

“The Cost of Power”

Reading: 1 Kings 12:1-15, 25-13:3

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As we’ve made this journey together through the story of God’s work with His beloved creation, we now have a large crowd of people standing before us. Each one is telling us their little part of God’s story. As we look at the whole crowd, we can begin to see the overall movement of God’s story in creation. We see that God has been painstakingly working to redeem His creation, to buy it back from the darkness that we pledged ourselves to when we rebelled against God in our pride. He’s done that through surprising means: He wants to build a nation of people devoted to Himself, set apart for a special relationship with Him, and through that blessed nation of people, He wants to eventually reclaim His entire creation. We’ve tried to keep that idea in front of us all along, that the whole crowd of God’s people is moving in a certain direction. Sometimes things are going well, and the crowd is moving forward, and there is hope, it seems, for a restored relationship between God and His creation. Other times some parts of the crowd do pointlessly brutal and chaotic things, and they persist in making choices that treat God like an enemy, and we wonder whether this rabble will make it to the next chapter.

So we keep an eye on the crowd as a whole to see the overall direction God is working toward, but at the same time we’ve been focusing in on some of the faces in the crowd to get a more intimate view of how God is working. We’ve got the big picture in mind, but we’ve also tried to emphasize that as much as God is working on the crowd as a whole, He also cares deeply about each individual in the crowd. The big story of redemption is made up of all of their little stories of redemption. So here in our crowd we have all of these seemingly insignificant folks who would never be remembered by history if God had not been present. Here we have Abraham, a fairly wealthy man, yes, but just a wandering herdsman trying to take care of his family. Here we have a handful of slaves known as Israel, the sort of people who are invisible when compared to their mighty Egyptian masters. We have Rahab, a prostitute in an enemy city, who helps further God’s plan and gets invited into the crowd. We have Ruth, a destitute, widowed, foreign woman whose generosity becomes a blessing to everyone in the crowd who comes after her. God delights in telling His grand story through these “little,” unexpected people.

But then there are times when the story is told through powerful people, the ones who stand out in the crowd with their crowns and thrones and armies, like the kings of Israel we have been reading about in recent weeks. There are several books of the Old Testament devoted to recording their names and deeds, and hopefully from time to time they honor God on a nationwide scale. These are the people history might remember even apart from God’s story. And of course God knows that as a leader goes, so the rest of the crowd often goes. If a leader is corrupt or depraved, that often trickles down to affect the other people. If a leader stands for justice and makes personally sacrificial choices, that can inspire others in the crowd to act likewise. Of course God will still be working through unexpected, forgotten people at the bottom and the edges of society, too, as we’ll see in the next few weeks when we hear the stories of the prophets, but God also wants to work from the top down. He wants to see kings who will be examples of godly leadership to their people.

And so our story shifts its focus to the kings. King David was a man after God’s own heart. Solomon ended poorly, but he had some good moments in there, too. It’s possible, in other words, to

wield great power in a way that honors God. But unfortunately we very quickly see some disappointing faces in our crowd, faces that are trying desperately to look mighty and powerful, but they're not facing in the direction God is trying to move them. We see some faces who use their power to lord it over others; they abuse their position and make stupid, self-centered decisions, and the result is that they could have been so much more.

The use of power is an extremely relevant subject for us today. Just about any conflict you come across, whether it's a war between nations or an argument between a parent and a child, will have at its root some sort of struggle for power. One person wants to exercise power over another, or one person feels powerless, or one person resents the other's power, and these squabbles over power play out in a thousand different disguises. Rarely do we stop and realize the role that power is playing in those conflicts and relationships. We have power over others in our families, in our church, in our jobs, in our communities; how do we use that power in a way that honors God? Some of the biggest debates our nation and our world are facing right now have within them that difficult question of how we as the people of God should use our power. Should we be politically active, and if so, how and to what extent? What sort of power should we try to use to contribute to the kingdom of God? We have some examples in our story — unfortunately, they're negative examples — that can guide us, because some of these kings grasped whatever power they could find and used it poorly.

Our story begins with Rehoboam, King Solomon's son who is the obvious choice to take the throne with Solomon dies. Rehoboam almost immediately inherits one of his father's problems: Solomon had built all of his great public works by using forced labor and heavy taxes, and the people have had enough. Their leaders come to Rehoboam at the beginning of his reign to get a sense of what sort of king he's going to be, and they ask him to lighten the burdens on the people. So Rehoboam consults with some wise old advisers as to what he should do, and they tell him to be a "servant" to the people. Build your power on their love for you, and that power will endure, they're telling him. But for whatever reason, Rehoboam goes and consults with some younger, more hotheaded friends of his, and their advice is to make it known that Rehoboam will be even harsher than Solomon ever was. "My little finger is thicker than my father's waist," they tell him to say. Build your power on force, fear, and coercion, in other words. Rehoboam chooses poorly, and the result is a civil war that causes all but a couple of tribes to side with Rehoboam's enemy. God's people are cut off from one another in a way that never really heals.

Rehoboam thinks of power like a huge, fire-breathing dragon, and I think if we're not careful we can think the same thing. Rehoboam thinks that if he can just conquer that dragon, put a saddle on its back, ride it where he wants it to go and have it breathe fire on what he wants destroyed, then he'll be a truly powerful man. It feels powerful to sit on that dragon's back and have everyone look up to you in fear, but what Rehoboam missed is that even if you convince the dragon to let you ride on its back, the dragon is still the one with all the power. The power isn't yours. Using power in a way that controls and inspires fear is a dangerous game to play; we're riding the back of a beast that is hardly tame. And as Rehoboam learned, forcing others to do what you want through fear and coercion usually, sooner or later, turns on you, and then you're in real trouble. As a preacher, I could try to terrorize you into the direction I wanted you to go by shouting a lot and pounding the pulpit and so on, and some of you would probably put up your hackles while others would shrink down and do what you're told, but that sort of leadership will ultimately backfire for everyone involved; the message I was preaching and our relationship together would be changed by the abuse.

We saw another misuse of power in the second king we read about today, King Jeroboam. Jeroboam is the king who led the successful rebellion against Rehoboam, and at the end of the civil war when the kingdom is split in two, Jeroboam finds himself in control of the larger kingdom with more people, more wealth, and more power than Rehoboam's kingdom to the south. The problem is that his citizens are worshippers of Yahweh, the Lord, and God had recently made the center of His worship in the temple in Jerusalem which was in Rehoboam's kingdom. Jeroboam is smart enough to realize that if he is trying to consolidate his power in the northern kingdom but his people keep going back to the southern kingdom a couple of times a year to worship God, he's giving his enemy a golden opportunity to erode Jeroboam's authority. His people's allegiance might slowly drift back toward Rehoboam.

We need to keep in mind that God had actually blessed Jeroboam and intended him to do great things, but Jeroboam starts feeling insecure and builds centers of worship in his own kingdom for his own people. They're state-sponsored altars, in other words; they're places of worship that are intended to serve the king's needs. You can probably guess right now how well God likes being used as a political endorsement. It's not just that Jeroboam was telling people to worship in places other than where God had commanded them to, it's also that Jeroboam is trying to use God as a prop for his own political ends. Not a good idea.

So while Rehoboam seems to think of power as this terrible beast that he can use to instill fear in others, even though that beast is going to turn on him one day, Jeroboam is using bluster and bluffing to claim authority that doesn't really belong to him. If I tried to impress you with my power as a pastor by claiming that the President of the United States was a close personal friend of mine, I'd be resting my power on his authority, but I'd be doing it without any justification. Even if you believed me at first, sooner or later the truth would be found out, and my authority would be ruined.

Last week we heard about the wisdom of King Solomon, and if you read your chapter of *The Story* you read some of the wise sayings that Solomon recorded for future generations. Many of his proverbs remind us of the ways in which our actions have consequences: hard work and integrity will tend to give you a better life than laziness and deceit. You have some control over your future, in other words, if you act in a wise way. But there are also times in Solomon's wisdom when he laments the reality that the world is not just. We do not always get the consequences we deserve. "Everything is meaningless," the book of Ecclesiastes cries. It's like chasing after the wind. We want to think we can control events and exercise power, but the reality is that we have very little power or control over the world around us. Real power rests with God, the one who created and continues to shape the entire world, and power is used best only on His terms.

Jesus had something to say on the topic once. His disciples were arguing over greatness, and Jesus explained to them how God wants the people in His family to handle themselves: "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them," He said, "and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." He points them to Himself, as one who came to give Himself for others.

The reality is that very few of us are likely to have the opportunity to abuse power like Rehoboam or Jeroboam did; none of us are going to become kings or queens. But in smaller ways every day — with your family, at the checkout counter, on the phone with customer support, in workplace politics, in working for change in our culture — we are faced with the question of how we will try to influence other people. Rehoboam and Jeroboam were ultimately enslaved by their abuses of power; they were caught in their self-serving attempts to coerce people and lie to people and mislead them for the sake of their own power. Not so with us. The people of God are called to something different.



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