

Looking at Leadership: Lessons from 1 and 2 Kings

Students Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

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The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

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The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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A *Looking at Leadership* Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

The sports names are legendary: Aaron and Ruth. Jordan and Barkley. Elway and Marino. Agassi and Williams. Nicholas and Sorenstam. Owens and Rudolph. Pelé, Gretzky, Jenner and Retton.

From the wide world of entertainment come names like Rogers and Hammerstein, Hitchcock and Coppola, Olivier and Hepburn, Spielberg, Elvis and Jackson.

Gates and Buffett mean business.

From the pages of social movements and governments leap the names of men and women who have changed the course of history: King, Chavez, Meier, Gandhi and Carter. Joining them are Bush, Blair, Arafat and Hussein.

In inimitable ways, a tiny woman called Teresa and a man with a booming voice named Graham introduced thousands to Christianity.

Leaders emerge in every sector of every culture. A number rise to the top because they are the best at what they do. Some take the reigns of leadership by cunning, treachery or force. Others seem to stumble into place and never quite figure out what they are supposed to do. A few claim that divine providence has placed them at the helm.

Whether they are respected or reviled, successes or disappointments, the lives of each display qualities we can either emulate or avoid. All offer lessons in the school of leadership.

In every arena, faithful and effective leaders share certain qualities, are subject to failure and face thorny experiences that test their mettle.

Some leaders are Christian. Are all Christians leaders?

A careful search of scripture does not reveal a specific command from Jesus to “be a leader.” It does, however, issue a call to a kind of revolutionary discipleship and commitment that regularly places followers of Christ squarely in the middle of situations that demand clear thinking, positive speaking and decisive action.

Sounds a lot like leadership, doesn't it?

Following Christ means that leadership opportunities regularly arise. Few Christians are leaders in every situation, all of the time. All are called to lead as a result of their obedience to Jesus' commands to actively engage with the world at every level. Those opportunities come at both expected and unexpected times.

Looking at leadership honestly means looking at the best and the worst. Scripture offers examples of both.

At its heart, leadership for the Christian means loving God, walking in God's ways, acknowledging God's blessing, confessing personal limitations and corporate failures, doing justice, seeking peace and asking God for the gift of discernment.

The pace of our culture demands that those in leadership gather and assess facts quickly and make decisions based on available knowledge. At best, that knowledge is incomplete, and human visual scope is limited. Though we say we value history, we ignore it more often than not.

While Christian leaders can arrive at moments of decision with certain wisdom in place by virtue of their relationship with God, they never know it all. Their wisdom grows as they face tough problems and make difficult choices. They learn to listen, test options and take suitable action. When leaders show good judgment, they gain the respect of those they lead.

Many popular and powerful leaders have discovered the hard way that morality matters. Even Christian leaders are tempted to make poor personal and communal choices. As a result, they face loss of respect, influence and the ability to lead.

Christian leaders are not immune to factors and influences that result in failure. Religious life in particular seems to promote a “Superman” and “Wonder Woman” phenomenon that expects Herculean strength and exacts a schedule with no reprieves.

Physical fatigue opens the door for all sorts of lapses: blurred judgment, inability to focus, divided loyalties, sagging commitment, spiritual unfaithfulness, even depression. Failure is never far behind.

It also lurks around the corner when leaders choose to listen only to those who tell them what they want to hear and ignore the voices of others with legitimate points and concerns.

Unfortunately, even some Christian leaders terribly abuse their positions. They know religious jargon well enough to cast their purely selfish motives in those terms, convincing many that they are genuine, sincere and speak for God.

Those who lead long enough will sooner or later run headlong into a number of complex experiences that require

patience and wisdom to navigate. Encountering them indicates not failure but longevity, faithfulness, wisdom, courage and respect.

Knowing when to take a risk is one of those experiences. Wise leaders facing this dilemma listen to advice from all kinds of people and weigh options carefully. They recognize that not all decisions are clear cut, and risky decisions in particular may mean traveling some unmarked and bumpy paths.

Long-term religious leaders regularly find themselves in the midst of wealthy and powerful people. Some even begin to feel that they too have worked hard and deserve some of the comforts money and material things can bring. The temptation to grasp some of that wealth for themselves is ever present.

Eventually, every leader must either step down or step aside. Wise leaders prepare carefully for the ones who will follow them and take steps to facilitate a smooth transition.

Some faithful Christian leaders follow others whose tenure was characterized by reckless and selfish disobedience. In spite of their consistent pursuit of righteousness, they cannot always stem the tide of destruction their predecessors set into motion. They and those they lead must sometimes live with the long-term consequences of earlier sin. Is their leadership any less effective? No. But history may regard them unkindly, or not at all.

As Christians, looking at leadership means looking at ourselves. What are our strengths? Where are our weaknesses? At what points are we most apt to stumble or snap? When should we be assertive? When do we need to back off? Will we be found faithful and consistent?

Since you likely both lead and follow, lessons from 1 and 2 Kings offer helpful examples that can enable you to do each more wisely, effectively and faithfully.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Faithful Leaders Discern the Lord's Wisdom

1 Kings 3:3-15

Theme: The wisdom of God is the foundation for Christian leadership.

Introduction

Fishhooks McCarthy was a well-known political leader in New York City a century ago. A devout churchman, he stopped at St. James Church in downtown Manhattan on his way to work every morning to say the same simple prayer.

“Oh Lord, give me health and strength. We'll steal the rest,” he reportedly prayed.

While we may chuckle at Fishhooks' blend of piety and politics, we must readily admit that religion has played a central role in American political leadership.

Richard Nixon associated himself closely with Billy Graham. Jimmy Carter made the term “born-again” a mainstream cultural concept, becoming the first modern president to put his personal faith in full public view. He cited Micah 6:8 in his inaugural address, went to church regularly and took his annotated Bible to Camp David for meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Menechem Begin. When Bill Clinton found his presidency imperiled, he turned to religious leaders for support, seeking counseling from three Christian leaders.

In an interview in *Ladies Home Journal*, George W. Bush said that he read the Bible every morning and drew strength from his faith. “Just living this life—when you realize that there is an Almighty God on whom you can rely—it provides a great comfort,” he said.

Like many Americans, our presidents have expressed their dependence on God and sought God's blessing. Some presidents have been very private about their faith. Others have been accused of parading their piety. Of course, discerning Christians listen to pious presidential statements with caution, hoping for integrity and watching for evidence of authentic faith in personal practices and public policies.

Beyond presidents, we have witnessed an upsurge in interest in the relationship between leadership and religion. *Jesus CEO*, a popular book by Laurie Beth Jones first published in 1995, illustrates this connection and looks at Jesus' values for leadership.

The Biblical Witness

Text without context is pretext. We cannot study the assigned text without examining the knotty context of succession, the struggle between King David's two sons. The very transfer and consolidation of political power introduces us to Solomon.

“King David was old and advanced in years; and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm,” reads 1 Kings 1:1. By the middle on the next chapter, we read, “Then David slept with his ancestors” (2:10).

Between these verses lies a dramatic story—rebellion, manipulation, jealousy, broken promises, revenge and assassinations. The story contains a frail king (David) and

a beautiful young woman (Abishag); the king's scheming son (Adonijah) and his fellow conspirators (Joab, the military commander, and Abiathar, the priest); Nathan, the prophet, who conspired with Bathsheba, the king's wife, for the succession of her son Solomon to the throne; and a host of other characters.

"When David's time to die drew near," he gave Solomon clear instructions. "Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes," David said (2:2b-3a).

David also told Solomon to pursue a scorched-earth politics, telling him to eliminate Joab, the general, and Shimei, a long-time critic. Solomon obeyed. Solomon also had his half-brother, Adonijah, assassinated, and banished the priest, Abiathar.

When Solomon had finished his internal political consolidation, he sought to secure his external boundaries. Solomon "made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter" (3:1a), despite the prohibition of marriages to foreigners (Deut 7:1-6).

1 Kings 3:3-4 Love Expressed

³Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

Solomon first nodded at Providence when he recognized that the Lord had placed him on the throne (2:24). However, he displayed little personal piety until his potential rivals were eliminated and a treaty with the mighty Egyptian

empire was sealed. Only then did the story turn toward the new king's spirituality. "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David" (v 3), an odd note considering his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter.

1 Kings 3:5-9 A Wise Request

⁵At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

Solomon went to a sacred high place called Gibeon, rather than staying to worship God in Jerusalem, where the ark was located.

At Gibeon, God took the initiative to speak to Solomon. God appeared in a dream (v 5) and said to Solomon, "Ask what I should give you" (v 6).

Solomon replied with thoughtful humility. He acknowledged that God had been faithful to his father David. Solomon honored his father's memory, recalling how David "walked

before you [God] in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you” (v 6).

Then Solomon admitted his political inexperience. He said, “I am only a little child” and “I do not know how to go out and come in” (v 7).

Considering the swiftness and brutality of his consolidation of power, Solomon’s lacks the ring of honest confession. It sounds almost like a note of understatement about his inexperience as a leader. From another vantage point, could Solomon’s words reflect his awareness that things could have been handled differently?

After declaring to God that he was responsible for “the people whom you have chosen, a great people” (v 8), Solomon asked for the most important quality of leadership. For the first time, Solomon showed a depth of moral character. He asked for the gift of discernment.

Earlier in the story, David had told Solomon that he already possessed wisdom. Instructing Solomon to eliminate Joab, David urged him to act wisely (2:6). In dealing with Shimei, David said to Solomon, “you are a wise man” (2:9).

Surely, the father was blessing the son with the affirmation that the son was wise. Yet Solomon did not assume the complete validity of this blessing. Perhaps he needed reaffirmation about his wisdom. Or maybe, he knew that wisdom was a divine gift which leaders need. At any rate, he replied to God’s request: “Give your servant ... an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil” (v 9).

1 Kings 3:10-14 **A Conditional Promise**

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.”

Solomon’s request “pleased the Lord” (v 10). Solomon had shown that he recognized that true wisdom comes from God. Additionally, Solomon had prioritized the governing responsibility to lead the nation towards an understanding of what was the right thing to do.

Having avoided a selfish request for long life and great wealth (v 11), Solomon found himself the recipient of divine favor. God said he would grant Solomon’s request for “a wise and discerning mind” (v 12). But that was not all. God said Solomon would receive unmatched riches and honor (v 13).

God’s promise was conditional, however. To experience God’s full blessing, Solomon would need to walk according to God’s way, keeping God’s statutes and commandments (v 14).

1 Kings 3:15 **Reverent Worship**

¹⁵Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant

of the Lord. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

When Solomon awoke from his dream (v 15), he returned to Jerusalem, where he again worshipped God. Solomon stood before the ark of the covenant, which symbolized the presence of God among the people. He “offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being,” signs of his reverence to God.

Leading and Following

What may we conclude about the early pages of Solomon’s kingship? What does his story teach us about leadership?

First, the transfer of royal power from David to Solomon is a painfully realistic story. It is akin to our own experiences as fallen human beings. Neither David nor Solomon carried himself as an ideal human being. Neither modeled the perfect man. Both were flawed.

Simply put, it is a morally messy story, one which certainly strips away the polish of perfection that surrounds the Solomon about whom we first learned in childhood Sunday school. Solomon came to power with blood on his hands and a marriage to an Egyptian woman.

Like Solomon, many of our leaders are morally flawed. While we need not excuse private and public moral failings, we must guard ourselves against two dangerous temptations.

One temptation is perfectionism. Some people project such a moral purity on their leaders that they slip into idolatry. They really worship their leaders. They trust them so much that they become blind. Their idolatry keeps them

from an honest assessment, from appraising critically the words and actions of their leaders.

The other temptation is defeatism. Defeatism arises from deep disappointments in leaders in whom people have invested high expectations. Sometimes disappointment can lead to resignation. We wonder what difference leaders make and why we ever trusted them. Consequently, we drop out, give up. In some cases, we refuse to trust any leader.

Remembering the real Solomon story should help us to think realistically about leaders.

Second, God does not give up on the human predicament. God keeps working through flawed leaders in pursuit of the divine agenda.

In the Solomon story, God takes the initiative. God went to Solomon at night when Solomon was asleep, when Solomon was not obsessed with building political power and ensuring the safety of his kingdom.

God talked to Solomon. God engaged him in a conversation—what is it you would like from me? God’s self-disclosure was not a crushing weight. God did not overwhelm Solomon with marching orders. Instead, God listened and allowed Solomon freedom. Solomon had the opportunity to choose. As such, Solomon worked with God—God worked with Solomon.

Third, wisdom is the basic quality of successful leadership.

Courage is an important leadership ingredient; but courage without wisdom may lead to brave folly. Integrity is an important leadership ingredient; but integrity without common

sense may lead to impractical Puritanism. Creativity is an important leadership ingredient; but creativity without discernment may lead to unworkable solutions. Wisdom is the most important quality of leadership.

Solomon showed wisdom when he asked for divine wisdom. Perhaps he recognized the limitations of his own human wisdom and the necessity for an even deeper wisdom available only from God.

At another level, when Solomon prioritized moral discernment, he made a commitment to seeking God's will, knowing the difference between good and evil. Solomon said that he would seek first God's agenda.

It is this quest that Christian leaders should seek, whether they are elected officials, corporate officers, academic administrators, classroom teachers or media decision-makers. Rather than seeking higher status, more office space, personal wealth, fame and fortune, Christian leadership should be about pursuing God's will, doing what is morally right.

Jesus told his followers, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt 6:33).

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Cowardice asks the question: Is it safe? Consensus asks the question: Is it popular? Conscience asks the question: Is it right?"

It is this question that discloses the real nature of discerning leaders.

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Faithful Leaders Practice the Gift of Wisdom

1 Kings 3:16-28

Theme: Faithful leaders exercise good judgment, influential decision-making and godly wisdom.

Introduction

One of my colleagues and close friends when I lived in Ethiopia was Dr. Debela Birri. I became aware immediately that everyone loved and respected Debela. Soon after I got to know him he was elected president of the seminary where we both taught.

Debela's status and reputation stood in some contrast to his demeanor. He was a quiet, unassuming man. Ethiopian culture highly regards positions and official titles, but Debela had spent several years in the United States doing graduate work and had experienced the informality of personal relationships characteristic of our culture. Soon after we met, he took me aside and asked if he could call me by my first name and if I would do the same for him. We began to develop our friendship and I understood why he was so beloved.

Another colleague told me a story about Debela that took place a few years before I met him. A student at the seminary was experiencing great personal difficulty. An orphan, he had been sent to the seminary when he finished high school because he and those who had raised him were unsure of the direction his life should take. He had become

confused and had decided to leave the seminary. The young man decided to go and talk with Debela, who was one of his teachers.

As the young man talked with him about his struggles, Debela was moved with compassion and began to weep. The young man suddenly stopped talking and stared at Debela. After a moment he said, "No one has ever wept for me before." He decided that he could not leave a place where someone cared so much about him, so he stayed and finished school and moved on to a productive career.

Debela's actions in this story might not be what we would normally describe as wisdom. Some people may have been able to construct a sound argument that would have convinced the young man to make a good decision. But because Debela had led such a faithful life and had cultivated a sense of wisdom beyond words, when a difficult situation came along his natural response provided exactly what the young man needed.

Practicing wisdom involves listening carefully and fully, testing the arguments and acting decisively.

The Biblical Witness

1 Kings 3 provides us with a startlingly mixed portrait of Solomon. This young man who had ruthlessly secured his place on the throne then made a marriage alliance with the king of Egypt. We are told that he loved the Lord and obeyed the law, but that he worshiped at high places. In 3:5, when God appeared to him in a dream and granted him one wish, we may feel we are being set up for one of those "genie" jokes.

Readers respond to the ensuing story in very different ways. To some, Solomon's request for wisdom was admi-

nable, and God's decision to grant him this and the wealth he did not ask for was a confirmation of the goodness of his request.

To others, his response was manipulative. Solomon gave the "good little boy" answer and acquired what he really wanted from a naïve parent. Those following this second reading might see in it a piece of royal ideology which justifies the wealth and power of the king. 1 Kings 3:15 leaves us wondering whether the whole episode was just part of Solomon's imagination.

It is in this literary context that the story of the two prostitutes and their infants suddenly lands.

1 Kings 3:16-22 A Strange Situation

¹⁶Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. ¹⁷The one woman said, "Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. ¹⁸Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. ¹⁹Then this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. ²⁰She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. ²¹When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne." ²²But the other woman said, "No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours." The first said, "No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine." So they argued before the king.

The purpose of this story in the Kings narrative is to demonstrate the wisdom bestowed upon Solomon in the previous text. Was this the only such story available? Why does the narrator not supply more illustrations to strengthen the case?

The easy familiarity this story has gained, even within popular Western culture, belies its strangeness. Are we supposed to wonder why a squabble between two prostitutes makes it all the way to the attention of the king? This part of Hebrew scripture contains other stories in which seemingly ordinary women gain an audience with the king (2 Sam 14:1-20 and 2 Kings 8:4-6), so this story does not stand alone within the biblical tradition.

We are not told the story before we hear an account of it from one of the two women. The other woman disagreed, but we do not hear her full account of the story. So, we are in the same position as the observers in the story, including Solomon. We do not know which woman was telling the truth.

The repetitive nature of 3:18 emphasizes the point that no witnesses were available, so Solomon's judgment must take a form not typical of court cases. The syntax of each woman's speech was somewhat odd and confused. This feature has often been taken as a sign of problems in the transmission of the text, but it is more likely a literary technique used to demonstrate the emotional disturbance of the speaker. If so, then both women were understandably upset.

The word used to describe them is the designation for common, not cultic, prostitutes. Before we judge these women harshly, we should remember three things. First, in at least two cases (Rahab in Josh 1-6 and Tamar in Gen

38) the Bible presents prostitutes as bold, courageous women. Both of these women also appear in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1.

Second, in Ancient Near Eastern culture, women could be forced into prostitution by a number of circumstances outside of their control, such as being orphaned, being raped or being widowed.

Finally, bearing children, especially sons, was a sign of divine blessing, so these two fruitful prostitutes are enigmatic figures.

1 Kings 3:23-27

An Even Stranger Response

²³Then the king said, "The one says, 'This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead'; while the other says, 'Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.'" ²⁴So the king said, "Bring me a sword," and they brought a sword before the king. ²⁵The king said, "Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other." ²⁶But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—"Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!" The other said, "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it." ²⁷Then the king responded: "Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother."

Solomon's response to the situation of the two women was so startling that it is difficult to tell whether it was impulsive or carefully reasoned. If both women had agreed to split the child, would he have ordered it done?

The end of the story contains some ambiguity. One of the women objected to dividing the child and was deemed the

mother, but we are not told whether this was the woman who spoke first or the one who spoke second at the beginning of the story. We do not know if the babies were really switched in the night or if this was a false accusation.

Whether such ambiguity in storytelling is deliberate or accidental is always difficult to say. If we choose to understand Solomon as the hero of the story, this ambiguity should at least give us pause in labeling a villain. Whichever woman was lying, remember that she was probably young, she was an outcast of her society and she had suffered the horrible loss of a child.

Wise leadership does not draw attention to itself by treating the people involved as mere props in the story. What if both women had objected to dividing the child? The wisest of actions still depends upon the responses of others if it is to be effective. Evaluating wisdom purely by its results is a dangerous game.

1 Kings 3:28

Is Wisdom a Matter of Perception?

²⁸All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.

It is interesting that Solomon's name is never used in this story. The character is always called "the king." While this story, in its context, is about Solomon, it keeps its distance from him at the same time.

It is difficult to determine what the narrator wants us to think. The people stood in awe of the king, but are we, as readers, supposed to agree with their assessment? Looking

back at the story, Solomon's actions in this case were mildly clever, but they are hardly awe-inspiring. At the beginning we noted the oddity of a king adjudicating a case such as this one. It now seems equally odd that his judgment would be broadcast throughout the land.

Solomon would go on to act in a very unwise manner that would result in the division of the kingdom of Israel immediately following his death. Nevertheless, the canon has enshrined him as a wise man by associating his name with the book of Proverbs. Tradition goes even further by linking him with the book of Ecclesiastes.

What we see in this story is that people will respond to what they perceive as wisdom. Leaders can make use of this response in ways that are either open and honest, or deceitful and manipulative. The wise action of Solomon in this story stands in stark contrast to much of the rest of his life. He settled a difficult matter and reunited a mother and child by applying his divine gifts in a creative manner. The benefits of his wisdom extended to those of least status in his kingdom.

Solomon was given the gift of wisdom by God, but it was up to him to continue to practice this gift faithfully. Did he cultivate the kind of life out of which wise decisions like this one would arise consistently, or did it end up being a one-time parlor trick?

Leaders grow in wisdom by continuing to practice it as they face knotty problems and make tough decisions. When leaders demonstrate good judgment and influential decision-making, they gain increased respect of followers.

Solomon asked for the gift of discernment, the ability to know right from wrong. As a result of his wisdom in this

case, the people of Israel realized that God had indeed given him the wisdom necessary to render just decisions.

Leading and Following

I teach at a Baptist college in Tennessee. In the spring of 2003 as the United States was debating and preparing for the invasion of Iraq, I heard many students talk about this decision and read what some of them wrote about it. A statement that I read and heard a number of times disturbed me greatly.

Some students said, “Going to war against Iraq must be the right thing to do because the President said he prayed about it.”

I was troubled by how many facile assumptions were involved in this assessment. They did not question whether this statement was genuine or whether it had been made to manipulate them. They did not wonder about whether prayer always forms our decisions or simply reinforces decisions we have already made. They did not think about what it meant that many other people said they too had prayed and had decided that the war was the wrong thing to do.

The lives of our national leaders are so shielded in a complex modern society that it may not be possible to weigh their decisions against the backdrop of their whole lives. For leaders on lesser levels, transparency must accompany wisdom. Wisdom that can be trusted matches its source, and faithful followers must be allowed to make that judgment, lest our claims to wisdom become manipulative attempts to grasp for power.

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Faithful Leaders Make Worship a Priority

1 Kings 5-6

Theme: Faithful leaders make both public and private worship a priority and live lives that reflect their devotion to God.

Introduction

When most people think of worship, they think of the particular church service they regularly attend. They usually associate worship with a particular place.

The same was true for the people of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God associated the presence of God in their midst with certain places that assumed powerful significance: Jacob encountered God in a dream at Bethel. Moses encountered God atop a mountain in Sinai. The twelve wandering tribes carried before them the ark of the covenant as the objective place where God resided, invisible but real, among them. The Tabernacle was a “tent of meeting,” a mobile sacred space where the people met God.

Unlike many of the pagan gods of the day, however, the Lord God was not confined to any one country or place. Ezekiel’s revolutionary vision of God arriving on a throne chariot which rested upon “wheels within wheels” (Ezek 1) meant to teach the Jewish Exiles, marooned in far-away Babylon, that the God of all creation was mobile yet majestic, powerful yet personal, and always present with them no matter where they found themselves.

As a leader, Solomon recognized that worship was crucial to God's people and committed himself and all the resources he could muster to the building of the Temple. In fact, the building of the Temple in itself represented an act of worship to him. His care and attention to details showed the value he placed on worship. The Temple in Jerusalem was to be God's own "permanent home" where the people could come to encounter God.

Later, Jesus would lead his followers to understand that authentic worship may occur either in public ritual or in private reflection, in loud praise or in silent prayer, in a crowded sanctuary or in personal solitude.

Still, most of us need a place—a physical yet sacred space—where we can go to devote ourselves to a focused encounter with the very presence of God. Jesus himself spent considerable time around the Temple in Jerusalem. He recognized and utilized its value as a center for the people of God to encounter the life-changing presence of God.

Worship of God is an essential trait of faithful leaders and of those who follow them.

The Biblical Witness

1 Kings 5:1-3

A Father's Constant Obstacles

²Solomon sent word to Hiram, saying, ³"You know that my father David could not build a house for the name of the LORD his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the LORD put them under the soles of his feet.

For a long time, during their years of wandering, the Israelites carried around the ark of the covenant. But King David envisioned a permanent dwelling, an appropriately beautiful and sacred temple, to house the presence of God in the midst of God's people. Since the people had settled more broadly into the land promised and now given to them by God, there should be built a house in which God might "settle," too.

But circumstances prevented David from realizing his dream to build a temple for God (v 3). He had made some big plans. He began the many arrangements well in advance of construction. He even wrote or collected many of the psalms that later would serve as the songs of worship in that Temple. But he did not live to see the Temple as the center for the people's worship of God.

Following Solomon's ascension to the throne, King Hiram of Tyre contacted Solomon, because he had "always been a friend" (v 1) of Solomon's father. In the first of a succession of well-planned moves, Solomon returned the contact, taking advantage of this opportunity to do business with Hiram.

1 Kings 5:4-18

A Son's Constant Purpose

⁴But now the LORD my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune. ⁵"So I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God, as the LORD said to my father David, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name.'"

Solomon received from David a legacy and a vision. In the wake of his father's hindrances, Solomon set about to

complete successfully the Temple's construction. Whereas David was preoccupied by constant military campaigns that took his time and other resources, Solomon ruled over an expanded and peaceful domain (1 Kings 4:20-21). Reminded of God's earlier promise to his father (2 Sam 7:12-13), Solomon dedicated himself to complete the project he understood to be God's will upon his life and reign.

His leadership during its planning and construction reflected careful organization, calculated steps and detailed processes. He recognized that the opportunity was right and took advantage of the presence of peace and the absence of "adversary" and "misfortune" (v 4). He clearly stated his goal: "I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God" (v 5). This was the first priority of his new kingship. To this day he is remembered for "Solomon's Temple," his most significant contribution to Israel's history.

As a good business leader, Solomon reaffirmed his father's treaties and friendship arrangements with old allies such as Hiram, king of Tyre. He made a proposal to Hiram, recognizing the Sidonians' superiority in cutting timber (v 7). Hiram in turn recognized Solomon's wisdom in this venture, calling him David's "wise son" (v 7).

As contract negotiations often go, Hiram and Solomon exchanged ideas before reaching a final agreement. Hiram set the terms for the contract, stating what he would do and what he expected Solomon to do in return (vv 8-9).

Solomon agreed to supply food to Hiram in exchange for the materials Hiram would ship for the Temple's construction. In spite of the tremendous quantity of food items which might have impacted his own nation's economy, Solomon lived up to the terms of the agreement with Hiram, giving him food "year by year" (v 11).

Under Solomon's leadership, everything necessary to get the job done, from specially imported raw materials (vv 7-12) to the conscripted labor of many workmen (vv 13-18), was set into place. The writer's description of the number of workers, their organization into shifts and their areas of specialty again reflects Solomon's careful attention to every detail of the project. He left nothing to chance.

And "the LORD gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him" (v 12).

1 Kings 6:1-10 **Attention to Detail**

²The house that King Solomon built for the LORD was sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. . . . ⁷The house was built with stone finished at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor ax nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple while it was being built.

Architectural precision and symmetrical design reflected the value and significance Solomon placed upon the Temple. This was to be God's house, a worthy dwelling place for the Creator of all beautiful things.

With a floor plan of three chambers (vestibule, nave, inner sanctuary) and a height of three stories (v 6), the structure was spacious yet detailed. Windows, rarely found in most construction of the day, were a "special order." Wooden beams were placed very strategically (v 6) and stones were finished off site to minimize the construction noise on the Temple mount itself (v 7).

1 Kings 6:11-13 **The Presence of God**

¹¹Now the word of the LORD came to Solomon, ¹²“Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father, David. ¹³I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.”

Noticeably injected in between elaborate descriptions of the Temple in verses 1-10 and 14-38 are verses 11-13, the most important notes about Solomon’s venture.

As contemporary readers far removed from the Temple’s construction, most of us are probably puzzled at the detail and space devoted to descriptions such as this one in 1 Kings 6, wondering what relevance it has to our lives. The details can be overwhelming. But it is exactly this often laborious description that causes verses 11-13 to stand out even more.

The “word of the LORD came to Solomon,” (v 11), followed by an all-important “if ... then” clause. The Temple, in all its grandeur and beauty, would do nothing to offer stability to Solomon’s kingdom or bring about God’s presence. Only the people’s obedience to God’s statutes, ordinances and commandments would do that.

The Temple was not to become an end in itself, but a means to the end of God’s people drawing closer to God and God’s will for them. It was significant only if and when it was connected to the people’s faithfulness and obedience to God. As their leader, Solomon played a critical role both in modeling this himself and in reminding the people of its importance. The same is true for us and our places of worship: our relationship with God and our obedience to God’s will give them meaning and validity.

1 Kings 6:14-38 **An Impressive Result**

¹⁵He lined the walls of the house on the inside with boards of cedar; from the floor of the house to the rafters of the ceiling, he covered them on the inside with wood; and he covered the floor of the house with boards of cypress. . . .

²¹Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold, then he drew chains of gold across, in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with gold.²²Next he overlaid the whole house with gold, in order that the whole house might be perfect; even the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold.

Both the building and its contents were absolutely exquisite, some might say extravagant. However, the obvious motivation was: “God deserves nothing less than the best which God’s people can provide.”

Walls paneled floor-to-ceiling in rich cedar wood (v 15), wall-to-wall flooring of cypress wood (v 15) and gold overlay or gold chains everywhere one looked (vv 21-22) all combined with repeated “carved engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers” (vv 28, 29, 32, 35). In the inner sanctuary (also called the holy of holies) two large winged cherubim stood over the ark of the covenant, guarding over the holiness of God (vv 23-28).

Impressive structural architecture and aesthetic interior appointments represented the priority which Solomon placed upon the entire building project. Completed after seven years of construction work (v 38), this most sacred building served as the central sanctuary for the worship of God by God’s people.

Leading and Following

So how does lofty temple worship make it all the way down into daily life? How do our soaring experiences of the sanctuary translate and transform our stresses and exasperations of the streets? Can our discoveries about God in worship make a difference when we are prone to worry, or wail, or even “wimp out” completely?

As both leaders and followers, why should worship be a priority in our lives?

My experience during the week of July 26-30, 1999, has forever answered the question for me. During one of several long days that week as I walked alone down one of the hallways of Duke University Medical Center, I glanced out of the corridor window. Not very far away I identified a memorable sight from my past—the towering Gothic spires and the rising roof line of Duke Chapel.

That beautiful cathedral was immediately familiar to me as I recalled being inside it several times as an adolescent. My mother took my two younger brothers and me there several times—all the way from Raleigh—to give us our annual spiritual and artistic prelude to Christmas. We would join capacity crowds to listen to the combined choruses and orchestra perform Handel’s “Messiah” (and I am absolutely certain, as my boyhood memories still record the experience, that we heard the absolutely longest version available!).

“Surely, surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.” I believe now that I first absorbed those words of Isaiah’s powerful promise during those several long Sunday afternoons in early winter that I spent in Duke Chapel.

So that July afternoon at the hospital, as I kept a vigil at the deathbed of my oldest son, I stood looking out of that corridor window and saw once again the house of God. I thought about walking over there for a time of prayer inside that peaceful, quiet sanctuary, but I sensed in that moment a rich and reassuring reality. I knew that I didn’t need to walk over to the Chapel to be near God, or for God to draw near to me. I already *knew* the God of that sacred place. I had spent many hours over the years with that same God in much more humble houses of worship.

I *knew* that God; and I knew that God was with me, right there in that hospital hallway. And so God and I together walked back toward the neurological intensive care unit.

Faithful leaders and followers make worship a priority because in doing so, we meet God, learn more about God and understand more about who God wants us to become. As we encounter God in worship, God changes us and equips us to handle crises, make decisions, weigh options and exercise wisdom. Worshiping God makes us better leaders and followers.

Certainly, the sanctuary of God remains a sacred place I visit often for meaningful worship encounters with God. But on that particular summer afternoon, I didn’t have to be inside of that *place*, as special as it is, in order to know God’s *presence* with me “in spirit and truth.”

Written by Don Garner, Professor of Religion, Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City, Tenn.

Faithful Leaders Call for High Moral Standards

1 Kings 8:22-26

Theme: Faithful leaders walk after God's way, repenting and seeking forgiveness when they sin.

Introduction

It began with an accusation, followed by a hasty denial. Then came the media inquiry. A tearful politician looked into the camera and talked about his marital indiscretion. Asking for forgiveness from the people, he gave assurance that the same request had already been made to wife and God.

Most people can give the key figure in this story a name and an identity. The circumstances are quite similar regardless of where you live. So many of these incidents have surfaced in recent years, it has almost become a cliché: the shattered leader, hat in hand, begging the people to forgive him.

It has always interested me that these tearful public confessions happen only after the smoking gun has been found. Politicians do not regularly confess their human failings on public occasions. They are much more likely to follow the self-aggrandizing example of the politician who at one point claimed to have “invented the internet.”

Accomplishments win elections, and many leaders want to claim any and all whether they are responsible or not. They project themselves as super-human servants who through dint of their own will are creating utopia on earth.

Juxtaposing this image of accomplishment against the tears of a broken person and shattered family reveals the superficial nature of politics and leadership. Admissions of weakness are the death knell of a public servant. They are fodder for opponents to start a raging fire of public anger designed to raise new leaders. Few leaders maintain their power and authority after public confession.

What if our leaders regularly, publicly admitted to their need for repentance and sought the forgiveness of both God and the people? What if rather than taking credit at public celebrations, they reminded themselves and us of their dependence rather than their power? Would they be better, more humane leaders, or would they be one-term office holders removed by the people for their weakness?

We encounter Solomon in 1 Kings 8 not on an occasion of failure but of accomplishment. How did the wisdom of Solomon shape his words and attitudes?

1 Kings 8:22 At The Altar

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven.

Chapter 8 of 1 Kings relates the dedication of the temple. The majestic structure completed, it was a time for leaders to make speeches and take bows. The chapter begins with the assembling of the people. Everyone who was anybody was there. The ark was moved into place. Solomon turned and blessed the people, and then offered his public prayer.

Solomon was the king. It is important to remember this as he stood with his back to the people at the altar of the Lord. Usually he stood facing the people. He made pronounce-

ments, issued orders, imposed binding decrees. But in this moment, in the presence of the people, he stood before the altar a subject himself. His hands reached up to heaven as he humbled himself before the visible reminder of God's presence. It was not a kingly moment, at least not in the way most potentates would judge it. By this act, Solomon demonstrated to the people the contingency of his power. He was not the ultimate power or authority; he was the subject of God.

It surprises us that this all occurred in the public eye. We expect Solomon, like the politicians of our day, to publicly project confidence and power, not to admit his weakness and dependence. Our customs demand that spin doctors take the actions of leaders and make them all seem imminently reasonable and wise. But there stood Solomon, bereft of political advisors, revealing his dependence on God.

We have incorrectly identified faith as a private matter in our time. If Solomon were to make such a display today, we would probably be uncomfortable with it. We come to worship carefully reserved and preened so that we do not show too much of ourselves. We are uncomfortable confessing our particular needs and sins in front of others. We fear that if others know our failures, they will use this information to their advantage.

But there stood King Solomon, and he began to pray.

1 Kings 8:23-24 Promises Kept

²³He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you

with all their heart, ²⁴the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand.

Solomon began his prayer with words about who God is. It was simultaneously and publicly a reminder of who Solomon was not. In many cultures of the Ancient Near East, people equated the king with the divine. People worshipped their own specific god or gods who controlled their territory and people. From the beginning, Solomon identified the God of Israel as unique and sovereign.

First, he said, there is no other God like the Lord. The deities of others who supposedly dwelt either in heaven above or walked the earth in the forms of kings were mere shadows and shades in comparison to the reality of Israel's God. What proves this supremacy is two-fold. First the God of Israel keeps promises. The Lord is not a capricious deity whose whims and moods drive action. Rather God is a faithful covenant partner who enters agreements with people that are then faithfully executed.

Divine dependability is married with the second uniqueness: love for those who serve God. Rulers do not have to be all that concerned with their followers. They have the power, after all, to impose their will. As long as the end result is good for the leader, it does not matter much what it costs the followers. But the God of Israel is concerned about those who are in God's service. God is not merely benign, but loves those who are God's servants.

Solomon then remembered before the people the covenant God had entered into with David, his father. The Davidic covenant was fulfilled this day before the people. It accomplished the promise reiterated in verse 20 that a son of

David would rise to the throne and would build the house of the Lord.

1 Kings 8:25-26 **Promise of the Future**

²⁵Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' ²⁶Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

Moving from the past to the present and future, Solomon invoked the continuing promise of God. As God has been faithful thus far in covenant obligation, Solomon trusted that God would continue to be.

The covenant was that there would always be a Davidic presence on the throne of Israel. But it was a two-sided covenant. God accepted responsibility for maintaining Israel, but this action was contingent to the members of the Davidic dynasty recognizing the primacy of the Lord. If they walked before God in humility, then God would raise them to greatness.

Solomon announced that this was an acceptable agreement in his eyes. He accepted his place before God and within the Davidic covenant. Those who followed Solomon (and even Solomon himself) would break this covenant and the Davidic dynasty would come to a close. Rather than fading into the mists of history, it would be renewed eternally in the work of Christ in the world.

But on this grand day of celebration, when he could take credit for all the accomplishments, Solomon's prayer

revealed his clear understanding that he served at the pleasure of the Lord.

Leading And Following

"Every leader is a follower," wrote Larry R. Donithorne. "No one commands an organization without restraints. For every leader no matter how 'supreme,' there is always a higher authority who must be answered. . . Their success depends in a large part on how well they have learned to follow."

King Solomon recognized that he was a follower. His rule depended on two pillars. The first was the promise of God that a son of David would remain on the throne. The second was his own covenant responsibility to live and lead in a way that pleased God.

Solomon's prayer concluded with seven paradigmatic examples of sins and failures that ensnare people. Each was followed by requests for mercy. There is no person who does not sin, he prayed in verse 46. As representative of the people and on his own behalf, he asked forgiveness.

Do we respect leaders who ask forgiveness? It is an important question in an age where we tend to expect perfection and leap at failure. John F. Kennedy was a great leader. In recent times, stories of his failures have leaked into the public eye. Would he have been able to lead in the modern world where the public appetite for scandal ensures that there are fewer and fewer private failures?

How do we look at those who lead us in religious contexts? Do we expect them to be without sin? Do their failures disqualify them from leadership? If leaders ask for public forgiveness, do we restore them or seek to remove them?

Solomon realized that to be a leader meant to be a follower first. Being a follower meant that he needed to confess his sins and repent. This was not a private moment, but a very public one. Are there public confessions and acts of repentance that we need to make in order to be better followers of Christ and, therefore, better leaders?

Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.

Failed Leaders Turn from God

1 Kings 11:1-13

Theme: Wise Christian leaders recognize the pitfalls of personal fatigue and take steps to guard against it.

Introduction

On a number of occasions I have joked with some of my retired friends that I am just like them. When they seem a little puzzled I say, “Well I get re-tired every day.” It’s a little (or a lot) corny, but contains a real element of truth.

As a baby boomer, I seem always to have lived my life in a rush. My generation was the first to find the world really open up in such an unimaginable way as far as options for how to spend one’s time.

Whatever options I have known have only increased for my children. Five years ago my family and I moved out of a major metropolitan area to a town we thought would lead us to a more calm and peaceful life. We literally moved to Mayberry (Mount Airy, NC, is the hometown of Andy Griffith). Even in Mount Airy it is hard to imagine how our lives could be any busier.

From the time we get up in the morning (around 6:15 A.M.) to the time my wife and I go to bed (no earlier than 11:30 P.M.), we are literally on the run. With jobs, school drop-offs and pick-ups, civic clubs, volunteer work, children’s activities (we have three children ages 10-16) and church activities, we are on the go all day long.

A calendar scheduler on our home computer allows us to list all our activities. But an interesting thing happens many times when we make new entries. We get a message that says “appointment conflict warning.” In other words, we are regularly overbooked.

Because of our schedule, some of the essential activities of running a household—grocery shopping, cleaning the house, yard work and repair and maintenance—have to occur during what earlier generations counted as down time before going to bed. We are more likely to move to the bedroom to go to bed straight from the laundry room, rather than from the couch.

Although it is not epidemic in a strict medical sense, we face a crisis in this country. Many Americans suffer from sleep deprivation and the resulting fatigue. Most sleep studies indicate that the optimal amount of sleep for a median age adult is 7 1/2 hours. Many adults average less than 6 1/2 hours of sleep. This means that during the course of one week, many of us lose one night of sleep our bodies need to function as God designed.

Those in leadership roles are most often already burning the candle at both ends. This constant being on the run results not only in physical fatigue, but also mental and spiritual fatigue. Fatigue is something that leaders must be careful to avoid, because when it comes, one’s leadership may not be in line with God’s guidance and will.

The Biblical Witness

1 Kings 10 reveals Solomon at the peak of his power. He and Israel were recognized among all the nations of the earth. This passage shows a quick turn to the downfall of King Solomon and the beginning of the downward slide of his father David’s kingdom.

1 Kings 11:1-2 Compromised Allegiance

¹King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Amonite, Edomite, Sidonia and Hittite women ²from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the Israelites, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods.”

At one time King Solomon abided by the instruction of God concerning foreign women as wives, at least as far as their influence on him. In his youth he was still dedicated to the commandments God had given and was evidently cautious about outside influences. With the visit of the Queen of Sheba (chapter 10), Solomon began down a road to ruin by letting down his guard.

1 Kings 11:3-6 A Heart Turned from God

³Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. ⁴For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David. ⁵For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. ⁶So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not completely follow the LORD, as his father David had done.

The significant description of Solomon in these verses is in verse 4: Solomon was old. Solomon’s earlier ability to resist the influence of his wives was now gone. In biblical witness, to be considered young or old is more than just a designation of age. A level of vitality is associated with a person’s age.

“Oldness” is often synonymous with tiredness and lack of energy.

This may be somewhat hard to grasp in our society. Levels of health care and the way we can control environment no longer make age an automatic determiner of an individual’s veracity. Certainly, Solomon in his position as king would be able to stave off the effects of aging longer than anyone else. But the day did come when Solomon was thought of as old. He was a king whose kingdom and its demands had made him tired, in body and soul.

It was during this time that Solomon began to slip in his commitment to God. Up until now, Solomon had been able to maintain a spiritual perspective on his life as king. Even though he did marry wives with foreign backgrounds, God continued to bless him, even as God did his father David in the middle of his own times of sin. But when he was old, Solomon was no longer able to control the influence of all these wives. In order to be built up in their sight, to be made to feel young again, Solomon gave in to the demands of his foreign wives to institute their religions in Israel. His physical condition affected his spiritual commitment.

1 Kings 11:7-8 **A Loss of Passion**

⁷Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. ⁸He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods.

Solomon was a nation builder. He had to be a persuasive personality to keep the kingdom united after his father David’s death. He also had to have a vision for the future and then set

about seeing it through. He was the leader of the nation and the one who set the agenda for the future.

Previous chapters of 1 Kings give evidence of his leadership in military and commercial might. Verse 6 indicates that Solomon “did not completely follow the LORD.” This is evidence of a real breakdown in Solomon’s spiritual life and his leadership skills, or at least the desire. Solomon worshipped other gods, even though it was the Lord who made him who was (10:1).

Earlier in his life Solomon would not think twice about seeing his will become the action of the nation. Instead, when he was old, Solomon’s passion for even his new religion has become so weak that he willingly let his wives worship whom-ever they chose. He had lost all vitality in spirit.

1 Kings 11:9-10 **Even After Two Appearances**

⁹Then the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, ¹⁰and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods, but he did not observe what the LORD commanded.

Up until this time, the scripture’s concern has been with Solomon breaking one of God’s commandments. Here we learn the real source of God’s anger. It is more basic than any specific sin Solomon committed. The turning from God comes, according to scripture, after God had appeared to Solomon on two occasions. While the actions we do may not be good for us and may prove to be disastrous for our lives, God’s anger comes not from what we do to ourselves but what we do in our relationship with God.

Solomon turned away from God after having been the beneficiary of God's personal attention. There was little doubt in Solomon's mind, even in his fatigue, that God was real, yet he forgot God. What comes to mind is the expression we use when we want to dismiss being thankful to someone for their current support: "Yes, but what have you done for me lately?"

Secure in his own leadership and ability and forgetting how he got there, Solomon forgot God.

1 Kings 11:11-13

Here Comes the Punishment...Later

¹¹Therefore the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. ¹²Yet for the sake of your father David I will not do it in your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. I will not, however, tear away the entire kingdom; I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."

The type of punishment is important to note. David and his son Solomon had devoted their kingships to establishing, strengthening and expanding the kingdom of Israel. It was here that all of their leadership was focused. The punishment that came with the collapse of that leadership was at the very place where the leadership was most exercised.

When we allow anything to overtake our leadership decisions being based on God's will and utilizing God's gifts correctly, it is that which was at one time most valuable to us which we lose first. Unless we stay true to God and the divine purposes, we build for naught.

In the Old Testament, punishment is usually meted out swiftly following an infraction. In this case God's mercy held off the punishment beyond Solomon's life. Then almost as an afterthought, the punishment was not quite as harsh as to destroy everything. God's mercy is the primary way God deals with us.

The biblical witness about Solomon continues after these verses to indicate a time of revolution in Solomon's kingdom. A reign begun full of promise turned into one of chaos and disappointment. Through time, Solomon failed to guard himself against the physical demands of leadership and as a result almost all that his leadership had accumulated disappeared. Only by the grace of God would anything remain.

Leading and Following

The lesson from this chapter in Solomon's life is the need for leaders to guard against fatigue. The biblical portrait indicates that when Solomon had been on the job for a long time, he began to slip in his commitment to some things that were initially very important to him. By indicating that Solomon was viewed as old, the primary portrait of Solomon was being shaped by his physical age, not his years as king.

A direct connection between Solomon's physical condition and his spiritual ability to serve as king appears to have existed. This is in line with the Hebraic understanding of the unity of mind, body and soul. Human beings are a unity; when changes occur in one part of who we are, we can expect the effects to show up in the other parts.

When my family and I moved to Mount Airy, we expected the pace of life to be better for us. My expectation as the pastor of the new church was that I would be able to do all things better because we would have an opportunity to get a clear

handle on our lives. I write this lesson with a heart monitor attached to my body because of recent episodes of sudden blackouts. A diagnosis has not been made yet, but the conventional wisdom is that I have simply burned the candle at both ends for too long or that my age is catching up with me. The jury is out as to whether my body has suffered permanent damage because of the fatigue and stress I have felt for some time.

By most accounts I have effectively led my church through change, while providing the pastoral care needed in the congregation. But along the way, I have not cared for myself physically as I should have. And now, a body that may not be able to cooperate anymore threatens my spiritual leadership. I had already noticed how some aspects of my ministry that used to create excitement for me had turned into drudgery. As with Solomon, some of those fundamental commitments changed or disappeared, as fatigue became the norm.

As the future unfolds, I pray that I may have the opportunity to do those things which will keep me in top physical shape: exercise, sleep, relax, take time away. The book for me, as it is for many others, is not completely written. Will I, while I am able, do those things which will keep me from becoming a failed leader? Solomon learned too late, and almost all of what he had been working for was taken from him. Only God's grace allowed any of it to be preserved.

If you are a leader, will you commit to take good care of yourself physically? If you are a follower, will you commit yourself to help your leader be accountable for her/his physical care?

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, NC.

Failed Leaders Ignore the People

1 Kings 12:1-15

Theme: Wise leaders listen to their people and seek the wisdom of those with broader experiences and diverse opinions.

Introduction

Jerry became the pastor of a small western resort community in the mountains of New Mexico. The church was his first full-time pastorate following his seminary training. Vocational ministry was Jerry's second career. He brought a wide range of experiences from business into his new calling. With a background in both agriculture and construction, Jerry had earned his stripes as a hard worker, a devoted husband and father and a persevering craftsman. But nothing could have prepared him for the competing interests within the small church he was about to lead.

He arrived under the pretense that the church had healed from a difficult transition with the previous pastor. Some of his contacts in Texas frequently vacationed in this resort community, and they assured him that they were ready for fresh leadership. After three weeks, Jerry discovered that three groups were vying for control of the church.

The property owners in the community were divided between the residents who lived in town and worked in the local businesses throughout the year and the vacationers who came to live in their summer homes in the mountains for six months each year. Both of these groups were members of the small church. A third group was similar to the second. They owned vacation homes but chose to keep

their membership at the home church and wanted to have influence in the decisions of their church they attended for half the year.

The situation erupted into a classic systemic failure that can only happen in church. The pastor became a referee among the three parties and was unable to build community among any of the three groups. Although a man of integrity and honesty, Jerry found his own character being questioned when the groups locked horns over long-standing problems. They struggled to address deeper issues such as the repair of worn buildings or their ministry in the community. Jerry's tenure with this church ended after four years of frustration.

Leadership can only be successful when the leaders and the followers navigate the tumultuous waters of influence. Often leaders fail because they abuse the power that comes from influence over groups of people or the followers attempt to circumvent the natural processes for guidance of the larger community. Even though people attempt to cover the issues, they invariably become exposed during a time of transition from one leader to another.

Just as leaders in our culture face these challenges, so Rehoboam confronted similar difficulties when his father Solomon died. Rehoboam's actions, as well as the competing interests of the influential groups within the nation of Israel, resulted in the collapse of the united kingdom.

The Biblical Witness

1 Kings 12:1-2 The Transition of Power

¹Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. ²When Jeroboam son of

Nebat heard of it (for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt.

1 Kings 11 closes with the death of Solomon, preparing the way for a power vacuum in the "united" kingdom of Israel. The reader already knows that unity is short lived, and some would argue that Solomon had already sown the seeds for the kingdom's demise. The opening verses of Chapter 12 describe some early warning signs.

Rehoboam was the designated heir to the throne, but his exiled half-brother had his own designs on authority. In an attempt to garner support from Jeroboam's likely supporters, Rehoboam moved his coronation ceremony into hostile territory, the northern religious site of Shechem. He knew that he would face detractors but understood that if he garnered support from this region, he should have no problem winning the hearts of all of the tribal groups.

1 Kings 12:3-5 First Power Play

³And they sent and called him; and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, ⁴"Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you." ⁵He said to them, "Go away for three days, then come again to me." So the people went away.

Verses 3-11 describe the actions of three competing constituencies. Each had its own plans for control of the kingdom. The people of the northern tribes of Israel, led by Jeroboam, speak first in verses 3-5. They complained about the heavy demands Solomon placed on them and

requested that Rehoboam lighten the load. Their complaints ironically fulfilled the predictions of the prophet Samuel. He had warned them of the very things that were the subject of the complaints. Solomon's bureaucratic administration required the people to pay taxes, send their sons to fight wars and demanded loyalties to the state above family and God.

The people saw an opportunity in the younger Rehoboam to rectify the problem. As an insurance policy against Rehoboam, they recruited his relative Jeroboam to be their backup plan. Rehoboam wisely sent them away for a few days so that he could mull over his decision. Their request, however, was misguided. As commentator Russell Dilday noted, their complaints centered exclusively on their physical and material needs but seemed to care little about the spiritual vacuum that was left during the latter years of Solomon's reign.

1 Kings 12:6-7 Second Power Play

⁶Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the older men who had attended his father Solomon while he was still alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people?" ⁷They answered him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever."

The elders or "veterans," as the Hebrew text can be rendered, represent the second competing interest. Some commentators state that the elders had pure motives by suggesting that Rehoboam serve the people. In light of the overarching tribal issues and competing interests of power at the time, other commentators have suggested that the

elders were asking Rehoboam to feign service to the people in hopes of manipulating them.

When read silently, verse seven sounds like a normal and noble request: "Be a servant." If one reads the verse aloud with an appropriate tone of sarcasm, a person can see how the elders might have approached the new king. They hoped to mold him into a king of their own making, someone who could feign service to the people and gain their respect. Like his father, he would clamp down on the people after he eliminated his enemies. The elders/veterans would then maintain their control over the people as they had done under the previous administration. They were probably the wealthy landowners, farmers and businessmen who were the beneficiaries of Solomon's economic policies. It only makes sense that they would want this sort of system to continue. They knew that in order to continue to maintain their power, they would need to keep the people in line. False humility and flattery could go a long way.

1 Kings 12:8-11 Third Power Play

⁸But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted with the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him. ⁹He 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'?" ¹⁰The young men who had grown up with him said to him, "Thus you should say to this people who spoke to you, "Your father made our yoke heavy, but you must lighten it for us'; thus you should say to them, "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. ¹¹Now, 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.'"

Rehoboam's friends represent the third competing interest. These young men or "newcomers," as the context suggests, would have not been young by ancient standards. They were probably in their late 30s or early 40s yet had not risen to power. They were viewed as newcomers to the Israelite political system and were looking to seize upon their first opportunity in a transition of power.

Unlike some of their elders, they had never known a day of hardship in the kingdom. Their childhood was likely filled with luxury and privilege. They felt that they were entitled to certain rights, and Rehoboam represented an opportunity for their generation to be in control. The old guard needed to pass the torch, and they were ready to receive it. They grew up around Rehoboam and likely had many discussions with him that centered around the topic, "When I become king, I will . . ." Or "I'll never do it this way if I ever get to be in power . . ." They knew how to play to Rehoboam's ego better than any other group.

We can subtly see Rehoboam's sympathies toward this group in a slight grammatical shift in verse nine. Instead of asking what *you* think, he asked what *we* should do.

1 Kings 12:12-15 **The Decision**

¹²So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had said, "Come to me again the third day."¹³The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him¹⁴and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions."¹⁵So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought

about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

Rehoboam decided to go with the group to whom he was most loyal, his own buddies. Unable to use the three days' waiting period to size up the situation objectively, he gave in to the struggles for power and added fuel to a smoldering fire. He did just as the prophet Ahijah had predicted and became the king to oversee the fall of the united Israelite monarchy.

Rehoboam, and the groups who competed for his favor, neglected to consult the one in control of these affairs. Absent from these discussions was any appeal to the almighty God for help in choosing a leader, knowing how to discern right decisions or knowing what to expect from new leaders when they emerged.

With their safety net standing at the ready, the Israelite tribes naturally rejected Rehoboam's decision and turned to Jeroboam. Rehoboam returned to his home region of Judah (v 18) and mustered an army that he never used against the tribes of the north. This time he wisely listened to the Lord and stayed put (vs. 24).

Leading and Following

The problems with the competing interests in ancient Israel manifest themselves today. Leaders often choose authoritarianism over authenticity. They seek to listen to the people in hopes of assuaging others without primarily listening to God to seek divine wisdom. As commentator Simon Devries stated, "How much easier it is to break up what belongs together than it is to restore what is broken."

Transitions in power are much like passing a baton in a relay race. The relay teams that win are often not the swiftest but the ones who have learned to negotiate and properly execute the exchange. It requires teamwork, communication, humility and sacrifice in order for the team to succeed.

Nations, churches, businesses and families deal with competing interests. In the transition of power, how people listen to God, communicate with one another and handle the influence they have on one another can affect the long-term health of the community. Organizations will naturally subdivide into like-minded groups. Successful leaders and followers know their roles and listen to God who brought them together.

Some of the problems manifest themselves on a global scale. The fall of communism brought about a number of unexpected political difficulties as a result of the competing interests of local tribal and ethnic groups who had been squelched under the oppressive rule of the state.

Churches deal with these competing interests in staff transitions. Groups form around worship styles, Bible study groups, family groups and denominational opinions that seek to gain a voice and have influence over the new staff member. Invariably, the group that was suppressed during the previous administration seeks a stronger voice in the new. Generational tensions emerge as a more experienced group tries to pass the torch while a less-skilled group lacks the desire or training to carry the leadership load.

Families deal with similar struggles. When a matriarch dies or a couple divorces, families deal with the issues of mortality, inheritance, meaning and purpose at the same time. The choices of higher education, career and values play into the transitions at each stage in life.

Each situation calls for leaders and followers who are in tune with God's designs. The Lord sees the transitions before we reach them and provides a living presence to handle each person's struggles with power and influence. Service cannot be used as a tool to manipulate people into the real plans of a leader.

Under the guise of serving and fulfilling the people's immediate wants, the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus' response indicates that service alone cannot be the only determining factor in a leader's decision. The attitude of service must permeate every decision and outcome on both leader's and followers' parts, but the basis for every decision is its relationship to the word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Followers and leaders work together and mold their expectations for the good of the group. Followers expect leaders to be responsive to their interests and not merely listen in order to bolster their own interests. Leaders who put the groups' interests above their own expect followers to do the same and assist the leader in building consensus for the good of the community.

Kyle Matthews penned the lyrics to a song that confesses the tenuous nature of power:

“Lord, when I use power, it's such a coward's way
Of giving up on love to meet my needs my way.
So show me love's power comes to me in showers
When I give my power away.”

Written by Bill Shiell, senior pastor, Southland Baptist Church, San Angelo, Texas

Failed Leaders Create False Gods

1 Kings 12:25-33

Theme: Wise leaders resist the temptation to create false gods for their followers to worship, instead worshipping God alone and trusting God with the future.

Introduction

“New Testament, Blood-bought, Born-again, Premillennial, Dispensational, fundamental” proclaimed the star-shaped sign in front of author Philip Yancey’s childhood church. A tiny band of 200 believers kept tight fists around the truth. Disagree with them and you were instantly suspect, probably aimed head first into the crackling fires of hell.

Living on the church property in a mobile home, Yancey existed in a virtual church vice that eventually crushed the life out of his faith. The pastor, who served the congregation for forty years, preached hard-core racism with as much fire in his voice as in his flaming red hair.

“We sang, ‘Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight...’ but just let one of those red, yellow, or black children try entering our church,” Yancey wrote. Although he heard “God is love,” the real image he received depicted God as an angry, vengeful tyrant.

Years later, after a desperate and difficult struggle, he ransomed a personal faith. Today Yancey, a prolific author of books including *Soul Survivor*, *What’s so Amazing about Grace?* and *The Jesus I Never Knew*, seeks to guide those who, like he, need to rejuvenate faith or simply discover the fullness of the true God.

Could Yancey’s turmoil have been avoided? What drove his pastor to lead the congregation to follow the god of blatant racism? We can only surmise.

Perhaps it was fear—fear of change if others outside the group were allowed in—fear of losing his control of the congregation—fear of the future if he did not keep a lid on other races as well as his own.

Or maybe it was anger that drove him—anger over some past hurt that festered and brewed within him—anger that dissolved into resentment, then morphed into bitterness.

It might have been the need for approval—preaching what he thought the congregation wanted to hear—preaching what he thought would gain him respect as a spiritual guide.

Or perhaps it was the age-old dilemma of feeling superior (or inferior) that motivated him to hold onto the status quo, a grip that in time strangled God’s breath within the church. Whatever the motive, the false god of racism barred the church from worshipping God fully and trusting God fully with the future.

Several years ago Yancey attended a reunion of his hometown church. Ironically it was the final service before selling its building to an African-American congregation.

The Biblical Witness

1 Kings 12:25-27 Fear Factor

²⁵Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and resided there; he went out from there and built Penuel. ²⁶Then Jeroboam said to himself, “Now the

kingdom may well revert to the house of David. If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah.”

“In leadership, possibilities for sin emerge that previously were inaccessible, possibilities exceedingly difficult to detect, for each comes in the form of a virtue,” wrote Eugene Peterson. “The unwary will embrace immediately a new ‘opportunity to serve the Lord,’ innocent of the reality that they are swallowing bait, which turns, soon or late, into a curse.”

Jeroboam fell prey to these hazards and temptations of leadership. With his chance-of-a-lifetime quest for greatness and his soul simmering with fear his people might opt to return to King Rehoboam, we can hear his internal dialogue as he devised seemingly pious schemes as a cover to cinch his lock on the kingship. And those who embraced his leadership found themselves in a gradual downward spiral into the pit of sin.

The historic, economic and religious turning point of the division of the North and South tribes created havoc for both King Rehoboam and Jeroboam. King Rehoboam reeled from the loss of the North like Lincoln may have reacted to the South during the Civil War. Frantically Jeroboam had to attain necessary, tangible props of royal authority. In the shadow of the magnificent, well-honed temple establishment of Jerusalem in the South, Jeroboam undertook a religious building program of his own, bricking new worship centers in the North.

First he proclaimed Shechem as capital, taking advantage of the ancient religious traditions of northern Israelite his-

tory. Next, he rebuilt Penuel, another ancient shrine, located by the Jabbok River, east of Jordan, dominating the road east from the Jordan Valley. A favorite route for nomad invaders, Penuel became far more than a religious site; it became the forward defense for Shechem. Underneath his false spiritual bravado of religious construction, Jeroboam harbored his true pragmatic intent to establish his own kingdom, not God’s.

False Gods

1 Kings 12:28-30

28So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” 29He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. 30And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan.

Posing as a sympathetic king, Jeroboam told his people they no longer needed to make the arduous journey to Jerusalem. He graciously solved their problem—two gold calves were now in place in Bethel and Dan (also marking the boundaries of his kingdom). He introduced a no muss, no fuss, false god of comfort, not unlike our own gods of convenience. Perhaps unknowingly Jeroboam nudged his people toward an egocentric faith—the perfect state for turmoil within.

Both Bethel and Dan held historic, spiritual significance among the people. Bethel, the royal sanctuary in Amos’ day and the sacred place of the patriarchs including Jacob, proved more revered than Dan. Yet Dan held the distinction of being the site of the priesthood, dating all the way back to Moses.

Most scholars agree that at first the calves were not considered representations of gods, but merely provided a platform for the invisible Yahweh. In the minds of the people, the calves served the same purpose as the cherubim on the ark in Solomon's temple, a throne for the ever-present, yet unseen, deity.

Unlike the cherubim on the ark in the holy of holies, however, the gold calves sat in public view and were eventually and inevitably associated with Canaanite fertility worship, one more reason "this thing became sin" (v 30). The two shrines reflected the multiplicity of Canaanite Baal worship, implying a Yahweh at Dan and another Yahweh at Bethel. Eventually these calves spurred full-blown Baal worship and were emphatically condemned as idolatry by Hosea.

Just as Aaron manufactured a golden calf when he unceremoniously grabbed the reins from Moses' leadership (Ex 32), Jeroboam created two golden calves, which also led a retreat from the traditions of Moses and the command to worship only in Jerusalem. (Aaron and Jeroboam even sounded alike. Compare Ex 32:4 and 1 Kings 12:28.) The calves Aaron and Jeroboam intended for cementing their leadership among their people soon served as false gods, forming a conduit for sin throughout the North.

1 Kings 12:31-33 **Future Shock**

³¹He also made houses on high places, and appointed priests from among the people, who were not Levites.

³²Jeroboam appointed a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the festival that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar; so he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made.

³³He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he alone had devised; he appointed a festival for the people of Israel, and he went up to the altar to offer incense.

Jeroboam's founding act of erecting two gold calves was only the first step toward the relentless future shock of judgment, failure and destruction of the Northern Kingdom. The narrator of 1 Kings presents a laundry list of Jeroboam's other violations, giving the reader the impression that Jeroboam systematically and intentionally violated every principle of Deuteronomic law.

Notice three times the narrator reinforces the phrase "that he had made," implying Jeroboam's personal, not God-designed, actions. Non-centralized sacrifice, image worship, non-Levitical priests, the Feast of Booths in a different month, all reveal signs of Jeroboam's rash actions and bold sin.

Even blame for local high places, an age-old institution, was firmly placed on Jeroboam's shoulders. Considered heathen places for worship of gods and goddesses, they played a major role in the lives of most of the people in Palestine before Joshua. The average high place, an elevated site atop a mountain or hill, consisted of an altar, carvings in wood or stone of the female goddess of fertility and a male deity, other idols and some type of building. Animal sacrifices were conducted there and in a few places even child sacrifice. Rites of worship, including male and female cultic prostitutes, often occurred at these high places.

Yet full blame cannot be placed on Jeroboam. Earlier King Solomon re-established the practice of high places for the gods of his foreign wives. He even worshipped there

himself. The seriousness of this sin caused God to remove ten tribes from the kingdom of Solomon's son Rehoboam, creating the tempestuous North and South.

As the story concludes, King Rehoboam, once a foolish dictator and oppressor, evolves into an obedient king. But Jeroboam, one who enlisted false gods for his political revolution, ends up as the measuring stick of sin by which all future Northern kings will be judged. Often these kings would be considered good or bad depending on what they did regarding the high places. Redemption from this future shock only came much later with King Josiah, whose virtue lay beyond reproach (2 Kings 23). Because of Josiah's courage, the high places were destroyed and major revival broke out in the land of Judah.

Leading and Following

Obsessed with his Model T design, Henry Ford permitted no modifications or improvements for twenty years. When his designers surprised him one day with a prototype of an updated model, Ford literally ripped off its doors and proceeded to demolish the car with his bare hands. By the time Ford did agree to a new car for the public, the company was grossly behind its competitors in technical innovations and had shrunk to a market share of only 28 percent.

Ford's stronghold on his company took bizarre forms. He created a sociological department to track the lives of his employees and direct their private lives. Once he reportedly walked into the accounting office and tossed the company's books into the street. He told employees to put all funds received into a large barrel, and when a shipment of material came in, they should reach into the barrel and remove enough money to pay for the materials.

Although he openly touted his son Edsel as the bright next president of Ford Motor Company, he secretly undermined him by backing other leaders. As promising leaders arose, Ford repeatedly tore them down. Unfortunately, the promising Edsel died young, leaving his son, Henry Ford II, the apparent heir.

Henry II took over a company that had not made a profit in 15 years and was losing \$1 million a day. Plus, his grandfather's tendency for underhanded leadership had trickled down to him. Threatened by the power and influence of those beneath him, Henry II moved them to positions with less clout. He once advised Lee Iacocca, another Ford president, "Keep your people anxious and off-balance."

What might have become of Ford Motor Company early on if leaders had tossed aside their insecurities, released their white-knuckle grip on the reins and torn down the false gods of themselves? Wasted years could have been productive years, graced with strong leadership development and a life-affirming sense of teamwork.

What false gods do leaders follow these days? The stock market? Self-image? Power? Sex? Control? Grudges? Leisure? Money? Do you ever observe those in spiritual leadership positions misusing authority for personal agendas that sound good but prove lifeless?

What about you? Are there any false gods lurking within you? Ask God to reveal any gods that block your experience of the fullness and freedom of the true God's leadership in your life. Refuse to allow Jeroboam's sin to become your own.

Written by Ginny Bridges Ireland, freelance writer, Winston-Salem, NC.

Failed Leaders Reject Truthful Messages

1 Kings 22:1-40

Theme: Wise leaders understand the value of critics and truthful messages and downplay the adulation of the crowds.

Introduction

In Hans Christian Andersen's classic children's story, *The Emperor's New Suit*, a leader is surrounded by advisors and a kingdom full of people who refuse to tell him the naked truth. Motivated by their desire to appear urbane and sophisticated, advisors and citizens alike lavish the emperor with compliments on his outrageously expensive, custom-tailored suit. Of course, only people who are qualified for office or particularly intelligent can see the suit. No one wants to be thought of as inept, so all praise the look, the tailoring and the fit of the emperor's new clothes.

The emperor is proud of his expensive new clothes. On the suggestion of his closest advisors, the emperor decides to wear his clothes and march in a parade through town. As he marches in the festival followed by maids holding the train of this imaginary garment, the crowd all comments on how wonderful the garment looks.

The story comes to a fitting end when a child in the crowd speaks out with integrity about what he sees. Without the pretense of sophistication or the desire to curry the favor of the powerful, the child simply declares, "The emperor has no clothes!" Without even thinking of the "politically correct" answer, the child pierces the emperor's illusion with a blinding glimpse of the truth.

For any leader with eyes to see and ears to hear, this story from the 1800s continues to speak loudly of the danger of depending on the counsel of yes-men. For when "the lie" is shattered by reality, the leader is left standing naked and exposed before the world.

1 Kings 22 records that Ahab, the King of Israel, had a similar approach to leadership. He surrounded himself with prophets who told him what he wanted to hear. More cheerleaders than advisors, their counsel would result in the death of the King.

The Biblical Witness

1 Kings 22:1-5 Ahab Decides to Go to War

"He said to Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?" Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, "I am as you are; my people are your people, my horses are your horses." ⁵But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, "Inquire first for the word of the LORD."

Three years of peace had passed between Israel and Syria (20:34) but Ahab decided that it was time to go to war over Ramoth-gilead, a city in the Transjordan whose possession was in dispute. Ahab's decision to go to war was quick and not subject to discussion or debate.

War is not always a hard sell for political leaders. It was probably very easy for Ahab to stir the nationalistic pride in the hearts of his people. He would challenge them to rise up and reclaim the land that rightly belonged to Israel. There is no indication in the text that Ahab stopped to consider the cost of this aggression in human life or property. He had made up his mind to go to war.

Ahab summoned Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, to assist him in this venture. Jehoshaphat seems to have been in a weak position. He met Ahab on Ahab's turf and at Ahab's request. Clearly, he was in a secondary position, as Ahab called all of the shots. He acquiesced to Ahab's scheme and pledged his support. Jehoshaphat's only condition was that Ahab get a message from the Lord first regarding the likelihood of success of this campaign.

It is important to note the order of the decisions this ill-fated leader made. First, Ahab made the unilateral decision to go to war. He made this decision without seeking the counsel of God or man. Second, Ahab recruited others to assist in carrying out his plan. Then third, and only at the suggestion of Jehoshaphat, did Ahab consider consulting with the Lord through the prophets.

Ahab did not seem willing for the Lord to direct his decision-making. Rather, he seemed to consult the prophets as a way of stirring up popular opinion in favor of his conflict. It may have been a small concession to Jehoshaphat to help him feel better about his involvement in this attack. There seems to be little doubt that this consultation with the hand-picked prophets was more political than religious. But then, many a king has been willing to "baptize" their plans by wrapping them in religious language. After all, if the prophets say that God is for the aggression, who can be against it?

Leaders should look carefully at their decision-making process. At what point should others be consulted? At what point should leaders seek to discover God's will in the course of action that they anticipate?

1 Kings 22:6-9 **All of the King's Prophets and a Word from the Lord**

⁶"Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, "Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?" They said, "Go up; for the LORD will give it into the hand of the king."⁷But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there no other prophet of the LORD here of whom we may inquire?"⁸The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster."⁹Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, "Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah."

At the request of Jehoshaphat, Ahab quickly summoned his favorite prophets to rubber-stamp his decision to go to war. This group of 400 was unanimous in their approval of the policy to take up arms and reclaim their land.

It is clear that these prophets were on Ahab's short list of approved prophets who could be called upon on short notice to "baptize" the policies of his administration. One can only wonder what their motive was. Perhaps it was patriotism. Perhaps it was the desire to be associated with power or privilege. Whatever the motive of the hand-picked prophets, they were quick and unanimous in declaring that God would bless the war effort.

Perhaps it was the unanimity of the prophets that bothered Jehoshaphat. To put it in a Baptist context, you might expect that if you put 400 pastors together at a moment's notice you ought to expect 400 different viewpoints on such a controversial issue as war! Jehoshaphat was unconvinced by the prophets' display of "yes-manship." He asked, "Is there no other by whom we may inquire of the Lord?" He was looking for a prophet with integrity and the critical distance that would allow the prophet to speak freely.

How many times in history have leaders collected clerical yes-men who would accede to the desires of the powerful? Must integrity be the price of access to power? When presidents or leaders have had prophets in their pockets, what effect has this had on the vitality of the church? Have the “prophets” exchanged their integrity for the mere potage of proximity to the powerful?

Jehoshaphat was perceptive enough to identify what was going on in Ahab’s court. He insisted on an unbiased reading of the Lord’s instructions. “Is there no prophet who speaks freely and independently?” he asked.

Ahab reluctantly gave in to this request, stating that there was another prophet of the Lord. He was a prophet who was not on the list. His name was Micaiah. Ahab declared, “I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster” (v 8). Nevertheless, Micaiah was summoned to appear before the kings.

What are the dangers of leaders being surrounded by cheerleaders rather than advisors? Should the church be wary of leaders who seek to use religion to advance political and/or military agendas?

1 Kings 22:13-18 **A Single Voice of Integrity**

14“But Micaiah said, “As the LORD lives, whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak.”

While the kings awaited the arrival of the prophet Micaiah, a public demonstration was held at the entrance of the gate of Samaria (vv 10-12). It seems that the prophets were announcing the destruction of the Arameans in the impending conflict. One cannot help but wonder if Ahab had or-

chestrated this public display as a means of stirring up public opinion and demonstrating that “God is on our side.”

Lest the reader of the story miss the point, the writer of Kings makes it clear that the messenger sent to summon Micaiah attempted to coach the prophet on his answer. He told Micaiah that he should go along with what all 400 of the king’s prophets had already told him; namely, that God would bless the war plans (v 13).

How often have government leaders tried to coach pastors and church officials to be silent or to go along with policies, plans and programs in order to preserve national security or promote a united front? The prophet of the Lord, Micaiah, made it clear to the messenger that whatever the Lord put on his heart, that he would speak. Micaiah would neither be stifled nor be led by the nose. The words of this prophet would be the Lord’s, not the king’s.

Upon arrival before the kings, Micaiah was asked whether Israel and Judah should go to battle. His answer in verse 15 seems to be mocking the words of the king’s hand-picked prophets. In essence he said, “Sure, go ahead into battle. God will bless you.” But Ahab knew in his heart that these words from this prophet were not true. He knew that Micaiah was a prophet with integrity and it would be out of character for him to speak so positively about Ahab’s plans. The king chided the prophet and demanded the real word from the Lord. Micaiah replied that Israel would be scattered without a leader. Ahab turned to Jehoshaphat and said, “See, I told you he only has bad news.”

Some prophets cannot win. Ahab didn’t believe the comforting words of Micaiah given in sarcasm nor did he accept the true words given with all sobriety. The question for leaders today is an important one. How can leaders ensure

that minority or dissenting views are both heard and considered? Is truth the exclusive property of the majority?

1 Kings 22:29-34 **You Can't Deceive God**

34a "But a certain man drew his bow and unknowingly struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breast-plate. . . . *37a* So the king died. . . ."

Ahab had Micaiah imprisoned while he went off to war. Perhaps he didn't want the outspoken prophet to be able to speak against the war effort once it was underway. How often do leaders seek to silence their critics by imprisonment or in other ways?

The words of the prophet continued to echo in his mind. Truth and integrity have a way of sticking out when compared with illusion, spin and lies. So Ahab decided that on the off chance that Micaiah could be right, he had better be careful. Ahab devised a scheme whereby Jehoshaphat would wear his kingly robes but Ahab would disguise himself as a common soldier. In battle, the Syrians were looking for Ahab to be wearing kingly attire. The Syrian charioteers were instructed to seek out and kill the king of Israel.

As the battle progressed, they spotted Jehoshaphat in kingly attire, but when they got close enough, they realized that this king was not Ahab, and they pulled back. Elsewhere on the battlefield, "a certain man" drew his bow and "unknowingly" struck Ahab with a fatal shot. The soldier didn't realize that his arrow actually had shot King Ahab. The king who sought to deceive God would bleed to death.

Ahab learned that enemies might be fooled but God never is. While a soldier killed the king unknowingly, it is clear

from the text that this was seen as more than coincidence. It was considered the decisive act of God.

Leading and Following

Look again at that famous tale of Hans Christian Andersen. What if the emperor had surrounded himself with people who had the integrity and self-assurance to speak their minds? What if he had counselors who were able and willing to speak what was in their hearts? The story would have had an entirely different outcome. The emperor would have saved a fortune and would not have exposed himself before the world.

In order to make good decisions, leaders must select able men and women who are not afraid to speak candidly about their convictions.

For any leader, it can be hard to listen to the voices of the critics. Nevertheless, in those voices may be a grain of truth that is vital to successful decision-making. Like the emperor who invested a fortune on the invisible clothes project, we are heavily invested, financially and emotionally, in our pet projects or ideas. Once committed to a course of action, it can be hard to pull back. Good leaders count the cost before embarking on a major endeavor. Giving room to opposing views enables leaders to consider all of the options available and make better decisions.

Being a follower also carries responsibilities. As in Hans Christian Andersen's story, the unwillingness of the emperor's court to speak candidly led to the public embarrassment of the emperor and his administration. Being a good follower carries with it the responsibility to speak candidly and objectively. Prophets are worthless unless they speak with integrity.

Strong leaders will learn a lesson from Jehoshaphat. Unlike his counterpart, Ahab, Jehoshaphat knew that seeking God's guidance in the important decisions we face should take place on the front end of the decision-making process, not as a consideration of expedience.

Written by Jeff Scott, senior pastor, Colonial Avenue Baptist Church, Roanoke, Va.

Experiencing Burnout

1 Kings 19

Theme: Wise leaders recognize their vulnerability to burnout.

Introduction

Mike Yaconelli was involved in Christian ministry for over 40 years. Editor of the satirical *The Wittenburg Door* (now *The Door*) and co-founder and owner of Youth Specialties, he challenged the thinking of and helped educate thousands of people.

Yet a few years ago he had no idea that he had “lost his soul somewhere.” He simply had a lingering sense that something was terribly wrong.

“I spent hours every day doing God’s work, but not one second doing soul work. I was consumed by the external and oblivious to the internal. In the darkness of my soul, I was stumbling around and bumping into the symptoms of my soul-lessness—I was busy, superficial, friendless, afraid, and cynical—but I didn’t know where all these negative parts of my life were coming from,” he recalled in the online article “Lost and Found: My Soul” (www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2001/cln10808.html).¹

His feelings had persisted for months. “I was filled with longings I couldn’t identify, yearnings I couldn’t express, and an emptiness that seemed to be expanding. I was desperate even though I couldn’t articulate my desperation.”

After spending some time at L'Arche, a community in Toronto, Canada, for those living with mental and physical disabilities, Yaconelli came to some startling insights.

First, he determined that his life was consumed with *doing* instead of *being*. Though busy doing the work of God, he had no idea how to let God work in him.

He also realized that he knew how to talk about God, but didn't know how to sit still long enough to listen to God.

God had been speaking to him all along, he discovered, but the noise in his life prevented him from hearing. The stillness and solitude he found at L'Arche allowed him to listen to God and come into contact with his soul in new ways.

Such times of introspection and renewal are essential for leaders, who keep impossible schedules; answer countless questions; handle major crises; make weighty decisions and manage multiple priorities. The physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that comes with leadership requires regular doses of rest. Those who go without it open the doors for burnout and depression.

Even leaders who have experienced God's providence and power in amazing and unmistakable ways can give in to periods of fear, despair and darkness.

Such was the case with Elijah.

The Biblical Witness

The prophet Elijah burst dramatically onto Israel's stage determined to confront and discredit Baal, the Canaanite god the Israelites had begun to worship in growing numbers under the reign of King Ahab.

Ahab had married Jezebel, a Phoenician, in a political marriage likely designed in part to keep merchandise flowing into Israel from Phoenicia in exchange for agricultural products.

Jezebel's influence on Israel was more than political and commercial. She did nothing to enhance the observance of Israelite law and even encouraged the worship of Baal among the people. Under her influence, Ahab had an altar built for this purpose (16:32) and also imported some prophets of Baal (18:19).

Ahab joined Jezebel in worshiping Baal (16:31) and in fact strayed so far from Yahweh that scripture says he "did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (16:33b).

Prophets and worshipers of the god believed that Baal had the power to give rain, and thus life. When Elijah came along and prophesied a drought (17:1) that occurred and endured long enough to cause a crisis and a hole in the belief system of Baal worshipers, things got very interesting in Israel.

Elijah did not stop at simply prophesying drought. He also announced that Yahweh would provide the gift of rain.

In what amounted to a showdown between the God of Israel and Baal, Elijah and Ahab met at Mount Carmel in the presence of the people to determine which God, or god, provided rain. A lot was at stake. Where would the people of Israel ultimately place their faith?

Baal's prophets performed ceremonial dances and made ritual incisions on their bodies in their attempts to prompt Baal to send rain, actions Elijah ridiculed (18:27).

After preparing a sacrificial altar and even soaking it with water several times, Elijah prayed and asked the LORD to send fire. The fire God sent consumed not only the sacrifice but the altar itself, and the people acknowledged that the “LORD indeed is God” (18:39).

Elijah then killed the prophets of Baal, and the God of Israel sent the much-needed rain.

1 Kings 19:1-3a Man on the Run

¹Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ^{3a}Then he was afraid;

Elijah had become one of the most important leaders in Israel’s history in terms of its worship of Yahweh. The events at Mount Carmel were significant. The people responded in reverence to God, and even Ahab may have begun to think differently about Israel’s God as a result of what he witnessed.

But when Ahab told Jezebel what had happened, instead of responding with awe and wonder, she grew angry and threatened Elijah’s life. Interestingly, Jezebel “sent a messenger” to Elijah to warn him, allowing him a small window through which to escape.

Elijah, who had performed miracles, brought a woman’s son back to life and faced off with Ahab and the prophets of Baal, was suddenly shaken. On the heels of experiencing

one of the greatest demonstrations of God’s power and provision, Elijah responded to Jezebel’s threat with fear. His reaction was understandable, given Jezebel’s reputation. She had had prophets of the LORD killed on more than one occasion (18:4, 13).

1 Kings 19:3b-7 Woe Is Me!

^{3b}[H]e got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

Elijah’s flight was swift and deliberate. After arriving at the southernmost town of Beersheba, which was under Judah’s control and thus beyond the legal reach of Jezebel, he parted company with his servant and traveled farther “into the wilderness,” (v 3b) taking refuge under a tree.

Elijah’s self-pity and despair grew to the point that he asked to die, saying he was “no better than my ancestors” (v 4). Some commentators interpret this to mean that he believed his life was no better than the lives of his dead ancestors. He could also have meant that his life as a prophet was no more successful than any of the prophets who had preceded him.

In spite of his self-pitying state, God provided for Elijah. An angel gave him food and water, not once, but twice, and encouraged him to prepare for what he would face next.

Some of the narrator's word choices here are interesting. The Hebrew word used for "hot stones" is found in only one other place in Hebrew scripture, Isaiah 6:6. In that case, it refers to the hot coal a seraph first took from the altar of the Lord's Temple and then used to touch Isaiah's lips. This was in response to that prophet's feeling that he was not worthy to accept the Lord's commission.

The word the narrator used for "jar" is found only in 1 Samuel 26:10-16 and 1 Kings 17:8-16. In the second case, the writer used the word to refer to God's provision for Elijah through the widow of Zarephath, when Elijah was hiding from Ahab.

In what would certainly heighten tension in the minds of readers of the Hebrew text, the writer used the same word for "angel" in the first case here as for the "messenger" Jezebel sent to Elijah (v 2). Those readers would surely wonder if this individual would carry out Jezebel's threat. The second time the word "angel" is used, however, makes clear that this is an "angel of the Lord" (v 7).

Elijah displayed many of the classical signs of depression. He ran from his problems; wanted to die; slept a great deal; had to be told to eat and expressed feelings of failure. In short, Elijah was a mess.

1 Kings 19:8-18 **Elijah Encounters God**

⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb

the mount of God. ⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹¹He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Elijah did as he was told, perhaps moving mechanically only because the angel told him specifically what to do.

Interestingly, his destination was Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai. And the length of time he traveled—40 days and 40 nights—parallels the amount of time Moses spent on that same mountain when he encountered God in an unmistakable way.

After spending the night in a cave, Elijah heard God ask him a simple but direct question: “What are you doing here?” (v 9).

Not only did Elijah fail to answer God’s question directly, he expressed a distorted view of reality and began to complain bitterly, essentially blaming others for his miserable condition.

He reminded God of his faithfulness and loyalty but complained that the people “have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword” (v 10). How quickly he forgot the people’s positive response at Mount Carmel: the “LORD indeed is God” (18:39).

Elijah’s reference when he claimed that the people had killed God’s prophets is unclear. The Kings account describes only Jezebel’s killing of prophets.

He claimed to have been left all alone to do God’s work, and hard as he tried, he was being persecuted for it: “I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away,” (v 10). He failed to remember that Obadiah had rescued 100 of God’s prophets, so he was not alone at all.

Instead of scolding and correcting him, God told Elijah to go and stand on the mountain, because the Lord was “about to pass by” (v 11). This may have been intended to recall Moses standing “at the cleft of the rock” where he too encountered God passing by.

The events that followed were typical signs associated with the power and visible appearance of God: strong wind, earthquake and fire. Although these were familiar signs, Elijah did not find God present in them.

Those signs ceased, and Elijah experienced the “sound of sheer silence” (v 12), a phrase that has traditionally been interpreted as “a still, small voice.” Yet Elijah heard nothing, except perhaps the silent calm after the storm.

In a gesture indicating he understood he was in the presence of the divine and holy, Elijah covered his face with his mantle and went to stand at the entrance of the cave. Then he actually heard something: God’s voice. And God asked him the same question as before: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (v 13).

Even though Elijah answered in the same way as before, indicating that he just didn’t “get it,” God spoke to him a third time, this time telling him to “Go, return on your way . . .” (v 15), and gave him specific instructions about what he should do next: anoint Hazael and Jehu as kings and Elisha as the prophet to take his place. God also promised he could find 7,000 individuals in Israel who had remained faithful to the true God (v 18). Elijah was never alone in his faithfulness after all.

1 Kings 19:19-21 Renewed Strength

¹⁹So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. ²⁰He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him,

“Go back again; for what have I done to you?”²¹ He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

What Elijah did when he found Elisha plowing the field seems strange. He doesn't appear to have stopped; scripture says he “passed by him and threw his mantle over him” (v 19). Yet this gesture was likely symbolic for Elijah. His mantle held the same symbolism as did Moses' rod/staff for him. This was probably the same mantle Elijah had used when he covered his face at Horeb. He would also use his mantle later to strike the water of a river and cause it to part (2 Kings 2:8).

Elisha evidently understood the significance of Elijah's actions. If Elijah offered any words of explanation, scripture does not record them. Elisha seemed to know that the mantle signified prophetic leadership. He told Elijah that he wanted to tell his parents good-bye and then promised to follow him.

Elijah's question, “for what have I done to you?” (v 20), may be a symbolic reference to Elisha having to break ties with everything familiar to him: his family, work and culture. In his own symbolic gesture, Elisha sacrificed the oxen to indicate that he accepted his new role. After that, he “set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant” (v 21).

Leading and Following

“I don't want to be St. John of the Cross or Billy Graham,” Mike Yaconelli wrote in his 2002 book, *Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People*. “I just want to

be remembered as a person who loved God, who served others more than he served himself, who was trying to grow in maturity and stability. I want to have more victories than defeats, yet here I am, almost 60, and I fail on a regular basis.”

Tragically, Yaconelli died October 30, 2003, a result of injuries sustained in an automobile accident the evening before. But before he died, he had evidently learned some of life's most important leadership lessons:

- Leaders are not bulletproof. They are not super humans with supernatural strength. They grow weary and face periods of doubt and even darkness.
- God is not locked into any one particular way of speaking or acting. We experience God's presence through divine provision and miraculous events, but also through ordinary people and even in silence.
- Leaders who are faithful for the long haul often see the nature of their leadership and their ministries change. And that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Wise leaders recognize their vulnerability to burnout and take measures to prevent it.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Passing Along the Leadership Mantle

2 Kings 2:1-18

Theme: Wise leaders know both when to accept the mantle of leadership and when to pass it along to someone else.

Introduction

Anywhere Baptist Church was in the early stages of welcoming their new pastor when the first rumblings began. Rev. Jones, the recently retired pastor, was unhappy with the level of enthusiasm shown to his successor, Rev. Smith, and was making his feelings known to his friends in town.

Before long, murmuring began about the new pastor's salary, the quality of the retirement gift to his predecessor, the neighborhood into which the new pastor had moved and the dubious planning process he had initiated. Members began to form groups loyal to one minister or the other. Many parishioners started visiting other churches. Even Rev. Jones, his feelings bruised, began attending another church in town, sending a painful message to the church family and community. Instead of surging forward, the church stumbled badly and lost an opportunity to allow a time of transition to be a stimulus for growth and progress.

This fictitious scenario plays out in varied forms again and again in churches, non-profit organizations, businesses and educational institutions. Leadership transition is one of the most precarious events in the life of any organization or movement. Dangers lurk at every turn.

Some groups suffer from “founder-it is,” the unique situation created when a founding figure is unable to hand off the church or organization to a successor. Some deal with issues of rivalry among camps of followers of past leaders. Some suffer when the new leader shows a lack of respect for what has taken place to date. Some wrestle with former leaders who meddle and manipulate to their successor's detriment. Some are unable to make clear and crisp endings and beginnings. Others never deal with substantive issues lurking just beneath the surface of the church or organization that will surely erupt regardless of the leader.

A smooth transition sends clear messages about the health and future of the group, while a rocky transition can handicap the new leader and set the group or organization back significantly. We need to be deliberate and biblical about leadership transitions. The demographic data tells us clearly that, as Baby Boomers reach retirement age in record numbers, many opportunities will arise in the near future to manage transition well, or poorly.

The Biblical Witness

Elijah was fully aware that his ministry as prophet was drawing to a close. Earlier, (1 Kings 19:11-16), he had heard the voice of God directing him to delegate his responsibilities to those who would succeed him. Elisha was called to follow, and he obeyed (v 19-21).

One of the most difficult calls to hear is the call to end our time as a leader. Coaches, educators, CEOs, committee chairs—people in every position face this transition sooner or later. Our identities are often caught up in our careers or positions. The idea of being out of a job so threatens us that we often refuse to give retirement or transition careful thought. We pass many stop signs because our eyes are closed to the possibility of ending. We ignore obvious signs

that we ought to consider preparing for the transition out of our fear and anxiety about what such a move might mean.

Elijah heard God's voice and listened, even when it was not what he preferred to hear.

2 Kings 2:1-8 **Preparing for Change**

¹Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ²Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." ⁴Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. ⁵The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." ⁶Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. ⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

A warm, rich relationship between Elijah and Elisha had blossomed. In 2 Kings 2, we read of Elisha's unwavering

loyalty and devotion to Elijah. Despite three separate attempts to leave him behind (vv 2, 4, 6), Elisha was insistent that he stay with his mentor and friend. When other prophets questioned his allegiance, his was clear about being beside Elijah until the end.

In some circumstances, the exiting leader and the incoming leader have the opportunity to model a healthy respect and appreciation for one another. When that is possible, it contributes significantly to the ability of the organization to make a smooth transition. Such respect and appreciation is the result of spiritual maturity, healthy self-esteem and an understanding of the church that sees the goal of growing the Kingdom as more important than individual agendas.

Elijah and Elisha were able to demonstrate to those who watched that God was blessing them both, and that God was part of the transition to new leadership.

2 Kings 2:9-12 **Saying Good-bye**

⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." ¹⁰He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." ¹¹As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

In response to Elisha's faithfulness, Elijah asked if there was anything Elisha wanted him to do before he departed.

Wisely, Elisha responded, “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit” (v 9).

The double portion is the portion of inheritance reserved for the eldest son, and thus Elisha was asking to be treated as Elijah’s sole heir. Such a request conveyed healthy respect and appreciation for his mentor and communicates a winsome humility about how Elisha saw himself.

Many new leaders would do well to inject a sizable dose of humility into their leadership style. Paying tribute to predecessors, acknowledging that successes have occurred and that we all owe huge debts of gratitude to our forefathers and mothers is not only the truth but is also wise. Too many of today’s leaders are unwilling to honor the accomplishments of those who have gone before us. To do so graciously is to ease the tensions that are an inevitable part of the transition drama.

2 Kings 2:13-18 **Moving Ahead**

¹³He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. ¹⁵When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. ¹⁶They said to him, “See now, we have fifty strong men among your servants; please let them go and seek your master; it may be that the spirit of the LORD has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley.” He responded, “No,

do not send them.” ¹⁷But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, “Send them.” So they sent fifty men who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸When they came back to him (he had remained at Jericho), he said to them, “Did I not say to you, Do not go?”

Elisha symbolized the transition between Elijah and himself by taking up Elijah’s cloak. Following Elijah’s spectacular departure, Elisha was left to carry on the prophetic role. He mimicked Elijah’s earlier act (v 8) and struck the waters of the Jordan (v 14). Experiencing the same success as Elijah, he was recognized by the company of prophets as the rightful heir to the title (v 15). Thus began his tenure as God’s prophet.

Interestingly, the company of prophets from Jericho was not quite ready to give up their previous leader. Despite Elisha’s protests, they set out to try and find the missing Elijah. Searching to no avail (vv 17-18), they returned in time for Elisha to give them a well-deserved “I told you so.”

One helpful concept for managing transitions comes from author Bill Bridges. His book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes* (Persus Books, 1980) is an excellent resource for managing transitions of all types. One of the author’s primary concepts is that all transitions can be broken down into three separate processes: The Ending/ Saying Good-bye, Shifting into Neutral, and The Beginning/ Moving Forward.

Saying good-bye is that difficult decision to let go of the way that things have been. There can be no transition, no beginning, without an ending. For Elijah, the ending of his role as prophet was a hard good-bye. He did so at God’s bidding and in full confidence of God’s providing love. In our transitions in our churches, careers and families, it is often

with great ambivalence that we say our good-byes. Even when God's will seems to be leading us in a new direction, we deeply mourn what we are leaving behind. The primary task of this stage is to let go and leave behind what we must.

Bridges suggests that we call the time in between our ending and our beginning the Neutral Zone. It is that state of being that is full of uncertainty and confusion about what comes next. It is uncomfortable, so we try desperately to get out of it. It is his contention, however, that a successful transition is dependent upon our spending time in the Neutral Zone. That time is the point at which our hearts are most likely to be tuned to God's frequency. We are more able to sense God's leadership. We are more likely to heed God's counsel. Our illusion of self-sufficiency having been squashed, we spend our time in fervent prayer.

Elisha was all ears from the moment Elijah called him out of the field in 1 Kings 19. His Neutral Zone lasted until he successfully passed the "mantel test" in 2 Kings 2:14. Those days were rich in insight and learning for him. The uncertainty of what was about to happen did not drive him to despair, but instead drove him to listen carefully for the word of the Lord.

How many times have our Neutral Zone experiences left us stressed, anxious and worried? What if we considered the time of uncertainty a gift from God? What if we realized that our creativity and energy were activated in times of uncertainty? What if the real transformation in our lives often takes place in that time between our Ending and our Beginning? The primary task of this stage is to resist the temptation to flee from the fear and confusion and to stay in the Neutral Zone long enough for God to work with us there.

The third process Bridges describes is the time of Moving Forward. This is our new beginning, the opportunity to behave in a new way. Perhaps the new in your life will be a new role as a leader, a new vocation, a new family, a new attitude or spirit. For Elisha, it meant seeing himself differently. No longer was he the apprentice; now he was the expert. His mentor was gone, and he was now the prophet and leader to whom others looked for inspiration.

Such a self-redefinition can be frightening. Doubt and second-guessing can creep in. Bridges says it is essential to keep before us a clear goal of where we hope our new beginning will take us. Using our call from God as a north star for our life will enable us to overcome misgivings and press on toward the vision God has given us. The primary task of this third phase is to avoid freezing, to keep moving in the direction God has called us.

Elijah and Elisha managed to make this leadership change smoothly because they successfully navigated all three phases of the transition. There was a clear Ending, when Elijah accepted that his time in leadership was over and he needed help in finding a successor. There was a stormy Neutral Zone in which Elijah and Elisha experienced strange and wonderful events that cemented their relationship to one another and to God. There was a New Beginning, when Elisha accepted the mantle of responsibility and began his ministry under God's sustaining power.

Leading and Following

Spending time carefully considering the dynamics of leadership transition may be new to many churches and church leaders. The leaders of many companies, educational institutions and non-profits spend vast amounts of time deliberately preparing for and looking for their successors. We will do well to follow suit.

Elijah and Elisha model one way to allow God to use such a time to show divine power. By carefully considering our Endings, our Neutral Zones and our Beginnings, we can also find ourselves energized, our vision renewed and our faith in God confirmed. When we transition smoothly, the Kingdom of God is enhanced and the life of the Church is enriched.

Written by Bill Wilson, pastor, First Baptist Church, Dalton, Ga.

Making Risky Decisions

2 Kings 5:1-19

Theme: Wise leaders act boldly in the face of risk.

Introduction

Fred Craddock tells a story (he has a million stories!) about preaching at Ebenezer Baptist Church, and looking more than a little nervous as he moved to the pulpit to read his text and start his sermon. After all, this was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, church. Dr. Craddock was a famous professor of preaching, and he wanted to do well, especially in this place.

He says he got to the pulpit and was about to read his text when the pastor who had invited him stood up and started to sing, "I feel much better now that I've laid my burden down." Others joined in right away, and pretty soon there were instruments going, hands clapping, and the whole congregation was rocking.

Craddock says he had been standing there quietly for a few minutes when he realized that he was supposed to be leading worship at this point, so he started clapping and singing, too. The singing went on for a while, he says, and when it finally stopped, he preached like he could have gone on all day.

After the service, Craddock asked the pastor about it. "Well, when you stood up there, one of the associates leaned over to me and said, 'That boy's going to need some help.'"

Help can come from many sources, and true leaders are not always the people up front waving their arms. As we can learn from Naaman's experience, slaves can give great advice to generals, and servants can know better than kings what needs to be done. As you read the passage, think of your own relationships to those you follow, lead and work alongside.

What sort of leader are you? Are you willing to listen to good advice, no matter who gives it?

What sort of follower are you? Are you willing to take the risk to say the right thing at the right time?

The Biblical Witness

2 Kings 5:1-4 An Unlikely Leader

¹Naaman, commander of the army of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.

The story begins with the characterization of Naaman: a great man, highly placed; the instrument of the LORD; a mighty warrior; but a leper, and this last fact was meant to trump all the rest.

"Leprosy" meant a skin rash, describing many illnesses we now name differently, ranging from the irritating and embar-

assing to the serious threat to health. Leviticus 14 describes purity regulations for leprosy involving isolation and cleansing, but they are irrelevant here, because Naaman was not an Israelite and did not live by the Torah. Instead, what we are to wonder about are the apparent contradictions in his description.

The LORD had blessed him with victories, but had also struck him with leprosy; he had done harm to Israel, but through God's power. Naaman's victories came at the expense of the Israelites: border raids on Israelite towns, where the Arameans took food, weapons, livestock and women.

One of the girls enslaved by Naaman as a household servant spoke up: "If only my lord were before the prophet in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (v 3). This girl and Naaman are foils, characters who stand in contrast to each other: slave and mighty man, young girl and older man, Israelite and Aramean, captive and captor. They were on opposite ends of the scale of social rank, prestige and influence. Yet she dared to speak up; in fact, the narrator does not give us any hint that she was bitter toward Naaman or afraid of him, or that she hesitated to speak her mind.

She called Naaman "my lord," correctly denoting their relative status, but who was the leader in this situation? Watch how fast the word of this slave girl whizzes up the chain of command and sets things in motion.

Wise leaders act boldly, and there are some who know that they can lead without ever being acknowledged as leaders if they are bold enough to speak the right word at the right time to the right person.

2 Kings 5:5-7 **No Leader Here!**

⁵And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that his man sends word to me to cure a man of leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”

This is rich satire on the limits of power and on the habits of kings. Naaman, commander of all the forces of Aram, told his lord what a slave-girl said. On the strength of her testimony and without any further thought or investigation, the king of Aram decided that Naaman must go to Israel. But this thing must be done properly, in a kingly manner. Naaman must have a letter of introduction (“Allow me to introduce my chief border-raider, a man who probably needs no introduction to many of your peasants.”) and a proper gift (“Here’s a little token of my esteem, mostly taken from your own citizens.”). The letter was addressed to the King of Israel; after all, that’s where real decisions are made and where real leadership happens, right? Not in this story!

The Israelite king took it as an insult and a challenge. “It isn’t enough that Aram raids Israelite towns; now you have to send us your lepers, too? And what do you expect me to do about it? Am I God, with the power of life and death?” Well, many earthly lords seem to think that’s exactly who they are, and many of them exercise the power of life and

death over those they rule. So he tore his clothes—a sign of mourning, or of horror over some outrage—and interpreted the letter as an excuse for a fight. At this point in the story, the slave-girl’s advice has been forgotten, and Naaman has come to the wrong place to get help.

The Aramean king comes off as impulsive and clueless—if you’re going to take a slave’s advice, then pay attention to what she says!—and the Israelite king looks equally foolish, having managed to forget about Elisha, who by this point in 2 Kings has fed multitudes and raised the dead.

2 Kings 5:8-14 **More Unlikely Leaders**

⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Elisha learned of the episode and intervened. To him, the most pressing issue was not Naaman's illness (surely the general thought it was!) but the chance to demonstrate that Israel's God, the LORD, was the true God.

Leadership often means stepping back to look not at the immediate problem but at the larger issues, not at the precipitating cause of a crisis but at the long-term consequences of acting and reacting.

Elisha acted rudely, deliberately so, for surely he knew how to welcome an important person into his home, listen to his story, read his letter and then prescribe a remedy. The cure was also, as Naaman pointed out, completely arbitrary. What's so great about the Jordan? Why seven times? Why not a prayer and a little hand-waving out of respect for the dignity of his guest?

Elisha risked Naaman's anger to teach him something about God and power. Had Naaman been received as his station required, then this would be a story about the way things work in the world and how the rich and powerful get what they need. Instead, it becomes a story about the power of God, about the relative impotence of human lords and the omnipotence of Israel's LORD.

Notice who took the decisive leadership role. Not Naaman, who stomped off in a huff, nor Elisha, who stayed in his house, apparently indifferent to whether this man got cured or not. The real leaders were the servants, who knew how to speak to Naaman. They called him *Abi*, "my father," rather than *Adonai*, "my lord."

"Look, Pops, you would have done anything hard to get healed; why won't you do something easy?" they asked him. And for the second time in this story, servants inter-

vened and the general took their advice. Whatever else we would say about Naaman, he knew enough to listen to wise advice no matter who gave it.

2 Kings 5:15-19 **Happy Ending?**

¹⁵Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." ¹⁶But he said, "As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. ¹⁷Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice except to any god except the LORD. ¹⁸But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." ¹⁹He said to him, "Go in peace."

The episode closes on a happy note. Naaman was cured; Elisha proved that the LORD is master of everything; Elisha rejected a monetary gift that would have obligated him to persons of power; and Naaman made a sort of a conversion to the worship of the LORD. But as it ends, the episode again leaves us with a paradox.

Naaman wanted to serve the LORD alone, but he knew he could not get out of some ceremonial honoring of Rimmon, the Aramean god. So apparently Elisha cut him some slack on this one—this from the man who wears the mantle of Elijah, the fearless opponent of idolatry in Israel.

Many unresolved questions remain: Will the border raids continue? Will the Israelite girl remain a slave? Will Naaman keep his promise to worship only the LORD, and will that mean that other Arameans find the truth?

Leading and Following

Sir Ernest Shackleton led a crew of 27 men on an expedition to Antarctica in 1914. The plan, to cross the continent on foot, was doomed when their ship was completely trapped in polar ice. The ice carried them along for ten months and then crushed their ship. For four months, during the long cold polar night, the crew camped in flimsy tents on the icepack.

When spring came, the ice melted and the crew sailed for a week to a small rocky island; then Shackleton and five others sailed 800 miles in an open lifeboat to South Georgia Island. They landed on the wrong side and had to hike across the icy, mountainous, as-yet-unmapped island to reach the whaling station on the other side. There Shackleton was able to arrange for a ship to go back and retrieve his crew, all of whom were alive.

This is an amazing story, often studied for what it teaches us about leadership. Shackleton's abilities to keep his crew focused, to keep their morale up, to make the tough decisions quickly, to know when to take risks and when to stand and wait, were considerable. But perhaps the greatest lesson of leadership in this story is the trust he put in his crew. Shackleton took time every day to speak with crewmembers individually and to listen to their ideas and complaints. He eliminated any differences between upper and lower classes on his crew: everyone took turns doing all the chores, everyone shared equally in the provisions and everyone was made to feel that his contribution was vitally significant.

Jesus reminded us that leaders normally lord it over followers, but he said it should not be so among those who follow him. In his group, the last should be like the first, and the one who serves should be considered the greatest.

Good leaders take chances: Naaman listened to his servants and his wife's slave; the servants and the slave-girl spoke up; Elisha risked the anger of a general in order to show him God's power. What if each of them had stayed in the places society put them?

How Christian are we in our work relationships? If you have people you supervise, have you fostered the sorts of relationships of trust and respect that would enable them to give you their best ideas? If you have a boss, do you treat him or her with respect, offering the benefit of your best ideas?

Written by Richard Vinson, dean of the faculty and professor of New Testament, Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond, Richmond, Va.

Running after Wealth

2 Kings 5:19b-27

Theme: Wise leaders turn from the temptation of greed.

Introduction

My high school government teacher had a favorite saying he delighted in repeating on a regular basis for his impressionable students: “Remember—money is the name of the game.”

As a high school senior, I was puzzled by exactly what he meant. I knew how useful it was to have money in my pocket, but I sensed that my teacher had far more in mind than enjoying the convenience of some spending money. He later elaborated on his convictions concerning material wealth: money is power, he said; money opens doors to influence; money makes life comfortable. He urged us to pursue careers that would be lucrative.

My government teacher was not unique in his views concerning material things. While he may have been more outspoken than some, the pursuit of power, influence and comfort through the accumulation of wealth is the preoccupation of many. It has almost ceased to be news when a political figure, high-profile minister, business leader or professional athlete either misappropriates funds or receives compensation far in excess of what any one person could spend in a lifetime.

Do we ever have enough? Is it appropriate for a person of influence to purvey values that elevate materialism to the

chief motivator of life? Have we become so cynical about obscenely large salaries, outrageous buy-outs and both personal and corporate greed that we no longer take offense or bother to comment on their existence?

Not all greed takes place at the highest levels of leadership; but greed at any level has an effect on others. It sets a poor example of stewardship. It pits individuals against each other for personal gain. It promotes inequity and unfair distribution of resources. It breeds resentment, jealousy and dishonesty. Recognizing and guarding against greed is a necessary spiritual discipline for anyone who desires to follow God and to reflect God’s nature. This is especially true of those who hold positions of influence and leadership in the Christian community today.

The Biblical Witness

Gehazi is not exactly a household name, but his attitudes and actions have much to teach us about the allure and consequences of greed. As the servant of the ninth century BC Hebrew prophet Elisha, Gehazi occupied a position of both privilege and influence. His actions reflected not only his personal values and attitudes, but also reflected on his master, Elisha. Gehazi did not operate in a vacuum; his actions affected the witness and ministry of the prophet.

As we study this incident from Elisha’s ministry, it is important to remember that our attitudes and actions also have ramifications far beyond what we may perceive as our personal business. Gehazi learned this painful lesson in relation to greed.

2 Kings 5:19b-20 **Taking Matters into One's Own Hands**

^{19b}But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, ²⁰Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, "My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something out of him."

The story of the miraculous healing of Naaman's leprosy by Elisha is a charming and powerful one. Naaman, the commander of the army of Ben-Hadad II, king of Syria, was afflicted with the dreaded and incurable skin disease. He learned of "the prophet who lives in Samaria" (2 Kings 5:3) from an Israelite slave girl who served his wife. The slave girl heightened the drama of the story, for her presence in Aram (Syria) was the result of border skirmishes and hostage-taking between Israel and the Arameans.

Naaman arrived in Samaria with a letter of introduction and request from his king. He also brought with him a considerable inventory of precious metals and clothing to use as payment for services rendered in the event of a cure. 2 Kings 5:8-18 records the reluctant Naaman following Elisha's instructions to immerse himself seven times in the Jordan River, the miraculous restoration of his skin and his confession of the God of Israel as the one true God. The grateful general is ready to reward Elisha handsomely for his trouble, but the prophet adamantly refuses.

It is important to note here the motivation for Elisha's refusal of payment for his healing ministry. As the successor to the prophet Elijah, Elisha stood in a tradition of Hebrew prophecy that valued truth over popularity and faithfulness to God over compensation for pleasant words. False prophets of the day were marked by proclaiming what others wanted to hear and by profiting nicely from their trade.

Elisha's refusal of compensation illustrates his determination to serve the Lord purely out of obedience to God's direction.

What a stark contrast we see to the prophet's servant Gehazi! The servant's disdain for "that Aramean" is understandable in his context of political and military unrest, but his insistence on extracting "something out of (Naaman)" is both selfish and disrespectful of his master's wishes. Naaman was already on the road back to Syria when Gehazi pronounces an oath of determination ("as the Lord lives") that the recently healed commander of the Aramean forces would leave some of his material goods in Israel.

Gehazi had no authorization to pursue Naaman. He had only a motivation of self-serving greed. What follows is a downward spiral of deception and misrepresentation by the servant for his own purposes.

2 Kings 5:21-24 **Letting Greed Run Its Course**

²¹So Gehazi went after Naaman. When Naaman saw someone running after him, he jumped down from the chariot to meet him and said, "Is everything all right?" ²²He replied, "Yes, but my master has sent me to say, 'Two members of a company of prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim; please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.'" ²³Naaman said, "Please accept two talents." He urged him, and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them in front of Gehazi. ²⁴When he came to the citadel, he took the bags from them, and stored them inside; he dismissed the men, and they left.

The story of Gehazi's deceptive manipulation of Naaman is told with a chilling simplicity. He lied to the Syrian general about Elisha's circumstances and needs. Bands of prophets referred to as "a company of prophets" or "sons of the prophets" were common in Israel. Elisha was associated with prophets in Bethel (2 Kings 2:2), Jericho (2 Kings 2:5) and Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38). Gehazi falsely told Naaman that representatives from such a group had come to visit his master, Elisha, and that the prophet was in need of gifts for them.

Just as Gehazi hoped, Naaman jumped at the chance to be of assistance to the prophet to whom he felt indebted for his health, offering Gehazi even more goods than he actually requested! The deed was made even more sinister by Gehazi's cover-up of the ill-gotten gains once he reached home.

There are always ripple effects from any action. Evil actions produce harmful consequences. First, Gehazi put his master Elisha in the position of appearing self-serving. False prophets of the day prophesied for profit; Gehazi's actions reflected badly on his master. Second, Naaman's miraculous healing at the hand of God now had a price tag placed on it. No longer was the grace of God freely shared; it was available to one able to pay for it. Third, Elisha's needs now appeared to be met not by the generosity of the God he served, but by bartering with new converts for services rendered.

Nothing could be further from the spirit of Elisha's ministry. Gehazi was well aware of the evil of his actions, as evidenced by his concealment of the silver and clothing. What the servant could not cover up was the sin of his words and deeds and the harmful effects they produced.

2 Kings 5:25-27

Reaping Tough Consequences

²⁵He went in and stood before his master; and Elisha said to him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?" He answered, "Your servant has not gone anywhere at all." ²⁶But he said to him, "Did I not go with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? ²⁷Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendents forever." So he left his presence leprous, as white as snow.

The greed that had gripped Gehazi prompted him to conceal his actions from his master to the point of lying concerning his activities. The problem with lying to Elisha was that the prophet already knew the truth! Whether by divine revelation or by a discerning spirit or by unnamed informants, Elisha was aware that Gehazi had fallen into the trap of many others in the grasp of greed: he sought, under false pretences, that which was not his own.

That Gehazi would lie so blatantly to Elisha, his master, is indicative of the cumulative effect of his misdeeds. One sin truly led to another and another. Gehazi discovered there is no place to hide from the reality or the consequences of sin. His greed jeopardized his reputation, his relationship with Elisha, his master's ministry and even his own health. He compromised his integrity.

The leprosy that then plagued Gehazi carries many meanings. Obviously, it is the disease from which Naaman had just been delivered and can be interpreted as divine judgment pronounced by the prophet upon his servant. It can also represent the Hebrew understanding of corporate or

community solidarity, where the consequences both of blessing and sin are felt far beyond a single recipient or perpetrator. It also is a graphic rendering of the mark of disobedience upon a life—the deterioration of the outer person reflects the inner malaise of spirit.

Whatever significance one wishes to attach to Gehazi's leprous condition, the story surely has been preserved in Hebrew scripture as a warning against greed and its resulting ill effects.

Leading and Following

The United States economy is predicated on economic growth and expansion. Our culture is heavily materialistic. The advertising industry encourages us to satisfy our wants and our perceived "needs." The result of these pervasive factors is pressure upon us all to compete, acquire, consume and accumulate.

One night while channel-surfing, I was struck with how many times I was bombarded by commercials telling me I "deserved" this or that, or that time was running out for a real deal, or how desperate a merchant was to be taken advantage of monetarily by his or her customers, or there was the more subtle message that beautiful and intelligent and happy people use some particular product. It is little wonder that we feel deprived when there is so much out there we don't yet have! It is also little wonder that we feel pressured to gain wealth for the sole purpose of adding those possessions to our personal inventories.

That same night I also came across a religious broadcaster who assured me, as he stared intently into the camera, that all God needed to bless my life was a "seed of faith" contribution from me—to the religious broadcaster. The promise

he made was that God would return far more to me in both material and spiritual blessings (and miracles) than my original investment in the broadcaster's television ministry.

I suppose my high school government teacher was onto something, after all. For many, money truly is the "name of the game." The question is whether we as people of faith want to play that game. Jesus offered sobering words recorded in Matthew 16:26—"For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" If Gehazi could speak to us in person today, it would be interesting to hear his perspective on this profound biblical truth.

Wise leaders (and followers) learn from both the examples and the mistakes of others. The misguided efforts of Gehazi can become our motivation to evaluate our own attitudes toward wealth and the means we employ to accumulate it.

How much is enough? For what purposes do we amass wealth? What means are we willing to employ to reach our desired end? Is our first priority to continually honor God in both our acquisition and use of material gain? Do we recognize the difference between healthy initiative and dangerous greed?

The irony of running after wealth is that the finish line always seems to move away from us, just beyond our grasp. We can find better uses for our time and energy than the pursuit of a goal that perpetually eludes us and entices us to be less than God desires us to be.

Written by Bert Browning, senior pastor, Huguenot Road Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.

Pursuing Rightness Consistently

2 Kings 22-23

Theme: Wise Christian leaders consistently do what is right and understand that their faithfulness may call for sacrifice.

Introduction

Effective leadership in the best of times is never easy. When times are stressful and critical, principled leadership can be as rare as an artifact in a museum. Flawed systems tend to encourage flawed behavior. Businesses, corporations, nations, denominations and churches stand in need of reform. When any culture drifts from the principles from which its birth occurred, strong leadership is required to recover lost values.

When Josiah's father was murdered, he began to rule over a nation in moral and ethical decline, precipitated by years of apostasy and faithlessness toward God. Josiah reigned from 640 to 609 B.C. The young ruler, unlike his predecessors and the subsequent generation, was sincerely devoted to God. Only his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, gave any indication of honoring God in principle and practice.

Leadership can be tricky, especially when plummeting values characterize an entire culture. Every leader knows that progress rarely occurs in a straight line. Spiritual transformation and moral reform always occur in a resisting medium.

The issues Josiah faced can also describe the leadership challenges of our time:

- Rebuilding trust in leadership.
- Recovering a lost heritage and rediscovering the value of God's redemptive acts in history.
- Inspiring hope after years of corruption and cynicism.
- Galvanizing the public and overcoming resistance to change.
- Dealing firmly, yet fairly, with displaced persons who have gained financially or influentially from the "old system."
- Projecting a consistent example.
- Assembling a team sharing the same vision and values.

The chasm between leaders and followers grows with the hypocrisy, greed and insincerity of those who exploit their constituents. Jesus boldly confronted religious leaders who were guilty of treating persons as pawns simply to keep a system of power in place.

Senator Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) makes it a policy of returning to the Treasury any pay he receives that is above his salary when he began his 6-year term. He recently asked, "How can Congress give itself a \$3,400 pay raise while nearly 9 million people are unemployed?"

His question is justifiably pointed.

To Jesus, the needs of others were more important than the hypocritical double standard existing between CEOs, board members and stockholders. We soon realize that our culture is not far removed from Josiah's. The images and personalities are different, but the abuses are the same. In our day, external symbols (i.e. The Ten Commandments) seem to fuel more passion than meeting the needs of the impoverished.

Josiah led the way in instituting much needed reforms. He put himself at risk. Not everyone was happy. But the verdict of history has looked upon him with favor.

The Biblical Witness

2 Kings 22:1-2 Sweeping Reforms

¹Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. ²He did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

Josiah's accession to the throne of Judah at such a young age underscored the need for counselors and advisors. From the tender age of 8 until he was 39 years old, Josiah was rigidly focused on instituting much needed religious reforms. He refused to "turn aside to the right or to the left" (v 2).

Simple math indicates that the reforms were begun when Josiah was 20, but probably much younger according to the Chronicler (2 Chron 34:3). The vigor of youth combined with a sense of divine direction enabled Josiah to provide "one shining moment" in the otherwise dark demise of the nation of Judah.

Internationally, Judah was enjoying some degree of independence. Assyria had been greatly weakened due to the military alliance between the Babylonians, Medes and Scythians. Assyria's capital had fallen in 612 B.C. Judah, as a small vassal state, felt free to initiate social and reli-

gious changes now that the oppressive strength of the superpower had diminished.

On several fronts, Josiah pushed for reform.

2 Kings 22:3-7 The Repair of the Temple

³In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the LORD, saying, ⁴"Go up to the high priest Hilkiah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; ⁵let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the LORD; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house, ⁶that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. ⁷But no accounting shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly."

After years of neglect and idolatrous abuse, Josiah instructed Shaphan to oversee the repair of the temple, an administrative task which was done with the help of Hilkiah, the high priest. Shaphan, perhaps a secretary of state, had strongly supported the work and preaching of Jeremiah (Jer 26:24; 29:3). Craftsmen were paid and materials were purchased from the offerings of temple worshipers.

2 Kings 22:8-10 An Amazing Discovery

⁸The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD."

When Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it.

During temple renovations, Hilkiah discovered the scroll of the law. The high priest shared the scroll with Shaphan who always seemed to be in the right place at the right time during pivotal moments of national reform. Before sharing the scroll with King Josiah, Shaphan read it first. It is the consensus of contemporary scholarship that the scroll was some form of the Book of Deuteronomy. Shaphan not only faithfully administered the funding for temple repairs, he also knew that the discovered scroll had spiritual significance.

2 Kings 22:11-13 **Josiah's Response**

¹¹When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes.

On its face, the simple reading of the scroll brought conviction to King Josiah. The tearing of his royal garments indicated deep remorse and sincere repentance. In addition, Josiah authorized a delegation to seek out a prophetic interpretation of what he had learned from the words of the scroll.

It is interesting to contrast the reaction of Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, a few years later when Jeremiah's scroll was read (Jer 36:23). Instead of tearing his clothes, he shredded the scroll. He was not a "chip off the old block." Josiah's repentance, however, was heartfelt.

Another note of great significance is that Josiah felt responsibility for correcting the abuses of his predecessors.

2 Kings 22:14-20 **A Woman Speaks for God**

¹⁹because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the LORD.

Huldah, as a prophetess, is specifically identified and located. She is ranked with good company along with Miriam, Deborah and Noadiah in the Old Testament. Her message was simple and straightforward: The nation will not be spared God's judgmental wrath, but the humble and repentant Josiah would die and thus be spared the spectacle of national disaster.

Huldah's husband was a "keeper of the wardrobe," perhaps the priestly vestments in the temple or the royal garments of the court. The prominence of this prophetess, at least for a time, eclipses the popularity of Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Nahum, whose ministry had already received national attention.

2 Kings 23:1-3 **The Public Renewal of the Covenant**

¹Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. ²The king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. ³The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant

before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

Both king and people publicly subscribed to the stipulations of the covenant when the scroll was read. Public endorsement now paved the way for further reforms. Over the years the national identity as a covenant community had been greatly compromised by ethical breaches and spiritual apathy and by accepting idolatrous practices into the culture. “This act is nothing less than the recovery of a lost identity,” noted commentator Walter Brueggemann.

2 Kings 23:4-14 **The Great Purge**

Under Josiah’s leadership and with the help of the high priest, the systematic dismantling of every semblance of idolatry took place. Vessels consecrated to Baal, Asherah and the pagan deities were burned, pagan priests were deposed and related worship sites were demolished.

2 Kings 23:15-20 **Extending National Reforms**

With the decrease of Assyrian control and motivated by the euphoric success of religious reforms, it is believed that Josiah sought to reclaim the Northern Kingdom. Perhaps it was in stretching the capabilities of Judah’s military that the king made himself vulnerable to the forces of Pharaoh Necco. Nonetheless, the concept of a reunified Israel must have gained momentum by the dismantling of the central shrine at Bethel with its pagan influence over Samaria.

2 Kings 23:21-23 **The Passover Renewed**

²²No such passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, even during all the days of the kings of Israel and of the kings of Judah.

It was a Passover without precedent. To trace the history of the monarchy is to discover the absence of any mention of the Passover. In a sweeping maneuver to honor the words of the newly discovered scroll, the Passover had a galvanizing effect on the public and domestic worship. The Passover was a stimulus to remember the nation’s early deliverance from the oppression of the Egyptian pharaoh. Ironically, another pharaoh would engage the good King Josiah in battle.

2 Kings 23:24-30 **History’s Verdict, Surprising Demise**

²⁵Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

Josiah’s wholehearted sincerity is laudable. His reign provided an interlude of fresh air in an otherwise dark and dank history of spiritual and national decline. His death is surprising in light of Huldah’s prophecy. In order to oppose Pharaoh Necco, who had brought his troops to the aid of Assyria against Babylon, Josiah was killed at Megiddo. The prophecy was fulfilled only in the sense that Judah was still in tact and viable as a nation at the time of the King’s death. Thus “peace” prevailed, but only for a time.

Leading and Following

Josiah's experience reminds us that effective, moral leadership rarely occurs in the absence of historical knowledge. The reform movement received momentum when the lost scroll was found. When it was read, hearts were moved. An emotional and spiritual bond now existed with God's original design for the nation.

A nation or denomination that ignores or neglects its history is on a precipitous course. No one is surprised to learn that the nation of Judah had very little resemblance to its early national experience. The worship of fertility gods and goddesses had been thoroughly assimilated into the life of the nation.

Josiah faced the daunting task of recovering a lost heritage.

The Baptist witness has been compromised in recent years because our heritage as a free and faithful people has been flagrantly, if not intentionally, neglected. A new Baptist culture has emerged which bears little resemblance to the one which our forefathers experienced. In this vacuum of historical knowledge, we have witnessed the rise of secularism, fundamentalism and materialism.

For many it has been too long since pulpits thundered the principles of freedom which comprised the birthright of all Baptists. It will require strong leadership from persons who are willing to put themselves at risk if Baptists are called back to their first principles of soul competency, the freedom to interpret the Bible, local church freedom and religious liberty.

Perhaps Donald Creighton, the Canadian historian, was right when he noted, "History is the record of an encounter between character and circumstance."

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