

Born to Win

The Ends of Power

by Ronald L. Dart

Jerusalem had fallen. An old man was walking through the streets of Jerusalem—looking here and looking there. He was an old man and, as he wrote about all this, he wrote with a *broken* heart about a *broken* country. He'd been just a kid when he started. When God commissioned him, he said, "Oh, I'm just a *child!*" And God said, "No, get out there and preach." Over the generations, he had warned about what was coming. He had been reviled, hated, rejected, thrown in jail, tossed into a dungeon and left to die. They only rescued him through the back door, and he was still in prison the day the city fell. The Babylonians, finding him in prison, thought, "Well, he can't be *all* bad", and they let him go.

Now, he walked through the streets, and he thought about what he had seen and what he had heard. For a long time, as he preached as a young man, he had assumed that repentance was possible. But now, as he considered the tragedy of Jerusalem, he began to wonder if the die had been cast long before he ever preached his first word as a young man. Now, on this day, it seemed to him that everything he had preached had been *in vain*—that there had been no hope from the outset. So why had he been commissioned and sent down there to preach in the first place? He knew the answer as soon as he formed the question: the people had to be told—they had to be told *what* was coming and *why*. And the roots of evil went so deep, no one really remembered where they had made their first mistakes. As he walked, Jeremiah formed the words that he would later sit down and write:

Lamentations 2

NIV

- 13 What can I say for you?
With what can I compare you,
Daughter Jerusalem?
To what can I liken you,
that I may comfort you,
Virgin Daughter Zion?
Your wound is as deep as the sea.
Who can heal you?
- 14 The visions of your prophets
were false and worthless;
they did not expose your sin
to ward off your captivity.
The prophecies they gave you
were false and misleading.

So why did the people listen to the prophets who were *false* and reject the one prophet who told them the truth. Well, it isn't hard to answer that: the false prophets had told them what they *wanted to hear*. And by the time Jeremiah came on the scene, it was really getting too late to change the hearts of the people—but they still had to be told. Jeremiah doesn't seem to have been melancholy by nature, but by the end of his days there was no brightness on his horizon. His faith in God had to tell him that there was a hope that lay ahead, but that it was beyond his meager span of years.

For some reason that I don't fully understand, I feel drawn to Jeremiah these days. Maybe it's because I am sensing that the die is cast on *this* nation and our precious freedom is being lost. And just like the people of Jeremiah's day, we can't pin down the moment when we began the process—a process that will finally take our freedom away from us. For Israel, the moment came when they decided that freedom was *too hard* and they asked for a king. Samuel told them what their king would be like and what he would do. And it's really an astonishing picture he painted for him—astonishing in that, with very few alterations to allow for technology, the picture looks *way* too much like the United States of America *right now*. And if you want a thorough explanation of how it happened—what happened when they gave up their freedom—just write to us, call us, and ask for a program (it's on CD): *How Freedom Is Lost*.

So Israel, the day they asked for a king, started down a road that led *inevitably* to the corruption of their leadership from top to bottom. God gave them the very best there was at the time: Saul—handsome, tall, strong. A man, though, who was humble and converted. The onset of power changed all that. As time passed, Saul cared less and less about the people, and more and more about his power. It's a truism, you know: the people we put in power come, day by day, to care less about us and more about how to hold on to their power.

When David was perceived as a threat to Saul's power, Saul tried to have him killed. On one occasion he tried to kill him himself. He threw a spear at him and just missed him. His obsession with David grew into a kind of mental illness. The man was sick. He had the sickness of power. David did better. Solomon did worse, in that he took 700 wives—many of them pagans—and you know how wives are. He went out and built temples to all their gods out there. And, finally, God decided to take the kingdom away from Solomon's son and created a new house of Israel under the leadership of one Jeroboam, the son of Nebat. The story is told in the 11th chapter of 1 Kings.

1 Kings 11

AKJV

²⁸ And the man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valor: and Solomon seeing the young man that he was industrious, he made him ruler over all the charge of the house of Joseph.

This is in the north, where the tribes of Joseph—Ephraim and Manasseh—were. He put him in charge of all that.

1 Kings 11

AKJV

²⁹ And it came to pass at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him in the way; and he had clad himself with a new garment; and they two were alone in the field:

³⁰ And Ahijah caught the new garment that was on him, and rent it in twelve pieces:

³¹ And he said to Jeroboam, Take you ten pieces: for thus said the LORD, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to you:

³² (But he shall have one tribe for my servant David's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel:)

Now, why was this being done? Well, he goes on to explain. He's doing it:

1 Kings 11

AKJV

³³ Because that they have forsaken me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in my eyes, and to keep my statutes

and my judgments, as did David his father.

³⁴ However, I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand: but I will make him prince all the days of his life for David my servant's sake[....]

God had made promises to David, and he felt obligated to keep those promises. Well, anyway, the story is repeated here and then he tells Jeroboam this:

1 Kings 11

AKJV

³⁸ And it shall be, if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do that is right in my sight, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did; that I will be with you, and build you a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel to you.

³⁹ And I will for this afflict the seed of David, but not for ever.

Now, *no one* had more reason to know *why* he was a king and *what* was expected of him than Jeroboam did. The story of how this all played out can be read in 1 Kings, chapter 12. Jeroboam's problem was this: he had power. And once he had power, he began to worry about the *retention* of that power—the possible loss of that power. And this, folks, is true. The temptation to this falls upon every man—it's like a virus that goes with power, that a man can become sick of, that he worries himself to death about whether he's going to be able to hang onto it. And then they lie and they cheat and they steal in order to get what they want. Here's what Jeroboam did:

1 Kings 12

AKJV

²⁶ And Jeroboam said in his heart, Now shall the kingdom return to the house of David:

²⁷ If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again to their lord, even to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam king of Judah.

Now, the reason for his worry was this: there were three pilgrimage festivals that God had commanded—they were the Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles—and every year people went to Jerusalem to the Temple to offer sacrifice. They had a nostalgia for this. When the leaves began to change, when the air began to cool, and autumn came on, the nostalgia to go to the feast jumped on these people. And he knew that they would want to go up. What he doesn't seem to understand is that if he had only governed in accordance with the law of God, and if he had made it *his duty* to take care of the people, God would *see fit* and *see to* the retention of his power. But he didn't because he was *afraid*.

Now, to understand why this works this way, it's important to know that the Temple was that *center* to which the people were drawn—not so much because of the Temple, as such, but because the Temple was the center of the worship of God. It was symbolic. And the sacrifices they did there—the festivals they observed with the priesthood there offering sacrifices to God—these festivals, these holy days, were *the most powerful, unifying force* in Israel: the fact that they were commanded to come back together every year. And this is what Jeroboam was afraid of. So he got some advice:

1 Kings 12

AKJV

²⁸ Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said to them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

²⁹ And he set the one in Bethel, and the other put he in Dan.

On both ends of his kingdom. Okay, so as you can find a place of worship that is closer than Jerusalem. One of them you had to *go by* in order to *get to* Jerusalem. And we're told:

1 Kings 12

AKJV

³⁰ And this thing became a sin: for the people went to worship before the one, even to Dan.

³¹ And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi.

Now, why in the world would he do that? Because he wanted to keep them *under his control*. He went further.

1 Kings 12

AKJV

³² And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like to the feast that is in Judah, and he offered on the altar. So did he in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made: and he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places which he had made.

So he changed the calendar; he changed the dates. He said, "No, no, no. We're not going down there on the 15th day of the seventh month. That's a little too early and sometimes it interferes with the harvest. So let's go down (well, not 'down', let's do it here) in the 15th day of the eighth month." And he did it. He went and sacrificed to the calves he had made. He went through the whole rigamarole.

1 Kings 12

AKJV

³³ So he offered on the altar which he had made in Bethel the fifteenth day of the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast to the children of Israel: and he offered on the altar, and burnt incense.

Now, this is one of the pivotal events in the history of Israel, and *so much* hangs on it. The die was cast when Israel abandoned freedom and demanded the king. The second pivotal point was the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon. The third was the abandonment of the worship of God and the turn to paganism by Jeroboam. In doing this, he cut the people off from the road back to God. For the holy days, the festivals, the times they came to Jerusalem were times of renewal, times of repentance, times of drawing back to God. And now, he had cut the road. In the house of Judah, over the years that followed, there were bad kings followed by good kings—an occasional revival. In the house of Israel, there were only *bad* kings, *worse* kings, and *rotten* kings. There was no longer a way of restoring the way back to God in Israel. Time after time, it is said of the kings of the house of Israel, "He continued in the sins of Jeroboam, who sinned and made all Israel to sin." And why did Jeroboam do this? Because he feared the loss of power.

Now, just to give you an example of where this leads and what it means, I want to bring you forward to a successor of Jeroboam named Ahab. This story is in 1 Kings, chapter 16.

1 Kings 16

AKJV

³⁰ And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him.

³¹ And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

Now, you need to know this about worshiping Baal: it involved child prostitution and child sacrifice. They *burned* their children to their gods in those places. Don't just think this is merely a matter of people getting confused about who God was, and burning incense to the wrong God. No, no, no. They went a lot further than that

1 Kings 16

AKJV

³² And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.

³³ And Ahab made a grove [*an Asherah pole*]; and Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.

He was the worst of a very bad lot. Jeroboam *opened the door* to a world of child prostitution, child sacrifice, when he set up those calves and abandoned the pilgrimage festivals. Ahab was a weak man in a powerful position. This is an *extremely dangerous* combination. Do you understand why? A weak man in a position of power. You're better off, frankly, with a strong man—a confident man—who holds the reins of power because he doesn't have to *prove* anything. In 1 Kings 21:

1 Kings 21

NIV

¹ Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria.

The Hebrew says it was “hard by” his palace. Every morning Ahab got up, looked out the window, and he saw this vineyard out there.

1 Kings 21

NIV

² Ahab said to Naboth, “Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.”

Now, this is a reasonable offer, but Naboth didn't want it. The land had *sentimental* value as well as monetary.

1 Kings 21

NIV

³ But Naboth replied, “The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.”

⁴ So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, “I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors.” He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

He had a royal tantrum, a royal pout. Jezebel, who was stronger than he was:

1 Kings 21

NIV

⁵ [...] “Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?”

⁶ He answered her, “Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, ‘Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.’ But he said, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’”

⁷ Jezebel his wife said, “Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

⁸ So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him.

If a strong man found out his wife had done that, he'd taken *her* head off. A weak man? Well, here's the story.

1 Kings 21

NIV

⁹ In those letters she wrote: "Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people.

¹⁰ But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them bring charges that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."

¹¹ So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them.

¹² They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people.

¹³ Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death.

¹⁴ Then they sent word to Jezebel: "Naboth has been stoned to death."

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead."

¹⁶ When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.

How did they get to this place?

The Old Testament is just replete with story after story of circumstances where too much power fell into the hands of men too young, too inexperienced, too weak, to handle it properly. You know, for all I know, this principle was in the minds of the Founders when they included the Takings Clause in the Bill of Rights. Because what he did was just go out there and *kill* so he could get his property. It's a little more extreme than what they do today, but people *today* who are in power still, for some weird reason, think they have a right to just go take your property away from you, for whatever reason. There's the story of that place up there where the guy had a *beautiful* view of the river and they took his property away and wanted to have somebody build a high-rise condo. Why? To increase *tax revenues*. (It never occurs to these scoundrels that what they need to do is to cut spending.) But, no, they'll just come and *take* the property away from you. I guess that's better than killing them. But, you know, for some people—the inheritance of their land—it's almost worse than death to lose it. So, I think the Founders, when they included takings in the Bill of Rights, were thinking about examples in history that just go back further than... you can imagine it. And they were well-read men; they knew their history and they didn't want that kind of thing happening in this country—didn't want that kind of power becoming centralized in the hands of one person.

Jezebel, to her husband says, "Are you the king or not?" There's something very important to know: Jezebel felt her power as a royal consort was threatened by the mere refusal of an ordinary man to sell his patrimony—his birthright. The royal consort's power was threatened. Anything that made her world less than what she wanted it to be had to be dealt with, and it didn't matter if someone had to *die* to make it so.

One of the talking heads on television, a few nights ago, made an observation that rang very true to me. The politicians talk a lot about helping ordinary people. "We're going to help the little guy. We're going

to provide insurance for a little guy. We're going to do all this kind of stuff." "But", he said, "you should know this. They don't care about the little people. All they care about is their power. That is why they lie so commonly, to the point that their lies become the *butt of jokes*." And remember this: money is a form of power.

The pattern of wicked behavior finally became too much for God to bear, and he opened the door for the Assyrians to take the country captive. The house of Judah continued for quite a few generations, but finally that virus of power took them down, as well. To get a picture of what this was like in the end, just read Jeremiah's Book of Lamentations. Nothing much changes. Even a little bit of power is *just too much* for some men.

Have you ever wondered at the hostility toward Jesus on the part of the religious establishment of the day? Think about who Jesus was and what he was doing. Even if you didn't believe he was the Son of God, look at *what he was doing*. He was healing the sick; he made lame people walk; he even raised a dead man. He preached the written law of Moses faithfully and pointed men to his Father. Why did they want him dead? Well, the answer is fairly simple, actually, and the story is told in John's gospel. What happened—Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, fell sick, and instead of going immediately to him and healing him, Jesus waited; he waited; he waited. *Three days* went by and finally he decided, "Well, we better go on down there." Now, what he had done—he had waited until Lazarus died *deliberately*. He had waited three days *deliberately*, because he wanted to establish in the minds and hearts of everybody that Lazarus was *really graveyard dead*. Because, in those days, they had vigils for these people, and people had been known to *appear* to die only to come back to life again—a coma. They didn't know what to make of them in those days, and so they just tried not to bury him completely and not right away.

So, here we are trying to sort this out. Jesus waits. Lazarus dies. He returns three days later, and he walks out to the tomb where Lazarus is buried. Had them roll back the stone and says:

John 11

AKJV

⁴³ [...] with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

⁴⁴ And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus said to them, Loose him, and let him go.

⁴⁵ Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him.

⁴⁶ But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees [*the snitches*], and told them what things Jesus had done.

⁴⁷ Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man does many miracles.

⁴⁸ If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.

That was what they were *really* worried about. Worried about the little people? Ha! Jesus was *healing* the little people. They were worried about *their power*.

John 11

AKJV

⁴⁹ And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said to them, You know nothing at all,

⁵⁰ Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.

Even here, “Well, we’re doing it for the people.” And if you think for a moment they cared about the people of the nation, think again. What they cared about was *their* place and *their* power. Jesus was a dangerous critic of the administration; he had to be *disposed of*, even if it meant killing him.

I am so grateful that the founders of our nation, well aware of the lessons of history, built freedom into our Constitution and value system, and they limited the *power* of the government.

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