

The wrong kind of creativity

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0:00] So we're looking in 1 Kings chapter 12 and we've prayed and I would like to say that this is one of those chapters where things go wrong.

! We've had the golden age of Solomon, we've been going through the book of Kings, so following it chapter by chapter, we've now got to this section at the end of chapter 12 where things go wrong. They go terribly wrong. They go wrong religiously. Now, I don't know what view you take of religion. It would be fairly common in our society to take a sort of equalities view of religion. Equalities is a great buzzword these days. So all religions are just a matter of choice, so you choose the religion that suits you.

They're all equally valid apart from extremism. I don't know what extremism is. I thought if you believe something you should believe it with an extreme enthusiasm. But anyway, it would be said that all religions are equally valid apart from extremism.

[1:11] That they're all worthy attempts to find God with a small G or a big G or plural at the end of it. But the Bible has a very different slant.

The Bible does not commend all religions and say, well done guys, good effort. The Bible is very harsh on some forms of religion.

In fact, most forms of religion. And says that religion can be not a commendable effort, but an insult to God.

And of all sins, strangely, the Bible often says the worst sin is your religion.

And that's what it says in this chapter. In other words, religion is not in the Bible seen as a solution to the human condition, but sometimes the worst and most blameworthy sin of the human condition.

[2:20] Strange, isn't it? Surprising. Strange. But that's what the Bible says. And we're going to see an example of it here in 1 Kings 12. So, I, after a couple of attempts, this is what I've come out with as an outline.

It's to do with King Jeroboam. So, five questions. Who is Jeroboam? What did he think? What did he say? What did he do? And what made it so bad?

So, that's my plan of attack this morning. Five questions. Who is Jeroboam? What did he think? What did he say?

What did he do? What made it so bad? Number one. Who is Jeroboam? There's a picture of him, which you'll recognize instantly. His name means, the people strive.

Very democratic name. And I mischievously thought, perhaps Jeremy Corbyn wishes that his parents had named him Jeroboam. The people strive.

[3:23] It's a nice sort of socialist name, really, isn't it? A nice democratic name. Jeroboam, without giving you all the details of the story, was a capable, gifted, popular young man.

And he appears in the story in chapter 11. He has a good track record of building and management. It says in chapter 11, verse 28, Jeroboam was a man of standing.

And when Solomon saw how well the young man did his work, he put him in charge of the whole labor force of the house of Joseph. So, he was a good, up-and-coming, talented chap.

And strangely, and without any warning, the word of the Lord came into his life to give him kingship. To give him kingship of the north.

And along with this gift came promises from God if he walked with God in obedience.

[4:31] So, the word of the Lord said to him, I will take you. You will rule over all that your heart desires. You will be king over Israel if you do whatever I command you.

Walk in my ways. Do what is right in my eyes. As David, my servant, did. I will be with you. And I will build you a house as long-lasting as the one I built for David.

So, what an amazing promise. What was he? He was a building supervisor. And now he's going to be king.

And he was promised ten portions, ten tribes out of the twelve. And this was shown by a cloak being ripped into ten pieces. So, there's the ten pieces.

Ten pieces. I'm sure he would never have forgotten that cloak being ripped into ten pieces. Ten tribes. The northern tribes will be given to you. He was popular.

[5:35] People wanted him to be king. So, there he is being king. And as we come into chapter 12, verse 25, it says, Then Jeroboam built, well, it says fortified Shechem.

But the word is built. He built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And from there he went out and built up Peniel. So, he's still building.

And he's like Solomon. Solomon loved building. And Jeroboam is also a builder. So, what could possibly go wrong? He seems like an excellent leader.

We're doing some practical theology in the evenings. Thinking about how to appoint deacons. And if Jeroboam was a church member, I'm sure we'd be thinking, Excellent chap.

Bright future ahead of him. Capable. Well, it all goes horribly wrong. So, second question. What did he think?

[6:34] So, in verse 26, it tells us what he thought. Jeroboam thought to himself, or actually it literally says he said in his heart, but thought will do. Jeroboam thought to himself, The kingdom is now likely to turn to the house of David.

If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again turn to their Lord Rehoboam, king of Judah.

They will kill me and turn to King Rehoboam. So, I read it in a literal clunky translation. But as you can see, he was worried about people turning.

So, you need a little map. So, I've done a little map here. So, this is sea. This is land. That's the Dead Sea. That's Sea of Galilee.

And the kingdom of Israel is divided into two sections. The north up here. The south here. And Jeroboam is king of the north.

[7:45] This bit. And you need to know a little bit of geography in order to make sense of what's said. So, like in England, we have from John O'Groats to Land's End. That's what we say about the north.

And from the very top to the very bottom of the country. They would say from Dan to Beersheba. North, Dan, south, Beersheba. So, two extreme ends.

Capital of, well, what used to be capital of everything is Jerusalem. Just here. And Jeroboam has in his sight Dan at the north.

And this place here called Bethel. Anybody remember what Bethel means? House of God.

Interesting. Of course, this is where the house of God is. But strangely enough, there's another place, a sort of alternative, called Bethel.

So, let's just look at what he's thinking. He's thinking, the people in the north, whoops there, will turn back to the south if I let them.

[8:55] They'll turn back to the historic home of King David, the historic city of Jerusalem, and the current king, David's grandson, Rehoboam. And he says, and the key to this is when they go three times a year to offer their sacrifices, they will go to Jerusalem.

And that's a key thing. And that's a key thing. Because once they go to Jerusalem and remember the promises of God and King David, they'll turn to that country.

So, he's thinking sacrifice is basic in this matter. They'll want to sacrifice and they'll go to Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is the key to sacrifice.

And interestingly, he says, when he says it in his heart, they will turn to their lord, Rehoboam, king of Judah.

So, it sounds to me as if he's really thinking, Rehoboam actually is their king. I shouldn't be. Rehoboam is their king. They know that. They will turn to their lord.

[10:02] And he, furthermore, thinks in a fearful way. And what will happen if that happens? They'll kill me and turn to King Rehoboam.

So, he's thinking this in a panicky, fearing way. So, let's just notice about what he's thinking in his heart. He's very definite about the sacrifice being the key.

That's fundamental to his thinking. They're going to go and do sacrifices. They want to do sacrifices. They need to do that. It's also interesting that he is unconvinced about what God has given him. Because, do you remember, in the terms at which God spoke, he says, I give you the northern kingdom. If you walk with me, it will be secure in your hands down through a number of generations.

That's interesting because God said he would do that. But, Jeroboam is unconvinced that God is capable of doing that, isn't he? Because he's worrying.

[11:13] He's saying, oh, they'll turn away. They'll kill me. It's interesting that at the root of this, he's not convinced that God means what he says. And he's not convinced that God can actually do it.

He's fearful that God will not keep his promises. And lots of bad things come from this. And I'd like us, before we go on, just to simply notice that not believing what God has said is very close to the heart of sin.

And you and I, let's be honest, that's one of our big struggles, isn't it? To actually believe that what God has said is true. So, for some of us, it's very difficult to believe that God actually loves us. Because we're so aware of our own failures and deficiencies and weaknesses. Even though God has, Jesus has died on the cross for us and God has demonstrated his love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

We don't necessarily believe him. And I want to say, we should believe him. We should believe him.

[12:33] It's part of what faith is, to say, even though it doesn't make sense to me, I'm going to believe God. And it's actually fundamental to our Christian lives that we do live lives of faith.

So, there's one example, believing that God loves us. We shouldn't be fearful. We shouldn't make plan B like he's doing here, in case God doesn't.

So, what did he think? Thirdly, what did he say? Well, first of all, so this is, what did he say? Verse 28. After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves.

He said to the people, it is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. One he set up in Bethel.

The other in Dan. One, and so on. Let's take it at a time. So, first he took advice. Well, getting advice is a good thing, isn't it?

[13:35] The Bible says in the multitude of counselors there's wisdom or something like that. The king of the south, Rehoboam, took advice.

Do you remember? He took advice from the old men who said, be a servant king. And the young men who said, show them who's boss. So, it does depend whose advice you take, actually, doesn't it?

Taking advice is a good idea. Just a question of who you ask. He took advice. And he made two bull calves.

Might have a picture of them. There we are. This is his action. He made two bull calves.

Let's look at what he says by way of commentary. He said to the people, it is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem.

[14:32] What an interesting thing for him to say. Guys, you live up there in the north. You live in the Hill and the Grimsby of Israel.

You know, what do we want to be doing going down to that smoky old southern place? That's a long, long way. That's a lot to ask, isn't it?

It's too much for you to do that. And it's interesting that his approach is based on a sort of reasoning to avoid excess. You don't want to be going all that long way.

You know. You don't want to do anything demanding in your spiritual life or anything that demands that sort of effort. No, no, no. It's interesting what Jesus said on this.

He said, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. But he did say, take my yoke upon you and learn from me.

[15:36] So it's interesting the balance of that, isn't it? Jesus doesn't say, there's no yoke. You know, that would be too much. He says, oh, no, there is a yoke. You've got to take it on. You've got to put it on fully.

Now, you won't find it burdensome. But you do have to put it on. It's very interesting as we sort of talk to ourselves and hear voices talking to us.

Too much for you to do that. Too much for you to do that. Too much to expect you to read your Bible. Too much to expect you to pray. Too much to expect you to turn up.

Hold on, hold on. Satan uses those sorts of argument. It's too much.

Here, here, here up in the north. Here are your gods. Behold your gods, O Israel. I think that's been said before in the Exodus.

[16:41] Where they made the same mistake of making golden calves. It was an appalling mistake. They're doing it again. But this is what he's saying. Don't go down there to Jerusalem.

Behold, here are your gods. Ta-da! Golden calf. Fantastic. They've got nothing like that down in the south. Now, it's very interesting.

What theology is he doing? Is he saying, forget the Lord God, the historic God. Forget him.

This is brand new. Because he isn't really saying that, is he? He's saying, no. Coming out of Egypt. All of that.

Yeah, that's us. You know, that's our historic. That's us. And this, this bull, is the one who did it.

[17:44] Here are your gods who brought you out of Egypt. I find that quite confusing, isn't it? What's he actually saying to them? He's not bringing in another god.

He's not saying, here's Baal. We'll worship Baal. Or here's Ashtaroah. We'll worship Ashtaroah. He says, here's the calf. This is what brought you out of Egypt. He's almost saying, this is what the Lord is.

It's quite a subtle, twisty sort of thing that he's doing. Are they different gods? Or is he saying, you know, Aaron, he got a very bad press when he did the golden calf.

But he was right all the time, actually. This is part of our historic identity. I don't know what he was saying. But the people were, they were very happy with it.

I want to say, just to be quite clear, there is a clear command. And there always has been, right from the beginning of Israel's existence, that you don't make things to worship.

[18:52] So you worship the Lord in that way. Two commandments at the beginning of the Ten Commandments. Number one, you shall have no other gods before me.

So they could say, well, we're not having other gods, are we? It's not Baal. It's not Ashtaroah. Not Chemosh, the abominable god of the whoever, Moabites. No, it's not having other gods.

Commandment number two. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Don't make an idol in the form of something in heaven, or on earth, or under the water, to make that your focus of worship, your object of worship.

[19:59] I can't see any way around that. He's just not doing what he's told. Am I right? He says don't do that, and that's exactly what he's doing. And he's very clever about it.

I haven't got the map up, but he puts one up in the north, top end of the country. You know, if you fancy a skiing holiday or something, you could call in at Dan. And then one on the south.

If you were going to Jerusalem, there's one right on, you know, you don't have to bother going across the border. You know, perhaps you didn't bring your passport, didn't change your money.

You know, here's Bethel, house of God. What could be better? Stop off here. Worship the golden calf there. So that's what he said. And what God says about it is this.

It says, verse 30, this thing became a sin. And the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there, which is strange, because he says you don't have to do long journeys, but they're apparently saying, no, we're up for that.

[21:04] There's a golden calf at the end of it. We'll go as far as Dan to worship the one in the north. It became a sin. What did he do?

What did he do? Well, I'd like you to look at verses 31 and onwards, and let me do a thing with the translation again, because there is a word which isn't obvious in the translation.

It's the word to make, and it crops up lots of times. So he's made, in verse 28, two golden calves. One in the north, one in the south. And let me read what it says. Jeroboam made a house on high places.

Another thing is made like Solomon, but not that one, a different one. He made houses on high places, and he made priests from all sorts of people.

[22:09] Very democratic. Very, very democratic. But you can tell the writer is not pleased. Because priests are special.

You can't just have anyone as a priest in this arrangement here. He made priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites. Verse 32.

There's a priest. He made a festival on the 15th day of the 8th month, like the one held in Judah. And he offered sacrifices on the altar.

So he's made a time, a timetable, a feast, a festival. And it says... And it says... No, let's carry on down.

He... This he made in Bethel. Sacrificing to the calves he had made.

[23:09] And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made. And in the 15th day of the 8th month, a month he devised from his own heart, a month of his own choosing.

He offered sacrifices on the altar he had made at Bethel. So he made the festival for the Israelites and went up to the altar to make offerings.

Do you get the idea that the writer is wanting us to realize that all of this is man-made? Where did it come from? He made it. And why did that come from?

He made that. And where did that bit come from? He made that. He made the whole thing. It's all man-made. He made in Bethel. There's the house, the calves he made, the priests he made, the altar he made, the festival he made.

And the theologian John Calvin made this interesting comment that Jeroboam is not alone in making religion. And he says, the theologian says, the heart of man is a factory of idols.

[24:21] Interesting, isn't it? He's saying it isn't just Jeroboam that does this. But this is what sin does to human beings or what sinful human beings do.

They love to make up God and a way of thinking of God, a way of portraying God and a way of approaching God.

Have you ever met anybody who says, I like to think of God as, and then you fill in the blanks there. I've met people who say that.

You say what it says in the Bible and say, well, I like to think of God as such and such. Or my God is very personal to me. Meaning I've made up my own version of God.

That's what he did. And I would invite you to ponder how insulting this is to the real God.

[25:23] Who says, this is what I am like. This is the way of approaching me. And Jeroboam says, no, no, you're not like that. You're like this. You're like a cow, like a calf.

And we approach you this way. Not that way. And God says, what do you think you're doing? So what made it so wrong? Last question.

Well, I have to say that in some ways, from some points of view, actually, he was very smart. Okay, American word smart, English word clever, whichever word you want to choose.

He was good at what he did. He wants to keep his kingdom together. And this method is highly successful. It's long lasting, because down through the generations, people say the same arrangement was in place for years and years on.

It's so very long lasting. It did keep the kingdom from turning back, because there was never a movement to go back to reunification. And it was very popular with people. It was, wasn't it?
[26:34] They said, this is great. What should we do for our summer holidays? Tell you what, we'll take a trip to Dan. I know it's a long way, but you know they've got a golden calf there. Got nothing like that anywhere else.

We'll go up there. Fantastic. We'll make a, I'll tell you what, if we go in the eighth month, on the 15th day, we can go for the face there. That would be brilliant, wouldn't it? Take our sandwiches, make, come on, the whole family can come.

Brilliant. Very popular. Which shows us that religious things can be very successful. And very popular.

But still completely wrong. It's a bit sobering, isn't it? How can they all be wrong? Well, they are. Conversely, it does not prove that unsuccessful, unpopular things are right.

Sometimes churches use the idea that they're unsuccessful and unpopular. Say, well, at least we're faithful. It doesn't prove that either, I'm afraid. So, let's just take this on a bit.

[27:39] What did make it so wrong? Well, we are forbidden to attempt to image God. So, he says, there is no way that you can take something that has been made and say, that is a good representation of God.

So, you can't take a star or a planet and say, that's what God's like. Or, you can't take anything in this world. You can't take a cow or a snake or a dog or a cat and say, that's what God's like. Because all of that squeezes and reduces God so much that it's an insulting thing to do. It is always wrong to image God.

Because there is only one place where you can look and see God. And that's Jesus. Because it says, he, he is the exact image of God.

And do you remember Jesus talking to Philip, the friend that he'd been with for so many years. And Philip said to him, show us the Father and that will be enough.

[28:56] And Jesus said to Philip, have you been with me so long and you haven't realized that if you see me, you've seen the Father. He is the exact representation of his being.

That is the only image of God that does the job. And he does the job perfectly. And that's a testament to the glory of Jesus.

There's no one else like him. No one comes anywhere near him. Only he is the one. If you look into his eyes, you see God. Don't try looking into the eyes of a golden calf.

Because you just see rubbish. And we're also forbidden to change the time and the place.

And the person by whom we come to God. Now in the Old Testament, there was a very complicated set up with a place, Jerusalem.

[29:59] The place, and we've been through all this, how much effort was taken to build a house and plate it with gold and all the sacrifices and everything. And there was, this whole system was run by a priesthood who had a very particular job of making the sacrifices.

No one else was to do that. It was a very exacting job, a very special job. They made the sacrifices. And the sacrifices, day by day, month by month, year by year, God says, this is how it's to be done. So, in the Old Testament, it was all laid out in considerable detail. Now sometimes when people move to the New Testament, because we don't live in the Old Testament, we live in the New Testament.

People say, ah, well, then God must have told us that when you meet together, first of all you have a hymn. And then only the pastor can announce the hymn.

And then you've got to have a long prayer and a short prayer. And so on. And that's the way to approach God. And I think that's going down the wrong route. Because actually the Bible doesn't specify those things at all.

[31:08] It describes what happens when Christians meet in a different way altogether. It doesn't give a blueprint. But what the New Testament does, it doesn't have earthly places and priests and sacrifices.

But in the New Testament, it has one place. And the place is a hill in Jerusalem, or actually outside Jerusalem, where criminals were executed.

And one time, three condemned criminals were executed. One on the right, one on the left, and one in the middle. And the ones on the right and the left were guilty of terrorism.

The one in the middle had never done anything wrong. That place was the place of the skull, Golgotha, sometimes known as Calvary.

That's the place. That's the only place where we can approach God. Through that, the cross of Christ. And the priest, I'm not a priest.

[32:22] Even if I had a long beard, I would actually not be a priest. Because we're all priests, in a sense, as priesthood of all believers. Our priest, the one person who stands between us and God, and the person who is, as it were, holding hands with God, at the right hand of God, and can stretch out a hand to us, and say, if you put your hand in my hand, I can bring you to God.

That's what a priest does. That's what a priest does. No human being can do that, apart from Jesus. There is one God.

There is one sacrifice. There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. He's the only one who can do this.

And there is one time. So, okay, we like to celebrate Christmas and Easter, and okay.

But, timing in the New Testament, there's only one time that fits into this category, which is a long time ago, 2,000 years ago.

[33:44] So, we have a place. We have a time. It was on a Friday, when this person in the middle was nailed on the cross, and the sun refused to shine, and the earth split open, and he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And at that time, he bore in himself the penalty for our sins. He bore this in his own body on the tree. And he did it all in that space of whatever it was, a matter of hours.

And that's the time when the sacrifice was made, and at the end of it, do you know what Jesus said at the end of it?

Finished. Done. That's the sacrifice. Don't have to repeat it. Don't have to imitate it. Don't have to offer him afresh, because he did it all then.

He did it all then. Amen. Jeroboam sinned greatly. He made a version of biblical religion, which was not from the revelation of God's word, but was manufactured.

[35:17] It was made up from the human heart, and by human hands. But I say, let's not manufacture anything. Let's take what God has given to us in his word, because he's shown us completely, and fully, and gloriously, who he is, what his image really is, and how to approach him.

He has shown us, he has made, he has finished. He's shown us who he is, on the cross. He's made the sacrifice.

We don't have to make any more, we don't have to alter it, and he finished that work, so we don't have to repeat it. And if we were to try and make that different, we would be doing the same sin as Jeroboam.

What a disaster. He doesn't say to us, you manufacture something, he says, I've done it. And our job is not, to manufacture it, but to receive it.

So I can ask these questions. Jesus dying on the cross, God being revealed in Jesus Christ, are you happy with that? Good enough for you?

[36:42] You say, yeah. You're not saying, yeah, but I actually prefer, I prefer something a little bit, you're not saying that, are you? You're saying, this is it. Jesus, absolutely.

You're happy with that? What he did for you? You don't want to add to it. You don't want to change it. You don't want to say, oh, it would be better if, you say, it's absolutely perfect as it is.

Are we embracing Jesus? We say, he's the one. Yeah. Don't want anyone else, don't want a Jesus mark too, we don't want a new, improved Jesus. He's the one that really is.

And, the way to God, through him, his promises, his sacrifice, we're not saying, well, I'm not too sure about that. You know, can you have a bit of meditation in there, or something like that?

No, we're not saying that, we're saying, what he did, spot on, can't be improved, totally happy with it, absolutely brilliant. He said, it's finished.

[37:49] It's finished. Let's sing together.