

Lesson 15: The Kingdom Divides (1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17)

The Kingdom Divides

Solomon has all the wisdom in the world, but he does not have virtue. He allowed himself to be a slave to his disordered desires for power, pleasure and wealth, which in the end turned his heart away from God and led to the division of his kingdom. The Lord is clear in His response to Solomon's sin, "Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will hear it out of the hand of your son."¹ While Solomon repents and finds a degree of peace before he dies, his sins will quickly affect the future of the kingdom. This is a reminder that even though the guilt of sin may be forgiven, the consequences remain. Accordingly, one of the great acts of penance a person can do is to accept in love and patience the painful consequences of their sin as an offering to God. Without this acceptance there is the danger of allowing resentment to grow and to let sin once forgiven evolve into another form and cause of sin.

With the death of Solomon² his son, Rehoboam, succeeds him as king,³ however, as one might expect, it is not as simple as that. Jeroboam, a former aide to Solomon to whom it was prophesied that he would become king and whom Solomon sent into exile because of the prophecy,⁴ returns after Solomon dies. In the prophecy a cloak is torn into twelve pieces, representing the twelve tribes, and the prophet Ahijah says, "Take for yourself ten pieces...I will give you ten tribes because [Solomon] has forsaken me, and worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sionians, Chmosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites, and has not walked in my ways, doing what is right in my sight and keeping my statutes and ordinances, as David his father did. Nevertheless I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand; but I will make him ruler all the days of his life, for the sake of David my servant whom I chose, who kept my commandments and my statutes; but I will take the kingdom out of his son's hand, and will give it to you, ten tribes."⁵ Because of this prophecy, Solomon seeks Jeroboam's life and is forced out of the kingdom to Egypt; but now that Solomon is dead, Jeroboam returns to confront Rehoboam about how the kingdom has been run and to challenge his leadership. Jeroboam does not initially claim any right to the throne, but simply questions Rehoboam about how the kingdom is being managed, specifically how much the people are being taxed.⁶ Solomon, remember, oppressed the people with heavy taxation. The people certainly must have been thinking that with Solomon's death there is an opportunity to have some of the heavy burden lifted.

Rehoboam listens to the request from the people for tax cuts and for three days takes counsel. At first he asks the elders who recommend that Rehoboam act as a servant to

¹ 1 Kings 11:11-12

² 1 Kings 11:43

³ 1 Kings 12:1

⁴ 1 Kings 11:26-40

⁵ 1 Kings 11:31-35

⁶ 1 Kings 12:4

the people, implying that it would be best to lighten the tax burden and garner the support of the people. Rehoboam, however, does not like this advice and so he asks his childhood friends what he should do. They want to increase their power and wealth and so their advice is much different. They tell Rehoboam to significantly increase the tax burden and rule of law. Unfortunately, the latter is the advice Rehoboam takes. It can be safely assumed that he was not looking for honest counsel, but simply advice that supported the decision he had already made. He responds, “My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. And now, whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.”⁷ This is a danger all of us must resist. In our pride, we want to follow our own plans and we shop around for counsel that simply supports what we have decided. This is not prudence, but pride. Prudence seeks honest counsel, pride seeks to affirm one’s own will.

The response to Rehoboam’s decision is quick – it is a response that would affect the rest of salvation history. “And when all Israel saw that the king did not hearken to them, the people answered the king, ‘What portion have we in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, David.’ So Israel departed to their tents...So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day. And when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel.”⁸ This is the event that splits the kingdom into the ten northern tribes under the leadership of Jeroboam (from here forward in the Scriptures they are usually referred to as Israel) and the two southern tribes (now called Judah) under the leadership of Rehoboam.⁹ What was once a united kingdom of God’s chosen people is now divided politically and, we will soon see, religiously, which will lead to their downfall.

The Downfall of Jeroboam and the Northern Kingdom

In the north Jeroboam is the king of the ten tribes of Israel. Initially the people of the northern tribes were still connected to Judah through the location of the Temple in Jerusalem. In order to worship and offer sacrifice to Yahweh, the people of Israel had to travel into Judah for Temple worship. This created difficulties for Jeroboam since the people of Israel found themselves still being influenced by the southern kingdom through their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. In Jeroboam’s thinking, as long as he allowed his people to worship and offer sacrifice in the Temple, his control of his own people would be weakened and the people might want to return to the Davidic line found in the south.

Therefore, in order to maintain the loyalty of his new subjects, Jeroboam establishes a new national religion. He constructs two golden calves at each end of his kingdom (one in the north at Dan and one in the south at Bethel) where the people of Israel are to worship. He tells the people “Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the

⁷ 1 Kings 12:10-11

⁸ 1 Kings 12:16-20

⁹ This occurred around 930 BC. Due to the split none of the kings of Israel can trace their ancestry to David, whereas all the kings of Judah trace their ancestry to David.

land of Egypt.”¹⁰ In this way, the people no longer need to travel to Jerusalem in order to worship. Jeroboam goes even further and makes “houses on high places”¹¹ (remember, this is a Hebrew idiomatic expression that refers to the construction of pagan temples). He then appoints priests from among all of the people rather than from the tribe of Levi and establishes a feast of his own making instead of keeping the feast of Tabernacles that was celebrated in Jerusalem. Jeroboam not only leads his people into idolatry for the protection of his own earthly power, but assumes for himself the role of God, who alone has the authority to establish the hierarchical offices. This compounds his grave sin, which will have serious consequences. Jeroboam had been picked by God to offer much-needed reform for all of the tribes, however, rather than offering reform Jeroboam leads a revolt against Yahweh that breaks away from the covenant. Sadly, history is peppered with similar figures who could have offered healthy reform, but instead lead destructive revolutions.

God did not intend for the northern tribes to break away from the Temple to worship Him apart from the Levitical priesthood. This is what led to Saul’s downfall when he assumed for himself the role reserved only for the priest.¹² This is also why Miriam, Moses’ sister, was cursed with leprosy,¹³ and why Korah and his rebellion were destroyed in the desert.¹⁴ In each case, they grumbled against God’s chosen instruments and assumed authority for themselves.

Few people have such a negative impact on salvation history as Jeroboam does by offering alternate worship and sacrifices outside of Jerusalem. Curiously, he does not sleep with somebody else’s wife and kill the husband (as David did), nor does he have a thousand wives (like Solomon). He is neither an adulterer nor a polygamist, but he does alter how and where God is worshipped, as well as changing the fundamental concept of who God is. It is this that leads to the most severe consequences for Israel.

Jeroboam’s reign is characterized by the sin of idolatry, and he sets an evil precedent for his successors.¹⁵ Jeroboam will become the symbol of the idolatrous king, as David is the symbol of a king faithful to God. This shows how important it is to react quickly after committing sin. David sinned, but repented; Jeroboam does not repent. The Northern kingdom from now on epitomizes unfaithfulness, rebellion, and idol worship – all for the sake of political power. This infidelity leads to a series of prophets who respond to this infidelity by challenging the people to return to Yahweh.

One of Jeroboam’s successors, Ahab, is especially unfaithful to Yahweh. As the Scripture says, “Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.”¹⁶ Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, make up a sort of unholy alliance. Jezebel is “the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went

¹⁰ 1 Kings 12:28; This looks like a return to the idolatry of the golden calf in Exodus 32:1-5.

¹¹ 1 Kings 12:31

¹² cf. 1 Samuel 13:8, 9

¹³ Numbers 12

¹⁴ Numbers 16

¹⁵ 1 Kings 13-16 summarizes the succession of evil kings.

¹⁶ 1 Kings 16:33

and served Baal, and worshipped him.”¹⁷ We see, then, that Ahab set himself up for trouble by marrying outside the faith of Israel, and as we have seen many times, a wife who does not love the Lord can turn the heart of her husband away from his faith. In deference to his wife and her religion, Ahab sets up a national religion that worships nature.¹⁸

The Showdown at Mount Carmel

In response to this God sends the prophet Elijah to call the people to conversion and back to the true worship of Yahweh.¹⁹ Elijah confronts Ahab about the cultic worship of nature and condemns the idolatry. Through Elijah God proclaims a drought as a plague against the nature gods, especially the goddess Ashera, the vegetation goddess who was worshipped in all of the temples to Baal. The drought kills the vegetation, which is a way of condemning the false god. This echoes back to the plagues of Egypt, when the Egyptian gods were symbolically killed so that the Israelites may once again know (*yada*) the God of Israel, so that they may serve (*avaad*) Him. So, the heavens are shut for three years.

To weed out the idolatry Elijah proposes a contest at Mount Carmel.²⁰ The worshippers of Baal are to prepare an ox on an altar and call upon their gods to consume it with fire, and Elijah will do the same. Whoever answers the call with fire is the true God. It is, in a sense, an ancient showdown. Elijah is facing some 450 self-acclaimed prophets of Baal as well as 400 prophets of Ashera. As those who are calling upon the pagan gods fail to get a response, Elijah mocks them, asking them to yell louder and hop around with greater energy, for maybe their gods are on a journey, asleep, or even in the bathroom (which is actually what the Hebrew says). After this humorous display, Elijah instructs the people to pour jars of water, drenching the offering, the altar, and even filling the trenches surrounding his altar with water and prays:

“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel let it be known this day that thou are God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at they word. Answer me, O Lord...that this people may know that thou, O Lord, are God. And that thou hast turned their hearts back.”²¹

Then fire from heaven falls upon the burnt offering, consuming it, the altar, the stones, even lapping up the water and dust in a huge flash of fire.²² When the people see it, they fall on their faces and say, “The Lord, he is God.”²³ With this miracle, Elijah kills the wicked prophets. It is a harsh judgment, but the punishment fits the crime of idolatry and cultic worship since what Ahab had established was threatening the very existence of Israel. The radical evil called for a radical response. Ahab and Jezebel established these false gods

¹⁷ 1 Kings 16:31

¹⁸ One of the gods of this cult is Baal-Zebub, which is one of the names for the devil.

¹⁹ The Catechism says, “Elijah is the ‘father’ of the prophets, ‘the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.’ Elijah’s name, ‘The Lord is my God,’ foretells the people’s cry in response to his prayer on Mount Carmel” (CCC, #2582).

²⁰ 1 Kings 18:17-40

²¹ 1 Kings 18:36; The Catechism says that the “sacrifice on Mount Carmel is a decisive test for the faith of the People of God” (CCC, #2583).

²² The fire is a figure of the Holy Spirit, see CCC, #696.

²³ 1 Kings 18:39

and now that the gods had been defeated Jezebel is outraged and sends an army out to kill Elijah, and so Elijah does what any reasonable person would do, he runs for his life.²⁴

A Still, Small Voice

Elijah makes his way to Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai), “the Mount of God,” the very place where Moses received the Ten Commandments.²⁵ These little details tie the events of the Old Testament together in a beautiful pattern that reveals the divine choreography of history. On the way God feeds Elijah with “cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water.”²⁶ This bread alone was his strength for forty days, a foreshadowing not only of Christ’s temptation in the desert, but also of the Eucharist itself, the bread that Jesus tells us came “down from heaven.”²⁷

It is at Mount Horeb in a cave that God speaks to Elijah, just as He did to Moses.²⁸ However, unlike Moses, the Lord’s voice was not in a great, strong wind, nor in the quaking earth, nor even fire. We read that Elijah hears the Lord in a “still, small voice.”²⁹ Commenting on this passage, Mother Theresa of Calcutta says, “In the silence of the heart, God speaks, and the fruit of this silence is prayer.” Silence is the key ingredient in prayer. Without times of silence it is almost impossible to hear God speaking to us. This is also a reminder that a calm spirit is characteristic of the spirit of God. Sometimes the first phase in prayer is simply to still one’s spirit in preparation for prayer.

In the silence God instructs Elijah to anoint a new king of Syria, Hazael, and a new king of Israel, Jehu, who will replace Ahab.³⁰ It is from the sword of these two kings that God enacts His punishment on the wicked sons of Israel who have turned to the worship of idols. God also instructs Elijah to anoint his replacement, Elisha,³¹ who will succeed Elijah as prophet to the North. Elijah goes out from the mountain and finds Elisha plowing his fields.³² Elisha responds with great faith by leaving everything behind, putting himself at the disposal of the prophet Elijah. God calls Elisha in the midst of everyday, ordinary activity, just as God called Moses while he was tending Jethro’s flock and called David when he was tending his father Jesse’s flock. Jesus calls Peter, James, and John while fishing, and he calls Matthew while at the tax collectors post. This is an important lesson for us today. God uses the ordinary circumstances of life to our call through His still, small voice. We, too, can meet God in the ordinary circumstances of

²⁴ 1 Kings 19:3

²⁵ In this event and others Elijah can also be understood as a type of Christ. “Elijah prayed and offered sacrifice, and Christ offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. Elijah prayed on Mount Carmel, Jesus Christ on the Mount of Olives. Elijah prayed that rain might fall on the earth; Christ that divine grace might flow into human hearts. Elijah’s command to his servant: ‘Go up and look out seven times’, is a foreshadowing of the seven-fold grace of the Holy Spirit to be given to the Church. (Saint Augustine, *Sermons*, 40, 5).

²⁶ 1 Kings 19:6

²⁷ cf. John 6:27ff

²⁸ It is through Moses that Israel is born, and it is now through Elijah that Israel is saved from death.

²⁹ 1 Kings 19:12

³⁰ 1 Kings 19:15-16

³¹ Elisha means “My God saves.”

³² 1 Kings 19:19

our life, provided we feed on the heavenly bread that Christ gives us and cultivate our prayer in silence.³³

Ahab's Plunder Blunder

Ahab and Jezebel are well on their way to self-destruction, but there is one more event that will cement their fate. While Ahab is king, he is far from content in life. He is looking for things to satisfy his unrest and spies out a beautiful vineyard that he begins to covet, however the owner of the vineyard, Naboth, does not want to sell. Ahab is disappointed, but he accepts the fact that he cannot buy the property. Jezebel is not so resigned. Her philosophy is that if you have enough power you can get whatever you want by using whatever means necessary to get it. It has been said that a good wife can save her husband's soul, but the opposite is true as well. The marriage of Ahab and Jezebel is a classic and tragic case of spouses who bring fundamentally different and mutually exclusive core values to their marriage and home. Ahab will allow Jezebel to lead him down a path of ruin.

Much like in the story of David coveting Uriah's wife Bathsheba, Ahab covets his neighbor's goods and will acquire it through murder. Jezebel hires two scoundrels who accuse Naboth of cursing God and king. For this blasphemy Naboth and his children are stoned to death, which removes any heirs to their father's vineyard. Ahab then takes the vineyard for himself.³⁴

The crime, however, does not go unnoticed. Just as Nathan confronted David, Elijah confronts Ahab.³⁵ Ahab does repent but the damage is already done.³⁶ The entire kingdom has turned from God and will soon face destruction. It is a good thing that Ahab repents, but it would have been much better had he repented sooner. As the Psalm says, "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts."³⁷ Growth in the spiritual life requires a disposition to act today, not to delay conversion for the future. It is easy to say, "I will start praying next week," or "Just let me finish this one thing," but Saint Paul says, "Now is the appointed time."³⁸ The sooner we respond to the grace of conversion the less damage there will be from a sinful life. In fact, one of the most dangerous sins is the sin of presumption.³⁹ Very often we fool ourselves into believing that we will become a saint in the future or that God's mercy is so great that we do not even need to respond to His grace. Presumption keeps us from responding today, and even if we convert at the end of our lives, there is much grace that is missed and usually much pain and suffering left in the wake of a delayed response to God's grace.

³³ The Catechism emphasized the importance of specific times of prayer if we want to be a person of constant prayer (CCC, #2697).

³⁴ 1 Kings 21:1-16

³⁵ 1 Kings 21:17-19

³⁶ 1 Kings 21:27

³⁷ Psalms 95:7-8

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 6:2

³⁹ CCC, #2092

The End of Israel

Because Ahab repents the northern kingdom (Israel) does not end in his lifetime, but it happens shortly thereafter. One of the kings that follow Ahab is Hoshea. He is the fruit of the culture of idolatry and pagan worship that Ahab and Jezebel fostered. The pagan culture of Israel becomes so bad that they “forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God...and served Baal...and burned their sons and daughters as offerings, and used divinization and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord.”⁴⁰ This sin was catastrophic. God allows the neighboring Assyrian nation to overthrow Israel (722 BC) and take the northern tribes into captivity (exile).⁴¹ The sacred text explains, “This was so, because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh...”⁴²

This is how the northern kingdom ends. It is the end of a long process of infidelity that began with Jeroboam and the making of the two calves. The physical exile is simply the manifestation of spiritual exile. God allows this to happen as a severe mercy in the hope that hitting rock bottom His people will turn their hearts back to Yahweh. It should be a clear and loud message to the southern kingdom (Judah) to be careful not to fall into similar disgrace. As we will see, however, Judah too will lose its way.

⁴⁰ 2 Kings 17:16-17

⁴¹ When the Assyrians conquered a territory they would take the conquered people into slavery and disperse them throughout the empire (sometimes referred to as the deportation) so as to keep the people from gathering strength and revolting. In essence, the people would lose any identity apart from Assyria. The Assyrians would repopulate the conquered territory with their own people – in this instance, the Assyrians use the Samaritans to repopulate the territory, which is why there is just strong conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans in the New Testament.

⁴² 2 Kings 17:7