

The Christian and living in the world with Coronavirus. 2 Chronicles chapter 13

At the end of 2019 none of us could have envisaged that only three months into 2020 we would go into virtual lockdown as a world. We could not have foreseen a virus coming from China, and as of Monday 16th March, being present in 2/3 of the countries of the world to a greater or lesser degree. We could not have foreseen hundreds and thousands of deaths worldwide. We would never have imagined that airlines would cease to fly, having for so long taken them for granted, and not having seen anything like the scale of it even after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, which brought down the twin towers. We had no understanding of what a pandemic would do, having never experienced a pandemic ourselves. We never foresaw thousands of people being made redundant overnight! Many hotels, restaurants, coffee shops, nurseries, playschools, and schools themselves are closing and many places are making their workforce redundant. I heard this morning (Thursday) that BMW has shut its plants in Germany! All this is new to us, a challenge to us. It has brought with it the fear of knowing what to do, where to go to be safe outside our homes, of panic buying, hoarding, and some younger adults even taking toilet rolls from elderly people in the queue of supermarkets as they waited to pay at the till. We are living in uncharted days, in unknown times.

As individuals, parents, grandparents, family members of both human families and our church communities we do have our anxieties. That is the way that God has made us. We need to recognise that God had a hand in making us the way we are 'hardwired' to use an expression which I think is from the computer and technological age. But the God who has made us, has not just left us to our own in the anxious times, in this time of uncertainty. When others' hearts are failing them for fear of what may be coming down the tracks at great speed what can the servant of God do, how should he react? Is there anything that we can see in Scripture that will encourage the believer in a time of crisis? There may not be any occasion where we find a pandemic in Scripture, but there are many instances of God's servants finding hope in anxious and gloomy times.

Let us look at Abijah in 2 Chronicles 13:1-22, who is a king in Judah and perhaps see some lessons to help and encourage us in our present uncertain age and circumstances.

1. THE POSITION. The events that we read about in this chapter take place only two generations down the line from Solomon. Abijah was a grandson of Solomon who had been a good king, but who also showed his weaknesses and his strengths. Abijah has succeeded his father Rehoboam as king and I am sure that he hopes for a quiet reign and no trouble coming from any quarter. Unfortunately, there had been continual warfare between Jeroboam, King of Israel and Rehoboam (chapter 12:15); so in one sense the future did not look great. I would suggest to you that he was hoping and looking for a long, peaceful and prosperous reign. He had only been king for three years in Jerusalem when his northern counterpart, Jeroboam declared war.

We must remember that Jeroboam was a rogue ruler. (vs. 5,6) Rehoboam tells both Jeroboam and his army that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given the kingdom to David and his descendants for ever, yet Jeroboam, just an official under David had a coup-d'état, a sudden and violent uprising and had taken control of the 10 tribes which formed the northern kingdom of Israel. This rogue ruler, 3 years into Abijah's reign, comes against the smaller southern kingdom of Judah with a massive army. We are told that Abijah went out against him, obviously to do battle. Jeroboam's army was 800,000 strong, while Abijah's was 400,000. There is obviously a great difference in numbers, 2 to 1, and I don't think any of us would like to be outnumbered 2 to 1 on a football field or in a game of rugby or on the netball court. We definitely wouldn't win.

But Abijah is a strong leader, and he is not afraid to speak out and warn Jeroboam what he is doing is wrong. Abijah tells Jeroboam that not only has he brought this massive army but he has brought "the golden calves." (v. 8) These are gods that Jeroboam himself has made for the people to worship and to lead them away from the Lord. More than that he has "driven out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the

Levites” (v.9) and in their place they have made their own priests like the heathen countries around them. Whoever owns a bullock or a ram could become a priest. It was a real free for all to become a priest. (v.9) The Lord had chosen Aaron’s clan and family and set the Levites apart for the service of the Tabernacle and later the Temple, but Jeroboam had thrown all God’s instructions aside and followed his own ungodly path.

Do you remember the last time that golden calves were mentioned? When Moses was up the mountain and God was speaking with him, there was a time when the Israelites thought he had died on the mountain and they would never see him again. As a result they made the golden calf – a sign of rebellion against the God who just a short time earlier had brought them out of Egypt with a mighty outstretched arm following 10 plagues and the opening of the Red Sea so that they walked through on dry ground. The golden calf was one of the many gods of Egypt and, here generations later they were still hankering after the things of Egypt thought they had never seen or experienced them. Sin lies deep in the heart. It is deep-rooted. These Israelites not only made a false god in which they were trusting and which they were worshipping, but they also forsook God’s command of who was to serve the people as they came to worship him and to seek forgiveness for their sin.

So civil war had broken out between the people who had the same covenantal heritage. There was a great difference in the size of their armies. Jeroboam believed numbers mattered more than anything else.

2. THE REMEDY. Many times in Scripture we are told that numbers do not matter to God, but it is faithfulness to his revealed word. We can think of Gideon and his chosen 300 who defeated the host of the Amalekites. Abijah says something very noteworthy here in v. 8 “And now you plan to resist the kingdom of the Lord.” He adds in v. 10 “as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken him” Then he goes on to tell them that they had ignored God’s instructions regarding who should be God’s appointed

priests and Levites, before continuing, “But you have forsaken him. God is with us; he is our leader. His priests with their trumpets will sound the battle cry against you.” (vs. 11,12) Abijah calls the rebels to repent informing them that the most powerful warrior is with them, not with Jeroboam and his massive hordes of soldiers. Was that not also such an encouragement to the ‘small’ army of Abijah? God is with us. God is not a bystander in this present crisis our modern world is facing. He is an active participant in it. He will act mightily to save. He has promised those who love him and obey him that he will never leave them nor forsake them. Is that not a comfort to us in these anxious times? Is that not an encouragement to know that our sovereign God is in control of circumstances that are beyond the control of humans and the mightiest of nations.

Abijah called on the rebels to repent. “Men of Israel, do not fight against the Lord, the God of your fathers, for you will not succeed.” Abijah was confident that God was in control and that this massive army that he was facing would be defeated. We can be confident too in the midst of the present crisis that our gracious God is in control and he will give the victory to his children. The storms of life will come. That’s life. But God is greater than the evil virus in our world today. Rev. Warren Peel quoted R.C. Sproul who said that there cannot be a single molecule – or virus – anywhere in the world that is outside of God’s sovereignty. How true those words are. Hold on to that fact. God is in sovereign control of this present situation. The nations believe this virus is out of control, but there is one who controls even the very nations.

But back to Abijah and his difficulty. His storm had come. He was outnumbered, overwhelmed by the situation but his faith in God did not fail.

3. THE RESPONSE. In short, Jeroboam did not listen to the wise counsel of Abijah. During the time that Abijah had been calling for him and his troops to repent of their sin of rebellion against God, Jeroboam had sent troops around behind Ahijah’s army so that they were not only outnumbered but now surrounded. Now he was facing an attack

on two fronts, something no commander wishes to consider. Yet still his faith did not fail. There are times when we will be unpleasantly surprised. We might think all is fine, but all is worse than we thought. In those moments we will turn to him all the more readily. God will use those very unpleasant circumstances for your betterment and growth in grace as you look to him. We may think we are facing overwhelming odds, surrounded and outnumbered. We may feel that we are in a circumstance in which we can't cope, have many fears or are facing seasons of difficulty. God does allow tough things to happen, but God will bring good things out of bad that you would never have chosen for yourself.

When Elizabeth Elliott's husband Jim and a colleague were killed by natives as they tried to evangelise them, we could have been forgiven in thinking she should have gone back to the US. But she later went to the very people who had taken her husband's life, and the man who actually killed her husband, was the first to come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God cared for your soul and sent his Son to die on the cross for you. If he did that he also cares for your circumstances and the situation in which we all find ourselves with this threat of Covid-19 hanging over us. Men like Abijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Paul in the NT all had their severe trials. But in each case God utilised those circumstances for their growth in grace and he will use this circumstance in 2020 for our growth in grace too. It will validate our faith as we trust the Lord who knows what he is doing and we can be lights to others. We can speak of a sovereign God, who is in charge of all things, even though we cannot understand his outworking. Lift your eyes up to the Lord (Psalm 121) and seek him. God will use this circumstance to make you more like his Son. We can say "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah is on our side" and "The Lord is my shepherd (literally shepherding me – an active participle) I shall not want." Psalm 23:1. What an encouragement that verse alone is.

4. THE RESULT. Jeroboam felt secure by massive numbers. But he was defeated and lost

500,000 of his soldiers. That staggers us. We are realistic and know that thousands have died and will for weeks continue to die due to this virus. It is striking how many are frightened by the virus. The most powerful economic powers in the world, where people feel immune to various troubles, are indefensible against this virus which knows no borders. But our trust is not in man but in God who keeps us in the palm of his hand and as believers we know that nothing shall remove us from his care and keeping. We are told Abijah grew in strength. May we grow in strength spiritually as we look to God at this time.