

## Do You Have A Golden Calf?

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We are going to continue with the history lesson that Mark started.

A short 30 miles southeast of this hotel is Stones River National Battlefield, where over 24,000 men were killed or wounded in three days of fighting as the new year of 1863 began. Contrary to my grandchildren's belief, I was not there!

Like all battlefields, it is very sobering to walk around. The 600 acres that are preserved also contain the Stones River National Cemetery, established in 1865, with the graves of over 6,000 Union soldiers. Now only 76,400 men participated in this battle. So, the 24,645 casualties make this the highest percentage of killed and wounded of any battle in the American Civil War, higher in absolute numbers than the bloodbaths of Shiloh and Antietam earlier that year. As a matter of fact, of the ten bloodiest battles of the civil war, three were fought here in Tennessee (Stones River, Shiloh, and Donelson); another one (Chickamauga) just across in Chattanooga. So I grew up hearing and reading a lot about this time in history: a time when brother fought brother, families and communities were split, an entire nation was divided.

Roughly 1.25 million American soldiers have died in all of this nation's conflicts from the very founding—small battles, large. Over half of all those deaths occurred in the Civil War. The newest study I found said 750,000 deaths. Almost that many more were wounded. The violence of this conflict shocked a young nation. To put it into perspective, our casualties in all of World War I were 320,000; all of World War II, a little over a million.

History has a way of repeating itself and we never seem to learn. To quote George Santayana's famous aphorism, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Many nations have experienced civil wars. That is an oxymoron in itself: How can war be civil?

Perhaps one that we are all familiar with is the breakup of Israel after King Solomon's death. Maybe you never thought of it as a civil war, but that is exactly what it was: Israel divided from Judah after King Solomon's death, and they fought each other for decades thereafter.

Rehoboam became king after Solomon, and he could have held the country together had he done things differently and had he been what God wanted. It has always been a bit confusing to me (Rehoboam-Jeroboam/Judah-Israel. I have always used this little mnemonic device to keep it straight.) It would be easier, quite frankly, if Jeroboam had been king of Judah (J and J)! But he was not. It was just the opposite. So Judah's king is Rehoboam, and the 'J' for Judah goes to the opposite kingdom—the opposing nation—Jeroboam. So try to keep that in mind.

Let us begin in I Kings 12. We are going to go back and forth between I Kings and II Chronicles, the two parallel accounts. At this point Solomon has died and Israel is still one nation.

**I Kings 12:1-2** And Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had gone to Shechem to make him king. So it happened, when Jeroboam the son of Nebat heard it (he was still in Egypt, for he had fled from the presence of King Solomon and had been dwelling in Egypt).

Now Rehoboam's soon-to-be-nemesis Jeroboam has been in exile. As a young man, Jeroboam's talents had been noticed by King Solomon and he had put him in charge of a building project in Jerusalem. While working there in Jerusalem, Jeroboam became familiar with the discontent of the people. They were suffering very high taxation. He became involved in some conspiracies to take over the kingdom. The conspiracies were discovered. He had to flee for his life and He fled to Egypt. So now Solomon is dead, and Jeroboam has returned to Shechem for this coronation.

**I Kings 12:3-4** . . . they [his fellow conspirators] sent and called him. Then Jeroboam and the whole congregation of Israel came

and spoke to Rehoboam, saying, “Your father made our yoke heavy; now therefore, lighten the burdensome service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you.”

Well, Rehoboam asked for three days to consider this request. He consults with the elders who advised his father. They suggest in verse 7:

**I Kings 12:7** “If you will be a servant to these people today, and serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever.”

So, naturally, he did as they suggested. No! At age 41, he still was not mature enough to rule. He had too much pride. In verse 8, he rejected the counsel, and he consulted the friends that he grew up with. Their brilliant advice is in verse 14.

**I Kings 12:14** and he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!”

And then we see in verse 15 that this turn of affairs was from the Lord.

**I Kings 15:16** [So] the people answered the king, saying, “What share have we in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Now, see to your own house, O David!”

Thus begins decades of internecine warfare—brother fighting brother, families torn apart, thousands of young men slaughtered. Rehoboam reigned for 17 years and Jeroboam for 22 years. In I Kings 14:30, it says there was war between them “all their days.”

Now Rehoboam comes down to us through history as a bad king, but I want you to notice verse 22 of chapter 14.

**I Kings 14:22** Now Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord, and they provoked Him to jealousy with their sins which they committed, more than all that their fathers had done.

Did you notice how that was phrased? “Judah did evil.”

Now, in the story of the kings, normally it is this or that king did evil. Here it says Judah did evil. Does that mean Rehoboam was a good king? No, he was not. He could have been a good king. He did have flashes of humility. But he was a follower, not of God unfortunately, but of idolatry. In verses 23 and 24 we see some of the sins of the nation.

**I Kings 14:23-24** For they also built for themselves high places, sacred pillars, and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree. And there were also perverted persons in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel.

Now, this phrase “perverted persons” is translated in other versions as “Sodomites” and “male cult prostitutes”. Maybe Rehoboam did not participate directly in this idolatry and perversion. I really do not know. But, as king, he did not stop it. Perhaps he allowed court clerks to go to jail rather than sign same-sex marriage licenses. We do not know. We do know he allowed idolatry to continue on his watch.

Let us flesh out the story a little more by going over to II Chronicles chapter 11. Rehoboam assembles an army made up of men from Judah and Benjamin. He builds cities for defense. Let us pick up the story in verse 13.

**II Chronicles 11:13-15** And from all their territories the priests and the Levites who were in all Israel took their stand with him [meaning the king of the South, the king of Judah]. For the Levites left their common-lands and their possessions and came to Judah and Jerusalem, for Jeroboam and his sons had rejected them from serving as priests to the Lord. Thus he [speaking of Jeroboam]

appointed for himself priests for the high places, for the demons, and the calf idols which he had made [quite a departure from kings David and Solomon!].

So a lot of people in the northern kingdom came south. The southern kingdom would be made up of Judah, Benjamin, Levi, a lot of Simeon, some of Manasseh, and others. All this influx of people, with strongly held beliefs from the northern kingdom, “strengthened the kingdom of Judah [verse 17] and made Rehoboam the son of Solomon strong for three years. Because they walked in the way of David and Solomon for three years.”

What follows in verse 18 is not strictly chronological (it did happen earlier), but it is interesting that it is placed here in the narrative.

**I Chronicles 11:18** Then Rehoboam took for himself as wife Mahalath.

**I Chronicles 11:20** After her he took Maachah the granddaughter of Absalom; and she bore him Abijah.

In the next verse, we see that Rehoboam,

**I Chronicles 11:21** . . . loved Maachah the granddaughter of Absalom more than all his wives and his concubines; for he took eighteen wives and sixty concubines, and begot twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters.

I do not see how he had time to fight a civil war. Just as David and Solomon before him, he was distracted from his job by multiple marriages and the influences that each of these wives brought into the marriage, especially his favorite wife, Maachah, which we will discuss later.

We learn in verse 22 that he selected Maachah’s firstborn son, Abijah, to be the next king. And in verse 23, it says he “dealt wisely” with all his sons.

II Chronicles is generally more favorable to Rehoboam than I Kings. Remember, he did well for three years; and then he wandered off the trail, so to speak.

**II Chronicles 12:1** Now it came to pass, when Rehoboam had established the kingdom and had strengthened himself, that he forsook the law of the Lord, and all Israel [which really means Judah here] along with him.

We read earlier, in I Kings, that Judah did evil. Now we clearly that Rehoboam was full of himself and turned away from God, and all Judah with him. The *Contemporary English Version* renders this verse:

**II Chronicles 12:1 (CEV)** Soon after Rehoboam had control of his kingdom, he and everyone in Judah stopped obeying the Lord.

Well, God sends Egypt against Judah. They roll right over its fortified cities like they were nothing. They lay siege to Jerusalem. II Chronicles 12:6 says that “the leaders of Israel and the king humbled themselves; and they said, “The Lord is righteous.” So God relented.

So Rehoboam did have his moments of humility and righteousness, but he could not stay on the path. His pride and the influences of his many wives diverted his attention again and again. This brings me to II Chronicles 13, which is where I wanted to go. We just had to get there.

It is the reign of Abijah. Now Rehoboam was 41 when he came to power. I am assuming that Abijah was a teenager—a young adult—at that time. He got to see and experience firsthand the effects of his father’s decisions: Civil war; political intrigue; the times he obeyed God, the times he did not, and the consequences when he turned from God.

**II Chronicles 13:2** He reigned three years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Michaiah the daughter of Uriel of Gibeah. And there was war between Abijah and Jeroboam.

So the civil war, that has been going on for 17 years, continued at least another three years. Now let us see how he handles himself. Verse 3 jumps right into a battle with the northern kingdom.

**II Chronicles 13:3** Abijah set the battle in order with an army of valiant warriors, four hundred thousand choice men. Jeroboam also drew up in battle formation against him with eight hundred thousand choice men, mighty men of valor.

I told you earlier that the Battle of Stones River, during the American Civil War, involved 78,000 men. The more famous Battle of Gettysburg pitted 163,000 men against each other. The most men I could find in the Civil War in any one battle was Chancellorsville, which had a combined force of 194,000. This battle here, between Israel and Judah, is shaping up to be a battle for the ages: 1.2 million soldiers—the youth and the future of these two nations.

Remember, Abijah is probably in his forties. He is no kid. He has seen the ups and downs of his father. He had been a part of this war with Jeroboam all of his adult life. He is facing an army twice his size. So what does he do?

**II Chronicles 13:4-8** Then Abijah stood on Mount Zemaraim, which is in the mountains of Ephraim, and said, “Hear me, Jeroboam and all Israel: Should you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a covenant of salt? Yet Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the servant of Solomon the son of David, rose up and rebelled against his lord. Then worthless rogues gathered to him, and strengthened themselves against Rehoboam the son of Solomon, when Rehoboam was young and inexperienced and could not withstand them. And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord, which is in the hand of the sons of David; and you are a great multitude, and with you are the gold calves which Jeroboam made for you as gods.

Let me pause here. There is a lot that has been said. Zemaraim is 15 miles north of Jerusalem, at the northern border of the kingdom of Judah and the southern extent of Israel. Abijah feels that he is in the right even though he is vastly outnumbered.

Some Bible commentators feel that the ancient writers added a zero to the end of these numbers, and it is really 40,000 men and 80,000 men. Because, let us face it, these early writers were pretty stupid (!!!), could not count, did not have computers. \*laughter

Just because these numbers seem incredible to us, it does not make them any less true. We do not have time, but you can put in your notes I Chronicles 21: 5, when David held that famous census that caused so much grief later. That census identified 1.1 million men in the army of Israel and 470,000 military men in the army of Judah. So fantastic as these numbers seem, they are accurate.

Abijah thinks he is going to reason with the enemy. He gives them a history lesson. He tells them their commander Jeroboam is a cad whereas he is of the line of David and Solomon and is in the right.

He says, “You think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord, which is in the hand of the sons of David.” And he points out that they have “gold calves which Jeroboam made for you.” Basically he is saying, “You are dummies. You serve a wrong king and the wrong God.” He cuts his father some slack. He says that his father made a bad call early on because he was young and inexperienced, even though he was 41 at the time. And the friends he grew up with were “worthless rogues.” I would say, reading this, that Abijah loved and admired his father, and did not fault him for Judah’s situation. Which could also mean he did not learn the lessons of history. Now verses 9 and 10.

**II Chronicles 13:9-10** Have you not cast out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made for yourselves priests, like the peoples of other lands, so that whoever comes to consecrate himself with a young bull and seven rams may be a priest of things that are not gods? But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken Him; and the priests who minister



to the Lord are the sons of Aaron, and the Levites attend to their duties.

Skipping down to verse 12.

**II Chronicles 13:12** Now look, God Himself is with us as our head, and His priests with sounding trumpets to sound the alarm against you. O children of Israel, do not fight against the Lord God of your fathers, for you shall not prosper!”

Powerful words! And he really, I think, looked to save some lives here. He felt that strongly about it. If I was in the army of Israel at that time and I heard this, I think it would give me pause. “Do not fight against the Lord God of your fathers, for you shall not prosper.”

So, is Jeroboam influenced by any of this at all? Verses 13 and 14.

**II Chronicles 13:13-14** But Jeroboam caused an ambush to go around behind them; so they were in front of Judah, and the ambush was behind them. And when Judah looked around, to their surprise the battle line was at both front and rear; and they cried out to the Lord, and the priests sounded the trumpets.

Well, it appears that the army of Judah was listening intently to their king’s speech so much so that they failed to see a couple of hundred thousand men going around behind them. But they did not panic. They

**II Chronicles 13:14-15** cried out to the Lord, and the priests [who are mentioned so frequently] sounded the trumpets. Then the men of Judah gave a shout; and as the men of Judah shouted, it happened that God struck Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.

Quite a lot of faith is in evidence here. Outnumbered two to one, the king stands up on a hill; preaches a sermon to shame the opposing army, trying to get them to quit the field (and I think) in an effort to save some people’s lives. They are trapped in an ambush, surrounded on all sides, and the army

of Judah cries out to the Lord. I think these men believed in their leader that day.

**II Chronicles 13:16-17** And the children of Israel fled before Judah, and God delivered them into their hand. Then Abijah and his people struck them with a great slaughter; so five hundred thousand choice men of Israel fell slain.

Half a million men killed one day, one battle. Now the Hebrew word translated 'slain' is *chalal*. It is used 94 times in the Old Testament. 81 of those times it is translated 'slain' or 'killed.' A secondary meaning is 'pierced' or 'deadly wound.' That is used 10 times in the Old Testament and then 'profane' three times. Now most Bible translations use 'slain' ("500,000 slain"). Some say "500,000 fell." Young's translation says "wounded." I do not want to get bogged down in this. Did a half a million die, or is it 500,000 dead and wounded? Either way it is virtually impossible to comprehend. Do you not think that the mothers and the fathers of Israel, the sisters and the brothers, the wives and the children of these men would turn to God in their grief? That they would evaluate the worship of the gold calves? Maybe make a change? And what about Judah? Verse 18 says:

**II Chronicles 13:18** Thus the children of Israel were subdued at that time; and the children of Judah prevailed, because they relied on the Lord God of their fathers.

We see, in verse 1 of the next chapter, Judah had about ten years of peace then. And then war started up again. Because neither of these nations learned anything from their history. Israel, I guess, licked their wounds for ten years or so until another generation of young men could become old enough to go and fill the depleted ranks of the army. They continued in idolatry. And they were taken into captivity, as we know, much earlier than Judah.

So, what about Judah? In verse 18, it said "They relied on the Lord God of their fathers." God delivered them. So then went forth in faith and obedience and lived happily ever after. End of story. No, not quite. Remember Abijah's father Rehoboam had three good years? And then he jumped the track. Abijah has three good years and then God cuts his rule and his life short. Verse 21 says:

**II Chronicles 13:21** But Abijah grew mighty, married fourteen wives, and begot twenty-two sons and sixteen daughters.

Now the way this is worded leaves me to believe that this great battle—this great victory over Israel—happened very early in his three-year rule, and after that he grew mighty. Three years later he is dead and gone. What went wrong? Now we are not given a definitive answer, but I will give you three possibilities that I see.

First of all, his faith in God—his crying out to Him, that great speech he gave—was a one-off. His normal character was much less. He was able to muster the courage one time only, and God backed him because of His promises to David. A great quote from David Guzik, a Protestant minister and writer, says: “One great spiritual victory does not make an entire life before God.”

The second possibility of what went wrong. This great victory went to his head and he became filled with pride. God cannot work with the vain. It says “Abijah grew mighty.” Fourteen wives. Some concubines, I am sure. Thirty-eight kids. It says, in verse 20, the Lord struck Jeroboam and he died. So Abijah’s nemesis is gone—the thorn in his side his entire life and the life of his father. These things, I suppose, could go to your head. Could they not?

The third possibility of what went wrong (and I will spend the rest of the time on this point): Abijah did not move forward with his success. He did not build on it. He did not grow from it. He did not remove the idols from the land. He did not lead. It seems to me that idolatry and the lack of leadership go hand in hand in the history of God’s people. God granted Abijah and Judah this tremendous victory. They had peace for at least a decade or more. They gained some territory. But Abijah allowed idolatry to continue. And God will not allow you to put anything ahead of Him. Now keep that in mind and let us go back to I Kings 12. This is right at the beginning of the separation of these two nations.

**I Kings 12:26-29** And Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart

of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah.” Therefore the king took counsel and made two calves of gold, and said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!” And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

In verse 32, he ordained a new feast, a counterfeit of the Feast of Tabernacles, where we sit today. He changed the dates. Skipping to the middle part of the verse, it says “So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made.” in Bethel. Verse 33 also mentions again “offering on the altar [which he had made] at Bethel.” Keep Bethel in mind.

The worship of golden calves comes up again and again in the history of the children of Israel. We all know that it comes from Egypt. We know that Egypt represents sin and this world, and it is something we ought to come out of. We all remember the incident of the Golden Calf, with Aaron and Moses, and how quickly the Israelites went back symbolically and spiritually to Egypt.

A Bible help that we seldom hear from anymore is *Haley’s Bible Handbook*. I found something in there that is a little nugget—a little gem—that I would like to quote to you—on page 193 of *Haley’s Bible Handbook*, in a little section called “Religion of the Northern Kingdom.” Now keep in mind Jeroboam fled from Solomon to Egypt and lived there many years.

Jeroboam, founder of the northern kingdom, to keep the two kingdoms separate, adopted calf worship, the religion of Egypt, as state religion of his newly formed kingdom. God worship had become identified with Judah and the family of David. The calf came to stand as a symbol of Israel’s independence of Judah. Jeroboam rooted calf worship in the northern kingdom so deeply that it was not swept away until the fall of the kingdom. Baal worship, introduced by Jezebel, prevailed about 30 years and was exterminated by Elijah, Elisha, and Jehu, and never returned, though it did persist intermittently in Judah. Every one of the 19 kings of the northern kingdom followed the worship of the Golden Calf. Some of them also served Baal. But not one ever attempted to bring the people back to God.

So Haley says that Elijah, Elisha, and King Jehu got rid of Baal worship. That is in II Kings 10.

**II Kings 10:28** Thus Jehu destroyed Baal from Israel.

Good job! But wait. Next verse.

**II Kings 10:29** However Jehu did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin, that is, from the golden calves that were at Bethel and Dan.

So nine kings and 75 years after Jeroboam, the gold calves are back at Dan and Bethel. Now I say “back” because when we saw them last they were with the troops of Israel at the battle of Zemaraim.

Back to II Chronicles 13. This is in the middle of Abijah’s sermon to Jeroboam and the forces of Israel. And he says:

**II Chronicles 13:8** “And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord, which is in the hand of the sons of David; and you are a great multitude, and with you are the gold calves [plural] which Jeroboam made for you as gods.”

So it would seem that Jeroboam brought the calf from Dan, up in the far north of Israel, stopped and picked up the one at Bethel, and brought them to Zemaraim. Now the town of Bethel was a part of Israel prior to this big battle. It is only a few miles from the site of this fight. In verse 19 we see that Judah took Bethel as part of the aftermath of this battle. So what happened to the gold calves after this terrible loss? I mean, after the battle and the loss of half a million men, there were still 300,000 Israelites and they fled the field. Evidently, they took the time to drop off a calf at Bethel and the other one at Dan—because they are still there 75 years later. Half a million casualties, but they managed to save those calves!

My point is very simple. Abijah was given a great victory by God. He was riding high. His favorable ratings were huge. His poll numbers were way up. He could have been a true leader at this point. He controlled Bethel. What an

easy thing it would have been for him to destroy the gold calf and the altar on which it stood! But he did not. He allowed the idolatry to continue. God gave him three years and then He took him. God will not allow you to put anything ahead of Him.

Was Abijah swayed by his fourteen wives, and who knows how many concubines? Do you think? What about his mother Maachah, the granddaughter of Absalom? How much influence did she have on him? Because she was quite an evil lady. In fact, Abijah's son, Asa, trying to turn Judah back to God after he took over, had to take her title from her.

**II Chronicles 15:16** Also [Asa] removed Maachah, the [grandmother] of Asa the king, from being queen mother, because she had made an obscene image of Asherah; and Asa cut down her obscene image, then crushed and burned it by the Brook Kidron.

The Hebrew word here for “obscene image” or “idol” is only used four times in the Bible: Two times here and two times in the parallel account in I Kings 15. It means a terror, an idol. It means a horrible thing. Her sin—her idol—was so over the top, God had to use a special word for it. This was the character of Abijah's mother.

So the man carries some baggage, I will give him that: Growing up royalty and watching all that his father went through, civil war all the days of his adult life, the influence of an idol-worshipping mother. But God still saw within him the ability to overcome this—the ability to be a godly leader. To face 800,000 soldiers intent on taking the life of you and your men, you climb up on a hill and you give them what for. This is either an act of faith or an act of lunacy. He gets up on a hill and he says, “Now before you try to kill me, let me just list your sins. And, oh by the way, your leader, he is a real doof.” This was not the act of a crazy man; this was an act of faith. But he did not build on it. He did not go any further. That is as far as it went.

So what does this mean for us? If we do not learn the lessons of the past, we get what we deserve. One act of faith is just a building block on which we stack the next one and the next one. Abijah could have told his mother “No more idols!” It did not have to fall to his son Asa. Abijah could have said, “No more idols!” He could have destroyed the gold calf at Bethel. He could

have stopped marrying so many wives because I am pretty sure one is enough. It has been for me. He could have gotten rid of the perverted homosexual cult prostitutes. He did not do any of these things.

A lot of kings failed in the same way—many were worse—and God did not take them after three years. But Abijah was gone after three years. I think it was because he was given so much, and much was expected from him.

What has God given us? What does He expect us to do with these gifts? Where are the gold calves in our lives—the sinful influences that we fail to eradicate? What kind of leaders will we be when the time comes? The story of Abijah carries multiple lessons and they can be different for each of us. Overcoming defects in our raising, learning the lessons of history, being godly leaders—these are all great lessons—but I think the best takeaway I can offer for you is this: God hates idolatry. If you have your own gold calf, God will take it, or you, away.