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The Surety of Sovereignty I Kings 12

Intro: In our last study, we looked at the sad end of Solomon's reign. His rule began with theological dedication and divine blessing ended in shameful infidelity and divine chastisement. Solomon started out following in the footsteps of his father David but towards the end of his life, his heart turned from the Lord to worship pagan, ungodly idols. In between the bookends of his reign, Solomon accomplished quite a bit. He was a man of great wisdom and purpose but after all he was able to do, he was still faced with the question of whether it was worth the effort. In [Eccl 2:18-19](#) he presents the problem very succinctly. "Who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?" That's a very astute question for anyone who is leaving behind a great legacy. Will that legacy be carried on after I am gone? Will it even survive the next generation? Solomon had no clue what would happen after he exited the stage, but we're about to find out.

The last verse of [ch11](#) informed us that Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam. There didn't seem to be any of the squabbling over the throne that we saw with David's passing. Apparently, Solomon wanted to spare the nation and his family the agony of a possible civil war and appointed Rehoboam as his successor. In fact, Rehoboam is the only son of Solomon's that we know by name. He's even the only one mentioned in the Book of II Chronicles. With 700 wives and 300 concubines, it's preposterous to think this was Solomon's only son but we only read of one son to carry on his father's name and this son was a fool! This goes to show that sin's a terrible way to build up a family.

Rehoboam wasn't a complete idiot. He occasionally makes a shrewd decision or two, enough to show that he did possess some of Solomon's DNA. He was a chip off the old block but just barely a chip because, for the most part, he was a foolish ruler. He possessed the capacity and had the opportunities to make intelligent decisions but his arrogance and hubris too often overrode rational thinking and plain 'ol common sense. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us. During his relatively short reign of 17 yrs, the way Rehoboam responds to situations reveals what kind of person he really was. His first act as king was to make a selfish decision that will

split that kingdom and then 4 yrs later he will turn from the Lord to worshipping idol. His reign could hardly be called successful.

1 – Solomon must have made it clear that Rehoboam was to be the next king but it was still necessary for the people of Israel to affirm the choice (recognize and ratify) by entering into a covenant with God and the new king. This had been done to each of the three previous kings: Saul, David and Solomon. This meeting was to be held in Shechem, a city with rich historical significance for Israel. Abraham had worshipped there; Jacob built an altar and purchased land there; Joseph was buried there. It was also the geographical center of the northern tribes. If Rehoboam picked this spot for the meeting, it was a shrewd choice. Situated 40 miles north of Jerusalem, within the inheritance of the tribe of Manasseh, this location would be pleasing to the people of the northern tribes.

I'd like to think Rehoboam had heard rumors of rumblings amongst the northern tribes and was trying to get ahead of it, but as we'll see, that's not too likely. He probably looked on this Shechem assembly as just a ceremonial formality. He apparently couldn't recognize a crisis when it was screaming in his face.

2-7 – Clearly, in the minds of the northern tribe representatives, this meeting was anything but a formality. They've been chaffing under the yoke of Solomon for some time now and they believed it was time for a change. So, they make their confirmation of Rehoboam's kingship contingent on him granting certain concession to them; namely, that he give them some relief from the "harsh" policies of his father. From their perspective, the tax burden that Solomon had placed upon them was too severe. If he would provide this relief they would, in turn, offer him their allegiance.

Now remember, God had warned Israel about this in **I Sam 8:10-19** when He spoke through Samuel to reveal to Israel just what a king will take from them. But, even after this gracious warning, the people still wanted a king. Now they knew what it was like to be ruled by a taking king and they don't seem to care for it much. They want relief and they want it now. Sadly, notice that there were no spiritual demands or requests made of Rehoboam but the elders of Israel. Apparently, the gross idolatry and apostasy of Solomon's later rule didn't bother them at all. Rehoboam seems to be taken aback by their demands for change and he asked for time to seek counsel.

“Come back in 3 days and you will have your answer.”

Rehoboam then goes on the equivalent of a Congressional fact-finding tour. You know, the kind where a gaggle of representatives and/or senators go on an expensive trip to some far off location disguised as an opportunity to discover truth but is actually just a vacation since they all already know how they are going to vote anyways. That’s basically what is going on here. Rehoboam first asks advice from his father’s counselors – the “old guard” as it were, those men who had stood before Solomon and had heard his wisdom and learned from his diplomacy. Their advice was both simple and logical: if you show a little restraint today, you’ll win the allegiance of these disgruntled subjects forever! Basically, they tell him that concessions will conquer complaints! Simple, logical but also not gonna happen!

8-15 – If you already know where Rehoboam’s head is then you should also know where his mouth is going to go. The text seems to imply that the advice from the old guard was never really considered by the new king. Look what he says when he gets together with all his frat buddies, “how should we answer this people...” We? Who’s in charge here? The inexperienced king gives away his thought process – which is no process at all. He wasn’t seeking counsel as much as he was shopping for advice; just keep looking around for advice until you find some that you like and go with that. His “we” shows who he really identifies with – a bunch of snot-nosed brats.

These young whippersnappers believed that nothing impresses like intimidation, nothing tames like threatening. “The beatings will continue until morale improves!” They even come up with a pithy one-liner for Rehoboam to use in his rejoinder (**10b**) and just in case the complainers were a little thick, they had a memorable illustration handy to clarify the new king’s intentions (**11**). There’s no grey area in that remark. In their view, this was not the time to give the proverbial inch – it was time to impose the royal yard stick. The young men’s advice was the opposite of that of the elder statesmen. They advise an adversarial approach, one that’d make Rehoboam more feared than Solomon was.

Two sets of advice, one was to woo the people, the other was to warn them – brace for impact. One would win allegiance the other would add fear to the already overburdened populace. One was logical and considerate; the other

was selfish and arrogant. One offered civil discourse, the other offered civil war. Rehoboam made his decision and the rest is history. Well, we don't find out the rest of Israel's history for a few more verses but, as soon as you hear the surly, heavy-handed response in [v13-14](#), you already know the glue has gone out of the kingdom. As one theologian put it, "With a dozen rash words, Rehoboam, the bungling dictator, opened the door for 400 yrs of strife, weakness and, eventually, the destruction of the entire nation" (Dilday). Talk about not being able to read a room!

Of course, it would be natural to want to moralize this passage. I'm sure many a sermon has been preached about the folly of refusing to listen to wiser, more experienced people (your "betters"). You can even glean your proof texts for this sermon from the book of Proverbs. How many Youth Groups have been brow-beaten with messages about the perils of peer pressure and such like? It may seem natural to draw these conclusions except for the fact that the text precludes this and even forbids it. We're not free to make just anything we want out of this story because the text itself explains to us why what happened in this scene, actually happened ([15](#)).

The focus here is on divine sovereignty, not human stupidity. This verse actually tells us the end God had in mind for this entire affair. It refers to the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite ([11:31-39](#)), namely, that 10 tribes would be given to Jeroboam. As such, the text is simply revealing the certainty of the word of God. What happened at Shechem that day happened because Rehoboam was selfish, arrogant or stupid. It happened because Yahweh wanted to make His previous word come to pass.

If that was the end, then what was the means God used to achieve that end? How did He bring it about? The writer calls it a turn of events, what we would call "circumstances." This was a twist from God Himself. The term points to the subtlety by which God's sovereign design goes into effect. God maneuvered this whole series of events but He didn't make Rehoboam take this unwise and sinful action. He just left Rehoboam alone and allowed him to make the critical errors his sinful heart wanted to make. There's nothing mechanical here. God's sovereignty didn't violate the king's free decision; instead, it came about by way of that royal freedom. God allowed the king to follow the desires of his own heart. The question is: was this grace or judgment?

Sovereignty seems so natural. Rehoboam's not satisfied with the moderating, conciliatory stance of his father's brain trust of old fogies but he gets jazzed over the sarcastic response his frat buddies come up with. He likes they way they think, the new ideas and new terminology they come up with. He likes the idea of assertive leadership, power rule – intimidation through ultimatum! That's the way they ought to go! That's what Rehoboam wants to do. Yet, it was really just a twist from Yahweh.

This spiritual principle revealed in v15 should be a great encouragement to God's people today. Is a divided kingdom a sad situation? Yes it is, but God had not only predicted it, He is orchestrating it in order to bring His word to pass. Are Rehoboam and his buddies arrogant, cocky and stupid? Perhaps, but v15 testifies that human hubris never catches God by surprise. In fact, He uses it! Big men (especially royal, arrogant ones) are still just little servants of God's sovereignty, His Word. Contrary to our current fears, human stupidity is not running amok in our world today. It is firmly on the leash of God's sovereignty, and a very short leash at that! This should boost our collective sanity.

16-20 – In case you thought Rehoboam's stupidity in the last section was just a momentary lapse, this section shows us that it wasn't just an episode – it was a pattern. Maybe stupidity is too strong a word; regardless, the king keeps getting it wrong. It was bad enough that he took sorry, selfish advice over sound, sensitive advice. Next, still suffering from royal density, he sends his top IRS official on a northern mission to show that the king means business! No one is going to push Rehoboam around! Well, for Adoram, let's just say the reception was "rocky" – fatally so. Then, after Rehoboam finally is able to gather his wits about him and high-tails it back to the safety of Judah, he assembles his troops to attack the northern tribes and militarily force them into submission. The prophet Shemaiah will show up in time to put the kabosh on that "bright" idea.

Even though human stupidity is under sovereignty, it is still sad. **V16-20** highlight the sadness. There are 4 references to David and his house in this text (**16a, 16b, 19, 20**). All these reference call to mind the covenant that God made with David where He assures David that he will always have descendents; his kingdom will last forever; his dynasty will never end (**II Sam 7**). There's nothing that can overthrow the Davidic covenant; nothing

that can falsify God's promise to David; nothing that can prevent the certain coming of the greater David (Messiah). What a great promise for David and his house – his descendents!

The good news is: Rehoboam can't nullify it; the bad news is he can besmirch it. He can't destroy the covenant but he can derail it. So, under Rehoboam's reign, instead of seeing the Davidic covenant exemplified, we see it eclipsed. Instead of seeing it modeled, we see it mangled. Rehoboam can't dissolve God's David Plan but he can certainly demean it and that's sad. By the same token, none of us can prevent God's kingdom from coming in power and great glory but we can tarnish its luster today by our foolishness and faithlessness, by our own brand of Christian arrogance and hubris – and that's also sad.

21-24 – Back in Jerusalem, Rehoboam is still in knee-jerk mode. He re-institutes the draft and musters the troops to – preserve the Union! He feels forced to use force (fight fire with fire). But, God's Word comes to him to put a stop to his foolish words and plans. Surprisingly, Rehoboam listens to the prophet and releases his army from service. This is the first wise decision he's made in this whole chapter. Again, God is at work. Before, Yahweh allowed the new king to follow the desires of his own heart and this was nothing but the judgment of God against his father's infidelity and his own obnoxious arrogance. Now, God intervenes with His word once again to prevent Rehoboam from further folly. This clearly has the fingerprints of God's grace all over it.

Yet, we must acknowledge that the new king and his people have gained some wisdom: they listened to the word of God. This is amazing! Now, you might think, "Well, duh, why wouldn't they?" but, as we make our way through I and II Kings, just keep a running score of the number of times the kings and/or people of Israel or Judah heed the word of the prophets and how many times they refuse to. One invariably outweighs the other and not in a good way. So, in light of that sad reality, this truly is an amazing little notice because here, they choose to submit. God informs them that the whole affair is His doing and both the king and the army give up and go home.

25-33 – Okay, so obviously Rehoboam did not have a monopoly on royal stupidity. Didn't God already tell Jeroboam that He was giving him these 10

tribes to rule and if he would only remain faithful to Yahweh, his descendents would also rule after him, just like David's would in Judah? But, if he wanted to have a dynasty like David, he had to have a heart like David's. He had to be a man after God's own heart. All Jeroboam had to do was trust God and remain faithful. Apparently, that was too tall of an order.

We'll look more closely at Jeroboam's bootlegged religion in our next study but, besides the obvious offense against God's grace as was shown to Jeroboam, this turn to idolatry had an even greater adverse affect on Israel than what is shown here. II Chron 11:13-16 tells us that when the idol worship was introduced into Jeroboam's kingdom, all of the priests and Levites who were faithful to Yahweh left the country. After the faithful religious leaders fled, all the rest of the faithful Israelites also back up and made a run for the southern border. Now, there were hardly any faithful Yahweh worshippers left in Israel. What do you think that is going to do to their society as a whole? It's only going to get worse

So, if human stupidity is still covered and corralled by divine sovereignty could we not assume that this also applies to human intelligence and capabilities? Some people are very successful and yet they often see it as simply a result of their own hard work, smart decision making and good effort. They often fail to realize that their success is also a twist from God, a turn of events that God has manufactured to place them in a position to bless and serve others for the advancement of His kingdom. Any time we are successful, the only thing we can say is, "this is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes!"

Still, there are plenty of people in God's kingdom today who have found themselves in a similar position as king Rehoboam. By their own arrogance or selfishness or "stupidity" they have landed themselves into a network of circumstances that they simply cannot undue. Their lives are riddled with gaping cracks that cannot be filled or with irreversible consequences that cannot be made right. What are they to do? How are they to move forward? Well, just like Rehoboam, all they can do at this point is listen to the Word of God and go on living in His kingdom as grace enables them to do so. At least that is what wisdom would do and we could all use a little more of the consequences that wisdom brings. 😊