

TIBNI

THE EVILS OF DIVISION

Text: 1 Kings 16:15–22

A monster that is ever lurking in the shadows to rip apart families, churches, organizations, and nations is internal strife. One of the devil's mottos for victory has always been "Divide and conquer." Aware that "a house divided against itself cannot stand," he seeks to destroy God's people by turning brother against brother. If he cannot bring down the house of truth using woodpeckers from without, he will slowly corrupt it using termites from within.

Along with all its other difficulties, Israel had to wrestle with a national division, a problem that came close to being the final step in their downfall. Perhaps the nation that was least ready for the distraction of division was Israel. The nation had gone through three kings as if they had been throwaway hand towels. A total of five kings had reigned since 931 B.C., and all five had died with the judgment of God upon their heads. Of the five, one was smitten of God (Jeroboam), two were assassinated (Nadab and Elah), and one committed suicide (Zimri). We do not even know what happened to Baasha. Jeroboam and Baasha were given the longest reigns, with Jeroboam reigning for twenty-two years and Baasha for twenty-four. Jeroboam had used his time to set up his own religion, and Baasha had used his time perpetuating Jeroboam's religion. Therefore, both kings failed to provide the spiritual leadership the nation needed. As a result of these failures, Israel was in a weakened state, spiritually and structurally. The people desperately needed a transfusion of spiritual life

and rededication to God. Someone was needed to pull the nation together and bring the nation back to God, or death could be imminent. Maybe the next king would be the answer.

To the disappointment of all God-seekers, no hope was found in the next king, Tibni. The next attempt to put a king on the throne would make matters worse, dividing the nation into two warring factions. This conflict brought a four- or five-year-long fracture to the nation. These years of Israel's disunity pushed the nation to the brink of annihilation. Had the kingdom continued in a divided state much longer, it surely would have been destroyed by the superior rising powers of Damascus to the north and Assyria to the east. The nation must have come within seconds of having its death knell sounded.

What brought on this near demise? How did the devil almost get his vicious way? He used division, one of his favorite tools of destruction.

Omri, though popular with about half of Israel, was not accepted by the other half. The dissenters to Omri's appointment chose as their king a man named Tibni:

Then the people of Israel were divided into two parts; half of the people followed Tibni the son of Ginath to make him king; the other half followed Omri. But the people who followed Omri prevailed over the people who followed Tibni son of Ginath. And Tibni died and Omri became king. In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned twelve years; he reigned six years at Tirzah (16:21–23).

Tibni reigned for four or five years over part

of Israel (885 to 881 B.C.), while Omri reigned over the other part. During this time of division, a civil war raged between the two parts until finally Omri overcame Tibni and became the sole ruler.

Tibni is an obscure figure. He dashed upon the stage of Israel's history for only a moment, then disappeared. We do not even know how he died. Was he killed in a battle? Did his cause die with him? We do not know.

We do know that he led a portion of Israel away from unity into division. No indication is given in the text that his cause was just or honorable. Had he been leading his people into a righteous choice to honor God's Word and way, surely it would have been mentioned by the Holy Spirit.

Two types of division exist: faithful division and factious division. God causes the first, and the devil causes the second. One is from heaven, and the other is from the earth. The first type of division takes place because of the written truth and the living truth (2 Corinthians 6:16–18). Jesus said, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34b). A decision to follow Jesus can divide a family, a husband and a wife, or friends. This would be God-honoring division. If being a Christian makes it necessary for you to separate yourself from people who would destroy your faith in Christ, lead you into unfaithfulness to Christ, or mar your influence for Christ, then come out from among them. That division is necessary and noble, one that is God's will. It is an acceptable division, not an accursed one.

Factious division is the type of division that must be branded and avoided. Paul wrote,

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting (Romans 16:17, 18).

Factious people are troublemakers, walking conflicts looking for an issue in order to cause trouble. They cause division over opinions, personalities, and personal wishes, not over truth.

What kind of division did Israel experience: faithful or factious? It must have been factious, a

division that should not have taken place, a division that advanced the devil's cause, not God's.

Can you imagine? This nation, tottering on the edge of spiritual death, further complicated their woes by splintering into two factions and expending much of their remaining energy fighting each other. Israel had far greater concerns to be dealing with than taking on the rigors of a civil war.

This page of Israel's history is especially instructive to us. Among other truths, it expresses to us the evils of division. Look at these evils through the tears of their failures. Weigh carefully these evils, and resolve that you will not allow them to afflict you.

DIVISION DIMINISHES OUR STRENGTH

The first evil of factious division that we must notice is that it diminishes our strength. Israel needed to direct all of its energy toward restoring the spiritual life of the nation. Instead, for four or so years its energy went into eliminating a faction. Rather than having prayer meetings, they had war counsels; instead of gathering to listen to sermons, they gathered to sharpened their swords. Their resources went into achieving man's will, not God's.

A small, united group is strong; even the largest group is weak when divided. The energy needed for the spiritual battles that must be fought is diverted to the worries and heartaches that come from the division. If a mule is kicking, it cannot pull; and people who are fighting with each other are usually not moving forward.

You may have heard of the father who urged his sons to be united by using sticks as an object lesson. Before all of them, he picked up a stick and broke it. He said to his sons, "You can see that one stick by itself is easily broken." He picked up two sticks and with a little more effort broke them. He said, "Sons, if just two of you stand together, it will be harder for you to be overcome." The father put several sticks together and tried to break them. It was impossible for him to do it with his bare hands; they were too strong. Then came the lesson. He said, "Sons, you see that if all of you stand together, it will be impossible for the devil to overcome you. One of you alone is weak. Two of you together makes

for greater strength. All of you together can be invincible." All of us know that the lesson he was teaching is true.

Who, while thinking clearly, would undervalue unity? Israel did, however, and we sometimes do. Israel should have gone to God and asked Him to select their king. Then they should have joined together in fulfilling God's selection. Had they done so, they would have done God's will, would have been united as a people, and would have been invincible as a nation. However, the people wanted to make their own choice, and they could not agree. One thing led to another, and a rupture occurred. That is ever the case. Division usually springs from a rejection of God's way. People can be united only when they are forced by circumstances to come together or when they agree to submit to God's will. It is the latter way that all people should desire and seek.

DIVISION DISPLACES OUR LOYALTY

Another evil of division that we dare not miss is that it displaces our loyalty. Israel was to have one loyalty to the God of Israel. He was to be their sole leader. The king was to be His representative on earth. The king's task was to lead his nation in being God's "set apart" people on earth. When Israel divided into two groups, each family became loyal to a faction. Instead of being one nation of one heart and one soul under God, Israel had become two nations, each vying for supremacy over the other. How unlike one nation under God could they be? Their commitment had been switched from God to a clique, from God's will to their whims.

The marks of carnality in the New Testament include envying, strife, and divisions (1 Corinthians 3:3). In other words, carnality is more than dancing, drinking, and watching R-rated movies. Some people today draw back in horror from these three activities, and well they may; unfortunately, some of the same people are masters at envying, strife, and divisions. The Holy Spirit knew that discord and division would be the bane of the church through the ages, and He warned against strife more than against other evils which have engaged much of our attention.

Haven't we seen the evil of losing our loyalty

arise with denominationalism? People who claim to be Christians divide up and promote factions. They give themselves special names, write unique creeds for themselves, and organize themselves for perpetuity. A loyalty which should be only to Christ and His church becomes loyalty for "their church" and "their beliefs." Christ is only a part of their scheme, when He should be the total scheme. If we would only take the time to consult God's Word without prejudice, we would find that no denominations at all exist there. The Scriptures preach only one church (Ephesians 4:4, 5), which the one Christ purchased when He died on Calvary (Acts 20:28). It is not "my" church, "your" church, or "our" church, but *His* church. No one is added to it unless he submits to Christ's will, and no one lives properly for Christ unless he lives solely as Christ's church without addition and subtraction.

I tell my preaching students to guard carefully against a great mistake: Do not come to the throne of God on the last day with your record showing that in your ministry of the gospel you divided a church over opinions, personalities, or personal whims. That is one of the worst marks you can have against your name. You are a gospel preacher. Preach peace, the unity of the Spirit kind, not division. Unite brethren; do not separate them. God is the God of peace; Christ is the Prince of peace; and the gospel is the good news of peace on earth and good will toward all men.

DIVISION DIFFUSES OUR FOCUS

A third evil of division is that it diffuses our focus. It sidetracks us, gives us another emphasis, and takes us away from God's purpose.

What focus should Israel have had? Had Israel been true to her calling, to God's purpose for her, she would have been seeking God's will, God's plan for the nation. Israel was to declare to the nations around her the excellency of Jehovah, her God. With the nation severing into two parts, Israel's focus had been changed to getting "our" king on the throne or winning the war over "them."

The same tragedy can, and often does, happen to the church. When we splinter into groups, we lose sight of the one true purpose that God has for the church: to be a testimony

to the nations, to preach the gospel to the world (Mark 16:15; 1 Timothy 3:15). Division causes us to focus on fulfilling personal plans and goals for our particular factions, instead of God's will.

I have known of churches that split up and literally lost their divine purpose for existence. As united congregations, each of them could have worked toward taking the gospel into all the earth. They had money to spend on it and members who could work on it, but they split asunder. The groups that left had to build other buildings (of course), and that took all the money they could give. The groups that stayed behind were now so small that all they could do was maintain their old buildings. In each case, a united church that could have done something became two churches that could do nothing but support themselves. Division diffused their focus. They experienced what Israel had experienced with Tibni and Omri.

When Israel succumbed to division, the evil of a diffused focus descended upon her, leaving her without a divine purpose for her ambition. She no longer sought God's will; she had become a pagan nation that insisted upon "doing things my way."

CONCLUSION

Will we learn the lesson Israel's dark moment teaches us? Division leads away from God, not to Him. It saps our strength, dilutes our loyalty, and misdirects our focus.

The story is told of a little girl becoming lost in the wheat fields of Kansas. She had wandered off from her mother and had lost her way in the maze of standing grain. When she was discovered to be missing, a massive search was organized. Time was an essential consideration, for the night brought cold winds and other dangers. The searchers went in every direction, to no avail. Precious time passed. The day of searching passed, and then the night. On the morning

of the second day, one of the leaders in the search suggested that everyone join hands and make a long line of people to sweep across the large fields, covering every inch, until she was found. They joined hands and began the sweep. Within a short time the girl was found. She was in the middle of one the fields. She had huddled down among the stalks, attempting to keep warm, but they had found her too late. She was dead. Someone later remarked, "If we had just joined hands sooner, we could have saved her life." That observation may be the verdict of God regarding the efforts of a divided religious world to take the message of Christ to the lost. If we would join hands by obeying the plain teachings of the Scriptures and by just being Christ's church, truly becoming one in Christ, we would be able to rescue far more people from the grip of sin in this world. Crippled by division and disobedience, we are unable to get a wicked, careless world to listen to the gospel, much less obey it.

Unity in Christ is precious to God and appealing to man. One sure evidence of the authenticity of Christianity is our oneness in Christ. The evils of division are noticeable to even the non-Christian. All want unity, not division.

We are pilgrims together on a journey into the presence of God. All who claim to be Christians should seek the unity and fellowship seen in the comradeship of the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles.

Let us as New Testament Christians plead for and always demonstrate the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). As we await the return of Jesus, the message of 2 Peter 3:14 must be our agenda: to "be found by Him in peace." ■

*Lesson To Be Learned:
Division is not from God,
but is of the devil.
Avoid it.*

Kings of the Northern Kingdom

"Israel [the Northern Kingdom] continued as a nation for just over two centuries, 931 to 722 B.C. Nineteen kings reigned, representing nine ruling families. Eight kings were either assassinated or committed suicide. Not one of the nineteen was considered good by God, . . ."

A Survey of Israel's History
Leon Wood