

In one of the *Peanuts* cartoon strips, Lucy and Linus are sitting together while Lucy reads Linus a story, concluding “And so the King was granted his wish – everything he touched would turn to gold! Now, the next day...” At this point Linus jumps up and says “Stop! You don’t have to read any further! I know just what’s going to happen.” He walks away, despairing, “These things always have a way of backfiring!”

When we read 1 Kings 1-10, we might get the impression that everything that Solomon touches is turning to gold. His wisdom causes the leaders of the world to come to him. But when we arrive at 1 Kings 11:1, everything seems to backfire. The kingdom that has been held together suddenly becomes unravelled, and division takes hold.

Division is a terrible thing, and division always happens because of sin. The Lord desires that his people dwell together in unity – this is good and pleasant. But sin always disrupts unity and causes there to be jealousy, strife, envy, and selfish ambition. Any time there is division, there is need for us to take stock not merely of the circumstances, but of ourselves. And 1 Kings 11 gives us a little window into how we ought to reflect upon division. What are we needing to do when there is division? Solomon’s downfall gives us some points of reflection.

Ensure Your Heart Clings to the Lord (vv. 1-12)

As the chapter opens, what we hear is how Solomon has had many wives. We might wonder why he would have so many marriages. The vast majority of these relationships would not have been out of love but for political alliances. By having these marriages, Solomon was cementing the security of Israel among the nations.

But in Exodus 23:32-33 and Deuteronomy 7:1-3 the Lord had commanded Israel to drive the nations out of the land and not to marry the nations that are mentioned. But when Solomon marries the daughters of the Canaanites, the Lord sees that like the first Adam, he has not listened to the voice of the Lord. Instead, we are told that the danger of these relationships would be that they would turn the heart away from the Lord.

And this is precisely what happens. We are told that Solomon clung to these in love at the end of v. 2. And over and over, we hear the problem: it is a problem of the heart. Throughout vv. 2-4, the problem isn’t a political problem, a strategic problem; it was a heart problem: His heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God. He had many gods. The problem wasn’t a political problem. The problem was his affections. Yes, he still worshipped the Lord as the chief among the gods, but here was a first commandment violation: he did not love the Lord his God with all of his heart. The wisdom that he had received – the wisdom of the heart he had received (3:9) was good. But his heart did not pay attention to his first true love.

How did this happen? How did Solomon slip so far? We get some clues in 1 Kings 10. The Lord had commanded Israel that when they received a king, that the king should not put his trust in

The Story of Everything: Division – 1 Kings 11

horses and chariots, or gold, or many wives. But throughout chapter 10, Solomon is accumulating great wealth – so much gold for a small nation; he is getting chariots and horses from Egypt; and now in chapter 11 he has acquired many wives. Doing exactly the opposite of Deuteronomy 17:14-17, Solomon has let his heart cling to other loves.

And this is the danger of the heart. God has commanded that we guard the heart, for out of it flows the springs of life (Prov. 4:23). Solomon even pens this proverb. And yet he himself did not heed his own warnings. His heart slipped.

Interestingly, verse 2 tells us the problem – it was a clinging problem. This word should cause us to think back to Genesis 1 and tells us that a man should leave his father and mother and cling to his wife. What happened with Solomon was not a political problem, it was a heart problem.

God has told his people that marriage with unbelievers will tear their hearts. For the Christian, marrying someone who is not clearly a Christian is risky business. There is no guarantee that you will win them over to the Lord. There is no guarantee that your influence on them will be greater than their influence on you. Instead, it is more likely that there will be an imperceptible drift over time, a drift that you barely notice. Your convictions will loosen. But after years and years, suddenly things will fall apart because when your heart does not cling to the Lord, it will cling to something else. For Solomon, he eventually built altars on the mountains for some of the most ruthless gods – Chemosh and Molech. These gods were ruthless, and Solomon built a temple for them on the Mount of Olives, just east of Jerusalem.

If you think you can stand against these pressures, the story of Solomon is a dire warning: take heed lest you too fall. The division of the kingdom came subtly, and slowly. It's like a pair of glasses – one day the lens just falls out of your glasses to the ground and can be badly cracked. Why did it happen? Because slowly over time, imperceptibly, the screw that kept the frame tight has become loose. And the result can be disastrous.

The result of Solomon's sin was the anger of the Lord (vv. 9-12). The kingdom would be torn from him. His love for other gods angered the Lord. And so the Lord would tear the kingdom.

Trust the Sovereign Lord of History (vv. 14-43)

While we don't have time to go through the detailed accounts of these verses, Solomon's actions might make you wonder if history is out of control. People feel like they need to act. And three times we hear about the Lord raising up adversaries. First, we hear of Hadad the Edomite in v. 14. Then we hear about Rezon the son of Eliada of Damascus in v. 23. And finally we hear about Jeroboam, an Israelite, who raises his hand against the king. What becomes clear is that these three become adversaries – or Satans – against Solomon. Each one of these men works against Solomon. Each one functions like a Satan – working against Solomon to bring about his demise. But notice in vv. 14 and 23 that the Lord raises these men up? And as

The Story of Everything: Division – 1 Kings 11

the rest of the chapter becomes clear, Jeroboam does not rise up on his own strength, but because the Lord is the sovereign one of history. The kingdom will be torn, but not because God is out of control.

And here is the good news of the bad news: the Lord is the sovereign one of history. Division may be a Satanic work, but it is not outside the limits of the sovereign Lord's hand. Solomon would experience opposition and consequences for his sin, but the Lord will not allow those consequences to be outside of his purposes. God is not the author of sin or division, but he will set the limits on what is done.

Two things our hearts need to remember in hard times are these things: division is a devilish work and the Lord is not out of control. We have to guard our hearts always. We have to watch that our hearts do not allow ourselves to work in ways against one another. We must cling to our first love. We need to check our hearts, our loves, our aims when division arises. But we must also remember that there is one accuser of the brethren, and it is not your job or mine. We have the responsibility to cling to the Lord; and we also have to trust that the God of sovereign history has everything in control. These may sound like contradictory truths, but at the same time there is a divine mystery that we will never fully grasp. God is working to accomplish his purposes. God is working to purify your heart and mine. Opposition, division, and difficulty are an opportunity for us to check our hearts and trust that God is at work to purify us and his people for himself so that his name is not blasphemed among the nations. So even in times of trial and difficulty, trust the sovereign Lord of history – he's got it under control.

We do want to take a little peek at Jeroboam though. From vv. 27ff, he seems to have success written all over him – he's hard working and enthusiastic. As he's leaving Jerusalem when he encounters Ahijah – this unknown prophet appears. He's wearing a new cloak, and as soon as they're out of sight, he tears it to pieces – 12 to be precise. "Take 10 pieces!" he tells Jeroboam. What's the point of this? Is Jeroboam to take these and start sewing? No – Ahijah tells him, the Lord is going to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon and give Jeroboam 10 tribes. This is what will happen after Solomon dies. But Jeroboam can't wait – he's eager to gain power and this seems to be the reason Solomon wants him executed (v. 40). He could not wait for the Lord's timing – he had to rush off ahead.

But all of this is under the sovereign hand of the Lord. History might look like it's out of control. It might look horrible. But God is in control. He's got things in his hand. Nations rise, nations fall. But this is no surprise to the Lord.

What we need to know is that the Lord will make evil serve his good purposes. Evil will not win. Evil will not prevail. We only see dimly now, but the Lord sees from beginning to end. We often act panicky about the present; we worry about how things are going to play out. But God has human sinfulness on the leash of his sovereign hand.

The Story of Everything: Division – 1 Kings 11

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Andrew Hall
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And we know this is true because God can keep what he is undoing. Will his promise to David fail – will there be a son of David on the throne forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16)? Even in human stupidity, God is working. He reminds Solomon that there is discipline for sin, but his promises still stand (vv. 11-13). God may afflict the disobedient, but not willingly, from his heart. No, he will not do anything that does not accomplish his purposes (v. 39). He will have mercy, and he will abundantly pardon.

And all of this is intended for us to see the glory of Christ.

In the midst of division and strife, one greater than Solomon came along (Matt. 12:42). This one, greater than Solomon, faced the satans of his day. Just as Solomon faced the adversary Hadad the Edomite, Jesus faced Herod the Idumean. And Rezon the Gentile raged against Solomon just as the gentiles raged against Christ. And even as Jeroboam the Jewish leader would fight against Solomon, so Jesus would have the Jewish authorities against him. But in the greatest act of evil and injustice, with all the world conspiring against him, Jesus would be torn, just as the kingdom would be. He would be torn on the cross. The greatest act of evil would take place – but all under the sovereign hand of the Lord. As the apostles would say in Acts 4, this Jesus whom you crucified was crucified under the sovereign hand of the Lord. History was under his control and reign. He would send his anointed son, the King of the Jews, to be torn on the cross so that they might bring healing to the world.

And that healing comes to all who cling to Christ. That healing comes to the repentant. That healing comes to those who humble themselves. But what are we to make of Solomon?

I can't speak definitively, but I do wonder. I wonder because the king of Jerusalem, the son of David, would pen the book of Ecclesiastes. He would write about the despair of pursuing pleasure – money, wealth, women, success, and fame. He would write that there is nothing but toil and trouble under the sun, a life that is like a vapour. But he would end his book with these words: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with everything secret, whether good or evil" (Eccl. 12:13-14). And I can't help but wonder – are these the words of a repentant man? Are these the words of Solomon, at the end of his life, reflecting on his heart that clung to other gods and did not trust the sovereign God of history? Could it be that even in the face of disaster, the discipline that the Lord had said he would bring to David's sons if they did not follow his ways produced the fruit of righteousness in Solomon – a discipline that was painful but productive?

For if the sovereign God of history can have the kingdom torn in two and send his own Son to the cross, can't he take a heart that clings to worthless idols and turn it back to him? For everything the King of kings will touch – he will turn it in to gold...in his time.

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