

2 CHRONICLES 10 WHAT A MESS!

Three weeks ago yesterday, a church burned down in Lincoln, Nebraska. The church was called Zion Church, and it was a church of our denomination, pastored by a friend of ours from seminary, named Stu Kerns.

Not long after the fire, Stu wrote to his congregation,

“As I watched the building at 9th and D erupt with flames and met with you, with neighbors, with friends from all over Lincoln, we wept and spoke of a house full of memories. A House built by simple immigrants 80 years ago, yet built to the glory of God.

“I have marveled over the past 10 years how families with such humble means came together to build a structure that seems impossible to replace. This house held over 4000 worship services, hundreds of weddings, fellowship dinners with homemade noodles, baptisms, and funerals.

“For many, it feels like the death of a dear old friend.”

The Bible is God’s story of his plan to bring people back into relationship with him. But when we reach 2 Chronicles 10, we wonder if the plan is dying.

God has promised to bless all nations through the people of Abraham. He has delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and given them a land of their own. He has provided them with a law to live by, and with kings to lead them.

King Saul has come and gone. King David has come and gone. King Solomon has come and gone. Now what happens?

WHAT A MESS! Surely Stu thought that as he rummaged through the rubble of that building. Maybe you have thought that, as you consider your life, and your world. That is what I thought, as I read these words.

This mess is first, SOLOMON’S MESS. This king, known for his wisdom, has contributed to this mess.

There is his personal mess.

We read in 1 Kings 11, “As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God...”

Because of this, the Lord has become angry with Solomon. He has told Solomon that his personal mess will lead to the breakup of his kingdom. This will not happen during his lifetime, and his sons will still rule over some of the kingdom, but Solomon’s personal mess will contribute to this mess.

There is also his professional mess. When we read 2 Chronicles 10, we see that Solomon has ruled his people harshly. They have carried a “heavy yoke.” He has worked them too hard, and they have resented him for it.

This mess is Solomon’s mess. This mess is REHOBAM’S MESS.

If you are losing track, Rehoboam is the son of Solomon. He became king upon the death of Solomon.

He could have made it better. Solomon was tough on the people, but now Rehoboam visits the northern tribes at the town of Shechem, and he has the opportunity to show mercy, and improve the relationships within Israel.

But instead, he made it worse. The northern tribes ask, in our language, for the king to “lighten up.” Lighten up on the work. Lighten up on the taxes we pay to support you.

Rehoboam meets with the “elders.” These are probably older men who have served as advisors to the king. They say, “Take it easy on them.”

Rehoboam meets with the “young men.” These are other advisors. They may be Rehoboam’s half brothers. They say, “Get tough with them.”

He listens to the tough guys, and the situation gets worse.

Rehoboam declares, “My finger is thicker than my father’s waist.” In other words, I am

much bigger and tougher than he was.

Rehoboam promises, “My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even harder.” You think it has been hard for you? Just wait.

Rehoboam blusters, “My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.” This might be a description of the kind of whip he would have his people use on these people, if they did not obey him.

He could have made it better. But he made it worse. What a mess!

Yet this is also JEROBOAM’S MESS.

Who is Jeroboam? He was a rising young star in Solomon’s kingdom. Now he leads the northern tribes.

He turns his back on the king.

When Rehoboam declares the plan, Jeroboam’s followers cry, “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!”

They are saying, “We are no longer part of your kingdom, son of David.”

Then he turns his sword on the king.

Rehoboam sends one of his assistants to the northern tribes. He will straighten them out. They stone him to death.

Then they come after Rehoboam, and they nearly get him.

So here we are. The kingdom is split. Jeroboam rules the ten northern tribes, and Rehoboam rules the two southern tribes.

What a mess! How far have God’s people come from Exodus 19! God has freed them from Egypt, and he is about to bring them into the promised land. He declares, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Kingdom of priests? Holy nation? How many kingdoms? How many nations? Where is the holiness? God chose this people to be his own, and to bless each nation of the earth. Now look at them. The kingdom is in shambles.

As you read on in the Old Testament, you will read of fighting between the kingdoms, and of fighting with other kingdoms, and of the destruction of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

What a mess! Has God’s plan failed? It seems so. These messy people have apparently messed up God’s plan for God’s people in Israel.

But is that so?

Amidst the wreckage and rubble of these words, we hear a faint voice of hope. It says, WHAT? A MESS? A mess? Just wait.

It is a mess to our eyes, but the writer of the Chronicles says, THIS WAS FROM GOD.

The northern tribes ask, and Rehoboam answers, and we read in verse 15, “So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from God, to fulfill the word that the Lord had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat...”

Wait a minute, says the writer of the Chronicles. We are noticing the actions of people here. But what is God doing? This is from him.

Back in 1 Kings 11, we read of a man of God named Ahijah. He comes to Jeroboam - the rising star in Solomon’s kingdom. Ahijah is wearing a nice new cloak, but then he tears it to pieces. Then he gives ten pieces to Jeroboam. He tells him that Jeroboam will rule ten tribes of Israel.

Solomon’s mess is real. Rehoboam’s mess is real. Jeroboam’s mess is real. But the writer of Chronicles wants us to know that this is also real: God’s plan is to use these messes, to work out his perfect plan. God is in every bit of this. These messes are not outside his control. He will take messes like this, and carry on with his plan to bring people back to himself.

We see this even more clearly, when we see that not only was this from God, but THIS

WAS FOR GOD.

What do I mean? If you read into the next chapter, you will see what comes after the division of the kingdom. We read in 2 Chronicles 11:15-16, “Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the Lord, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord, the God of their fathers.”

The faithful people flock to Jerusalem. They follow the Levites, who are the worship leaders of God’s people, and they will worship only the Lord.

Do you see what is happening? Even through the mess, God is preserving the worship of his faithful people! No, this picture is not perfect. When you read through the rest of the book of Chronicles, you see the rise and fall of faithfulness in both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

But God’s plan is still in place, in the midst of the mess. God is keeping people faithful to him, for he is faithful to his promise, to bring people back into relationship with himself.

A son of David will keep ruling. Those sons will rule until another Son comes, named Jesus. He will fulfill God’s promise to fully and finally bring people back to the Lord.

He will live without sin, so that his Father is pleased with his life.

He will die for our sins, so that the Father will not punish our sins.

He will rise from the dead, to conquer death.

He will ascend to heaven, to rule until he returns.

It has been God’s plan all along, and that plan will not be stopped, even when people make messes.

Now listen to Paul’s words in Ephesians:

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

“In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

What? A mess? To our eyes, yes. But to God, it is one more path, by which he will work out his eternal plan: to reunite himself and sinful people, in Jesus Christ.

Do you believe it? Can you wrap your heart and mind around that? If so, you are starting to wrap your heart and mind around two questions that every one of us must face. One we could call a “theological” question, and the other we would call a “personal” question.

Here is the “theological” question: The theological question of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Is God in charge? Do all things work out according to his plan?

If so, what about us? Are we responsible for what we do? Or are we just puppets on the string of God the puppetmaster?

All through the Bible, but especially here, we see the reality of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Solomon’s mess is Solomon’s mess. Rehoboam’s mess is Rehoboam’s mess. Jeroboam’s mess is Jeroboam’s mess. Our mess is our mess.

But even as we affirm human sovereignty, we must also affirm divine sovereignty. This was from God. This was for God. God’s purposes shall prevail, despite man’s messes, and even through man’s messes.

How can both be true? We do not know. But somehow in God's sovereign plan, he chooses to work through human actions, to do what he will do.

Yet we must know this, as well: human responsibility will never "win out" over divine sovereignty. God's rule is "bigger" than man's actions. We may truly say that we have done this, or we have done that. But our decisions, actions and messes never distract, derail, or defeat God's sovereign plan.

But this is not just a "theological" question. This is a "personal" question: The personal question of living before a God, with a perfect plan for his people.

After the fire, Pastor Stu wrote to his people, "On family vacations my Dad used to drive our station wagon and camper through the winding roads of Colorado's Rocky Mountains. One time he drove it all the way up Pike's Peak!

On particularly narrow and windy trails we all used to get a bit anxious, reminding him - in the most polite tones - to keep his eyes on the road! He would laugh and shrug off our fears. He was a good driver, and in time I learned that I could enjoy the ride while my father was at the wheel.

"Your Father is at the wheel. He is an excellent driver, and you can rest in Him."

As I enter into this personal question, I must ask this first: is he your Father, through Jesus Christ? Have you turned in true sorrow from all the messes you have made, and looked in faith to Jesus Christ to clean up your messes, and give you the forgiveness of sins, new life, and eternal life?

I pray so, for in this messy world, you need the Father who saves you to life, and from unending suffering and death.

But if this question is personal for you...if indeed you know Jesus as your Savior and Lord...ponder for a moment, the messes of your life and world. I know you tried to leave them behind when you walked in today, but you failed. They are still there. They are still with you.

The mess of a broken relationship and a broken heart. The mess of financial chaos. The mess of chemical dependency. The mess of a frigid relationship with your spouse. The mess of that empty, sinking feeling of despair, as you look at your loved ones and your world.

You say, "What a mess!" But God seems to be saying, "What? A mess? No, my child. That may be what you see, but my purposes still stand. I am building my kingdom in your world, and I am building my likeness, in your heart."

"I am building my kingdom in your world."

Pastor Stu wrote, "Jesus is building His Church and the devil himself can't stop it. Notice that Jesus is on the offensive, not the defensive. He is bashing down the strongholds of Satan and the gates won't hold. 'I will build my church.'" "I am building my kingdom in your world."

"I am building my likeness in your heart."

Pastor Stu also wrote, "Trials always put us on our face before God, asking Him to teach us, lead us, show us His purpose, and for that we must be a humble and prayerful people. Don't ask these questions because you need the lessons of an angry God; ask them because you want to learn at the feet of a loving and gracious Father. He has our attention. What is he going to say?"

What? A mess? Not at Zion Church.

What? A mess? Not at Christ Presbyterian Church. Not in our congregation, and not in our lives.

Will you rest in that truth with me today? My daughter was sick this week, so I did a lot of putting my hand on her forehead, so I could get at least some idea of her temperature.

If I have any idea of the temperature of us as a congregation, and some of us as individuals, I sense that we need these words.

We are in a season of loss for our church. We are sick of seeing beloved brothers and sisters move away.

We are in a season of weariness in our church. Sometimes the work of the kingdom just makes us tired.

We are in a season of hurt in our church. There is nothing new about that! But I look at you all, and I see the hurts of this messy world.

What? A mess? No! Jesus is building his kingdom in this world! Jesus is building his likeness in our hearts. This is certainly from God's hand, and this is surely for God's glory! We need not worry. We need not fear.

We keep worshipping. We keep striving to make and teach disciples. We keep on, in a messy world, confident in the God of, and over, messes.

He is an excellent driver, and you can rest in him.