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A ROYAL FOOL

By Patrick Henry Reardon

Rehoboam was almost the perfect example of what the Bible means by the word “fool.” Because he was the son of Solomon, Israel’s wisest king, furthermore, this foolishness was a matter of irony as well as tragedy. After Solomon’s death in 922, this heir to Israel’s throne traveled to Shechem to receive the nations endorsement as its new ruler. The move was especially necessary with respect to Israel’s northern tribes, a people touchy about their traditional rights and needing to be handled gently. Even David, we recall, had to be made king twice, first over Judah about the year 1000 (II Sam. 2:4, 10). And then over the north some years later (5:4, 5).

Those northern tribes, for their part, seemed willing to be ruled by Rehoboam, but they craved assurance that the new king would respect their ancient traditions and customs. Truth be told, they had not been entirely happy with Rehoboam’s father, Solomon, and they sought from his son a simple pledge that their grievances would be taken seriously in the future (I Kings 12:1-4). A great deal depended on Rehoboam’s answer. The new king apparently took the matter seriously, because he sought counsel on what to say. He began consulting the seniors of the royal court, the very men who had for forty years provided guidance for his father. These were the elder statesmen of the realm, those qualified to give the most prudent political counsel. Significantly, these elder men urged Rehoboam in the direction of caution and moderation with respect to the northern tribes. “If you will be a servant of the people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever” (12:7). Rehoboam, nonetheless, eschewing the instruction of the elders, followed the impulses of his younger companions, who encouraged him to stand tough and not let himself be pushed around. Indeed, they urged Rehoboam to be insulting and provocative to the petitioners: “But he forsook the counsel of the elders which they had given him, and consulted with the young men who grew up with him and served him. So he said to them ‘What counsel do you give that we may answer this people who have spoken to me, saying, ‘Lighten the yoke which your father put on us?’ And the young men who grew up with him spoke to him, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to this people who spoke to you, saying, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, now you make it lighter for us!’ But you shall speak to them. ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s lions! Whereas my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’” Pursuing this foolish counsel, then, he immediately lost the larger part of his kingdom (12:12-16).

As I suggested above, there is a great irony here, for it may be said that one of the major practical purposes of the Book of Proverbs, traditionally ascribed to Solomon, was to prevent and preclude exactly the mistake made by Solomon’s son. According to Proverbs, the fool is the man who ignores the counsel of the old and follows the impulses of untried youth.

Many a life has been ruined—in this case a kingdom lost—because someone preferred the pooled stupidity of his contemporaries to the accumulated wisdom of his elders. Those whose counsel Rehoboam spurned, after all, were not just any old men. They were the very ancients who had provided guidance to Israel’s most sagacious monarch. Rehoboam’s reign of seventeen years knew its ups and downs, the downs dominate. Five years after the story narrated above, Pharaoh Shishak, founder of Egypt’s twenty-second dynasty, invaded the Holy Land and took pretty much whatever attracted his eye. “In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. He took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house. He took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made” (14:26). The Sacred Text goes on to remark, “King Rehoboam made in their place shields of bronze” (14:27). By setting bronze shields in the Temple to replace the golden shields of Solomon, Rehoboam enacted a truly wretched symbolism. Some of the ancients (Daniel, Hesiod, Ovid) spoke of a historical decline from a golden age to a silver age, and thence to a bronze age (10:14-29). However, the reign of Rehoboam, his heir, was not just a declension to silver, but all the way to bronze. The lunge, when it came, came at once, in a single generation.

Rehoboam remained, Josephus tells us, “a proud and foolish man” (*Antiquities* 8 10, 4). He never recovered from the singular folly of his first political decision. After Shishak’s invasion, this thin, pathetic shadow of his father and grandfather reigned under a humiliating Egyptian suzerainty for a dozen more years. Like every fool, he had a heart problem. The final word about Rehoboam asserts, “he did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord” (II Chron. 12:14). (From: *Touchstone Magazine*, used by permission from the author).

ANOTHER ROYAL FOOL

Borrowing Patrick Henry Reardon’s title, we note another “Royal Fool” among the Old Testament kings; Saul: the first King of Israel. We’ll call him “The Head and Shoulders” fool; the head standing for human knowledge and shoulders for human strength. When Saul was chosen to be Israel’s first king it is said he was “a choice and handsome man, and there was not a more handsome person than he among the sons of Israel; from his shoulders and up he was taller than any of the people” (I Sam. 9:2). Later God instructed Samuel concerning the anointing of a king: “Do not look at his appearance or the height of his stature...for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (I Sam. 16:7). Jesus echoes this scripture in his condemnation of self righteous Pharisees: “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts, for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). Saul had an extra good appearance before the people but within a short time he would be rejected by God. In Irving Stone’s book *Clarence Darrow For The Defense* he tells of an encounter Darrow had with some fellow lawyers who were twitting him about his appearance.

Darrow's answer; "I can't understand why you chaps look so different from me. I have my suits made at the same tailors you do, I pay as much for them, I go to the same stylish shops to buy haberdashery. The only thing I can figure is maybe you dudes take off your clothes when you go to sleep at night". This is the way some Christians manage to have a good appearance before the world. On Sunday morning in church services they have on the whole armor of God; but upon facing the world on Monday, they have taken it off. The next Sunday morning the armor is unwrinkled, unspotted, unused, clean and still has that new look. The reason for this is that it has not been worn during the week. They have during the week the same appearance about them as the rest of the world.

Saul was a good representative of the flesh, yet he was chosen by God, anointed by Samuel and filled with the Spirit. In fact "the Spirit of God came upon him mightily, so that he prophesied among them...when all who knew him previously saw that he prophesied now with the prophets, they said to one another 'What has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets'" (I Sam. 10:6-11). Saul among the prophets was still Saul and destined to become another "Royal Fool". He was permitted to see signs from God, became angry when his people were mistreated and showed compassion toward those who did not accept his kingship (Chapter 11). In spite of all this within seven days after his being anointed, God rejected him and announced He "has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you" (I Sam. 13:14). Ironically, however, Saul was permitted to reign over Israel for thirty-two years. He thus reigned thirty-one years, eleven months and twenty-three days after being rejected by God.

Saul prophesied, sacrificed, fought God's enemies, worshipped the Lord, and confessed his sins. He looked like a king, talked like a king, acted like a king, fought wars like a king, collected taxes like a king, but all the while he was completely out of the will of God. We have Christians, preachers and churches today emulating Saul by trying to live and minister on the basis of human knowledge and human strength. They preach, sacrifice, fight battles, worship the Lord and try to deal with sin. They look like Christians, talk like Christians, and pay tithes like Christians, but they are completely out of the will of God because they refuse to listen to and obey the word of God. The sad thing is we can do all these good things and more, but be doing them in the flesh. We become "head and shoulders" fools. The reason God rejected Saul was the one fact that he would not keep what the Lord commanded...he did not listen to the word of God. (I Sam. 13:14). Saul later confessed "I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord because I feared the people and listened to their voice" (I Sam. 15:24). A modern example of "listening to the voice of the people" is illustrated by the late Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In discussing the modern media in general and Television in particular, Postman wrote: "A great media-metaphor shift has taken place in America with the result that the content of much of our public discourse has become dangerous nonsense." He tells of watching forty-two hours of religious programming on television and came to the conclusion that on television and in real life "religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as entertainment. Everything that makes religion a sacred and profound human activity is stripped away. The preacher is tops,

God comes out as secondary." He quotes the national director of the Religious Broadcasters Association as saying "You can get your share of the audience only by offering people something they want'." Saul listened to the voice of the people and gave them what they wanted and for that reason he was rejected as King (I Sam. 15:21-24). The reason Saul gave for not listening to the voice of God was that he "feared the people" (ver. 24). Proverbs 29:25 states: "the fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted."

Saul's failure was not immediate. In the beginning his humility and obedience to God were commendable. Early in his career he had some decisive victories. He made a good beginning. But in his first campaign against the Philistines he experienced some real difficulties (I Sam. 13:5-7). Samuel had instructed Saul: "And you shall go down before me to Gilgal; and I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice of peace offerings. You shall wait seven days until I come to you and show you what you should do" (I Sam. 10:8). Realizing Israel was defeated in the battle with the Philistines, Saul "waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. So Saul said, 'Bring me the burnt offering and the peace offerings.' And he offered the burnt offering" (13:8, 9). This was Saul's first sin; his failure to wait for Samuel and his assuming the role of a priest. Samuel sternly rebuked him and stated: "You have acted foolishly, you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom will not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart and has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you" (I Sam. 13:13, 14; see Acts 13:22).

His second sin proved decisive. The occasion of this tragic sin was described by H. I. Hester in *The Heart of Hebrew History* in these words: "After successfully defeating Moab, Ammon and Edom, Samuel appeared to Saul with the command that he should go to war against the Amalekites, their bitter and cruel enemy. He was to administer decisive defeat upon them, even to 'slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, oxen and sheep, camel and ass.' Saul went as commanded and was completely victorious in the campaign. He carried out the instructions to the letter except for sparing the life of Agag, the king, and saving the best of the cattle. Upon his return he erected a memorial of his victory at Carmel then proceeded to Gilgal where he met Samuel. He lied to the prophet, professing to have carried out the order in detail. The lowing of the cattle gave him away, as did the presence of Agag. When reprimanded, Saul further betrayed his rebellious and self-sufficient attitude: 'The people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice unto Jehovah.' It was necessary now for Samuel to pronounce the doom awaiting the disobedient and deceptive king. (I Sam. 15:22-23)."

The spirit of rebellion and self-sufficiency finally caught up with Saul, and proved the truth of his own confession when he said "I have played the fool and have committed a serious error" (I Sam. 26:21) was when he turned despairingly to an outlawed witch at the village of Endor (Chapter 28:7-20). "Saul had removed from the land those who were mediums and spiritists" (28:3), yet his last and final demonstration of his foolishness was turning to the occult and seeking demonic guidance from an unlawful witch.