

I

It was the most complex operation in human history, at least in terms of the sheer numbers of people and equipment involved. It was called Operation Overlord, the Allied landings in France in June of 1944 during the Second World War.

Leading it all was General Dwight Eisenhower. His official title was Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces. And on June 5, 1944, it was his order that sent thousands of airplanes, ships, and soldiers moving across the English Channel.

But what fascinates me about Eisenhower on June 5, 1944, is not so much the decision to go or not go, or the details of the planning. It's what he did after he gave the "go" order that captures my imagination.

Because after giving the order, the Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force left his headquarters and rode out to an airfield where paratroopers were about to board their transports. These were the sergeants and corporals and junior officers, many of whom were not yet 20 years old, who would be the first ones in harm's way.

After giving the order to unleash the most complex operation in human history, he could have gone to bed, or relaxed in his headquarters. But the Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces went to an

airfield to give a word of encouragement and comfort to those under his command. I don't think it was a propaganda play or a publicity stunt. I think Eisenhower genuinely cared about the people under his leadership. I think Eisenhower understood that leadership is about so much more than ranks and orders and the chain of command.

II

And as I read the headlines, and as I look at my social media feeds, and as I listen to conversations between leaders in churches and businesses and schools and governments, I am convinced that at this very moment, we are experiencing a crisis of leadership.

This crisis of leadership isn't just about who occupies the White House or what happens in the Congress or the courts. It's not just about the Superintendent or the School Board or the local neighborhood association. Everyone who attempts to lead someone or something, whether it's a company or a college or a business or a family, is affected by this crisis of leadership.

II

And that brings us to today's story. This fall, we've been taking a broad survey of the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament. Last week, we read the story of King David, who is remembered as the king that consolidated the 12 tribes into a unified, independent nation.

Eventually, King David died, and his son Solomon came to power. Under

Solomon's reign, ancient Israel achieved the peak of its military, economic, and political power. King Solomon commissioned the construction of a permanent building to house the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem, and at the time of its construction, it was the grandest, most ornate building in the ancient Near East. If you go to the Old City of Jerusalem today and visit the Western Wall, sometimes called the Wailing Wall, you're likely touching the foundation stones of the Temple that Solomon had constructed about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ.

But as you know, building capital cities and constructing grand buildings and building up a powerful military, those are expensive endeavors. And just as God had warned the people through the prophet Samuel years before, the ancient kings of Israel had made life difficult upon their subjects. The tax burden was high. Some people had been conscripted and made to work as forced labor in government construction projects. The kings had questionable sexual ethics. For all of King David's successes, he had a devastating moral failure with Bathsheba. King Solomon was said to be the wisest of all the kings, and yet he was also reported to have 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Kings Saul, David, and Solomon were not always fair-minded leaders, and they didn't always make decisions with the good of the whole nation in mind. The old tribal and regional politics were always there, and the kings

were not above playing the ends against the middle for personal political gain.

By the time Solomon died and his son Rehoboam ascended the throne, ancient Israel did indeed have all the exterior trappings of a unified, independent nation. It had a capital city, complete with a king's palace and a temple. But the core unity of the nation was hanging by the thinnest of threads, and civil war, which seemed impossible when David brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem with dancing and singing only a few generations before, seemed all but inevitable.

And so with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from 1 Kings 12:1-17

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard of it (for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. And they sent and called him; and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you." He said to them, "Go away for three days, then come again to me." So the people went away.

Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the older men who had attended his father Solomon while he was still alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people?" They answered

him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever." But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted with the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him. He said to them, "What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, 'Lighten the yoke that your father put on us?'" The young men who had grown up with him said to him, "Thus you should say to this people who spoke to you, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you must lighten it for us'; thus you should say to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.'"

So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had said, "Come to me again the third day." The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfill his word, which the Lord had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king, "What share do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, O David." So Israel went away to their tents. But Rehoboam reigned over the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah.

IV

My friend, whether you know it or not, God has placed you in a position of leadership. Maybe you lead a classroom, or a courtroom, or a business, or a team. Maybe you lead a family or a community or a small group. It doesn't matter how old you are or how young you are. It doesn't matter if what you lead is small or large, even if all you lead is a sibling or the family pet. God has placed you in a position of leadership somewhere in your life.

And my friend, in this nation today, we are experiencing a crisis of leadership. This crisis of leadership isn't just about who occupies the halls of government. Everyone who leads something or someone is affected, including you.

And that means that you need some help. Every leader needs good advisors. Every leader, whatever the field, whatever the position, needs trusted people with whom they might consult and solicit advice.

Rehoboam had that. He had all of the advisors and elders who had served his father Solomon when he was

alive. They were probably the ones with the grey hair or bald heads. These were the people who had been there, done that, and bought the T-shirt. And so Rehoboam was smart enough to go to them and say, “What should I say to this people?”

And these seasoned, experienced advisors, all of whom were leaders in their own right, said to the king, “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever.”

These wise, seasoned, experienced advisors had been around long enough to learn the paradox of leadership that Jesus modeled over and over again for the disciples: the way up is down. The way to get to greatness is through humility. He or she who would be the greatest of all must be willing to become least of all and servant of all. These wise and seasoned advisors would not have been scandalized at all to learn that on the night before his arrest and betrayal, Jesus got up from the dinner table, took off his outer robe, wrapped himself in a towel, and washed the feet of his disciples, including the very feet of the one he knew would betray him.

But of course, Rehoboam didn't listen to the guys with the grey hair and the no hair. He called together the young guys, who were full of testosterone and hot air, and they told him to make obscene comparisons about the size of his hands, and to threaten the

people with punishment if they did not comply with his every petulant demand. Can you just imagine King Rehoboam's Twitter feed?

And you heard what happened. The people cried out, “To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, O David.” Do you know what they call a leader with no followers? Someone out for a long, lonely walk.

And that's what happened to Rehoboam. He lost his people. The united kingdom fractured, a civil war began, and a very dark period in our ancestors' history began to unfold.

God has placed you in a position of leadership, my friend. But do not forget the paradox of biblical leadership. The way up is down. Those who would be the greatest must be willing to become least of all and servant of all. The greatest king to ever rule over Israel, the one who still rules to this very day, does not stand over his people with scepter and spear, but kneels at their feet with a towel and a wash basin, and he says to you, “You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”¹

V

Almost exactly a year ago, the Holy Spirit began a conversation between me and the First Presbyterian

¹ John 13:13-15

Church of Athens about a potential call to serve as this church's eleventh Senior Pastor. Like you do when interviewing for a job, I set about to do some research on you. I called a friend of mine who works for one of the national agencies of our denomination, a colleague whose work takes him to congregations throughout the Southeast. As soon as I mentioned First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia, he said, "Oh, that's a *great* church!"

And over these months, I have found his testimony to be true. First Presbyterian Church of Athens is a *great* church.

But what makes this church great is not the building, or the staff, or the budget, or the programs, or any of the trappings of the institutional church.

What makes this church great now, and what will continue to make it great as we begin our third century, is a commitment to the biblical paradox of leadership:

The way up is down.

The path to glory is through the cross.

Those who would lead must be willing to follow the One who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Amen.