

ABIJAH AND OPPORTUNITIES TO LEAVE A MARK FOR GOD
2 CHRONICLES 13

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

He was born in England. His family life was difficult. His first wife died in childbirth. The child did not survive. He divorced his second wife. He either failed, or was unhappy, in all of his early career choices. He barely avoided debtors' prison.

He decided to leave this unhappy life and emigrated to America. He finally had some measure of success in a new career. During this time he also became an advisor to a US general during the war.

He returned to England after the war and developed a reputation as something of a rabble rouser. To avoid imprisonment he fled to France. There he ended up in prison for almost a year and came very close to being executed. Being freed from prison, he returned to the US.

This man was hardly a friend of Christians. He once wrote, **"My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches... appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."** He also wrote, **"...it would be more consistent that we call [the Bible] the word of a demon than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and for my part, I sincerely detest it..."**

He died in Greenwich Village in New York City at age 72. There were just six people who came to his funeral. The obituary for him in the *New York Evening Post* read, **"He had lived long, did some good, and much harm."** In spite of this rather grim legacy he took advantage of an opportunity to make a significant contribution to our nation's history.

We sinners occasionally have opportunities to leave a mark for God. We can have usefulness in the plan of God in spite of our shortcomings. It is better to leave a consistent, godly legacy, but we sinners do have opportunities to leave a mark for God. Such is the lesson which we will discover today from the life of King Abijah.

We have begun a study of the kings of Judah. We have observed that the people of this southern kingdom of Israel lived in a situation that has similarities to our own. They had a godly legacy. They had founding fathers who had a commitment to the God of the Bible, but they had begun to stray away from their founding principles. Their national morality was in decline. Their leaders reflected, and sometimes took a lead in, this decline. But occasionally we see God's intervention and human efforts to stem this decline. In this we may find lessons for us in our own current environment.

I.

So we are going to turn to 2 Chronicles #13 (p. 367 in our black Bibles under many of the chairs). In the first three verses we learn about THE SETUP FOR AN OPPORTUNITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE SETUP FOR AN OPPORTUNITY) We read beginning in v. 1: **“In the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam, Abijah began to reign over Judah. He reigned for three years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Micaiah the daughter of Uriel of Gibeah. Now there was war between Abijah and Jeroboam. Abijah went out to battle, having an army of valiant men of war, 400,000 chosen men. And Jeroboam drew up his line of battle against him with 800,000 chosen mighty warriors.”**

The time setting is 913-911 BC. Abijah is the son of Rehoboam, who was the son of King Solomon. We saw last time, two weeks ago, that Solomon chose Rehoboam to follow him as king. But when Rehoboam went into the northern part of Israel to have the whole nation ratify that decision, he encountered a problem. There was this guy Jeroboam who spoke for the northern ten tribes. Most of the people wanted relief from the heavy burden which Solomon had placed upon the people to maintain his central government. Rehoboam listened to his younger advisors rather than his older advisors, who had probably served under Solomon. So he followed the unwise advice of his younger advisors and announced an even stricter and more burdensome rule.

Jeroboam had served under Solomon. A prophet had told him that one day he would lead the northern ten tribes of Israel. So now he led this northern kingdom in rebelling against the rule of Rehoboam. Ultimately this happened according to the sovereign plan of God. But the sin of Solomon in having so many wives and worshiping some of their gods played a part in what happened. Also the foolishness of Rehoboam in rejecting the advice of godly counselors was a contributing factor. Our passage informs us that there is ongoing conflict now between the north and the south.

A parallel passage in 1 Kings #15 vv. 1-3 gives us a more complete picture of this situation. (1 KINGS 15:1-2) In the first three verses we are told, **“Now in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam the son of Nebat, Abijah began to reign over Judah. He reigned for three years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Maacah the daughter of Abishalom. (1 KINGS 15:3) And he walked in all the sins that his father did before him, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father.”**

The original Hebrew word here for “wholly true” is *shalem*. It is a variation of the word *shalom*, which many of you will recognize. It is the Hebrew term of greeting. *Shalem* means “complete, fully perfected, wholly true.” Having a heart which is not *shalem* is a problem which we will find characterizes many of the kings of Judah.

It is a problem which characterizes many among us today. We may be born again. We may have trusted in Jesus as our Savior from sin. We may have embraced and received the grace of God. Yet we are so very much influenced by the world system around us. We are drawn toward its temptations and the idols which it offers to us.

Solomon recognized this problem in his day. At the time of the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, which construction he supervised, he uttered a beautiful prayer. In v. 61 of #8 in 1 Kings (1 KINGS 8:61) he charged his people, **“Let your heart therefore be wholly true to the Lord our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day.”**

Unfortunately Solomon’s heart proved not to be wholly true toward the end of his life. He married lots of women, some of them from pagan backgrounds. He recognized their false gods as worthy of worship. This resulted in God’s judgment that there later would be division in his kingdom. Now his grandson Abijah was dealing with that division. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Given Abijah’s history and the evaluation of his life which we have in 1 Kings #15, we might not expect too much good to come from him in a crisis situation. But sometimes desperate people in times of crisis will turn to the true God. This is a desperate situation. For our text in 2 Chronicles tells us that Abijah and his army are outnumbered two to one.

According to v. 2 there has been an ongoing conflict between the north and the south. I doubt that Rehoboam initiated this immediate battle. At the beginning the situation outwardly did not look good for the army of Judah. I suspect that the army of Israel expected to prevail. Whether we are talking about the armies of nations or political movements or opinions on social media, people expect that getting more people on your side will tend to carry the day. Having significantly greater numbers on one side is expected to instill fear and intimidation on the other side.

But difficult situations are also opportunities in which God can work in great ways. Desperate people who are not fully devoted to God sometimes rise to the occasion. Such is what we find to be true here.

II.

In vv. 4-12 of our passage we encounter THE NEED TO DECLARE TRUTH. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE NEED TO DECLARE TRUTH) We read in v. 4: **“Then Abijah stood up on Mount Zemaraim that is in the hill country of Ephraim and said, ‘Hear me, O Jeroboam and all Israel!’”** Mt. Zemaraim was apparently on the border between the tribe of Benjamin and the tribe of Ephraim. (MT. ZEMARAIM) It is unclear how Abijah and his army ended up here. The impression which we get from his speech is that Jeroboam is the aggressor. The speech which the southern king delivers serves as a challenge to Israel and an encouragement to his own army.

According to v. 5 Abijah declares, **“Ought you not to know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?”** Salt, according to the Old Testament law, was to be applied to many of the animal sacrifices. Probably its preserving quality was central to its symbolic value. Its connection with the Davidic covenant relates to the permanence of God’s promises to

David and his descendants. Kingship over Israel was to remain forever with David's sons.

The significance of salt and covenants is referenced in Numbers #18 v. 19 (NUMBERS 18:19). The Lord says to Aaron, **“All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to the Lord I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual due. It is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you and for your offspring with you.”**

The point in our passage is that God made a promise which cannot be broken that the legitimate kingship of the whole nation of Israel belonged to the descendants of David. Jereboam is therefore a usurper. He does not have the right to rule. In attacking Rehoboam and his forces Jereboam is opposing the truthful revelation of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This claim to truthful revelation necessarily requires an accurate understanding of history. It is important for any successful leader, especially a national leader, to know a nation's history. That is especially true in regard to our involvement in Afghanistan. Whatever we take away from that involvement, we need to remember why we were there, what happened there, what promises were made, and what lessons should be learned. A similar thing is true in regard to our nation's history, our family's history, and our personal history. We don't have to be controlled by the past, but we have to confront it and learn from it. Sometimes we have to acknowledge wrongdoing. We also need to bring the principles and promises of God into the picture.

Rehoboam continues his speech in vv. 6 & 7: **“Yet Jeroboam the son of Nebat, a servant of Solomon the son of David, rose up and rebelled against his lord, and certain worthless scoundrels gathered about him and defied Rehoboam the son of Solomon, when Rehoboam was young and irresolute and could not withstand them.”**

Abijah seems to be saying that Rehoboam is the rightful master of Jereboam. There is some debate about the reference to “him” in v. 7. It seems most likely to me that the “him” is a reference to Rehoboam. Young men unwisely told Rehoboam to be tougher on the people of his kingdom. This contributed to a split in the kingdom. In acknowledging the errors of his father, Abijah is perhaps trying to make it easier for the northerners to reunite with the south under his leadership.

Verse 8: **“And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord in the hand of the sons of David, because you are a great multitude and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam made you for gods.”** Rehoboam identifies three problems with Jereboam's attack upon Judah and its forces. First, Jereboam is withstanding, or opposing, the kingdom of the Lord. God said that the rightful kingdom belongs in the hands of David's descendants. Second, Jereboam thinks that by sheer force of numbers he can resist God's will. We can think in those terms as well. Third, Jereboam has chosen to promote worship of idols rather than worship of the true God.

He had earlier established worship sites in Dan in the north and Bethel in the south. He put golden calves in these places to be worshiped.

Abijah continues his attack on Jereboam in v. 9: **“Have you not driven out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made priests for yourselves like the peoples of other lands? Whoever comes for ordination with a young bull or seven rams becomes a priest of what are not gods.”** The Old Testament law said that priests had to be descendants of Aaron. Fellow members of the tribe of Levi were to assist them. The false worship system which Jereboam set up prompted the godly priests and Levites to move to the south to worship in the true temple in Jerusalem. Whoever brings enough animals for sacrifice and applies for the job of priest in the north is accepted. Likewise today people can buy degrees and ordination certificates online. That doesn't qualify them before God to serve as spiritual leaders.

Verse 10: **“But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken him. We have priests ministering to the Lord who are sons of Aaron, and Levites for their service.”** Abijah and his people are worshipping according to the Old Testament instructions. The Chronicler is also writing these words for the benefit of his audience which has returned from exile around 500 BC. This history is intended to be an encouragement to them to do worship the right way.

Abijah finishes off his message in vv. 11 & 12: **“They [the priests] offer to the Lord every morning and every evening burnt offerings and incense of sweet spices, set out the showbread on the table of pure gold, and care for the golden lampstand that its lamps may burn every evening. For we keep the charge of the Lord our God, but you have forsaken him. Behold, God is with us at our head, and his priests with their battle trumpets to sound the call to battle against you. O sons of Israel, do not fight against the Lord, the God of your fathers, for you cannot succeed.”** Abijah sees this looming conflict as a clash between a true worship system of the true God and a false worship system of pagan idols. He is demonstrating true Biblical faith.

This faith is demonstrated in the way in which the king leads his troops into battle. According to the Old Testament law (PROJECTOR ON--- NUMBERS 10:8) recorded in Numbers #10 vv. 8 & 9, **“And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets. The trumpets shall be to you for a perpetual statute throughout your generations. (NUMBERS 18:9) And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the Lord your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies.”** Now the priests are blowing their battle trumpets.

These actions from Abijah are impressive, coming from one who is described as not wholly devoted to the Lord. Perhaps the desperate circumstances facing him have brought him back to Biblical principles. This situation is certainly right to declare truth. There is a need to claim the promises of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Sometimes we have unique opportunities that come across our path to declare truth. Those opportunities may involve a nation, a church, a work situation, or a family situation. The need to declare truth may involve a gospel opportunity. Doug is a friend of mine who worked for a Christian group called Athletes in Action. He spoke here once years ago. One of his first assignments with this group was Ohio State University. He was hanging around the athletes' dormitory one day when he struck up a conversation with a freshman football player from Columbus, Ohio.

The young athlete's name was Archie Griffin. (PROJECTOR ON--- ARCHIE GRIFFIN) Doug asked if he could share a gospel tract with him. Archie said "yes." When Doug was done, Archie said he wanted to put his trust in Jesus as his Savior. Archie went on to have a successful football career. He was the only football player in history to win the Heisman trophy twice. More importantly, he became a disciple of Jesus. He became a witness for Jesus. Football coach Woody Hayes said of him, **"He's a better young man than he is a football player, and he's the best football player I've ever seen."** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archie_Griffin) Such are the opportunities that God sometimes brings across our path to leave a mark for Him.

III.

In v. 13 and the first part of v. 14 we encounter THE CHALLENGE OF DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES. (III. THE CHALLENGE OF DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES) The text tells us, **"Jeroboam had sent an ambush around to come upon them from behind. Thus his troops were in front of Judah, and the ambush was behind them. And when Judah looked, behold, the battle was in front of and behind them."**

The outward circumstances confronting Abijah and his forces were difficult. They were outnumbered two to one. They were surrounded. It was a fearful situation. But it is such difficult circumstances that sometimes prompt us to turn to the living God.

We Christians deal with an enemy who attacks us from the front and from the back. At times we feel like we are surrounded. Our enemy wants our surrender. But we have a powerful and gracious God. He hears the prayers of His people, even of those who fall far short of His holy standards.

The thief on the cross was such an individual. He has been incorrectly labeled as a thief. He was actually an insurrectionist who was probably guilty of murder. The Romans did not care about thieves. They did care about rebels who attacked their forces. He had been convicted and sentenced to death. He joined another criminal and Jesus in being crucified. Initially he joined the other criminal in mocking Jesus. But over the hours that passed he listened to the message of Jesus and observed His unusual behavior. He became convinced that Jesus was the real deal.

According to Luke #23 v. 42 (LUKE 23:42) he said to Jesus, **"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** Jesus responded (LUKE 23:43), **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."** This was a pretty bad guy. But he took advantage of a unique opportunity to place his faith in Jesus. He had no goodness

in him by which he could earn salvation. He responded in faith to the gracious offer of Jesus to believe. For that he was provided not with physical deliverance but with eternal deliverance.

IV.

In the second half of v. 14 through v. 1 of #14 we find THE RESULTS OF BIBLICAL FAITH. (IV. THE RESULTS OF BIBLICAL FAITH) In the second part of v. 14 we read, **“And they [Abijah and his army] cried to the Lord, and the priests blew the trumpets.”** Here we find the exercise of Biblical faith. God is in the business of responding to such faith. Here the deliverance involves a physical rescue.

According to v. 15, **“Then the men of Judah raised the battle shout. And when the men of Judah shouted, God defeated Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.”** The method of God’s deliverance is not stated. There may have been direct supernatural intervention of some kind. There may have been divine control of the circumstances. There may have been divine encouragement of Judah’s soldiers.

Verses 16 & 17: **“The men of Israel fled before Judah, and God gave them into their hand. Abijah and his people struck them with great force, so there fell slain of Israel 500,000 chosen men.”** There is some debate about how to interpret these numbers. This is a huge slaughter. The total number of casualties in the Battle of Gettysburg was about 51,000. This is apparently an even greater slaughter. It is a total victory for Judah.

Verse 18: **“Thus the men of Israel were subdued at that time, and the men of Judah prevailed, because they relied on the Lord, the God of their fathers.”** Here is the divine interpretation of the victory for Judah. Judah’s army won because they relied upon the true God.

Verse 19: **“And Abijah pursued Jeroboam and took cities from him, Bethel with its villages and Jeshanah with its villages and Ephron with its villages.”** The capture of Bethel is significant. (BETHEL MAP 2) This is one of the two towns which Jeroboam established to be his worship centers. There were idols of false gods placed in both places. So Judah’s victory and ensuing capture of Bethel were theological statements about the superiority of the true God. It would be eighteen years before the northern kingdom would be able to regain control of Bethel. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 20 adds, **“Jeroboam did not recover his power in the days of Abijah. And the Lord struck him down, and he died.”** It was actually a year after Abijah died that Jeroboam was struck down. But the author attributes Jeroboam’s death to the direct judgment of God.

Another result of this faith struggle between good and evil is described in v. 21: **“But Abijah grew mighty. And he took fourteen wives and had twenty-two sons and sixteen daughters.”** Abijah is blessed with a large family. In Psalm 127 (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 127:3,5) the psalmist writes, **“Behold, children are a heritage from the**

Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward... Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate."

Thus children are seen as a blessing of the Lord. But the multiplication of wives is a violation of God's law recorded in Deuteronomy #17. It was this multiplication of wives that got Solomon in trouble. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The story concludes in v.22 through v. 1 of #14: **"The rest of the acts of Abijah, his ways and his sayings, are written in the story of the prophet Iddo. Abijah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David."** We don't know otherwise anything about the writings of Iddo.

Thus we find that King Abijah had a mixed record. He lacked total commitment to the Lord. But in a situation of crisis, he returned to his spiritual roots. Sometimes that is what it takes for us. In tough situations God gets our attention and motivates us to do the right thing, to declare the truth, to speak a word for God.

The Englishman in our introduction experienced some tough challenges in life. He had significant failures. He had a sad ending to his life. Yet he made a significant contribution to our nation's history. Although he was involved with our American military, his pen was more powerful than his sword.

In January of 1776, the year in which the colonists declared their independence, he published a pamphlet that caught the attention of Americans who were upset with their mother country. In three months 100,000 copies were floating around the colonies. Eventually 500,000 copies were spread among the colonies. In a nation of only two million people this was an amazing accomplishment. This pamphlet attacked the British monarchy. It called it "the institution of the devil." The author pointed out that in the Old Testament most of the kings of Israel and Judah "seduced the people to worship idols."

In his authorship of "Common Sense" Thomas Paine (PROJECTOR ON--- THOMAS PAINE) earned the title from some of the colonists as the "Father of the American Revolution." His writing stirred the colonists to action.

Later in 1776 Thomas Paine wrote a follow-up pamphlet entitled "The American Crisis." On Christmas evening before the famous crossing of the Delaware River General George Washington ordered his officers to read it to his men. Thomas Paine had written, **"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of the country, but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered, yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."** With these words ringing in their ears, the continental army won a great victory over the Hessian troops at Trenton, New Jersey. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We are all sinners. In the judgment of the world, and perhaps even of God Himself, some of us are worse than others. Yet we are all saved only by grace through faith in Jesus. We all still have opportunities to leave a positive mark for God, which comes by speaking the truth, doing the right thing, and being a witness for the true God. It is better to leave a consistent, godly legacy, but we sinners all have opportunities to leave a mark for God.