

The Preacher Who Killed His Congregation

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HIS CONGREGATION (2 CHRONICLES 13:18)

Hidden among the historical events of antiquity is a story of a young king whose faith shone as a beacon in the darkness. It describes how on the eve of a great battle he preached an eloquent sermon, but unfortunately, listeners refused to heed his advice, and their folly was fatal.

After the death of Solomon, the nation of Israel was divided and continuing antagonism led to a civil war. Jeroboam, a mighty man of valor, had been crowned by ten tribes, and Abijah, who succeeded Rehoboam, reigned over Judah. The respective armies were ready for combat when a surprising event took place. Josephus, the famous historian, described the scene.

"Now, as the armies stood in array, ready for action and dangers, Abijah stood upon an elevated place, and, beckoning with his hand, he desired the multitude and Jeroboam himself to hear first with silence what he had to say. And when silence was made, he began to speak, and told them: `God had consented that David and his posterity should be their rulers for all time to come, and this, you yourselves are not unacquainted with; but I cannot but wonder how you should forsake my father, and join yourselves to his servant Jeroboam, and are now here with him to fight against those, who by God's determination, are to reign. . . but you considered nothing of all this. And what is it you depend upon for victory! Is it upon those golden heifers and the altars that you have on high places which are demonstrations of your impiety, and not of religious worship? Or is it the exceeding multitude of your army which gives you such good hopes? Yet certainly there is no strength at all in an army of many ten thousands when the war is unjust, for we ought to place our surest hopes of success against our enemies in righteousness alone, and in piety towards God; which hope we justly have, since we have kept the laws from the beginning, and have worshipped our own God, who was not made by hands out of corruptible matter, nor was He formed by a wicked king, in order to deceive the multitude; but who is His own workmanship, and the beginning and end of all things. I there-

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fore even now give you counsel to repent, and to take better advice, and to leave off the prosecution of the war, to call to mind the laws of your country and to reflect what it hath been that hath advanced you to so happy a state as ye are now in.'

`This was the speech which Abijah made to the multitude. But while he was still speaking, Jeroboam sent some of his soldiers privately to encompass Abijah round about on certain parts of the camp that were not taken notice of (The Works of Flavius Josephus, Book 8, Chapter 11, Paragraphs 2-3).

It is not difficult to visualize that young king speaking from his elevated position to the multitude across the valley. His faith in God was almost beyond comprehension. The incident may be considered under three headings.

The Terrible Predicament. . . How Frightening

He was outclassed. Jeroboam, the rebel leader, was an expert at making war. The ancient writer said of him: "And the man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valour and Solomon seeing the young man was industrious, he made him ruler over all the charge of the house of Joseph" (1 Kings 11:28). The prowess and courage of this captain was known throughout the nation, and after the king, Rehoboam, failed to alleviate the sufferings of the common people, the discontented tribes asked him to

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champion their cause. When Abijah became king of Judah, he had little if any military experience, and it became evident he was wearing a crown too heavy for comfort. It is said that "Jeroboam despised him for his youth," but the new monarch did not avoid his responsibilities. He gathered an army, and with great faith in God and his cause, went to the battle. He would have appreciated the words of Paul: "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

He was outnumbered. "And Abijah set the battle in array with an army of valiant men of war, even four hundred thousand chosen men: Jeroboam also set the battle in array against him with eight hundred thousand chosen men, being mighty men of valour" (2 Kings 13:3). Some theologians dispute the accuracy of these numbers, believing the opposing armies were

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smaller. Josephus agreed that the army of Abijah was four hundred thousand, "but the army of Jeroboam was double to it." The important detail of the story is that the Israelites enjoyed an advantage of two-to-one over Judah, and that, under any circumstance, would have been formidable. Evidently, Abijah believed God was the God of minorities and shared the conviction expressed by the two spies who assured Moses it was possible to overcome the inhabitants of the promised land (Num. 14:6-9). Men and women of faith never lose sight of God. Even David said to Goliath: ". . . Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand. . ." (1 Sam. 17:45-46). David was only a youth, but he was tall enough to look beyond Goliath and see Jehovah.

He was outmaneuvered. "But Jeroboam caused an ambushment to come about behind them: so they were before Judah, and the ambushment was behind them. And when Judah looked back, behold, the battle was before and behind: and they cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets. Then the men of Judah gave a shout: and as the men of Judah shouted, it came to pass, that God smote Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah" (2 Chron. 13:13-15). As Josephus indicated, the treachery of Jeroboam was unmistakable in that he used the speech as a cover for clandestine operations.

Evidently there was a nearby hill or gully by which some of the soldiers of Jeroboam reached the rear of Abijah's army, and when the men of Judah were fighting for their lives, a wave of fresh attackers came behind them, and it seemed the besieged men would either die or be compelled to surrender. The men of Judah had been outwitted by a merciless enemy who failed to understand that God could not be ambushed! When the great battles of life are fought, it helps to have God on your side!

The historian described how, in their extremity, the men of Judah (a) cried unto the Lord, (b) the priests sounded with their trumpets; and (c) the entire army shouted with a great shout. "... and as the men of Judah shouted, it came to pass that God

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smote Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. And Abijah and his people slew them with a great slaughter: so there fell down slain of Israel five hundred thousand chosen men" (2 Chron. 13:15-17).

Much might be said of the king's emotional appeal, but in the final analysis, more must be said of the mercy of God.

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Although they did not realize the importance of the occasion, a half a million souls were receiving Jehovah's final warning. The incident teaches (1) How important is God's message; (2) How inspiring is God's mercy; (3) How imposing is God's majesty. There is always a way of escape for sinners, but when they refuse to accept it, punishment is inevitable.

The Tremendous Preaching. . How Faithful

Probably this was one of the greatest Old Testament sermons ever preached. Its theme, its content and the power with which it was delivered, suggest the preacher would have been a worthy companion for Simon Peter and Paul.

It was fearless. The speaker had no intention of "playing to the gallery!" He accused his opponent of betraying everything decent and sacred, and his remarks were directed personally toward the person most concerned. Evidently, he expressed the thoughts which occupied his mind. If at a later time he were required to answer for his verbal abuse, he would bravely confront his demise. Yet, even in death, he would know he had spoken truth, and not compromised his convictions.

It was factual. Israel's difficulties had been increased by national decadence. The tribes had forsaken God and their "old-time religion"; the faith of their fathers had been sacrificed upon strange altars. The king's sermon was comprehensive in that it covered many areas.

The people had no excuse, for the tribes had been defiant in their rebellion. They had no sanctuary. They had deserted the temple in Jerusalem, and erected substitutes in Bethel and Dan. This was a revival of the pre-Abrahamic bull worship condemned by God and His servants. The nation had no priest. Jeroboam's false ministers offered incantations and sacrifices before their idols, but they had no contact with Jehovah. They

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had no Savior. The confidence of the people had been placed in golden calves, as was the case when Moses received the commandments on Mount Sinai. Israel had no conscience. When they listened to the voice of the royal evangelist, they heard nothing! When the call to repentance was made, they were already planning to outwit their opponents. They were beyond redemption.

They had no hope. They were dead even before they died! It was remarkable that an ancient speaker who never attended any school of the prophets, should become such a dynamic evangelist. He was more proficient in his mountain pulpit than he was in his palace. Evidently, he believed in the Psalmist's theology: "Happy is that people, whose God is the LORD" (Ps. 144:15). That he preached in vain proved the decadence of the nation. Unfortunately, revolution was more popular than revival, and that unfortunate situation led to tragedy.

The Thrilling Preservation.. How fabulous

..... and the children of Judah prevailed, because they relied upon the LORD God of their fathers." This was one of the most conclusive battles in the long and troubled history of the nation. Palestine was not a large country, and since the defeated ten tribes lost half a million chosen men, Israel not only suffered a humiliating defeat; the fathers of that generation were annihilated leaving only children and aging men. That explained the complete inability of the vanquished people to recruit another army during the reign of Abijah. "Neither did Jeroboam recover strength again in the days of Abijah." It is interesting that the historian was more concerned with how the battle was won

The Preacher Who Killed His Congregation than in the magnificence of the military achievement. He mentioned four features which invite examination.

Their Problem. ". . . the battle was before and behind. . ." The young king was unaware of the treachery of his opponent, and was devastatingly surprised when, in the heat of the battle, a new army attacked from the rear. Undoubtedly, confusion overwhelmed the soldiers of Judah who, for a few threatening moments, hardly knew what to do.

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Their Prayer. and they cried unto the Lord. . . ."

That was possibly the greatest prayer meeting ever assembled. Men fought for their lives, and at the same time asked God to intervene. That was at least one occasion when men prayed with their eyes open! The incident provided a classic example of the doctrine of James who said: "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). When all else fails, it pays to pray.

Their Praise. and the priests sounded with the trumpet"

The electrifying notes of the trumpets, heard above the noise of combat, revived and renewed the strength of the men of Judah, who, with increasing confidence and zeal, attacked their startled enemies. Centuries later the Savior said to His disciples: ". . . What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). Faith is a much stronger weapon than anything manufactured by men.

Their Partner. "God smote Jeroboam and all Israel"

It was never revealed how God destroyed the people who refused to obey His commandments. He overwhelmed the Egyptians by permitting towering walls of water to collapse on their pursuing army (Exod. 14:26-27). He defeated the host of the Syrians by allowing them to hear the movements of a heavenly host (2 Kings 7:6-7). The Lord destroyed a host of Philistines during a terrific thunderstorm, when, in all probability lightning caused havoc among the soldiers (I Sam. 7:10). God has innumerable weapons in His arsenal, but faith is the key which unlocks the storehouse of heaven's resources. Blessed is the man who knows he is never alone. Throughout their acute danger, the men of Judah relied completely upon God, and that was the secret of their invincibility. God has never changed. The writer to the Hebrews knew this for he wrote: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

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