

## What's the Message – Lesson 59

Our study today begins a series of lessons from the divided kingdom of Israel.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray, Lord, that You would guide us and help us to realize in You alone do we have our strength. Help us to “walk in Your ways” all our life, and to be loyal and faithful disciples of Your Word. Amen.

Last time we showed how the events of the Children of Israel, from the time of Abraham through the time of the united kingdom, all tied together with the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 12, verses 1 through 4. Today our study begins a new chapter in the history of God's people, but our approach to this section of time will be somewhat different from before. Since our emphasis is not that of a history course per se, we will summarize greatly, and will extract only selected items so we can emphasize how the lessons to be learned relate to the major themes of the Bible.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings chapter 12, and in 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles chapter 11, we see how the revolt of the northern tribes and the kingship of Jeroboam set into motion a sequence of events that would brand the northern Ten Tribes as rebels against Yahweh forever. Jeroboam believed that the Temple, located in Jerusalem, would be a threat to his rule if the people continued to go there to offer sacrifices.

So he set up his own versions of the Temple, with golden idols in the shape of calves in each, building one at Bethel near his southern border with Judah, and the other at Dan in the northernmost part of his territory. Then he told the people that they had gone up to Jerusalem long enough, and from now on they would view his idols as their gods. He even removed the Levites from being priests and appointed his own priests to conduct sacrifices. Because of these acts, Jeroboam would henceforth be known as the man who caused Israel to sin.

In Judah, Rehoboam did no better. He continued in his foolish ways, and we are told “he forsook the law of the Lord”. There was war between these two kings from time to time throughout their reigns, and both men were ultimately punished by God for their disobedience. And for about 60 years

there was repetitious war between Israel in the north and Judah in the south . . . through the reigns of 6 kings in the north and 3 kings in the south . . . up until the reign of Ahab of Israel.

You may remember hearing this name before, and if I add the name of his wife, Jezebel, things might start to come into focus for you. Popular thought pictures Jezebel as an evil person, and her name is used still today to mark someone as being mean and evil. The classic story that paints the picture we have of Jezebel is given in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings chapter 21.

The story begins with King Ahab wanting the vineyard of Naboth, but Naboth refused to sell it because it was the inheritance of his fathers. So Ahab went to his house sullen and pouting. When Jezebel had determined the reason for Ahab's behavior, she told him to be cheerful, that she would get the vineyard for him. And so she did. She laid out a plan to have Naboth murdered, and then told Ahab to take the land he wanted, for Naboth was now dead.

And now we add one final member to this cast of characters – the prophet Elijah. It is a shame that Elijah is mostly known as the one who defeated the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel by successfully calling fire down from heaven to consume his offering – something the false priests could not do – and thereby proving to the populace that Yahweh was the only true God, and was the God of Israel, not tolerating false gods for His people to follow.

But Elijah did much more than that, and was a great pillar of strength for the Lord. Accounts of his life are given in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings chapter 17, through 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings chapter 2. We will only say here that Ahab was rebuked by Elijah for his role in the murder of Naboth. Elijah then prophesied that the penalty would be the death of Ahab and the death of Jezebel. Those last two events are given in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings chapter 22 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings chapter 9.

Teacher, I have tried to keep the history and the names of the many kings as brief as possible, and to focus on the behavior of the people. Once again we have some fascinating stories, but what does it all mean to us today? Teacher, what's the message for us?

There are a couple of points I want to emphasize here, and there will be more in the Study Aid that accompanies this lesson. First, in the rebellion against Rehoboam, the Ten Tribes of Israel traded one form of tyranny for another. They ran from the tyranny of Rehoboam, only to run into a worse slavery under Jeroboam – the slavery of bondage to a false god. Jeroboam feared that he would lose his power over the public if they continued to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. So he set up false gods and used the power of his office to lead the people into sin. This God could never forgive.

And so the north would struggle with strife throughout their existence, and there was no orderly succession of the sons of Jeroboam to the kingship, as would be the case in Judah with the House of David. Instead, there was a series of bloody *coups* to determine who would be the next king, and sometimes civil war ensued while the issue was being settled. It was a time of chaos, something that we have also been witnesses to. So it should be abundantly clear that a time without God as our Head, will be a time of chaos for us, too.

The second point I want to make is about the religious tolerance showed by Ahab to his wife. Jezebel was not just a follower of Baal, she was a fervent “evangelist” for it, and used the power of the head of state to force out or kill priests and Levites who still worshipped Yahweh and had not already fled to Judah. This was something never seen in all of Israel before. It was a totally new experience, and led Elijah to say to the Lord as he fled from the forces of Jezebel who were trying to catch and kill him, “I am the only one left” to worship you.

Are there people in our day who are trying to use the courts to obtain freedom “from” religion rather than freedom “of” religion? These people would try to use the power of the state to force Christians into a submission that is contrary to the Word of God. Do we take this seriously, or do we just go along and be tolerant? Is there a solid line that God has drawn? Yes there is; we call it the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods before Me.

Next time we will see more consequences that result from Jezebel and Baalism.