

## What *Not* to Pretend About

Do you like to dress up in costumes? Most children love to dress up and pretend they have important jobs, like police officers or firefighters or teachers. Sometimes children dress up and pretend they are superheroes or famous people from history. Others like to put on grown-up clothes and pretend to be mothers or fathers. Pretending is a *good* way for children to use their imaginations, but today I'm going to tell you a story about a grown-up who used his imagination in a *bad* way. He pretended something so foolish you will hardly believe it! Even though he knew about the one true God, he pretended that two shiny cow statues were gods. Worse yet, he tried to make other people believe it was *true*!



The Bible tells us that long ago, the land of Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. All the people of Israel and Judah were required by God to go to the city of Jerusalem to worship. This worried King Jeroboam, the king of Israel. He was afraid that when his people went into the land of Judah to worship, they might decide that they wanted to follow *their* king. Instead of trusting God or asking for His help, King Jeroboam came up with a plan. And without God's help, he came up with a *very* foolish plan.

King Jeroboam made two big cow statues out of gold. He placed them in two different cities in his kingdom and told his people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods"(I Kings 12:28 NIV). He built altars so that the people could sacrifice animals to these false gods. Then the king planned special feast days for the people and chose priests for them without thinking about the one true God or even trying to please Him. He wasn't thinking about what was best for his people, either. He only cared about keeping his kingdom.

What do you imagine that the one true God thought about King Jeroboam lying to His people this way—making up new gods and a new way to worship? Do you think God would say that it was OK because the King was just pretending? No, God was very angry. He sent a prophet to warn Jeroboam that he was in big trouble for leading the people to worship cow statues instead of the one true God.

One day when King Jeroboam was burning incense on the altar he had made in the city of Bethel, God's messenger came. He told everyone that a new King would be born named Josiah, who would burn the bones of the false priests on this very altar! Then he told them that they would

know that God had said these things when the altar split in half, and the ashes on it fell to the ground.

I wish I could tell you that the King turned from his wicked ways when he heard what the prophet said, but that's not what happened. Jeroboam got very angry, and pointed to the prophet. "Seize him!" he shouted to the guards. Immediately the altar split and the ashes scattered, just as God said they would. But something even more frightening happened—the king's hand that was pointing at the prophet dried up, just like a fall leaf! The skin shrunk and the muscles got tight and hard. It must have looked a lot like a skeleton hand. It didn't work any longer—he couldn't even pull his hand back to hide it! Jeroboam begged the prophet to pray and ask God to heal his hand. The prophet prayed, and Jeroboam's hand was healed.

God did some amazing things to warn Jeroboam and to prove to the people that He is the only true God, but the King and the people didn't tear down the golden statues. Eventually King Josiah was born, just as God said, and he did destroy the false altars and punish the priests who didn't worship the one true God.

When God dried up the King's hand, it wasn't just to scare him (although that was pretty scary!). I think God was also showing Jeroboam a picture of what his heart was like. I don't mean the heart that was beating in the king's chest, of course. When the Bible talks about the heart it means your feelings, especially those toward God. Jeroboam had been disobedient to God even though he knew better. The Bible says that disobeying over and over can make a heart hard, like a heart made of stone. Soon, the disobedient person doesn't have any good feelings toward God at all and might not even think about Him.

But the good news from the story is that God can fix a hard heart if we ask Him to. The Bible says that we all have done things that were against God's rules. We've loved other things more than God. We've told lies and been unkind to others. God sent His Son Jesus to the world to die on the cross and take away the punishment for the wrong things we've done. If we trust Jesus, He can take away our hard hearts and replace them with soft ones—feelings that love God and want to obey Him—in the same way God healed Jeroboam's withered hand when he asked. Then we can worship the real God from our hearts, with no pretending.

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