

Folly and Faith

1 Kings 12:1-15

7/22/2018

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We turn this morning to the book that is very riveting, 1 Kings. I don't know if you've spent any time in 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles. I must admit that on face value, many would consider it not a very riveting narrative. But we see here profoundly contemporary issues. But at the same time, we also see things that are also timeless. As we continue in this series of "by faith," looking at the life of faith through different perspectives and what it looks like to live out that faith, we look at it this morning. What does it look like to live out faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of folly? The folly of a culture that is falling apart, the folly of government. There is a lot to be seen here. And as we do so, we will seek to—if you will, we're going to look historically, first, and then we'll look at the lessons which are to be drawn from these—applications, rather, from these historical ideas, historical narrative, that it might make us stronger as a people, those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. So this morning, again, we look at faith and folly. 1 Kings 12:1-15.

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. And as soon as Jeroboam the son of Nebat heard of it (for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. And they sent and called him, and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you." He said to them, "Go away for three days, then come again to me." So the people went away.

Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people?" 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." But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him. And he said to them, "What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, 'Lighten the yoke that your father put on us'?" 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.'"

So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king said, "Come to me again the third day." And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." 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. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Lord, you call those who call on your name, those who would follow you, those whom you've redeemed, to walk in faithfulness even in the midst of folly. Lord, we pray you would make us wise. Make your people shrewd as they look at the world around us. As you call the people of Israel, so you call us, to learn the lessons of our forefathers. We ask you, O Lord, to call us to faithful humility, to walk in your ways. We ask that you would do this, that you would make your church a servant, that you would make your church a people who do not hold onto the gospel, but who declare it and walk in it. Make us that kind of people in the world. Make us a faithful people, even when it is amidst folly. Help us, we pray, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This is at the precipice of the nation of Israel no longer being one nation, but two. It would become a divided kingdom. Rehoboam, as he sits in the midst of this text, was 49 years old. Just my age. He would reign for 17 years. Now, he was related to Jeroboam, both sons of Solomon. And so now they're coming to a place where they find that the people of God, Israel, is in the midst of a decisive moment. Which way would it go? And what we will see in this passage, you'll see in the outline. First, the folly of ambition. But the ambition isn't just on the part of the leaders. It is also an ambition that was seen in the people. We will look at that together. Then the second point is all application: faith in the midst of folly. For there are lessons to be learned here. And my hope is that we can look at it together, recognizing that it will be—and I intend it to be—an ongoing conversation.

Because I want to be clear. The United States of America nor any nation can claim to be in the same place as Israel was. That was a unique relationship. God was the head of the nation. That is no longer the case. The Lord is the lord of all nations. And so there is not a direct line to be drawn from this to say, "Americans are the Israelites of today." That is not the point. But there are lessons to be learned as we see both the people, as well as we look at their leaders. And I believe application points for the church of Jesus Christ, regardless of what zip code or nation, or state, it finds itself. So let's look at this together: the folly of ambition.

So what we see in the midst of this passage is what we would say is the politics according to the world. And what we find here first, we find a situation where Rehoboam has two sets of advisors. The one, the old men. The other, the young men. Now, it gives us a caveat. It wasn't just young men. These were young men who grew up with Rehoboam. So in some sense, they were friends. They knew that he was going to be the next in line, the one who would ascend to the throne. But what we see here is that the old men give him the counsel that, in fact, he should seek to lead in a very different way than his father, Solomon. What he should do is seek to have a position of service. A position of service where he seeks to deal with the people in a way that his father had not. Solomon, as you know if you're familiar with biblical history at all, is that Solomon was the son of David. Solomon was a good and righteous king up until a point. At which point, he took on many concubines. He allowed for false worship. But more than that, to keep up his power and his reign and to feed it financially, he increased the taxes on the people. And they were greatly enraged.

And so now he has an opportunity to say, "What will my kingship be like?" He's presented with an opportunity. But I want to be clear that the people who come to him are not coming to him because they particularly love him. Throughout the biblical history of 1 Kings and, we learn, in Chronicles, is that the people were not necessarily coming to him going, "Boy, we can't wait to have you as a king." For they, too, were swept up in this ambition. In some sense, they wanted to know, could they perhaps get him to bend to their desires? So there's a war that is waging. And it is understood, in fact, because of the broader history. Israel at this—just before this moment, was a united country. But even under David and perhaps as a consequence of David's sin, a sword entered the Davidic kingship. It would rip his family apart

because of his sins, but also that would be reflected in the people—that even though David had a united kingdom, there were very old jealousies and animosities. Solomon tried to, like his father, keep that in check. But he did so even though, in name only, it was united. It was still a warring people with old jealousies and animosities.

And so what we see now here is that this is now a nation that is already on the verge of division. Which king and which part of the kingdom was going to rule? If it's his brother Jeroboam, it would be the northern kingdom. If it's Rehoboam, then it would be Judah, which included Jerusalem. And so what we have is we have a situation of the people wondering, "Who are we going to go with?" And one of those issues was the jealousies of the northern kingdom against the jealousies of the southern kingdom. Because the southern kingdom had Jerusalem, and that was the capitol. But it, too, was the site of many jealousies and animosities. Because were they going to worship the one true God, or were they going to worship Baal? It was a story of ups and downs, of faithfulness and faithlessness.

And so in this moment, the old men come to him and say, "We've got the best policy for you. Do not go the way of your father. In fact, turn it upside down." Their advice is, in essence, "Seek to be a kinder, more gentle leader." But then of course, the passage tells us he says, "Well, I'm not liking that very much. So I'm going to take also some advice—just come back to me in three days. I will take the advice of the younger leaders." And what do the younger leaders say? Now, it seems, though, that what he says is, "I'm going to whip you with scorpions." Actually what that meant was it was a certain kind of whip. It was a more vicious whip. It was a whip that had talons, if you will, on the end of it. So not only was he going to lay the hand of taxes and continue that policy—he would make sure that he kept them in check and under his thumb through even more severe punishment and violent oppression. And so what we see in the midst of this is politics according to the world.

But it is not just at the king level, which is what Samuel warned against. "If you do this, know this: that all kings and all rulers will begin to exhibit over time that the ends justify the means." If that means sending your children to war, I will do so. If it means taxing you to support my policies and agendas, I will do so. And so is the history of human government. Samuel warned against it, and now we see the consequences of the people of God desiring to be like every other nation. Now they get kings like every other nation. Some would follow the Lord. Some would not. And at this moment because of this decision, what would end up happening is Rehoboam would have to flee to Jerusalem with only two of the twelve tribes. The other ten went to the north and followed Jeroboam. Both Rehoboam and Jeroboam refused to worship the Lord only. And so would begin the long history of the divided kingdom of Israel.

And so one of the things we recognize is that if we want to solidify power according to the world, simply use the means that frankly the world says works. Now, it does for a time. But ultimately in the end, the Lord's Word tells us that only a small remnant from Judah would remain. Even Jerusalem would fall. And what happens is they go into exile. The people of God—the Lord allows them, because of their disobedience and their unwillingness to follow him, he allows them to go into exile, to fall under—even though they're his people, to fall under the oppression of foreign nations, Nebuchadnezzar being one of them in Babylon. And so, slowly but surely, Israel is snuffed out. And slowly but surely, Judah is snuffed out, even though the prophet said again and again and again, "Do not seek alliances with foreign kings and foreign gods. Turn to the Lord. He is gracious. He rescued us out of Egypt. Follow him." And they refused to do so. So it's the ambition of the people as well.

Because this didn't happen because the lowest rung of people decided to rebel against Rehoboam and Jeroboam, ultimately. It happened because all strata of society began to think about their own identity as a people. What do we want to be known as? We want to be a mighty people. We want to conquer. If that means drawing alliances with people who, frankly, don't worship our God? That's okay, too. This is the folly of ambition that would ultimately lead to the downfall of Jerusalem. And yet the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, "Though you are in exile, if you follow in my ways, if you seek the flourishing of the city where I plant you, if you have families, if you care for one another, if you seek to

love even those who I send you who may even be your enemies—if you follow in my ways, I will prosper you.”

One could say, in fact, that the lessons if you read 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles—one of the things you recognize is first, the Lord allows us to read this that we might learn, that the people of God might learn, the lessons of the mistakes of our forefathers. Number two, that God is ready to forgive. He is always calling his people to repentance. “If you repent and acknowledge your sin and follow my ways, I will be gracious to you.” And there will seasons of that. And then the next king would come along, and it would all be done away with. And the Lord would allow them to experience the consequences of their evil actions. But the third is the Lord does hold out hope for the people of God, even in the midst of such great folly.

How do we know? We know that the Lord gives his promise to David, that his throne would last forever. But they thought it would be through a king that they put there. But in fact, the ultimate King, the best David, is the Lord Jesus Christ. And the church of Jesus Christ that now looks back at the Old Testament, allowing both the Old Testament to speak into the New, and allowing the New Testament fulfillment of God’s promise to David to look back. And as we look back at the Old Testament, what do we learn? What we see is God is faithful to his redemptive purposes. But he takes seriously sinful rebellion to him and to worshipping him, and allows the people to experience the consequences of their folly as well as their kings. And yet he still puts a king on the throne: the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

But before we even can go there, the question is, what does faith look like in the midst of this folly? What does it look like? Well, the first thing you’ll see in your outline is humility’s wisdom. You see, what the older men were counseling Rehoboam was that if you seek to serve this people, they will follow you. If you hear what the Lord says—and Rehoboam knew this for sure. Just a few verses prior to our text, we read in chapter 11 verse 38, this is what the Lord speaks. He says:

“And if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you. And I will afflict the offspring of David because of this, but not forever.” Solomon sought therefore to kill Jeroboam. But Jeroboam arose and fled into Egypt.

So what we see is even at the moment that Solomon is receiving the promise of the Lord to follow in his ways, he’s worried about the power that his son is amassing. But what we recognize is the calling of this is the Lord’s message, “If you will walk in my ways, if you will acknowledge me, if you will come in repentance, if you will seek me with all of your heart, I will be with you.” So when they are counseling Rehoboam to do this, this is what they’re reminding him of. Don’t lord it over the people. Serve them.

Now, here’s the reality. The reality is even if, as many historians put together, even if Rehoboam had taken the advice of these older men, it would not have been a guarantee of solidifying his kingship. Because they, too, had their own ambitions. Were they going to follow Jeroboam or him? Who was going to bring them the greatest power in the world around them? There’s not a guarantee that it would have worked out for Jeroboam. But that’s the point. That’s humility’s wisdom. It’s not about establishing our own kingship, our own righteousness, but establishing His righteousness. So humility’s wisdom is, “I am not God. Whether I’m a king or I’m a peasant, I can’t see the Lord’s ways. All he calls me to do seems like complete folly to the world, but is truly wisdom’s humility.” And that is, if I take a humble space, it’s not on me whether my kingship lasts for four years or seventeen or forty. That’s up to the Lord. It’s not up to the Lord whether the people hear me or not. What matters is, where is my heart? And that’s not true just for the king—it’s also true for the people.

The history and the outcome of our decisions and of our ways, we cannot control. We can make a choice. Who will I follow? And the wisdom of the old men simply said: choose the way of service, choose the way of humility, turn to the Lord, follow in his ways—which is what the prophets had all said. So learning from the mistakes of our forefathers is recognizing that every single person that this text mentions simply wanted to be God. They wanted what they wanted, and not what the Lord wanted. People wanted a mighty nation. Kings wanted a mighty throne. That would ultimately end up being the most foolish thing they could do. And yet the Lord calls his people—this people and us—the church of the Lord Jesus Christ to humility’s wisdom. That even though following the Lord may seem foolish and ridiculous to the world around, that is not on us. That belongs to the Lord. Simply walk in my ways.

But secondly, love God and neighbor. This had been the counsel of God’s Word in the Ten Commandments and the judicial laws and even the ceremonial laws. Though these are ultimately fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, they are a reflection of God’s moral righteousness, his purposes, his perfect holiness, which he intends for his people to walk in. And as such, embedded within it is loving the Lord your God with all your soul, mind, and strength, but also to love your neighbor as yourself. Israel and Judah fell into great temptation, because they failed that reality. They ultimately worshipped themselves. They ultimately worshipped their own tribe. And they did not seek to love their enemies, nor did they seek the flourishing of the cities in which they were planted.

What does this mean for us? I’m grateful for my friend Reverend Scott Sauls, who also pastors a church which goes by the word “CPC” in Nashville. He wrote a book a number of years ago, *Jesus Outside the Lines*. And he quotes a particular person which I found helpful. It’s an essay called “The Top Ten Tips for Christian Evangelism (From an Atheist).” You can look it up. Or if you email me, I can make it available. But his name is Daniel Fincke, I believe, is the way you pronounce it. And Scott says this. He says: “It is written especially for Christians. Whether you agree with every piece of his advice or not, I hope that you will find it helpful. As for me, I find most of his advice to be, well, quite Christian.” Now, I’m not going to go through all ten. I’m just going to give you a couple.

First, he says, “When talking about religious and philosophical matters, ask more questions and do less preaching.” He says:

People just like to be heard and they like people who listen to them. And they will feel more trust in you the more that they open up to you. You have to overcome the temptation to make your attempts to persuade others all about how you feel and what you think. Your focus must be on what the person you’re persuading feels and thinks.

There’s wisdom in that. Another:

Don’t give unsolicited advice or judgments. Support people and wait for them to ask you for the input, if they want it. Ask if they want your advice before giving it. I think you have to have trust that a morally perfect God can save people without you acting in exploitative and manipulative ways.

That’s good. That’ll preach. Because notice what Jesus does. This is how Jesus interacts with others, even those who are very different than himself. In fact, oftentimes Jesus would say, “What are you asking me for? What do you seek from me?” He’s not seeking necessarily to try to exploit them. He wants to see, what are they wanting from him? Two more and I’m done.

Understand atheists and embrace the opportunity confrontational atheists afford you. Don’t ignore our rational concerns, interests, and preoccupations or you will be wasting your time. When you find one of us who is rather willing to have an argument with you, be grateful we are interested in talking to you about your faith. Rejoice!

And when we think about what it looks like to love God and neighbor, consider this final point, he says. At number ten, he simply says: “Love your enemies, not just your tribe.” And let me say, we are distanced from Israel by a long time. Long number of years. But I will say to you as your pastor, our culture is caught up in the folly that much of like what we see here in this text. Is it this ruler, or this ruler? Who’s your ruler? Is it this agenda, or that agenda? And what we begin to see is, day in, day out, across all political lines, we see people lining up, ready to tell us how we ought to think not only about their agenda and our own agenda, but what we think about other peoples’ agenda that may be very different from ours.

There is not a single media outlet that gets the ears and eyeballs of millions of Americans who will say, “Love God and love your neighbor, even if that neighbor may be an enemy. Love your enemy, not just your tribe.” Our country is caught up in the folly of accusation and recrimination. And I recognize comedians have their place, and my point is not about that. My point is about the seriousness. The serious news. And they’re all waging war against each other, and we all get lined up. Is it Trump, or never Trump? Is it the Supreme Court, or an appellate court? Is it this governorship or that one? And the church of Jesus Christ—I’m not suggesting this way. I’m suggesting that the church of Jesus Christ is far more caught up in that folly and the drawing of lines, that it scares me.

And I wonder, what would it look like for renewal? And I come again and again to passages like this. Renewal does not look like the country lining up after our agenda. What it looks like is the church of Jesus Christ beginning to say, “I will seek by God’s grace through the redemption of Jesus Christ to walk and love him and to love my neighbor as I love myself. I will seek to even love and respect my enemy, and not just my tribe. I will not allow the Christian faith and the gospel to be conflated by any political party or any political agenda. For when it is, it loses its power.”

Jesus Christ, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit are the respecter of no single nation in the world, period. It is a respecter of one thing: the church of Jesus Christ. It is the body of Christ. It is the body of Christ that the Lord seeks to put out into the world his mercy and grace, his truth and forgiveness. And the church of Jesus Christ is spread throughout the world under all kinds of democracies and oppressive regimes. But still the Lord says to his people, regardless of the folly of the nation or state which you are in, he says, “If you will walk in my ways, for I am the Lord your God, I will forgive you. I will redeem you.” Love God and neighbor.

Finally, faith in the midst of folly is not just seeing humility’s wisdom, not just remembering that we are called to love God and neighbor, even our enemies and not just our tribes—we worship a nevertheless God. A nevertheless God. We worship a God who nevertheless accomplishes his redemptive purposes. He gives hope through redeeming and loving a people, and he makes his own to bring about renewal. Let me repeat again. We worship a God who nevertheless accomplishes his redemptive purposes. He gives hope through redeeming and loving a people, his body, the church of Jesus Christ, wherever it may be found. And he seeks to bring about renewal through his people, through the message of the gospel through word and deed.

What we can say is despite the incredible folly of king after king, regardless of the folly and ambition of the people of God, the Lord would keep to himself a remnant through which he would bring about through the bloodline of David the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ. And he would die on the cross and be raised on the third day, and he would turn death into a servant. And he brings freedom and emancipation from sin and its consequences. And he brings about a renewal and a union with him that is beyond description, so that we can then turn. Instead of being in a holy huddle, we are called to turn to the world and be outwardly-faced. Because we worship the God who is nevertheless, we do not read the tea leaves of all the media about what is going to happen in this country or that country. It’s not that we can’t be interested in it. The point is, no country sets the fate of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. He will accomplish his purposes. He will bring about his redemptive plan, regardless. The question is, how can the people of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ, seek to not only worship the nevertheless God because

he gives redemption and grace—how can we then turn and live it out? Let me just remind you of three simple points.

First, during the time of the New Testament, it would be Christians who would lead the way and lead the movement for women's equality in culture. At the time, there were double standards in Rome with respect to gender. A woman was expected to be faithful to her husband, while a man could have multiple mistresses and wives. Unmarried and childless women were ostracized. If a woman's husband died, she had two years to find a new husband before the state would withdraw support and she would likely starve. Christians took up the cause of women, giving them prominent places of honor in the church, taking care of widows as if they were family, and insisting that men be faithful to their wives. And in spite of prevailing cultural values, a Christian man was expected to be either single or a one-woman man, the husband of one wife. The virtue of monogamous sexuality within marriage, a conservative value even today, was at play. But so was the progressive virtue of equality. Men could no longer treat women as inferior. This was not the result of the culture. This was the result of the gospel of Jesus Christ that recognized that men and women are created equal in his image.

Number two, at the time in which the gospel was being written and being preached, infanticide was incredibly at work and prominent in the city of Rome. There was no prevailing ethic of life, except that certain lives were expendable. Consider this excerpt from a letter from a husband to his wife while he was not able to come home:

Do not worry if when all the others return I remain in Alexandria. I beg and beseech of you to take care of the little child, and as soon as we receive wages I will send them to you. If—good luck to you!—you bear offspring, if it is a male, let it live; if it is a female, expose it. You told Aphrodisias, 'Do not forget me.' How can I forget you? I beg you therefore not to worry. [Oxyrhynchus papyrus 744. G]

Consider that. On the one hand, he said, "I may not be home. I wish you well in your pregnancy. I hope it's a boy. If it's not, done with it." The reality is this was all too common in the city of Rome. Christians, however, became known for taking up the cause of orphans, girls, children of other races or special needs—it didn't matter. By welcoming them into their families and raising them to adulthood, here we have the conservative virtue of protecting the unborn. Plus, dare we say it, the progressive virtue of championing female equality and social justice.

Finally, third, the poor in Rome were coldly viewed as useless eaters, a drain on society. But in Christian communities, the poor were treated with dignity and honor. There was a spirit of compassion and generosity among Christians which manifested in the sharing of wealth to narrow the income gap. But generosity was voluntary, not forced. I once heard someone say that though the early Christians were monogamous with their bodies, they were promiscuous with their wallets.

These are just some of the ways in which the church of Jesus Christ in its earliest days sought to take the gospel, to worship the nevertheless God, and not keep to itself but turn outward and say, "How can we walk with the Lord and serve the city in which we are in, wherever we find ourselves?" This is an opportunity even today. We have given to us the church of Jesus Christ the gospel, which says none of us arrive at it because we are wise or rational or insightful or smart. It has to be revealed. It is given. And what is demonstrated and given is that we are sinners in need of forgiveness before a holy and righteous God. But the God who is redemptive in his purposes brings about a King. Despite all the folly of man, he brings about a King who would ultimately serve and not just take a position of authority. His authority would be laying his life down, though it seemed like folly to the world. He received jeers and even abandoned by those closest to him. Jesus died for us.

If you are an atheist, I encourage you at least to think about these principles—that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in his name, he shall call them and

give them the name of son and daughter, redeeming them. And yet he calls them—all of us who call on his name—in the midst of folly, to walk in faithfulness. May the Lord give wisdom, humility, love, and grace to his church. May he enable CPC to consider: how can we serve this community and this region? How can we love widows and orphans? How can we care for the unborn? How can we assist and live out the grace which we have been given? How can we—even when it is so tempting and we're licking our chops to point the finger and mock at those who believe and act differently than we do—how by God's grace can we choose not to do that, but to love our enemies and not just our tribe? And how can we imagine that the Lord would build his church because we are so caught up in worshipping the nevertheless God and making him known through word and deed? May the Lord do this. May he begin with us and make us a people to walk in his ways. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your Word. We thank you for your grace to us. We ask, Father, that you would enable us to walk in humility and the wisdom of humility, that you would enable us to rejoice, that you are the Lord who has revealed your redemptive purposes to us and drawn us to yourself by grace. Lord, I then ask that you would enable us to be a people, though in the midst of folly, who walk in dependence and faith. Do this, we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.