

1 Kings 12

Why good things go bad?

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Israel Rebels Against Rehoboam

12 Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had gone there to make him king. ² When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt. ³ So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: ⁴ "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you."

⁵ Rehoboam answered, "Go away for three days and then come back to me." So the people went away.

⁶ Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked.

⁷ They replied, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants."

⁸ But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. ⁹ He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us'?"

¹⁰ The young men who had grown up with him replied, "These people have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter.' Now tell them, 'My little finger is thicker

than my father's waist. ¹¹ My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.'"

¹² Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, "Come back to me in three days." ¹³ The king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, ¹⁴ he followed the advice of the young men and said, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions." ¹⁵ So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.

¹⁶ When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king:

"What share do we have in David,
what part in Jesse's son?

To your tents, Israel!

Look after your own house, David!"

So the Israelites went home. ¹⁷ But as for the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam still ruled over them.

¹⁸ King Rehoboam sent out Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labor, but all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam, however, managed to get into his chariot and escape to Jerusalem. ¹⁹ So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.

²⁰ When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David.

²¹ When Rehoboam arrived in Jerusalem, he mustered all Judah and the tribe of Benjamin—a hundred and eighty thousand able young

men—to go to war against Israel and to regain the kingdom for Rehoboam son of Solomon.

²² But this word of God came to Shemaiah the man of God: ²³ “Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah, to all Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people, ²⁴ ‘This is what the LORD says: Do not go up to fight against your brothers, the Israelites. Go home, every one of you, for this is my doing.’” So they obeyed the word of the LORD and went home again, as the LORD had ordered.

Philippians 2:6-11

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

We don't need to look too hard before we see good things going bad. Particularly on the world stage. We may have concerns around climate change, international relations, social policies and community issues. At one point these were good things. So, why have they become divisive, and gradually getting worse? Why do good things go bad?

Perhaps we might think that all we really need is the right political leader. If we can just get someone who can make decisions and not compromise, that will solve all our problems. Or, perhaps our idea of a political leader is someone who will just let people do what they want. Whatever will be will be!

In today's passage, we meet two kings. Both kings have their own idea of how to get good things. One is uncompromising and the other is more laid back and happy to let things run their course. Two very different kings with different approaches. Yet, they share the same destiny - failure! In both cases, good things go bad, and they get worse. Let's see how this works.

So far in 1 Kings, we've seen the Kingdom of Israel come to its peak. King Solomon has become incredibly wealthy. Unimaginably wealthy. The guy was able to sacrifice that many animals in the temple, no one could count them (8:5). Public works were springing up everywhere, not to mention the temple! No expense was spared. It was a rapid time of growth. Solomon's fame spread as far as 3,500km away to modern-day Spain (10:22), and he was a recognised and respected nation leader by all. Israel is on a good thing!

Then just as the nation was enjoying its golden age, we're told that Solomon's heart was not wholly devoted towards God and he turned away.

The thing is, Solomon's turning away from God had a ripple effect right through the rest of the history of ancient Israel. We see the first of the ripples in the next king of Israel, Rehoboam. When Rehoboam comes to power this good thing goes really bad, and we can see why.

Before Rehoboam became king, Solomon had put a man by the name of Jeroboam in charge of the public works, which were actually built by forcing some of the people into labour. Understandably, the people became disgruntled, and Jeroboam saw an opportunity to seize power from Solomon. Solomon found out about this, and tried to kill Jeroboam. Jeroboam alludes Solomon by escaping to Egypt - of all places! You know things are bad in Israel when people are escaping to their former captors!

When Solomon dies, his son Rehoboam becomes king. This is where things become confusing with Rehoboam and Jeroboam sounding so similar. So, from now on I'm just going to call them king R and king J. Hopefully this will be more clear.

When king R becomes king (12:1), king J sees an opportunity to take power in the north. This is when the good thing going bad gets a whole lot worse. King J returns from Egypt to home in the north (v. 2), and gathers a bunch of people around him. Some of whom are probably those disgruntled about the forced

labour (v. 3). Reminiscent of Moses before Pharaoh, he petitions king R to lighten the burden (v. 4). In return, they will gladly submit to his authority.

Now, king R knows that things are getting worse, but he isn't sure what to do (v. 5). Obviously, he doesn't want a rival king threatening his kingdom. His right to be concerned! So, he is given two pieces of advice. Despite God declaring that he will tear the kingdom from Solomon (11:10–13), there is a way out. The good thing going bad doesn't need to get worse. The first piece of advice is if king R were to lead in the proper way and serve the people, which would imply not putting them into forced labour, then the people would do what they said they would do and gladly serve him (v. 7).

This isn't such a crazy idea. Later on in 2 Kings we discover that there was some co-operation between the two kingdoms, and at one point, both kings were even related (8:25–29). However, for king R serving the people of the north was a scary prospect. It meant trusting that people will do the right thing, and there's no guarantees that they would. It was risky! How does king R know that would-be king J won't make a final lunge at power? All King R could see is a good thing gone bad and getting worse.

So, he is given a second piece of advice which he takes. This is where king R has a rush of blood to the head and acts out of pride. This piece of advice amounts to saying, "If you think my father was tough, wait till you get a load of me!" (1 Kings 12:10–11). Power. Control. Authority. Yet, ironically, no guarantees. This won't stop a good thing gone bad getting worse.

What king R thought would secure power for him and give him control over the situation actually loses him his power when the people of the north made king J their king. Ultimately, what lost king R the ten tribes wasn't king J - as much of a threat as he was. What made king R lose the ten tribes was his pride. Instead of trusting in God and honouring God in responding to the threat, he looked to honour himself by thinking he could control the situation by applying more force. By doing things his own way, he just made things worse. We're told, "So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day" (v. 19). The good thing gone bad just got a whole lot worse.

When king J starts ruling over the ten northern tribes of Israel, he discovers that there's a threat to his power as well. He is worried that if people go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship, they might go back to king R and slowly undermine his authority and eventually kill him. So, does king J respond any better? Well, he doesn't respond by making people's burdens heavier. He doesn't respond by saying that they can't go to Jerusalem. But he also takes a good thing gone bad and makes it worse.

He acts out of pride and according to his own wisdom by giving people what they want - made-to-order religion. He sets up two golden calves, and if you're thinking that this sounds familiar, you're right. The same thing happened at the foot of Mount Sinai just after God had rescued them from Egypt (Exo 32:1–6). What's so bad about that? What's so bad about worshiping the way people want?

Modified worship quickly becomes about what we want, not what God wants. When we focus on what we want, others start to get left behind. We read in Exodus, “And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” So, we may assume that the same thing is happening under king J’s rule. After all, king J appoints religious officials who have no clue about the Lord’s ways. Without proper instruction the vulnerable in the community are oppressed. The good thing gone bad will get worse. Later, we read how Jezebel, king Ahab’s foreign wife, arranges to have someone killed so that king Ahab can take his field (1 Kings 21:1–16). The dream of autonomy is going to turn into a dystopian nightmare.

Two kings with two different ideas of rule. But they both fail. What's the lesson here?

No matter what your political view is, if it involves leaders acting out of pride, good things will go bad and they will get worse. Take any political issue, and take any response to that issue. If the response is out of human pride, there's a good thing going bad and getting a lot worse. The solution to the political challenges we face today is not to have strong, uncompromising leaders. Nor is it to have leaders who will give people whatever they want. It’s leaders who take the first piece of advice that King R should have taken and serve the people. To put the needs of the people before their own ambitions.

This is what another king did for us - Jesus. This is how Jesus is described in the New Testament:

“though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:6–11)

When Jesus took action and spoke, it wasn't for his ambition or himself. Jesus never felt that his authority or rule was threatened by others. Listen to what Jesus tells Pilate, the most powerful political leader in the land:

“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” (John 19:11).

It's an astonishing statement. Jesus, with no army, no political movement, recognizes that Pilate would have no authority over him unless God had given it to him. Jesus never acted out of ambition. As we have heard from Philippians, Jesus only acted out of his obedience to God the Father by serving those who were least deserving - sinners like you and I. He served us by dying on that cross for us that we might have eternal life with him. For this reason, God raised him from the dead, and gave him authority over and above every other authority. And here's the best thing about it all: It's because of Jesus,

things gone bad can actually become good. It's actually in Jesus that our broken lives and good things gone bad can be redeemed for God's purposes and used to honour God.

So, it's worth reflecting how we respond when good things go bad on a more personal level. If we act out of pride and ambition, the good things that have gone bad will only get worse. Instead, we should look to honour Jesus who takes our good things gone bad and makes them glorious. This may mean laying aside our ambitions and recognizing the all-sovereign authority of God. It may also mean forgoing our pride, and looking to serve the benefit of others. This can be scary stuff! It might mean not having control over a situation. It may mean losing some respectability with the people around you. It may mean enduring a great cost. But this is what Jesus did for us. What better way to honour King Jesus by reflecting what Jesus did for us by doing the same for others?

Ultimately, it's going to be Jesus who resolve the challenges we face. Not our pride or ambition.