroboam said nothing. With superior numbers, he simply began to surround Abijah's army while Abijah was making speeches about how it was supposed to be.

“You, Jeroboam, are not the rightful king, not in David’s line. Therefore you and all who follow you are opposing God and God’s purposes. Moreover, you cannot be God’s favored, or led by God as you have tried to claim, because you do not obey God. You support idolatry and do whatever will please the people. You only care from a human point of view. You are even content to abandon Jerusalem and the temple. You do not care about God’s plans or promises or why we were chosen to be God’s People in the first place. Our only hope is to reunite and be God’s People and live under God’s Covenant as our ancestors always intended.”

Whose side would you be on? Do you sympathize with Abijah, who speaks of old traditions and rules and expectations? Or do you side with Jeroboam, who favors more modern, enlightened, compassionate ways? Remember, it is the youngster king who represents the traditions of the past. It is the old veteran Jeroboam who represents the already-established thrust of new concepts and new expectations.

As I thought about it, I began to wonder if there were any people in our congregation who would end up siding with Abijah. Maybe it’s just me looking through my own prejudices, but I carry a lot of jaundice and rebelliousness against the stance Abijah represents. By tradition, I get uneasy with choice.

If I try to find myself in this ancient setting, surely I must be on Israel’s side, the Northern Kingdom – Jeroboam’s way of tolerance and compromise. Jeroboam, after all, was trying to be a reasonable, accommodating, rational, and enlightened king. There were lots of Canaanites left in Canaan. You could not just stamp out all the customs and rites and symbols and shrines that had become part of the land since long before Moses and his band arrived. Jeroboam tried to be at least a little broad-minded. He did not destroy the hill shrines or the people caught in the customs of Baalim worship. In some things he tried to live and let live, or at least let people decide for themselves how and where to worship. Solomon had been ruthless and greedy and had reduced the populace to ruin and slavery to maintain his own power and luxuries. Jeroboam was humane and open-minded and had the welfare of the people at heart.

And yet I imagine myself standing there, one of Jeroboam’s subjects, listening to Abijah. Even across all the distance and all the years and all the changes, he moves me. We have eight hundred thousand men and we are surrounding him. Abijah has only four hundred thousand men

and he either doesn't understand or doesn't care that when the battle begins, he and his soldiers will not have a chance. All the same, his words strike strange chords; they sift past the mind and lodge in the heart. In all the reasonable compromises, sensible efforts, logical changes, and broad-minded approaches of Jeroboam's reign, whatever happened to serving the Lord? What about *God's* purposes and promises? True, Solomon had turned out to be a nerd, but there was something incredible about the devotion, single-mindedness, and loyalty of David and Samuel and Joshua and Moses. Whatever their failures – whatever they did right or wrong – *nothing* shared God's place in their lives. Win, lose, or draw, it was absolute devotion. Jeroboam is a nice guy maybe, but that other thing is missing. Maybe, even, he is nice *because* it is missing. Nevertheless, young Abijah has a touch of that old devotion, and it sings strange things to the soul.

Don't you sometimes feel it too? When you realize that there is not one single act of devotion, not one single piece of behavior, not a trace of even one itty-bitty obligation that we as Christians feel strongly enough about to call it mandatory? Doesn't that sometimes make you want to leave Jeroboam and go over to Abijah? With no obligation, no covenant, no requirement of any kind, soon there is no identity, no devotion, no meaning. Power and vision drain away when nothing is required or expected. Who can repent if it is impossible to sin? Who can experience forgiveness when acceptance is automatic and predictable and brings no change?

But I got into my save-the-world phase: racial justice; the industrial chaplaincy; the farm workers; peace and justice; ecology; feed the hungry world; equal rights; inclusive language. How could the "church" be very important in comparison to such really important real-life issues? Until one summer I realized that the realest and most important of all the real-life issues and battles going on in this world is the one that goes on inside each one of us. Where do healing and growth and consecration happen? Where do we learn and talk about obedience to God instead of just running off with our own pet theories and half-baked dreams? The only place I know of in this world is a faith family – a *church* – people around us who want to walk the WAY as much as we do, and who mean to follow Jesus as sincerely as we do.

If some Abijah comes along today and says, "You liberal Christians may have some great ideas and big hearts, but you aren't going to make it because you don't care about Jesus anymore – you forgot about all the basic discipline and devotion that keep faith strong" – what would you say?

I think I would want to tell Jeroboam that it was wonderful for him to be so inclusive and understanding and all, but as for me, I'm going to move on over and join Abijah.

And I have not been very fair to Abijah yet, either. He was not mindlessly following the traditions of the past. He was not just letting tradition decide matters for him. That's what the unbelievers always accuse the believers of doing. Abijah was choosing the tradition afresh and on purpose, and in a time when this tradition was all but forgotten and neglected.

Not only that, but the *real* "newness" was Moses and the New Covenant with God. That was the rigorous new way to live. Jeroboam had gone back to the *old* ways, the ways before Moses: no real values, no purpose, not much required or expected. Abijah saw the Covenant – and the hope of a people dedicated to God – being destroyed for lack of conviction and faithful dedication. He wanted the people to return to the service of the Lord without excuse or equivocation. I'm not sure he cared whether it sounded reasonable. He had seen the rationalizations tear the nation and its religion into tatters. What he wanted was conviction and commitment.

Abijah had watched his own father stray further and further from the faith and its purpose, and he had watched Judah disintegrating because of it. He was heading back for the traditions and the disciplines and the specific obligations that turn faith into more than just a theory. Now his own life was on the line, and he and his four hundred thousand men were surrounded by eight hundred thousand men. You possibly wonder what happened ...

"The men of Judah turned to find that they were engaged front and rear. Then they cried to the Lord for help. The priests sounded their trumpets, and the men of Judah raised a shout, and when they did so, God put Jeroboam and all Israel to rout before Abijah and Judah. The Israelites fled before the men of Judah, and God delivered them into their power.... Judah prevailed because they relied on the Lord the God of their fathers." (II Chronicles 13:14-18) But then, God never was very good with numbers.