



# The Courage to Believe

Lessons in the life of Jeroboam

This booklet is a written version of the Burning Heart film series of the same name. The content was written for film, and we believe that it works best on film (so do watch it), but we make all our films available in writing for those who want to look back over what they've seen, or prefer to read than watch.

## *A forgotten king*

When people think of Biblical heroes they think of people like David, Mary, Peter or Abraham.

One name that doesn't ever seem to make the list is that of Jeroboam. Most people (even most Christians) have never heard of him. If they have heard of him, it's more likely to be because a particular extra-size bottle of champagne is known as a 'Jeroboam' than because of the Bible. This obscure type of wine bottle is the only lasting legacy of a man who could have been great.

In some ways, all you really need to know about Jeroboam is that you don't know about Jeroboam. That one fact, is actually the most important thing about this man.

It should all have been so very different. Jeroboam was supposed to be one of the heroes and giants of the Bible, and this short booklet is all about what went wrong, and how that should challenge us – you and me.

## *A dramatic promise*

We find Jeroboam's story in 1 Kings 11 to 14 – and it all starts with a bang! In 1 Kings 14:29-32 we read:

*About that time Jeroboam was going out of Jerusalem, and Ahijah the prophet of Shiloh met him on the way, wearing a new cloak. The two of them were alone out in the country, and Ahijah took hold of the new cloak he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. Then he said to Jeroboam, "Take ten pieces for yourself, for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'See, I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and give you ten tribes. But for the sake of my servant David and the city of Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, he will have one tribe.*

Solomon's sin had caught up with him, and God tears away half the kingdom, and gives it to Jeroboam.

And there's more – God also makes a promise to Jeroboam:

*"If you do whatever I command you and walk in obedience to me and do what is right in my eyes, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you."<sup>1</sup>*

### *A great name and legacy*

When you stop and think about it, that is the most extraordinary promise. I am one of millions people around the world, and through the ages, who have been named 'David.' All of us, to some degree or another, are ultimately named after our famous forbear, King David. It's an association I've always loved. David has been a hero and inspiration to me.

Even though he lived and died nearly three thousand years ago, David has left an enduring and important legacy. We know and read his story, we pray and sing his psalms. Most importantly of all Jesus was one of his descendants and part of his dynasty – when God himself came to earth as a man, he picked David as an ancestor.

That all means that David's story is part of all our stories, because God chose to use David as part of his plan to save the world. That's quite something! And all that could have been Jeroboam's as well.

That was all bundled into what God offered Jeroboam – if he followed God, God promised to build Jeroboam a dynasty as enduring as the one he built for David.

I might have been called Jeroboam – lucky escape! But I'm not, and none of that happened, and nobody's ever heard of him.

So what went wrong?

### *The Golden Calves*

God delivered on his side of the deal. When Solomon died, Jeroboam did indeed become King of the new northern kingdom of Israel, through a bloodless rebellion and coup.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 11:38

It was at that point though that things started to go wrong. Jeroboam realised that the Temple in Jerusalem was still the centre of his people's worshipping life, we're told that he reflected that:

*"if these people go up to offer sacrifices at the Temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam King of Judah. They will kill me and return to [him]."*<sup>2</sup>

Jeroboam was afraid, so he set up an alternative to the Temple. He had two new shrines built in his own kingdom, at Bethel and Dan, and he had two golden calves made as a centrepiece for the people's worship.

Bizarre as it may seem, Jeroboam probably intended them to be used to worship God – he didn't want to worship a new God, he just wanted to be in control, to do things his own way.

Whatever Jeroboam's motives, the results were disastrous – the golden calves drew people away from worshipping God.

That's really the key moment in Jeroboam's life. He was afraid, he didn't believe that God would do what he had promised, and so he did something stupid. It was a catastrophic failure of faith.

### *Defending Jeroboam*

In recent years though, Jeroboam's reputation has undergone something of a revival. Modern theologians are increasingly quick to jump to his defence. In an age when religion and politics were inextricably intertwined, where you worshipped was a matter of national importance.

One scholar, describes the pull of people travelling back to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple, and then explains that: "*politically it was essential that Jeroboam should stop them from doing so.*"<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand what's going on here, it's perhaps helpful to use a contemporary illustration – Brexit. In 2016 Britain voted in a referendum to leave the European Union (EU), actually leaving a few

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 12:27

<sup>3</sup> John Drane *Introducing the Old Testament*, p126.

years later. The famous slogan used by the Brexit campaigners was 'take back control' – they felt that Britain had given away too much power to the EU.

Imagine how much more controversy there would have been if British people had been asked to cede control of key areas of national life, not to the EU (an institution we were actually part of) but to a completely foreign nation.

To Jeroboam, the southern kingdom of Judah wasn't just another nation – they were his rivals, a threat, his enemy. No wonder he was worried! No wonder, you might say, he did what he did.

*Did Jeroboam have the courage to believe?*

That is where the story of Jeroboam suddenly becomes relevant for us. His decisions seem so reasonable – surely any of us would have done the same thing?

But (and it's a big 'but'), however reasonable they might seem, Jeroboam's actions were in direct disobedience to God.

The reality was, Jeroboam faced a choice. Would he trust God? Would he trust God despite the circumstances and the demands of realpolitik? Would he trust that God could deliver on what he had promised?

Or would he decide not to? Would he decide to go with the ways of the world, trusting his own judgement, and taking the easy path.

In short, did Jeroboam have the courage to believe?

*What about us?*

The reality is that we face that same choice all the time. Our situations may not be the same as Jeroboam's, but the choice *is* the same. So often we will find that the wisdom of the world cuts across the ways of God.

We face that same choice - do we have the courage to believe? Do we have the courage to follow God's ways?

Maybe it's at work – when we filmed *The Courage to Believe*, I was living and working in the City of London. I was surrounded by some

of the biggest firms and businesses in the world. There was (and is) a huge amount that's good that goes on in the City, but one word you won't often hear is "love." Yet Jesus commanded us to make love for others a priority. He told us to "*love your neighbour as yourself*."<sup>4</sup> Do we choose to love others, and put them first – even at work, when it might seem madness for us?

Maybe it's at home. Another thing that Jesus told us to prioritise was forgiveness – not something that most of us find easy, particularly maybe at home. How good are we at forgiving our families or housemates?

Maybe it's something big – being willing to risk your career, rather than do something you know is wrong.

Maybe it's something small, those numerous little decisions we make every day to tell the truth, to admit our mistakes, to forgive our colleagues, or to be open about our faith with those around us.

### *The direction of travel*

Sometimes we will slip up, we will fail, we will not believe. Thankfully it's not about the score sheet – in Jesus there is forgiveness and a fresh start again and again.

It is about the direction of travel though. Where is our focus, where do we want to be heading? Are we looking to Jesus? Do we want to walk in his ways? Do we have the courage to believe in him?

### *Outcomes*

But what happened to Jeroboam?

In the short term, his plans worked – Rehoboam didn't manage to retake the kingdom, and Jeroboam remained king for the rest of his life. This isn't a simple story of immediate consequences. Life isn't like that, and neither (usually) is the Bible.

In fact, things often seem to go the other way in the Bible – David's early years for instance were full of trials and struggles, as he had to

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 12:31

deal with the increasing paranoia and hatred of King Saul, while Jeroboam seemed to start off well.

That means that choosing to follow God's ways – having the courage to believe – won't always look like a smart choice. Things may go wrong, others may succeed by making the opposite choice, life may be difficult.

That probably shouldn't surprise us though. After all we follow a crucified messiah, who told us that *'in this world you will have trouble.'*<sup>5</sup>

In the long term though, Jeroboam's actions were a disaster. Whatever his intentions, we are told that what he did destroyed Israel's relationship with God:

*"Jeroboam enticed Israel away from following the LORD and caused them to commit a great sin."*<sup>6</sup>

That sin would have huge consequences. We read in 1 Kings 13 and 14 that God turned against Jeroboam. His later years were marred by personal tragedy, and a promise from God that his dynasty would wither and die – which it did shortly after his death. The writer of kings laconically comments:

*"this was the sin of the house of Jeroboam that led to its downfall and to its destruction from the face of the earth."*<sup>7</sup>

### *The sin that led to the downfall of a nation*

Tragically by then Jeroboam's sin had spread and taken root throughout northern Israel, to be repeated again and again by each new generation. It was a cycle that ultimately led to the downfall of the entire nation:

*'the Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam...until the LORD removed them from his presence...the people of Israel were taken into exile in Assyria.'*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John 16v33

<sup>6</sup> 2 Kings 17v21

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 13v34

<sup>8</sup> 2 Kings 17v22-23



The end of the story is depicted in the mural above, which is in the British Museum. It shows the triumphant Assyrian King as he conquers an Israelite town and carries it's people off into exile.

It's a sad ending for a story that started with such promise. It's a story that should have been writ large in God's plans to save the world, a story of a second David, and a story of God's promises fulfilled.

But who has ever heard of Jeroboam? His story is just a footnote in history (it didn't even make it into the museum!), a sorry tale of sin and disobedience. It is a story of what might have been - what might have been, if only Jeroboam had had the courage to believe. What would the story have been if Jeroboam had had the courage to believe that God could do what he promised?



## *What we are promised*

We aren't going to be kings of Israel, and God's promises to us are very different to those of Jeroboam. They are not about kings and dynasties and political power.

Yet in Jesus, what we have been promised is every bit as amazing as what God offered Jeroboam. It is nothing less than eternal life, what Peter calls '*an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.*'<sup>9</sup>

So, what do we need to do to receive that inheritance? Believe. We just need to have the courage to believe.

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 1v4