

“The Lord Might Fulfill His Word”

An Introduction to the Minor Prophets (3)

Texts: 2 Chronicles: 9-29-10:15; Ephesians 4:1-6

There is nothing so tragic and devastating as a civil war—families are divided, there is often extreme cruelty and revenge as those closest to you become your enemies and know your weaknesses. There is often great destruction because your neighbor and former countrymen know what things you treasure the most. But a civil war among the people of God is especially tragic when that people (Israel) have been established as a nation by YHWH, who rescued them from their bondage in Egypt and made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, before leading them into the promised land, dividing it among the twelve tribes of Jacob. Israel became a great kingdom under David and Solomon with an empire stretching from the Euphrates River in the north to the river of Egypt in the south. YHWH granted them victory over their enemies. But David and Solomon were now dead. The rot of unbelief, resentment, and distrust had been simmering for generations and spread throughout the twelve tribes. This division ate away at national unity to the point there was none. After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam “*reigned in his place.*” But Rehoboam acted foolishly at the beginning of his reign and was immediately challenged by a rival, Jereboam I, who was exiled to Egypt by Solomon. As set out by Israel’s chronicler in chapters 10-12 of 2 Chronicles, we find a tragic tale of two kings, two kingdoms, and a terrible civil war.

We have begun a series on the Minor Prophets and we are doing some historical background and establishing some context for their varied ministries before we take up each of the prophets individually. The first three prophets we will consider (Amos, Jonah, Hosea) were sent by YHWH to Israel (the Northern Kingdom), which was established by Jeroboam I after most of ten of Israel’s twelve tribes separated from the Southern Kingdom of Judah in a bloody civil war about 930 B.C. In order to understand the ministry of these three prophets to Israel, as well as why YHWH gave them the particular message he did—a warning that the covenant curses were about to come upon Israel, unless his people repent—we need to know something about how and why the united nation of Israel under the rule of a Davidic king was tragically divided into two rival kingdoms.

There are several things we need to know about the course of redemptive history and the role God’s prophets play before we take up the individual books of the Minor Prophets (the Twelve as the Jews know them). First and foremost is that a prophet is called by God and then given YHWH’s words to speak to his people. Moses was the preeminent prophet in Israel’s history. In many ways he is the model for all those prophets who YHWH sends after him—the writing prophets, which include the “Major Prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel), and the “Minor Prophets” (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). This also includes the non-writing prophets, men who exercise prophetic gifts but who leave no canonical books behind (men like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha). We will encounter several additional non-writing prophets (Ahijah and Shemaiah) who speak God’s words to Israel’s kings.

As we saw from our way-too brief survey of the closing chapters of Deuteronomy (28-34), God established Israel as a nation by making a covenant with them at Mount Sinai—a covenant which was renewed on the plains of Moab before Israel entered the promised land after wandering for forty years in the wilderness of the Sinai desert. YHWH’s covenant with Israel is administered as part of his gracious

covenant, but the law (the Ten Commandments) and its pass/fail blessing/curse principle reflect God's original covenant of works made with Adam in Eden. God promises his blessing upon the condition of "faithful obedience," but threatens covenant curses whenever his people forsake him, fall into unbelief and sin, and finally turn to other gods—the idols of their pagan neighbors.

In the case of the Minor Prophets, their preaching takes the form of a covenant lawsuit issued in the heavenly court to be delivered by them as God's process-servers. Throughout their prophetic ministries they echo the covenant curses about which Moses informed the people at Sinai and announced again when the covenant was renewed before Israel entered the promised land. Those prophets sent to Israel appear at a time when Israel has separated itself from Judah, is rife with the worship of Baal (the Canaanite weather/fertility god), and whose kings seek to make alliances with pagan empires to the north—Syria and Assyria, something forbidden by their covenant with YHWH. How this deplorable situation came about is the focus of our sermon. Why did Israel fight a brutal and bloody civil war against Judah? What are the consequences of this for the people of God?

In our Old Testament lesson we encounter the two kings, Rehoboam and Jeroboam I, who figure prominently in this tragic story of the division of God's kingdom on earth (Israel). The account begins with an appeal to otherwise unknown prophetic writings. "*Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, from first to last, are they not written in the history of Nathan the prophet, and in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and in the visions of Iddo the seer concerning Jeroboam the son of Nebat?*"¹ Nathan was a court prophet in the days of David and Solomon. The author of the Acts of Solomon was probably the prophet Iddo, who might be the unnamed prophet mentioned in 1 Kings 13, and who was active during the reigns of Solomon and Rehoboam. His writings are long lost to us. Ahijah the Shilonite was the Levite prophet in the days of Solomon, who prophesied in 1 Kings 11:31-39 that the ten tribes of Israel would separate from Solomon's kingdom and form their own kingdom (Israel—the Northern Kingdom). Upon hearing this, Solomon sought to kill Jeroboam, but the latter fled to Egypt for safety. In 1 Kings 14, Ahijah also foretold the death of the Jeroboam's son, the fall of his dynasty, and the eventual captivity and exile of Israel to a place "beyond the Euphrates." This was a frightenly accurate prophecy of Israel's defeat at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 B.C., nearly 200 hundred years later.

The Chronicler recounts the death of Solomon in verses 30-31 of chapter 9. "*Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel forty years. And Solomon slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David his father, and Rehoboam his son reigned in his place.*" Israel's two greatest kings were now dead. The third king of the House of David did not fare as well as his father and grandfather. Rehoboam's reign is recounted in 1 Kings 12-14, and in 2 Chronicles 10-12. Rehoboam's coronation was held in the city of Shechem, the very place where Israel once renewed its covenant with YHWH in the days of Joshua, at what was probably the high-point in Israel's relationship with YHWH. It is all downhill from there, as evident in the period of the Judges which followed. The coronation of Rehoboam at Shechem exposed deep divisions among the ten tribes living in the north, who were not willing to accept Rehoboam as their king unless he made significant changes to his father's policies.

The critical issue was high taxes. It is always taxes. The Chronicler tells us in the opening words of chapter 10, "*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 in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. And they sent and called him. And Jeroboam and all*

¹ A parallel account also appears in 1 Kings 11:41-43.

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.'" We will turn to Jeroboam's story momentarily, but it is clear from the time of Rehoboam's ascension to the throne of Israel that the northern tribes were not at all happy. Solomon taxed the northern tribes excessively. A great empire comes with a high price tag. The ten tribes in the north demand tax cuts. They will not get them. In fact, Rehoboam treats the northern tribes with contempt, a move which backfires but is ordained by God.

New to the job, Rehoboam seeks counsel from two groups within Judah—the wise and older elders of Israel, and a group of younger men, Rehoboam's friends and compatriots. Beginning in verse 5, we read Rehoboam's response,

"Come to me again in three days.' 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 good to this people and please them and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever.' But [Rehoboam] 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 the 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.'"

The word translated "finger" is a greatly cleaned-up English translation. You'll have to look that one up on your own. If whips were cruel, the scorpion is symbolic of even greater coercive pain. When Jeroboam and his people came back three days later, they were given the news by Rehoboam—"I'm unveiling my new scorpion tax plan!" "Read my lips: Much higher taxes!" We read in verses 12-15,

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 them harshly; and forsaking the counsel of the old men, King Rehoboam spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to it. 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 God that the LORD might fulfill his word, which he spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

The tax burden would not be eased—a bad move by Rehoboam. But the Chronicler informs us that this was YHWH's will, so as to fulfill the word of judgment regarding the division of his people which he sent to northern tribes spoken through the mouth of the prophet Ahijah. Solomon's great kingdom will be divided. The Northern Kingdom will eventually be destroyed and its people carried "beyond the great river," (the Euphrates) as slaves of the Assyrians.

We read in 1 Kings 12:16, "*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." With this, the Northern tribes officially renounced their ties to the Davidic line of Israel's kings. They will go their own way, establish their own nation, and install their own ruling dynasty.

Rehoboam made one last ditch effort to restore the now divided kingdom. We learn in 1 Kings 12:17-19, *“But Rehoboam reigned over the people of Israel who lived in the cities of Judah. Then King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was taskmaster over the forced labor, and all Israel stoned him to death with stones. And King Rehoboam hurried to mount his chariot to flee to Jerusalem. So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.”* Furthermore, the passage goes on to inform us in verse 20, *“and when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. There was none that followed the house of David but the tribe of Judah only.”* The brutal execution of Adoram was their final answer. The ten tribes to the North renounced all ties to the Davidic line and placed Jeroboam on the throne of an entirely new kingdom, Israel.

From the moment the division occurred the threat of civil war hung in the air. Rehoboam quickly assembled an army of some 180,000 men, and prepared to attack Jeroboam and the northern tribes. But he was prevented from doing so when the prophet Shemaiah revealed to Rehoboam that the division between Judah and Israel was an act of YHWH’s judgment upon his disobedient people because of their idolatry—in both Israel and in Judah. But the people of God were not to fight against their countrymen. We are simply told that after Shemaiah spoke, *“they listened to the word of the LORD and went home again, according to the word of the LORD.”*

Lest we think Rehoboam was a ruler who was faithful to YHWH’s covenant, 1 Kings 12:22-24 tells us, *“and Judah did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and they provoked [YHWH] 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.”* The Chronicler tells us (2 Chronicles 12:1), that *“When the rule of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the law of the LORD, and all Israel with him.”* Sadly, Judah’s fall under God’s covenant curse was as inevitable as was Israel’s—we saw this in our series on Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel. But the Northern Kingdom must fall first.

With the united kingdom now divided, Rehoboam took action against the rebels just short of invasion. He encouraged those members of the northern tribes who wished to remain loyal the lineage of David to do so, and travel south for temple worship. Rehoboam built 15 fortified cities throughout the tribal lands of Judah and Benjamin in preparation for a conflict sure to come. The Levites and priests from the North flocked South, creating an exodus of refugees faithful to David and Solomon and the Jerusalem temple.

But while preparing for war with the ten tribes to the North, *“because they had been unfaithful to the LORD”* (2 Chronicles 12:2), God sent Shishak, an Egyptian Pharaoh, who invaded Judah from the South. Shishak ransacked Jerusalem, pillaged the Jerusalem temple, took some of Solomon’s gold as booty, and even managed to capture a number of Rehoboam’s fortified cities. The Chronicler tells us in 2 Chronicles 12:7 that when the people of Judah repented, YHWH granted them relief from Shishak’s armies. *“When the LORD saw that they humbled themselves, the word of the LORD came to Shemaiah: ‘They have humbled themselves. I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some deliverance, and my wrath shall not be poured out on Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak.’”*

Since the apple does not fall from the tree, we should not be surprised to learn that Rehoboam had eighteen wives, sixty concubines and fathered eighty-eight children. He ruled Judah for seventeen years, was buried in Jerusalem, and was succeeded by his son Abijah. More about Abijah shortly.

We cannot talk about a divided kingdom without considering Jeroboam I, and his role in establishing the

Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam was from the village of Zeredah in the tribal land of Ephraim (just to the north of Judah). He was one of Solomon's servants, but led a revolt against his king before exiled to Egypt (1 Kings 11:26-28). The biblical account gives us a picture of a man driven by personal ambition, not a concern to honor YHWH's covenant. We read of his motives in 1 Kings 12:26–28, *“And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.’ So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’”*

This description of Jeroboam's open rebellion against YHWH comes as a surprise, given the fact that he was initially introduced in 1 Kings 11:28 as a loyal and faithful servant of Solomon. *“The man Jeroboam was very able, and when Solomon saw that the young man was industrious he gave him charge over all the forced labor of the house of Joseph.”* The house of Joseph may be a reference to the ten tribes to the north of Jerusalem. But Jeroboam's true motives were soon exposed by the prophet Ahijah, who tore his garment into twelve pieces and then gave ten of the pieces to Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:20-31). The symbolism is obvious, especially when Ahijah told Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:37), *“you shall reign over all that your soul desires, and you shall be king over Israel.”* But the prophet warned Jeroboam that he must remain faithful to YHWH's covenant—which Jeroboam had no intention of doing. Solomon saw Jeroboam as a traitor and the latter fled to Egypt only to return to Shechem upon Solomon's death.

With the brutal death of Rehoboam's agent, Adoram, it became clear that the northern tribes would not submit to Judah, nor a Davidic king. Now Jeroboam's secret intentions gave way to public action. He supported the break with Rehoboam and Judah, even if that meant renouncing the rule of the House of David over Israel. This would give him the chance to establish his own rule over a rival kingdom. Watching Rehoboam build fifteen fortified cities, Jeroboam followed suit, establishing several fortified cities of his own (including one at Shechem). Although YHWH prevented Rehoboam's armies from invading the ten rebellious tribes, the prophets make clear that YHWH brought this division about as a form of covenant curse upon both Judah and Israel.

But if Jeroboam renounced the House of David, it also meant renouncing the role the Jerusalem temple played in the religious life of Israel—the temple stood in Jerusalem in Judah, not in the north. So, Jeroboam began to usher in a series of “religious reforms” which amount to calling the people to embrace the very same idolatry Israel demonstrated against YHWH in the Golden Calf incident of Exodus 34. He built “high places” of worship (ostensibly to worship YHWH), but which were copies of pagan worship sites. According to 1 Kings 12:31–32, Jeroboam, *“also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made.”* Jeroboam is making it up as he goes along.

The Chronicler recounts that Levites living in the ten Northern tribes flocked south to Jerusalem. If this was not bad enough, we read in 2 Chronicles 11:15, Jeroboam *“appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat idols and for the calves that he had made.”* Goat idols? Golden calves? High places? Non-Levite priests? Lets just say, the Northern Kingdom got off to a bad start. Jeroboam becomes a tragic figure much like king Saul, who was renounced by the prophet Samuel, just as Ahijah prophesied against Jehoboam (1 Samuel 15:27-28). Biblical history has a way of repeating itself.

While Jeroboam was consolidating the northern kingdoms, Rehoboam died. His son Abijah became king of Judah. Jeroboam's son who is struck dead is also named Abijah. With his father dead, the resentment between Judah and Israel intensifies, and the inevitable civil war broke out between the now divided people of God. The details are recounted in 2 Chronicles 13:2-12:

Now there was war between Abijah and Jeroboam. Abijah went out to battle, having an army of valiant men of war, 400,000 chosen men. And Jeroboam drew up his line of battle against him with 800,000 chosen mighty warriors. Then Abijah stood up on Mount Zemaraim that is in the hill country of Ephraim and said, "Hear me, O Jeroboam and all Israel! Ought you not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt? [a permanent covenant] Yet Jeroboam the son of Nebat, a servant of Solomon the son of David, rose up and rebelled against his lord, and certain worthless scoundrels gathered about him and defied Rehoboam the son of Solomon, when Rehoboam was young and irresolute and could not withstand them. "And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the LORD in the hand of the sons of David, because you are a great multitude and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam made you for gods. Have you not driven out the priests of the LORD, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made priests for yourselves like the peoples of other lands? Whoever comes for ordination with a young bull or seven rams becomes a priest of what are not gods. But as for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken him. We have priests ministering to the LORD who are sons of Aaron, and Levites for their service. They offer to the LORD every morning and every evening burnt offerings and incense of sweet spices, set out the showbread on the table of pure gold, and care for the golden lampstand that its lamps may burn every evening. For we keep the charge of the LORD our God, but you have forsaken him. Behold, God is with us at our head, and his priests with their battle trumpets to sound the call to battle against you. O sons of Israel, do not fight against the LORD, the God of your fathers, for you cannot succeed."

The outcome of this battle is reported in the simple sentence found in verse 18, "*thus the men of Israel were subdued at that time, and the men of Judah prevailed, because they relied on the LORD, the God of their fathers.*" The account goes on to reveal that 500,000 of Israel's men died in battle, and that victorious Judah and Abijah even occupied several of the cities where Jeroboam had established centers of pagan worship (Bethel and Ephron). Israel was weakened to the point that they were never again a threat to Judah, and would eventually and easily fall to the pagan kingdoms to their north.

Jeroboam's fate is exactly what Ahijah the prophet foretold. In the period which followed Israel's defeat at the hands of Judah, Jeroboam and his wife tried to deceive the prophet Ahijah into revealing the fate of Jeroboam's son. Would he rule over Israel, just as Rehoboam's son Abijah ruled over Judah? No, he would not. Jeroboam's son Abijah soon died, and the Chronicler tells us that shortly after, YHWH struck Jeroboam down, and he too died after ruling over Israel for 22 years (2 Chronicles 13:20). His legacy is recounted in 2 Kings 17:22-23, and it is not a good one. "*The people of Israel walked in all the sins that Jeroboam did. They did not depart from them, until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had spoken by all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day.*" Not the way a ruler of God's people ought to be remembered.

It is to this defeated, weakened, and unfaithful people that YHWH sends his prophets Elijah, Amos, Jonah, and Hosea. We will turn to Elijah's ministry next time. These prophets come with words of

warning to Israel—impending judgment at the hands of Israel’s enemies to the North, Syria and Assyria. The people of Israel have forsaken YHWH. The threatened covenant curses will fall upon them. These prophets give a final warning. They call Israel to renounce their false gods and false worship now found throughout the land. But they also promise that one day God will restore his people, return them to himself, and forgive them of their sins. But that day will not come until Assyria invades in 722 BC and conquers Israel, scattering the survivors of the ten tribes throughout the region.

What do we say by way of application? We see in these two kings, these two kingdoms, and this tragic civil war that God’s kingdom on earth points ahead to a great kingdom yet to come, a kingdom established by Jesus Christ through his obedience, suffering, death and resurrection. When Jesus, the promised Messiah, comes in the fullness of time, he will do what Israel failed to do. He will perfectly obey God’s covenant, and on the cross take the covenant curses upon himself for all those trust in him. Christ’s kingdom is not geopolitical and cannot be divided nor thwarted. It is a spiritual kingdom which comes to us through word and sacrament in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a kingdom which offers true and lasting unity for all those who trust the Savior. Its impact is well summed up for us by Paul in his exhortation to the Christians in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:1–6). *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* Christ’s kingdom has come so that the Lord might fulfill his word. Jesus is the final prophet, priest, and king. He is the true Israel and his body is one and it cannot be divided.