

The Sin of Self-Deception

Self-Deception

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 14-Nov-92; Tape #047

I Kings 12: 26-33 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 asked advice, 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. Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. He made shrines on the high places, and made priest from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi. Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And at Bethel he installed priests of the high places which he had made. So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense.

In the previous sermon we were just beginning to see what Jeroboam did in the area of religion in order to insure that he would keep his position as king. I think you can recall how he came to have that position—that God was highly displeased with the way Solomon conducted his life, so God wrenched away part of the kingdom from the family of David. However, for David's sake, He allowed the family of Judah to continue to be ruled by one of David's dynasty. But the ten-tribe northern kingdom, Israel, was separated from Judah.

Jeroboam was concerned he would lose control of what was a new nation forming. He cast about in his mind and undoubtedly sought advice from those who were around him as to what he should do in order to cement his position. What he did was indeed politically astute. It was, what we would call today in our society, pragmatic, that is, he was motivated to govern by policies that were practical rather than idealistic.

In summary, what he did was establish new centers of worship—Bethel in the south and Dan in the north. He replaced the God-ordained Levites with men of other tribes as the nation's spiritual leaders and he did away with the Feast of Tabernacles, specifically, and he substituted

it with another of his own devising.

Let me remind you that the Bible does not say that all this was done in a blink of an eye. It would sort of give that appearance to you, because it all takes place in the matter of six or eight verses. But the Bible is just reporting what he did. What he did may have actually taken place over months of time or perhaps even years.

The benefit that he used to sell his program to the people was convenience. Remember in verse 28 he said, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem."

Operating by pragmatism has a show of wisdom because it appears to work. I want you to connect this to two sermons ago, where Paul was going through Colossians 2, and he said that that form of religion those people were turning into was something that had a show of wisdom. It looked good on the surface, but Paul traced its taproot all the way back to demonism.

So at the very least, it was something simply devised by men, it was not God instituted, and at its worse, it had its roots right in demonism. But it looked good to the weak Christian mind.

What Jeroboam was selling to these people also looked good on the surface—it looked good because it was convenient and because there were other features to it that the people were eager to get involved in. One thing we have to remember is that in the area of our relationship with God, principle is what really works because pragmatism almost invariably leads to idolatry.

Undoubtedly, traveling all the way to Jerusalem was not convenient. The people apparently jumped (as we would say today) at the chance of being relieved of that long trip on foot, or by donkey, or by cart. It was to them a deliverance that relieved the pressure of what they considered to be a burdensome responsibility, just to honor God, by doing what He said.

Making it more convenient for the people succeeded in cutting them off from the God-intended center of spiritual truth—that is, the temple in Jerusalem. You might recall the quote I gave you from Will Durant's book, *Our Oriental Heritage*. He said that the temple was the second most important step in the history of Israel. It was preceded in importance only by the giving of the law. It was the building of the temple that solidified the religion of Israel, the monotheistic approach to religion. It was also that which gave political stability, eventually, to the nation.

We are going to have a little bit more about this point later, but cutting them off from the temple—someone could view that as being essentially negative. This was something they did not have to do any longer. Jeroboam replaced it with something that could be viewed as being positive—that is, he connected it with something that was already somewhat popular and had a connection to their ancient history.

He drew from Israel's past by making Bethel in the south and Dan in the north the centers of sacrifices. I told you somewhat about that, how Bethel was the place where Jacob stopped when he was fleeing for his life. He had connived with his mother to get the blessing and the birthright away from Esau and Esau was, naturally, very upset.

Jacob had to flee for his life and in his fleeing he stopped at Bethel to rest for the night, and while he was there, God gave him a vision. Jacob renamed the place Bethel, which means house of God. He was very effected by that occurrence and he said, "Surely, God is in this

place." It became a place of some reverence for the people of Israel and they remembered that. Dan, on the other hand, had the connection with the grandson of Moses, because he had established a place of worship there somewhat earlier.

So with Bethel, there was a connection to the father of the Israelites, Jacob. With Dan, there was a connection to Moses with his grandson Jonathan, and with the golden calf—a connection with their liberation from slavery and the forming as a nation.

Never mind that God had commanded none of these things. Never mind that in all of them, except one, there was a very large measure of sin. The people were very willing to go along, to overlook these things. They loved to have it so, as it was expressed later in Jeremiah 5, that time pertaining primarily to Judah. But the people loved to have it so. I want you to hold on to that principle because eventually the sermon is going to take a turn into that direction.

Reading these accounts gives one an understanding as to why the apostle Paul stated, "The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither can be."

Think of this in reference to your own life. Even when a person has had the truth of God revealed to him and begins obeying it, there is still a powerful urge to go back to what was engrained in our character at an earlier age. Not only that, there is a strong urge to abuse something that is good and turn it into an instrument of evil.

I want to show you an example of this by turning to Numbers 21:8-9, and we will take a brief glimpse into the brazen serpent incident, where the people were being plagued.

Numbers 21:8-9 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent [that is something that is burnished and highly polished], and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten [that is, by snakes], when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

The people came to regard that very highly, but their regard eventually turned to superstition and the superstition turned to idolatry.

Turn to II Kings 18, to a number of years later in the history of Israel and Judah. Hezekiah is now king and one of the reforms is taking place under him.

II Kings 18:4 He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan [that is, the serpent].

They were now worshipping it. Incense, a symbol of prayer—they were praying to it and it had turned into an idol into their minds. Human nature has to be guarded against. It will take advantage of our willingness to be deceived. It is almost as if we want to be deceived.

In Deuteronomy 12:1-9, there are instructions regarding things that the Israelites were to change in their worship of God whenever they came into the land. (Deuteronomy was written just shortly before they began to take over the land.)

Deuteronomy 12:1-4 "These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall *utterly* destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things."

Do not blend the worship of Me with idolatry—with something that is foreign to My nature; something that is foreign from or different from My plan, My purpose, My way.

Deuteronomy 12:5 "But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place, and there you shall go."

That place became Jerusalem. It was not there at first. It was at a couple of other places, the most noteworthy being Shiloh. But wherever God placed the tabernacle and then the temple, that is where His name was. That was the center of worship.

Deuteronomy 12:7-9, 19 "And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the Lord your God has blessed you. You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes [the subject is worshipping God and they were free to worship God wherever they happened to be]—for as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you...Take heed to yourself that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land."

Exodus 34:11-15 "Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I am driving out from before you the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and

make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice."

Why did God want these places destroyed? Because He wanted there to be no temptation to idolatry; no joining together of the way the people of the land worshipped their god with the way God wanted His people to worship Him. He did not want His way to be diluted by anything that was foreign to His purpose, to His plan. So He specifically designates that there is to be only one place.

The answer as to why should be obvious, and that is that God wants His people to be trained in one way from a central source of knowledge. What this will do is reduce confusion and promote unity. There will be more progress and there will be less fighting.

That one central location had unifying political and social benefits as well. Please understand that does not mean it was the only place where they could worship, because when they came into the land they eventually built synagogues all over. But there was to be only one temple, one brazen altar for sacrifice, and only one central place for religious training for the priests.

By doing what he did, Jeroboam effectively cut off people from sacrificing at the temple. But that still was not enough. It says in I Kings 12: 31 that Jeroboam made priests from those who were not Levites. That could read that "Jeroboam made priests from the mass of the people," or that "Jeroboam made priests from people without distinction." It can be translated as loosely as, "Anybody who wanted to be."

Why do this? Let us turn to II Chronicles 11:13-17. If you look in verse 1, you will find the name Rehoboam mentioned, so the time here is the very time we are talking about in I Kings 12.

II Chronicles 11:13-17 And from all their territories the priests and the Levites who were in all Israel took their stand with him. [With who? With Rehoboam.] For the Levites left their common-lands and their possessions and came to Judah and Jerusalem [from Israel, the ten tribes], for Jeroboam and his sons had rejected them from serving as priests to the Lord. Then he appointed for himself priests for the high places, for the demons, and the calf idols which he had made. And after the Levites left, those from all the tribes of Israel, such as set their heart to seek the Lord God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord God of their fathers. So they strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and made Rehoboam the son of Solomon strong for three years, because they walked in the way of David and Solomon for three years.

There are two reasons, at least, that Jeroboam did what he did. One is because he had no choice. It could have been that the Levites may have stood up to him and refused to be priests teaching and participating in error. So they just up and left. If Jeroboam wanted to have a religion, he had to have priests. He could not use the Levites because they were not there. They had refused, so he decided he would put anybody in who wanted to be a priest.

The second possibility is that he may have summarily kicked them out because they represented too much of a threat. What he did though, or what occurred, insured that there would be no one who knew God's way enough to be a threat.

Related to this, that is, the leaving of the Levites, something else occurred. That something else was that Jeroboam instituted his own feast—a feast very similar to the Feast of Tabernacles, only exactly one month later.

Finally, the third thing was to give them something new to celebrate. That, of course, had a vague connection to something that was also part of their past, and that is the Feast of Tabernacles.

Again, the appeal that he gave in regard to the Feast of Tabernacles and why he was instituting something new was convenience. Remember, did not the law say that three times a year all your males appear before the Lord your God, and that meant traveling to Jerusalem.

The reasoning sounded good. Jerusalem was too far. In addition to this, they were a bit further north than the Jews were, so their harvest season was a little bit later than it was in Judea, and therefore the Feast of Tabernacles represented more of a financial risk for them. So, they decided, "Why not have it a month later?" "Yeah, that sounds really logical. That is good; that is practical, then the Feast of Tabernacles will never fall near the harvest season and we will not have to worry that we are going to lose our crop because we are keeping the feast."

"Wow, what wisdom! Why did we not think of this before? Jeroboam, you are really a leader." Can you not see the carnal mind working?

Ezekiel 20:7-8, 12-13 "Then I said to them, 'Each of you, throw away the abominations which are before his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.' But they rebelled against Me and would not obey Me. They did not all cast away the abominations which were before their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. [Remember what Jeroboam did? The golden calf; the idols of Egypt.] Then I said, 'I will pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt...Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness [that is, the rebellions began then]; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments [statutes—remember that some of them are holy days], which, if a man does, he shall live by them'; and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them in the wilderness, to consume them."

Ezekiel is telling us where this pragmatic, practical approach, led the people. It led them right into idolatry because through the years, they gradually forgot the rest of the holy days. Not only did the Feast of Tabernacles slide by the board, but eventually the others slid by the board

as well, and then the weekly Sabbath also disappeared and we find God condemning Israel for two major sins. This is why they went into captivity—idolatry and Sabbath-breaking.

Now back to I Kings 13. In the story flow, Jeroboam has done his dirty deed. He has instituted these things into the life-stream of Israel. The people have accepted it, apparently, wholeheartedly.

I Kings 13:1-6 And behold, a man of God went from Judah to Bethel by the word of the Lord, and Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense. Then he cried out against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, "O altar, altar! Thus says the Lord: 'Behold, a child, Josiah by name shall be born to the house of David; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and men's bones shall be burned on you.'" And he gave a sign the same day, saying, "This is the sign which the Lord has spoken: Surely the altar shall split apart, and the ashes on it shall be poured out." So it came to pass when King Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God, who cried out against the altar in Bethel, that he stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, "Arrest him!" Then his hand, which he stretched out toward him, withered, so that he could not pull it back to himself. [A paralysis miraculously set in.] The altar also was split apart, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the Lord. Then he answered and said to the man of God, "Please entreat the favor of the Lord your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me." So the man of God entreated the Lord, and the king's hand was restored to him, and became as before.

God mercifully gave Jeroboam further instruction. He was admonishing him to repent! He gave him a couple of miracles, in order to impress upon Jeroboam's mind that he was headed in a wrong direction—that if he did not turn, it was going to mean disaster for himself and for Israel.

God just did not stand aside, wring His hands, and wonder what He could do. He appealed to the man to change.

If we would read the remainder of the chapter, we would find that God even allowed this very prophet (that is mentioned in the beginning of the chapter) to die a horrible death by the jaws of a lion because the prophet did not specifically follow God's instructions regarding what he was to do on that trip to see Jeroboam.

God told him, "Do not eat while you are there." But the man of God allowed himself to be deceived by another prophet into eating. So when the man of God left the other prophet's home, on the way along the road the lion attacked him. But then as a witness to all who would pass by, the lion did not eat him. He simply stood by the prophet, attracting people's attention to what had occurred.

The lesson is obvious—"Jeroboam, you did not follow My orders. The man of God did not follow the orders and he died as a result that. You too are not going to come to any good end, because you did not follow My orders either."

I Kings 15:25-26 Now Nadab the son of Jeroboam became king over Israel in the second year of Asa king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel two years. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in his sin by which he had made Israel sin.

Nadab followed the same path. In verse 29, Baasha is king.

I Kings 15:29-30 And it was so, when he became king, that he killed all the house of Jeroboam. He did not leave to Jeroboam anyone that breathed, [Is that a reminder of what happened with the prophet?] until he had destroyed him, according to the word of the Lord which He had spoken by His servant Ahijah the Shilonite, because of the sins of Jeroboam, which he had sinned and by which he had made Israel sin, because of his provocation with which he had provoked the Lord God of Israel to anger.

In verse 34 we find that Baasha did not turn away from the sin of Jeroboam either. In chapter 16:19, we are talking about Zimri, the next king:

I Kings 16:19 ...because of the sins which he had committed in doing evil in the sight of the Lord, in walking in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin which he had committed to make Israel sin.

Zimri did not turn either. In verse 25, we find that Omri, the next king did not repent either. We find that Ahab, the next king, did not repent either. And in II Kings 17:

II Kings 17:20-23 And the Lord rejected all the descendants of Israel, afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them from His sight. For He tore Israel from the house of David, and they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king. Then Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord, and made them commit a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them, until the Lord removed Israel out of His sight, as He had said by all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away from their own land to Assyria, as it is to this day [that is, to the time of the writing of II Kings].

Here is a lesson from history. It is there for our admonition of what happened to a nation, or what will happen to any nation, or any church, or any individual who departs from God's way.

God indeed will try to get the person to repent, but He is showing that the normal course, that is, the natural course for human nature to follow is to go in the direction that it is going, which is away from God.

This whole thing with Jeroboam and Israel began in a small way—a small turning away. But it was like the first crack in a dam before the whole thing burst.

Are you aware how much the holy days mean to us; how much they have changed our lives? Who are you? The holy days tell you who you are. What did Christ do and what will He be? The holy days tell you that. What is the purpose of life? The holy days tell you that. What is going to happen to all who live? The holy days tell us that and many other things besides.

How long would we keep a true perspective on the Kingdom of God without the holy days? Not very long. Do you think Jeroboam did not know what he was doing? He was a man of great skill. Even God says that. He was a very intelligent, astute individual wise in the ways of human nature.

It did not take a great deal, but it led Israel into a way of life that they have not repented of to this day. And it began by simply turning them away from the central place of worship, from the true teachers, and from one of the holy days.

John 14:15 "If you love Me, keep My commandments."

There is nothing hard about that—to know, to understand. Do you love God? You can demonstrate that love by just doing what He says. There is nothing hard about that. It might be hard to do, but it is not hard to understand.

John 14:23-24 Jesus answered and said to him, "If any loves Me, he will keep My word; [He just turned a phrase, but it means the same thing as verse 15] and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me."

Here is our instruction. No equivocation. The Solomon/Jeroboam history is a clear example of how doctrine is first diluted and grows into outright idolatry. It is a vivid example of how a little leaven truly leavens the whole lump. It is an admonition to you and me to make every effort not to allow that first crack to take place before the dam bursts on our true spirituality before God.

There are a number of things we can learn from this example, but the one I want to concentrate on is that this occurred primarily because the people, from the very top of the government to the lowest citizen, wanted it to occur!

Catch that! It only happened because the people wanted it to happen. They made the choice to allow it to happen. If you had been on the scene when this occurred and had taken a poll of individual citizens—questioning them as to whether they wanted the nation to go into

idolatry—I have no doubt that they would have said, "No (resoundingly)! I do not want the nation to go into idolatry. I do not want to worship idols. I want to worship the Lord."

But brethren, it did occur. God has given us a true account of the history. It did occur and the reason it occurred is because the people individually allowed it to occur in their own life. I think they felt that they were just one person and it really did not much matter what they did. But brethren, God judges us individually. It does matter both individually and to the group what the individual does.

Jeremiah 5:30-31 "An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land [God reports]: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so [Now notice this question:] but what will you do in the end?" [The question God asks of the people who love this.]

The entire nation—Jeremiah is reporting here on Judah, just because Nebuchadnezzar invaded in 607 B.C.—the entire nation was spiritually and morally sick. This statement "and the priests rule by their own power," means, in more modern language, that the priests were functioning by their own authority—that is, they pushed the law of God aside.

The people loved it because in so doing, they allowed themselves to be deceived into thinking that the restraints and penalties of God's law would not affect them. "It will not happen to me." How do I know that? Because that is what God showed happened in the Garden of Eden. "You shall not surely die." Adam and Eve became convinced that it was not going to affect them if they disobeyed what God said. "It will not really affect me." They fell for what Satan sold them on.

Why does God concentrate on morals in His Book? There are many things He could have written about in His Book, but He chose to write very much about the morals of the people that He was reporting on.

I will tell you one reason why. Morals are like a weathervane. They show the direction a nation, or a church, or an individual is headed in.

There is a second thing that God concentrates on and that is the prophets and the preachers. Why? Because He has appointed them to be the conscience of His people. The preachers tend to lead the people either into morality or immorality—one or the other. They are like the spear point—the arrow that points the direction. They are like the lead men, the front men. That is why it says in verse 30, "An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power."

I can remember in 1989, just before the Feast of Tabernacles in Palm Springs, I was sitting with a group of ministers who were going to give sermons or sermonettes. The traveling speaker (the first one who came through that year) was addressing. I heard this man give instructions to all of the men who were going to be speaking that year and he said, "Do not make people feel guilty."

I just about collapsed in apoplexy. What, pray tell, is a minister supposed to do? Certainly a

minister should encourage. There is no doubt about that. He encourages by pointing to what God is, the great hope that is before us, and how we can make it because God is helping us. But when a minister sees sin, when a minister sees that people are heading in a wrong direction, he has the responsibility from God to call their attention to that so that they will have the opportunity to repent. And if he makes people feel guilty while he is doing that that is too bad. That is his job, and he is not doing his job if he does not make people feel guilty about their sins!

We have got to understand that even if a minister is not doing his job, though, and pointing out the sins of the people that he is responsible to for God, we still, individually, have the responsibility to obey God regardless.

Let us go back to Ecclesiastes 8, because we see here a principle that is at work in human nature, and we have got to be aware of this. Thinking about what Jeremiah said—the people love to have it so—Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 8: 11, by reflecting on his observations, watching people, thinking about himself, watching events occur in his land:

Ecclesiastes 8:11-13 Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. [Beware of this, brethren. This principle is at work within you and me.] Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

Just because the penalty does not occur immediately does not mean it is not going to come. Be aware! Adam and Eve set aside the teaching of God because they became convinced that the penalty—death—would not occur. When they sinned and death did not occur immediately, they were even more convinced. But death did occur and other evil things happened in their lives that did not have to happen.

We have got to understand that it is part of the way God operates, that He give us time to learn lessons; that He give us time to come to a better knowledge of Him; that He give us time to understand cause and effect. If God reacted immediately when we sinned, it would be all over the very first time. There would be no building of character; there would be no learning by experience; there would be no growth in wisdom; there would be no understanding of human nature. Do not be deceived because the penalty does not seem to fall quickly.

Let us go back into I Kings again. The two major players in this context are Jehoshaphat and Ahab.

I Kings 22:8 So the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is still one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say such things!"

These two were joining in an alliance. They were going to go to war together. They wanted to seek the will of God to see whether it was right for them to do such a thing and to do it together. The king of Israel brought his prophets of Baal before Jehoshaphat and Jehoshaphat was skeptical. He asked that a true prophet of God be brought. That is what is taking place. I want you to notice the king of Israel's response that when Jehoshaphat made that request, his response was, "I do not like him because he does not say things that please me!"

1 Kings 22:13 Then the messenger who had gone to call Micaiah spoke to him, saying, "Now listen, the words of the prophets with one accord encourage the king. Please, let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak encouragement."

It does not matter whether one is a king, a prophet, a priest, or a commoner—everybody has a powerful urge to hear good things, even at the expense of turning away from the truth.

Again, remember Jesus' words in John 8: 44-45. He said to the Jews in Jerusalem, "The sins of your fathers you want to do." You want to do!

I am going through this for a very specific reason, which I will get to in just a bit.

Jeremiah 23:16 Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord."

It was of this verse that I was thinking when I said earlier that even if a minister (a so-called man of God) is speaking lies to you (is not speaking the truth) the responsibility stills falls on the individual.

Jeremiah 23:17, 23-25 "They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The Lord has said, "You shall have peace"; and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'..."Am I a God near at hand," says the Lord, "And not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?" says the Lord; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the Lord. "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!'"

Here is a reality that God presents us with: If a spiritual leader is not telling us the truth of God that does not excuse us simply because we were not the perpetrator of the lie. Undoubtedly, God will take circumstances into consideration in His judgment, but there still is going to be some penalty! Otherwise, why would He ask the question, "Where can one hide?"

In Jeremiah 17: 9 is one of the best-known verses in the entire Bible to Church of God members. Here is a reality that we have to deal with.

Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

Human nature is going to try to reassert its dominance in a converted person's life. It is interesting that this word that is translated into the English word "deceitful" from the Hebrew means "tortuous, twisted, convoluted." That is the way human nature is. It is tortuous and twisted in its thinking. It is convoluted in its reasoning. He is referring to the kind of justifications or rationalizations that it will go to in order to convince the person that it is okay to sin; that it is okay to not pay attention to the law of God; okay to say to the self, "It really does not matter. I am only one person."

Listen to this frank quote from Aldus Huxley, which appears in his book *Ends And Means*. It comes from pages 270 and 273.

I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning. Consequently, I assumed that it had none and was able, without difficulty, to find satisfying reason for this assumption.

Convoluted, tortuous, twisted. Looking for rationalizations; looking for justifications? Oh yes. Continuing the quote from page 273:

Most ignorance is vendible will that decides how and upon what subject we shall use our intelligence. Those who detect no meaning in the world generally do so because for one reason or another it suits their books that the world should be meaningless. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.

Human nature—the heart twisted and deceived the truth of God into thinking that, "Well, let us make the assumption that the world and life has no meaning, therefore we can do what we want to do." This, from a highly intelligent human being.

I think we recognize that for us to acknowledge and yield to truth is going to be personally costly and we do not want to pay the price, so we allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking it really does not matter if I yield to the wrong thing this time. I will fight the battle the next time it comes up.

Turn to Matthew 21, because I want to inject this occasion in the life of Jesus.

Matthew 21:23 Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You

this authority?"

"These things" most specifically refer to what happened earlier in chapter 21. He made His triumphal entry into the city on the back of a donkey and the people shouted "Hosanna to the Lord!" There was a great multitude of people wishing Him well. He went into the temple area and overturned the moneychanger's table and those who were selling the sacrifices.

That was a direct affront to those who were in charge of the temple and the Sanhedrin. So their question to Him is: "Who gave you the authority to do these things?"

Matthew 21:24-27 But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: [This was a very common way among the Jews of that time to meet a question, that is, to respond with a question.] The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

This was a crucial incident because the Sanhedrin was directly challenging Him. Their response shows us a situation we want to avoid happening in our life. The term "baptism" is simply a way of indicating John's whole ministry. The question was, "By what authority?" Jesus had no authority from the temple; He had no authority from any priestly school; He had no authority from the Sanhedrin for what He was doing.

But His question on the return put them right on the horns of a dilemma. If they said John's authority was from God that would also validate Christ because John said Christ was the Messiah. If they said John's authority was not from God then they had to face the anger of the people, because the people looked upon John as a prophet from God.

So they dodged the question by claiming ignorance. They dodged the truth by claiming ignorance. Their attitude toward truth led them to expediency rather than principle. They became pragmatist. They did what was practical in the situation rather than following through with the ideal, which would have been to answer honestly. They did what they felt was safe rather than truthful and their pride of position led them into this evasion (because that is what it was).

This episode is critical to understanding how or why we first deceive ourselves into evading truth. We reason and we justify that obeying truth is not all that important because we do not want to face the pain it might cause us to undergo. Brethren, we are deceiving ourselves; we are hiding from ourselves.

We can do this with a multitude of lesser or greater sins. You cannot tell me that the people out there do not know better. They know the truth—that every cigarette is just another coffin nail.

What is the evasion? They say it is my business what I do with my life.

That is an evasion because it is more than their life; it is more than their business. They do not live in a vacuum. They are accountable to other people, at the very least, and to God.

This whole abortion issue is built on an evasion. The real issue is murder! It is the murder of the innocent and defenseless unborn. But the leaders of the pro-abortion movement knew that they could never win in a direct confrontation with the truth, so they subtly shifted the emphasis to one of choice. "I have the right to choose what I do with my body. I will do what I please."

That sounds really good to an American reared on this song of personal autonomy, but it evades the issue of dead babies.

We do it with food. We know we should eat better, but we hide ourselves behind a multitude of justifications. We do it out on the highway by exceeding the speed limit. We say, "Well, everyone else is doing it." But God's word says we are to be subject to every ordinance of man.

We do it in more serious areas, like Bible study and prayer. We just do not do those things in many occasions and then we evade the truth as to why we do not pray or study.

This principle works in direct reference to other sins against God as well. The desire to fornicate. We titillate one's sexual lust through pornography, gossiping, lying to make the self look good. We steal possessions that belong to other people because we reason that we cannot buy for ourselves, or we divorce rather than humbling ourselves and really working on the problems.

There is almost no end to the applications of evading the truth. We evade because we do not want to pay the cost. We fear the cost more than we fear God.

Let us go back to Jeremiah 17 and look at this verse in its context.

Jeremiah 17:5 "Cursed is the man who trusts in man."

I want to let you know that the subject in which Jeremiah 17:9 appears is a subject of faith. God is pointing out the problem of why it is that we allow our deceitful heart to get away with evading truth. It is a matter of faith; trust.

Jeremiah 17:5-6 "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes..."

In other words, the person who does not live by faith is not going to grow. He is going to be like a shrub in the desert that only receives water every so often, not near often enough to really grow.

Jeremiah 17:6-9...but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land which is not inhabited. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord. For he shall be like

a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

It is the heart that motivates us to break faith with God's Word. It does it by weakening our trust in what God says as being really true. Is that not what happened in the Garden of Eden? Is that not that why Adam and Eve sinned, because their trust in God's Word was broken by the arguments, by the reasons, by the convoluted ideas and justifications that Satan came up with?

Jeremiah 17:10 "I, the Lord [God says], search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings."

God is stating what was later reiterated in Jeremiah 23. There is individual responsibility and we have to face up to the fact that there is no hiding from God. God does not mean this in a mean way—not at all. He is not trying to make us feel as though we need to be looking over our shoulder all the time for His club to come down on us. That is not what He is looking for.

He is looking for us to get the good out of life. His reasons are honorable, and loving, and kind, and good. He is trying to help us to understand that cause and effect are at work. We need to consider: Do we really trust God?

Jeremiah 17:11-13a "As a partridge that broods but does not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by right [you might substitute the word prosperity, pleasantness for riches, or we might say a feeling of relief]; it will leave him in the midst of his days, and at his end he will be a fool." A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You [allowing the heart to deceive] shall be ashamed. "Those who depart from Me [those who do not really trust Him] shall be written in the earth..."

Written in the dust. What happens to anything written in the dust? The wind comes along and it blows away. Those who do not trust God, those who depart from the Lord, those who allow their heart to deceive them into not properly responding to the truth of God—their names are just going to blow away like something written in the dust.

Jeremiah 17:13b...because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters."

Do we really believe Him enough to live by faith? The person who lives by faith is one who believes God's truth and responds in obedience to it. The person who does not, departs from His

truth.

Put this principle right back into what happened with Jeroboam and the Israelites. They had a wonderful opportunity to recapture the glory days of the end of David's reign and the beginning of Solomon's. But instead, they listened to a man who was not telling them God's truth. Why? Because they thought, like Jeroboam, that it was not all that important to obey God. Their desire for convenience did them in. They reasoned that it would be better for them to do it Jeroboam's way.

Was there anything else they could have done? Yes, they could have done what it said in II Chronicles that others did. They left Israel and went to Judah. Their desire to obey God was so great they left, apparently, their property behind. They may have left their family behind. They left their friends behind. They just dropped things and went to where the truth of God was still being observed.

I understand that would have been quite a sacrifice and I know that some did what I just described. Some, undoubtedly, tried to do what they could within their communities still within Israel by not joining in with Jeroboam's reforms, because we find in II Chronicles 30 that when Hezekiah celebrated that Passover as part of his reforms, he sent out messengers who went all through Israel. Though some laughed them to scorn, others did come to Hezekiah and kept the Passover. Some did obey.

God is telling us in Jeremiah 17 that it is always going to be better for us in the long run, if by faith, we yield to His truth in obedience. He assures us in verse 10 that we will be judged according to what we do. He tells us that anyone who tries for prosperity, relief, or deliverance apart from God's Word—even though they seem to succeed for a while, in the end, they will not prosper.

When a person yields to God's truth (trusting God, that is) He does what is idealistic as compared to what human nature would normally do—that is, what seems practical at the moment. God is showing us that spiritual life cannot thrive. Instead, what occurs is immorality increases and the quality of life in the society declines.

That is what happened in the history of Israel and it is a very clear lesson to you and me.