

# Staying Alive?

*Sermon by Bob Arbogast*

*Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan*

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**Scripture: 1 Kings 12:25-33**

## Sermon

Jan and I moved to Michigan for the first time in 1982. It was a different world to us, a world with suicide lanes, a church on every corner, and Meijer Thrifty Acres. At first we felt kind of lost. But we got used to it.

In 1986, we spent the summer in western Canada. That was another different world. Again we felt lost. One time we needed a fly-swatter. And we had no idea where to find one. What kind of store sells fly-swatters? In Grand Rapids, we never had to ask a question like that. Whatever we wanted, we could find it at Meijer.

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What a brilliant concept that was: one-stop shopping! We were hooked by the convenience. As long as we could find what we wanted at Meijer, they didn't have to worry about us shopping anywhere else.

Jeroboam came up with a similar solution. And for a similar reason. And from his perspective, it made sense. It's what anyone would have done.

THINK ABOUT IT. All of sudden, Jeroboam is a king. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel are his, ripped from the hand of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. So far, so good. But all the institutions and the structures, all the ceremonies and the rituals—all of it is in the south, in Rehoboam's royal city, Jerusalem. And that's a challenge to Jeroboam. Because more than anything, he wants to stay alive and stay in power. So, first things first, Jeroboam establishes a royal city of his own, at Shechem.

It's an inspired choice! Shechem just about bursts with significance. At Shechem, God had confirmed his covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:6-7). At Shechem, Joshua had challenged all Israel to choose the Lord (Joshua 24). And at Shechem, most of Israel had chosen Jeroboam to be their king (1 Kings 12:1-20).

SO NOW JEROBOAM HAS HIS ROYAL CITY. But that's not enough. Because the Temple of the Lord is in Rehoboam's city. The priests are in Rehoboam's city. The festivals are in Rehoboam's city. And if the people go to Rehoboam's city to worship the Lord, they

might just as well embrace Rehoboam as their king, for convenience sake. You know, one-stop shopping. That would be the end of Jeroboam. So he comes up with a more convenient alternative for the people.

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He starts the spiel slowly. "Why go to Jerusalem?" he says. "Why go to all that trouble, when you can worship close to home?"

Then he pours it on. "I've put everything in place for you. Worship at Bethel. Worship at Dan. Whatever works for you. It's all good. There's a golden calf in both places!"

From there, he adds the finishing touches. "If Bethel's not convenient, if Dan's not convenient, don't worry. I've made improvements at all your favorite shrines. There's plenty of parking, artisan coffee, clean bathrooms. There's even a place for your kids to play, until it's time for them to be sacrificed!"

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That's Jeroboam's version of one-stop shopping. But it's all for nothing. It's all phony. And you can tell right away. Because when Jeroboam offers sacrifices and incense, he himself is not burned up.

IF YOU'RE UP ON THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS, YOU MIGHT REMEMBER THIS. It happens just after the Tabernacle is set up, just after the priests begin their work. At that time, Aaron is the High Priest. And twice a day, he burns incense before the Lord.

Well, if a little is good, then more must be better. So one day Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, they offer some incense of their own. It's the last thing they ever do. Because fire comes out from the presence of the Lord and consumes them (Leviticus 10:1-3).

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But when Jeroboam offers incense, no fire comes out and consumes him. And that can mean only one thing. That in all the religious buildings and activities that Jeroboam has established, in the calves of gold he has made and in the priests he has appointed—in all of it, the Lord is not present. All of it is phony. All of it is false. All of it is empty.

But under Jeroboam's leadership, that's what the people choose anyway. And there's more to it than convenience. Because they even make the long trip to Dan for worship. Dan is as far north as possible in Israel. That's like going to Copper Harbor for church!

AS THE STORY CONTINUES TO UNFOLD IN KINGS, NOTHING CHANGES. Starting with Jeroboam, a long line of self-serving kings will lead Israel astray. Jeroboam himself had only one thing to do. It was the one thing that could defeat his greatest fear. It was the

one thing that could keep him alive and keep him in power. The Lord told him, “I will make the same promise to you that I made to David. I will establish your throne forever. Just obey me, and do what is right.” Yet like every other king in Israel, Jeroboam does not obey God. He does not do what is right.

But Jeroboam doesn’t want to disobey alone. So he takes the whole nation with him. And he wins their loyalty, loyalty that will keep him in power, he hopes—he wins their loyalty by offering up a false religion to them. In his case, it’s empty temples and phony priests and false gospels.

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That pattern repeats across the ages and around the world. Nations and empires set up shrines, practice rituals, and celebrate festivals. And it’s all about staying alive. It’s all about holding on to power.

I WENT TO WINDSOR, ONTARIO, A FEW WEEKS AGO. I was in for a surprise. Because I didn’t realize how Canada is caught up in the mythology of the British Empire. I didn’t realize how important it is in Canada to keep that mythology alive.

One afternoon, I walked through Dieppe Park. It’s along the river, across from downtown Detroit. I stopped at several monuments to the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II. One monument listed all the ships that were lost and gave the number of sailors who died on each one. Another monument named all the sailors who died when *HMCS Hunter* was lost.

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Above that list of names, there was a biblical text, almost. It was from John’s Gospel, sort of. It said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his country” (see John 15:13). Really? That’s not how I remember that text. But the monument revises Jesus for the purposes of patriotism. The monument rewrites Scripture for the purposes of empire. And it’s false.

HOW MANY CANADIANS? How many Americans? How many Chinese? How many Ukrainians? How many people have God and country confused? How many people in how many places have been misled by parades and portraits, by movies and monuments, and by almost-religious rituals?

How many people offer their ultimate allegiance to something that is not God? How many people are loyal to premiers, presidents, and prime ministers and to kings and queens who are most concerned about staying alive and staying in power?<sup>1</sup>

THE LORD SAID TO JEROBOAM, “JUST OBEY ME, AND DO WHAT IS RIGHT.” It turns out he wasn’t able to do that. It turns out no king in Israel was able to do that. Because every king was concerned with staying alive and staying in power.

Do you remember how Israel wanted a king like every other nation? Well, they got kings who were like every other king. They got kings who were corrupted by the same fears. It’s the same for every king. To die before your time is a disaster. And to lose your power is a catastrophe.

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But what if doing what is right means a king becomes powerless? What if obeying God means a king dies? Is that the end of the king and his kingdom? Is that the end of his people?

ONE DARK FRIDAY, FIRE CAME FROM GOD. Even though the wood of the cross didn’t burn up, Jesus himself was consumed. And when he died, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two. But there was nothing behind that curtain. The presence of God was not there.

No, the presence of God was with the One who was dying on the cross. The presence of God was with his body in the tomb. The presence of God was with him as he rose up from death and took his seat at the right of the Presence in heaven. And now the presence of God is in this world. The presence of God is among us as the life-giving Spirit.

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In the Lord himself and in his church and in the faith once for all delivered to the saints—there we have a focus for our loyalty and a focus for our humble service. And none of it is ever about staying alive. None of it is ever about staying in power. No; it’s always about dying to ourselves. And it’s only about losing our grip on power as the one true Power in all the world grips us.

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*Glory and thanks be to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

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<sup>1</sup> In a functioning, present-day democracy, leaders stay alive and stay in power by getting reelected. Sometimes reelection appears to be the main objective; Donald Trump registered for reelection on the day of his inauguration.