

The Story: The Butterfly Effect
By Jason Huff

Psalm 50:16-23, 2 Timothy 4:1-5, 1 Kings 12:3-4,13-17,20-24,14:22-24,30

Today's final Scripture readings are selections from 1 Kings. Listen now to God's Word. "Jeroboam and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you." The king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, he followed the advice of the young men and said, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions." So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite. When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king: "What share do we have in David, what part in Jesse's son? To your tents, O Israel! Look after your own house, O David!" So the Israelites went home. But as for the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam still ruled over them. When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David. When Rehoboam arrived in Jerusalem, he mustered the whole house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin – a hundred and eighty thousand fighting men – to make war against the house of Israel and to regain the kingdom for Rehoboam son of Solomon. But this word of God came to Shemaiah the man of God: "Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah, to the whole house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people, "This is what the LORD says: do not go up to fight against your brothers, the Israelites. Go home, every one of you, for this is my doing.'" So they obeyed the word of the LORD and went home again, as the LORD had ordered. [Nevertheless, in the course of time,] there was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam. Judah did evil in the eyes of the LORD. By the sins they committed they stirred up [God's] jealous anger more than their fathers had done. They also set up for themselves high places, sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. There were even male shrine prostitutes in the land; the people engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites."

You may never have heard of the "butterfly effect," but you know what it is. It's a popular science-fiction movie, but it's also a concept about connectedness, chain reactions, and cause and effect. The idea comes from the study of weather and how infinitesimal changes can have a radical effect on weather over time. A butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon makes very tiny changes in the atmosphere, but those changes contribute to patterns that, for example, might cause a tornado in Texas.

Many of us don't understand the science of it, but we've seen the concept of the butterfly effect played out in the beloved film **It's A Wonderful Life**. George Bailey dreams of leaving Bedford Falls only to be stuck there running his family's building and loan year after year. One Christmas Eve, the company's money is secretly stolen by Potter, the cruel businessman who has Bedford Falls under his thumb. George contemplates suicide only to be given a chance to see what the world would have been like if he'd never been born. As the film illustrates, the ripple effects of his life touch thousands of people. That, in a nutshell, is the butterfly effect.

There are two main principles to the butterfly effect we see in today's lesson. The first principle is that tiny decisions and actions can have enormous effects on down the line. The second principle is that rarely do we know what causes those effects or understand their ramifications – only God has the full picture of how everything in His universe interrelates.

Today's story begins with Rehoboam, Solomon son's, inheriting his throne. As we heard in our reading this morning, the tribes of Israel had grown weary during his father's reign. Between the labor required to build the temple and the taxes that contributed to Solomon's wealth, the Hebrews felt the cost of having a king. They also saw the tribe of Judah enjoying the fruit of their labors because of their proximity to Jerusalem and to the king. They sent Jeroboam, one of Solomon's former administrators, to see what could be done about their burdens.

Rehoboam's advisers and elders counseled him to ease the load on the people, assuring him a gentle hand would win the love of his people. Rehoboam also went to his contemporaries, the young men who grew up alongside him. They recommended he take a hardline stance. Rehoboam listens to them and tells Jeroboam's contingent that his reign would be far harsher than that of his father. Incensed, the majority of Israel rebels and establishes Jeroboam as their king. All that stood with Rehoboam was his own tribe of Judah and the tiny clan of Benjamin. While the two kingdoms were perpetually at war, God kept them from destroying each other.

So now the country is in two parts. The largest half is that of the northern kingdom, which included essentially all the tribes save for Judah and Benjamin. During this time, the northern kingdom is called Israel. The southern kingdom is all the land of Judah and Benjamin, and it's called simply Judah. Their situation is a lot like that of North and South Korea today. There are skirmishes, a lot of sword rattling, and occasionally all-out conflicts.

The kings on both sides make everything worse. Most are power-hungry and idolatrous. Every king over the northern kingdom save one is declared bad by God. Afraid his people might reunite with the south if they worshipped in Jerusalem, Jeroboam makes idols and allows all sorts of worship. He allows anyone to become a priest. The northern kingdom's kings get worse and worse after him. As this chapter ends, we're introduced to Ahab and his queen Jezebel. Ahab considered sin a trivial matter and did far more evil than any of the previous kings. The southern kingdom, meanwhile, is a mix of good and bad. While Rehoboam and his son Abijah were bad according to God, Asa and his son Jehoshaphat were good.

The Bible isn't worried about the physical wealth of either kingdom. In fact, we read how Judah – the kingdom that followed God more faithfully – winds up selling off the finery from the temple to pay pagan nations around them to protect them against Israel. The northern kingdom, despite its woeful record towards God, prospers at times. But Scripture is only concerned about the spiritual legacy of each king...and the record's not pretty.

In one sense, this part of our study is simply about the history of Israel. This is what happened. But I want to go back to the concept of the butterfly effect. We have two key things going on here that clue us in to the way God and history work. The first is this: the tiny things matter even when we have no idea why. Second, we have to trust that God understands and controls the big picture.

You may feel insignificant. You may feel like your life has little purpose or meaning. You might feel stuck in your job or useless in your retirement. But what you do matters. Think about Rehoboam. We don't know the young men who gave him advice or how many there were. But their advice to Rehoboam ripples throughout history. You see, the division from Rehoboam's era is permanent. The northern and southern kingdoms? They never come back together, not ever. The twelve tribes are never again one nation. You may not have the ear of a king, but guess what? Taking the Hebrew literally, these young men were Rehoboam's slaves. They had no rights or authority or power. But their advice radically altered the history of God's people forever. They are the butterfly wings creating a spiritual tornado in the center of Israel.

All of us have the capacity for great godliness and great evil. All of us have the ability to affect people in ways we cannot fathom. History is strewn with situations where a simple event or choice marks a radical turn. A troubled young man with a gift for painting architecture applies to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. He's rejected because he has no talent for drawing the human form...something that didn't interest him anyway. As he applied and was rejected a second time, he read the fashionable anti-Jewish literature popular in Vienna...and the Adolph Hitler the world knows is born. Hitler created over 1,000 architectural paintings, and many of them are genuinely beautiful. While there were many different things that influenced his life, that one rejection shaped the 20th century. But there is another man of Hitler's time who was an artist...a man who painted to overcome his fierce bouts of depression. Unlike Hitler, he sold only a few pieces during his lifetime. His art seemed only a hobby, a trifling fancy, a very tiny part of his life. Yet his biographers say that his recovery from depression through his art mentally prepared him to stand up to the great evil of Hitler. That man was Winston Churchill.

Don't ever think that your contribution and choices are insignificant. Who knows how God will use you if you let Him? One thoughtful word on behalf of Jesus Christ can make a difference. An hour teaching Sunday school, a morning distributing food to the needy, an afternoon mentoring a young believer...they can affect someone's eternal destiny. Our lives can also be affected by those things we don't think anyone else can see. One prayer can change someone's life. One "secret" sin can harden our attitudes towards God. One email, one text, one comment...they all count. Even if we cannot see their ramifications, God knows.

God notices the little things. Whenever the Bible sums up whether or king was or good or bad, it always mentions whether or not the king removed the "high places." Only the very best kings get rid of the "high places." Now when the Bible mentions these "high places," they aren't talking about places for idol worship; *every* good king tears those down and gets rid of them. The "high places" were altars where the people made sacrifices to Yahweh. Many Hebrews lived far from Jerusalem. Rather than to travel all that way to make a sacrifice, they did it at a "high place." It sounds OK – the sacrifices were made to the one true God, right? But God commanded way back in Moses' day that once the temple was built, sacrifices were only to be offered there. People could pray in their hometowns, they could study Scripture together, but they were not to make sacrifices except at the Jerusalem temple. Maybe that sounded like extra work to the Israelites. Maybe they felt they should be able to worship Him wherever they wanted. But God's command is more important than how *we* think He should act. God was far more concerned about idolatry than the high places. But God noticed whether or not a king was willing to destroy them. He noticed whether a king was fully obedient to Him in everything.

That holds true for us as well. We may question why God condemns some things our culture takes for granted – issues surrounding sexuality, divorce, marriage, abortion, all those tricky issues. But God takes notice when we obey Him even when our culture says it knows better. There are times when you must make a choice between being praised by the world and praised by God. You may never hear the applause of God when the world is busy condemning you for being “intolerant” or “hateful” because you stand for what God says to us in Scripture. But God sees everything, and in the final analysis, His judgment is what matters.

This leads us into the other key issue this week: God is the one who orchestrates history, who steers its course to His own ends. We’ve mentioned this recently, but it’s so important that we need to see it wherever it occurs. It would be simple for us to attribute the breakup of Israel and Judah to poor choices by Solomon and Rehoboam to exploit their workforce and accumulate wealth. But well before the nation split in half, God said it would happen. God told Solomon that his son would lose control of most of the kingdom. This was not just a matter of political maneuvering and military scheming. God fulfilled His pledge.

We see God doing more than just dividing the empire. In terms of sheer military might, Israel was far more powerful than Judah. Had God not held them back, Judah could have fallen easily. But God promised David that his line would sit on the throne in Jerusalem. God kept that promise through a long line of idolatrous kings until both kingdoms had fallen apart. Even then, God eventually raises up Jesus from the line of David to be his eternal heir who would reign forever. God has a firm grasp on history. Even in devastating times, He controls the future.

This truth should inform our outlook on things. You see, nothing ever surprises God. The shooting out in Arizona a couple of weeks ago? Absolutely tragic. But it did not surprise God. 9/11 didn’t surprise God. Neither did any world war. Violence in the Congo, attacks on Christians in Egypt, horrors and atrocities that happen every day – not a shock to God. He knows the thick darkness of the human heart; He is far more aware than any of us the evil we do because of our bondage to sin. But God is also the one who has the perfect plan to release us from that bondage.

The butterfly effect was true in the case of the gospel too. In Jesus’ day, Judea was a rebellious backwater of the Roman Empire. Rabble-rousers were executed all the time; Jesus was just one among many. Pontius Pilate thought His death would be the end of it; things would go back to normal and Jesus would be forgotten. Instead, Jesus’ death and resurrection started a chain reaction that rippled backwards and forwards through all time. It changed everything. It gives us, who are dead in sin and dead to God and deserving of utter condemnation, the ability to become God’s sons and daughters, adopted into His family through the free gift of salvation.

And in the same manner, God was in control of it all. Not a thing that happened to Jesus surprised God – not the religious leaders’ hatred of Him, not the traitorous betrayal of Judas or the denial of Peter, not the illegal trial or the crucifixion. God steered this intense evil towards one perfect end – the deliverance of His chosen, the salvation of all who would come to Him in faith. Out of the most despicable act humanity ever committed, God created our rescue.

God's call to us today is one of faith, trust, and action. Put your faith in Jesus Christ, knowing that no matter what happens to you, no matter how dire, when you trust in Christ for your salvation, God is working everything out for your eternal good and the eternal good of all who will come to Him. Trust in Him and not in yourself, because He knows far better than we do what is best for us. Then commit to act according to His commands in the small, everyday actions of life. When you do, you will realize one of the wonderful mysteries of faith...the truth that while God has ultimate authority and control over everything, He desires you to follow Him in the little things, and He will work through even your tiniest obedience to bring about His ultimate plan for His creation and His people. Jesus said that even the tiniest seed of faith could move a mountain. When you have faith in Him, you're like the butterfly flapping its wings...and while you may not see it in this life, the consequences of your faith in God will ripple throughout eternity too.