

Divided and United

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[0 : 0 0] Let's admit it, the Bible can at times be difficult to understand. The Old Testament in particular can leave us scratching our heads.

Sometimes that's because the things we're reading aren't as hard to understand as they are to accept. Sometimes it's because what's written is genuinely mysterious and designed to make us think deeper.

And sometimes it's because we lack certain information which, if we knew, would make more sense of things. Tonight I want to deal with something connected to the last of these reasons.

An important piece of information which helps us to make sense of much of the Old Testament. But it's also a piece of information which, just like the whole of the Old Testament, shines a bright light on who Jesus Christ is and why Jesus Christ came.

After all, both Old and New Testament find their ultimate fulfillment not in history, philosophy, or sociology, but in a person, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

[1 : 1 6] Now, King David was the greatest king Israel ever had. Under his leadership, the borders of Israel stretched far and wide.

But within a hundred years, the kingdom over which he was ruled was divided into two separate kingdoms. You can put that slide up now if you don't mind, Sophia.

A northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah. If we understand that separation, it makes the whole of the second half of the Old Testament far more accessible to us.

And it makes why Jesus came so much clearer. The sinless Savior came to unite that which sin had divided.

To fix that which sin had broken. Let's examine this central truth of the Old Testament in two sections.

[2 : 1 9] First of all, the kingdom divided from 1 Kings 12. And second, the kingdom united from Ezekiel 37.

First of all, the kingdom divided. The kingdom divided. Now, King Rehoboam was the grandson of King David and the son of King Solomon.

Both those men had reigned over the United Kingdom of Israel, containing all the descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob.

Rehoboam, however, lacked the wisdom of his father and his grandfather. He was a foolish man.

And it was under his reign that the kingdom divided into two, as you can see, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

The northern kingdom of Israel containing the descendants of ten tribes. The southern kingdom of Judah containing the descendants of two tribes. Let's look at this division in 1 Kings 12 under two headings.

[3 : 2 6] First of all, from verse, well, from verse 15 really, the cause of the division. And then from verse 21, the division itself.

So, first of all then, from verse 15, 1 Kings 12, 15, the cause of the division. The cause of the division. When Rehoboam became king, his first challenge, as it often is for new governments, has been this for the new government in Holyrood, was to deal with Israel's economy.

The northern tribes, the descendants of the ten sons of Jacob, who had been allotted land in the north of the land, through their spokesman, Jeroboam, felt that they were being overtaxed.

And they complained to Rehoboam. Rehoboam took advice, first from the elders in Jerusalem, and then from his own peers. And he decided that rather than ease the tax burden upon the northern tribes, he'd increase it instead.

And he threatened them with harsh discipline if they did not pay their taxes. The scene was set for rebellion. It, on the surface of things, was caused by economic inequality.

[4 : 43] Rehoboam, with his throne in Jerusalem, which is in that red bit at the bottom, Judah, lived in wealth and opulence. And he was shielded from the hardships faced by those who lived far away to the north of the capital city.

And again, we see that in our own nation, where those who live in the north of England often resent the wealth of those who live in London and the southeast of England. Very similar.

But the real reason for the rebellion of these ten northern tribes was what had happened some years before in the days of Solomon.

Toward the end of Solomon's life, he lost his faith in God. He lost his faith in God. He married many women, many of whom were worshippers of foreign gods.

And he himself began to worship the gods his wives served. Solomon's heart was turned away from God, and he began to bow down to the statues of foreign gods and serve the idols his wives worshipped.

[5 : 54] As a result, a prophet called Ahijah met Jeroboam, who was the spokesman of the northern tribes in the days of Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12, but in a previous life, had been a senior civil servant in the administration of Rehoboam's father Solomon.

Ahijah, the prophet, tore his cloak and told Jeroboam that because of Solomon's unfaithfulness to God, the kingdom over which Solomon reigned would be divided into two.

You can read about it in 1 Kings 11, verses 26-40. So what divided Israel ultimately was not Rehoboam's economic foolishness, it was Solomon's unfaithfulness to God.

What divided Israel, what caused this tragedy in the history of God's Old Testament people, was the sin of King Solomon. That's what sin does, especially the sin of idolatry or turning away to worship foreign gods.

That's what sin always does. Sin always divides. Sin breaks, it destroys, it ruins. It was the sin of Adam which broke the paradise of Eden, and it was the sin of Solomon that broke the kingdom of Israel.

[7 : 14] It was the sin of Solomon who was an old man, turned his heart away from the Lord, which ended up dividing one kingdom into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

For all that he'd been a good man, Solomon ended his life far away from God, and his legacy was the disaster of the nation. What causes wars between nations, divisions in churches, and the breakup of families?

It's never righteousness, it's always sin. We need to remember that in our personal lives, that although sin might at times appear to be the path of pleasure, it always ends in disaster.

Always. That was the cause of the division. Then in verse 21, 1 Kings 12, 21, let's look at the division itself. The division itself.

The division between the northern kingdom of Israel, the orange patch on that map, and the southern kingdom of Judah, the red patch on that map, was sudden and irreparable. The ten northern tribes made Jeroboam their king and began to form the structure of their own nation.

[8 : 34] The two southern tribes centered around the city of Jerusalem stuck with Rehoboam, the grandson of David. These two southern tribes were Judah and Benjamin.

The ten northern tribes were Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, and Zebulun.

And as you can see from the very beginning, there wasn't just division between these two nations of Israel and Judah, but war. Rehoboam summoned all the fighting men of Judah to assemble in Jerusalem in order to wage war against the ten northern tribes to get his whole country back.

On this occasion, they didn't go to war, but through the following centuries, more Jewish blood was spilt by fellow Jews than was ever spilt by invading armies. The two nations grew apart as the years went on.

Religiously, the center of worship for Judah was Jerusalem. The center of the worship for Israel was focused on a religious shrine in the far north of the country.

[9 : 46] In general, Judah was more faithful to God than Israel. They were ruled by different kings. the most famous king of Israel was Ahab.

Judah had many famous kings, including Hezekiah, Josiah. They are given different names in the Bible. Israel is not only called Israel, but sometimes it's called Joseph. Sometimes it's called Ephraim. Sometimes it's called Manasseh. Confusingly, sometimes Judah is also called Israel. So we have to read the context of these passages carefully. They also had different prophets. The most famous prophets of the northern kingdom were Elijah, Elisha, and Hosea. The most famous prophets of the southern kingdom were Isaiah and Jeremiah. They had different foreign policies. Israel tended to make more alliances with foreign nations than Judah did. They had different histories. Israel was destroyed by the invasion of the Assyrians in the 8th century BC.

[11 : 01] Judah was destroyed by the invasion of the Babylonians in the 6th century BC. They were all of one ethnic stock, all brothers and sisters, all descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But they were two distinct nations. Now, to understand this makes the reading of the Old Testament, especially the books of Kings, Chronicles, and the prophets far easier for us. We now know to whom God is speaking in the book of Isaiah. Not the northern kingdom of Israel, but the southern kingdom of Judah. And in Hosea, he's not speaking to the southern kingdom of Judah, but to the northern kingdom of Israel.

But ultimately, it's tragic, is it not? But the descendants of those whom God saved from their slavery in Egypt by His mighty hand, the sons of David and Solomon, ended up sworn enemies and divided into two nations.

The Old Testament ends in Malachi with so many questions unanswered and so many sores remaining open.

[12 : 22] Chief of which is this, will these two nations of Israel and Judah ever reunite? Shall the sin which caused the division in the first place be done away with and shall peace come between Israel and Judah again?

Man, by his sin, ruined and destroyed God's nation. He divided into two that which was one. Now, if man can't fix the problem he has created for himself, who can?

That's the ultimate question of the Old Testament. But never mind international politics. If I can't fix the problems that I have created for myself in life through my own sin, who can?

So, we have in the first place then, the kingdom divided. Now, we turn to Ezekiel chapter 37 to see the kingdom united.

The kingdom united. By the way, I might be teaching my granny how to suck eggs here because you might all know these things already but I'll be honest, I didn't learn about the division.

[13 : 36] I'd been a Christian for 15 years before I knew any of these things. Ezekiel 37 verse 15 to the end of the chapter. The kingdom united.

The truth is the kingdoms of Israel and Judah never united again. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians and its people were taken into captivity and Judah, although it was taken into captivity by the Babylonians, did return to its own land under Nehemiah and Ezra.

Ezekiel's writing during the captivity of Judah and encouraging God's people that despite all appearances, despite being captives in Babylon, they do have a future.

But what about this prophecy in Ezekiel 37 where he prophesies the reunification of Israel as one nation, the two kingdoms coming together again as one as it was under David and Solomon?

Well, as with many other Old Testament prophecies, we have to look outside the Old Testament for its fulfillment. The kingdom God has in mind in Ezekiel isn't of the world of the Old Testament.

[14 : 52] It's looking forward to the day when the New Testament church shall unite all nations together under one banner where both Israelite and Judean, where both Jew and Gentile shall unite as one in the body of Christ.

The kingdom united may have been a dream of many Jews, but it was a pipe dream. The unity to which God is pointing in Ezekiel is that of the whole world under the kingship of Jesus. From this passage in Ezekiel, let's notice three aspects of that new united kingdom. First, it's united under one king.

Secondly, it's united in one heart. And third, it's united by one promise. It's united, first of all, if you look in verse 24, it's united under one king.

United under one king, verse 24. The unity of a nation rests in it having one king. Later on, in the Gospels, perhaps indirectly referencing the division of Israel, Jesus says to the Pharisees, a

kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

[16:10] What unites a kingdom and makes it stand is having one king. We call ourselves the united kingdom, not just because we're not a public, but we are one kingdom with one constitutional monarch, in our case King Charles III.

And what will unite the kingdom of God is it having one king. And in verse 24, through the mouth of Ezekiel, God promises, my servant David shall be king over them.

Just like the kingdom of Israel, before the division that is, was united under the kingship of David, so the kingdom of God shall be united under the kingship, this time not of David, but of his descendant Jesus Christ.

This is what gives shape on solidity to the kingdom of God, the kingship of Jesus. Without him there's no kingdom, there's no church, but Christ is our king and under him we're admitted in his banner of love.

At Glenfinnan in the western highlands stands a large pillar on top of which is a statue of a highlander wearing a kilt and brandishing a broad sword.

[17:32] In 1745, when body Prince Charlie landed in Scotland, it was there he gathered the clans and they declared their loyalty to him as king.

From then on, body Prince Charlie marched his army as one. The statue of Glenfinnan reminds us that it takes a king to unite a people.

It takes King Jesus to unite us as a people. A people who without him wouldn't have much else in common. The nations of Israel and Judah, these two nations, would never unite, but under the kingship of Jesus a greater kingdom has come, one which continues to this day to change the world.

Notice how else he's described in verse 24. They shall all have one shepherd. Time does not permit us to go deep into what this means, but in the Old Testament the king was sometimes described as the shepherd of the people.

He's an up close, he's a loving shepherd king, that's who Jesus is. Christ points to himself in John 10 as being the good shepherd who knows his sheep by name, he knows every citizen of his kingdom by name, he knows everything about me, he knows everything about you, but more than that he says, I am the good shepherd who's laid down my life for the sheep.

[18:58] Such a good king, such a loving king, that's the king we have in Jesus, whose death for us brings us into his kingdom and whose banner over us is love.

These are beautifully evocative images and we praise God for them. Our shepherd king carries his fragile, vulnerable, and weak lambs close to his heart and unites us under his kingship.

United by one king. But then secondly, and again in verse 24, we're united in one heart. United in one heart.

generally speaking, the history of both Israel and Judah was unfaithfulness and turning away from the Lord. Unless it was written in black and white, you could hardly believe just how corrupt these two nations became.

You could not swing a cat in Jerusalem without hitting an idol to a foreign god. Every hill in Judah and Israel was dominated by a shrine to Baal or some other foreign god.

[20:11] The politics of each nation were dysfunctional, the societies were rotten to the core, the rich oppressed the poor, and there was no justice in the land. There was little or no religious instruction being offered by the priests and the Levites, most of whom had converted to foreign religions.

The word of God was scarcely heard. It was in this situation the writer of Psalm 12 plaintively asked, Help, Lord, the godly have quite vanished from the land.

But when King Jesus unites his king, when through his death he creates a worldwide church, we read in verse 23 God's promise to them, They shall not defile themselves any more with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions, but I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned and will cleanse them, and they shall be my people and I shall be their God.

And then in verse 28, The God who made the two one will be known as he who sanctifies or purifies Israel.

And this promise is summarized in verse 24, They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. what comes first is Christ as king.

[21 : 39] What comes second is a people devoted to living for Christ. They shall turn away from their unfaithfulness, this unfaithfulness that characterized the nations of Israel and Judah.

They shall be clean, they shall be pure, they shall be holy unto the Lord. He shall do the cleansing and they shall walk in holiness. He shall do the sanctifying and they shall walk in purity.

What comes first is God's act. But God shall act in such a way as to give his people a new heart that tends toward faithfulness and devotion to him.

And this pattern in Ezekiel 37 is mirrored in Ephesians 2 where Paul, having declared that it's by God's gracious work in Christ Jesus that we've been saved, goes on to explain that we've been saved for good works.

And again in Titus 2 where the apostle reminds us that it was always God's intention in salvation to purify for himself a people of his own, eager to do what is good.

[22 : 51] Every nationality has its cultural traits. Many years ago, soon after the Iron Curtain came down, I visited Albania. Now the Albanians, because they'd lived for so long under the iron fist of communism, they walked with their heads down and they wore haunted expressions on their faces.

By contrast, the few Westerners you could see wore brighter clothes and they walked with their heads held high and were quick to engage in conversation.

You could tell a Westerner out of a crowd by the culture in which we'd been brought up. In the same way, as citizens of Christ's kingdom having been brought up in that kingdom through our shepherd's death on the cross, we have our own cultural traits.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Our chief passion in life is for the glory of God. Back in the 90s, you could identify an Albanian. Oh, there's one there. He holds his head low.

[24 : 09] He wears a haunted expression on his face. He doesn't talk to strangers. Today, we can identify a Christian. Oh, there's one there. She loves her enemies.

She's kind to those who gossip about her. She controls herself when everyone else is losing the rag. The citizens of God's kingdom with Christ at its head have new hearts which hunger and thirst for righteousness, which long to express the love they've received from God in expressions of love to each other, which, while never being perfectly devoted, long to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

A new nation with a new heart, the kingdom of God. That's God's glorious promise to us here. And then, lastly, we're united by one promise, united by one promise.

And this is in verse 27 and 28 of Ezekiel 37. It's hard to overestimate the centrality of the temple in Jerusalem to the national identity of the southern nation of Judah.

The temple represented God's presence and blessing upon the nation. It was there he dwelt and from there he forgave sin and blessed the nation with peace and fertility and prosperity.

[25 : 38] That's why the first thing the Jews did when they returned from their exile in Babylon under Ezra the priest was to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. And then Nehemiah came along some years later to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to offer protection to that temple.

But first came the temple because in the Jewish mindset of the day the temple was what it meant to be Jewish. In Ezekiel 37 verses 27 through 28 God promises to his people a new temple a new dwelling place from which he shall be their God and they shall be his people.

We read Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. Now far right Jewish nationalists and some dispensationalist Christians view this as a warrant for building a new temple in Jerusalem.

But as biblical Christians we see it differently. Listen to the words of John chapter 1 verse 14 And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. God promised he would dwell with his new nation the church and his son became flesh and dwelt among us.

[27 : 03] Christ is the new temple prophesied in Ezekiel 37. Christ by the Holy Spirit is the dwelling place of God among us. This is the promise of God that more than makes up for the tragedy of the division of Israel.

That Christ the word made flesh by his Spirit dwells in his church by his Spirit. And he is the new covenant temple of God. We don't need a third temple in Jerusalem for we have better by far. we have Jesus Christ with us in our joys and our sorrows our griefs and our delights our pleasures and our pains.

Knowing that in the 8th century B.C. Israel is divided into two nations the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah helps us to understand more of the Old Testament and that's good.

But what's better by far is knowing how Jesus Christ is the one through whom people from every nation of the world not just Israel and Judah come together as one under his kingship.

[28 : 15] That's what God does. He takes the ugliness of human sin and makes of it through Jesus Christ the most majestic beauty. He takes the division of Israel and through Christ makes of it one church in which by his spirit he delights to dwell.

Earlier on I said that man by his sin destroyed and ruined God's nation he divided that which was one. If a man can't affix the problems he's created for himself who can?

Never mind national politics if I can't affix the problems I've created for myself in my own personal life by my sin who can fix them. These two passages 1 Kings 12 and Ezekiel 37 placed side by side give us a plain and simple answer.

God can and through the cross of Christ he has. Let us pray. Our God and Father we thank you that the cross is central to everything in the scripture and the power of the cross is the power that takes two nations and makes of them one.

The power of the cross is that which takes men and women from all over the world and brings them together under the banner of the kingship of Jesus. The power of the cross is that which gives us a new heart a heart devoted to living for your glory and for your grace.

[29 : 57] Lord we ask that if there are any here this evening who have not yet had their hearts fixed by Jesus that even at this precise moment that ask him saying Lord Jesus I'm broken will you fix me?

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.