

Divide and Conquer!

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Date: 25 April 2021

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[0 : 00] So we're going to look today at the ongoing story of the Old Testament and this is the first and second Kings. It's not where you naturally go if you want an uplift. It's not where you naturally go if you want just a quick word from the Lord to speak into your life.

Is it? Because it's difficult, it's difficult. History, it seems weirdly strange in many ways. And I want to address that a little bit today because, you know, we talk a lot, as Christians, we talk a lot about God's love, about God's promises and about God's purposes in our lives.

And maybe we even do that, and I know we do that even through the misery of a pandemic and divination, well, God's sovereign, God's in charge, you'll work out good things from it.

But I think that's, we believe that's true, but I think, especially for people who are not Christians, if we say that to people who are not Christians, I think it's very difficult for them to understand that and accept what we're saying.

It seems like fatalism, maybe, to them. You know, we're just saying, oh, there's nothing we can do. We're just puppets. God's got his sovereign will and he's going to do it, whatever.

[1 : 14] And, you know, people, maybe you're just puppets. Or maybe people think, God doesn't care about suffering. You know, how often have you heard that argument? If he's all powerful and if he's all loving, why does he allow bad things to happen to people? If he could rescue us from them, such as some of the events that we look at in Kings?

Or they may be just accusers of being people who are a bit mentally weak and who engage in wishful thinking and who are naive, naive with hope in the midst of all kinds of contradictory evidence.

People who are Christians aren't thinkers. They're not realists and they just have this pie in the sky idea of God and His love. And what I think what's important for us to do is to wrestle with some of these things as believers and also to show to other people who are not Christians that we wrestle with them.

And that when maybe people who are not Christians read some of the Old Testament, as we've been looking at, they may think they find it very difficult and they find it problematic and they find some of the events that are recorded very difficult.

And we need to confess that as Christians, unless you're a genius and you find it all easy, we need to confess that there are tough realities that we find in the Old Testament. And there's a mystery there. We don't know everything. We don't have all the answers to the Old Testament.

[2 : 46] And we don't want to give out as Christians to one another cheap doctrinal statements about everything in the Bible. I think we need to show that we wrestle too. I wrestle greatly with many things and I've wrestled hard with this to understand the story of the kings and their place in the Old Testament and their place in God's plan and God's purposes.

We wrestle too. And so I think it's helpful at a broad level. I'm just giving a broad brushstroke here at the moment. It's helpful to remember two things. One, we are like God. Okay?

We started a series in the evening, talks about us being image bearers. Now that means, among other things, that we have moral responsibility. We are not puppets. Whatever mystery is involved in that, we're not puppets.

And in a rebellion against God as a humanity, we have chosen, humanity has chosen independence from God. And therefore, there's responsibility for that. We bear the consequences of that responsibility, of being image bearers who are morally responsible.

You can't blame God for everything. We can't keep blaming God for all the bad things that happen, because part of it within that mystery is a recognition that we've rebelled against God, and we are bearing the consequences for that.

[4 : 19] So we are like God. But on the other side, we are not like God. Or rather, should I say, God is not like us. He is God. And the danger very often with this, where we start our arguments, is that we are trying to recreate God in our image and make Him think the way we think.

We want Him to be like us. We want Him to suit us. We want Him to do what we want. And He doesn't. And He's not like us at that level, because there is mystery in His infinite, eternal and unchangeable nature.

There's uniqueness in His love and in His justice. And even at best, if God is God, and you know, wrestle with that today. Stick that right in front of your nose and wrestle with it.

If God is God, then we need to recognize that even as He reveals Himself, we are only grasping a grain of sand on the seashore of His infinity, of His glorious character.

Yet, yet we have Christ. Yet we have Jesus Christ, God made flesh. And that's not easy. And it's not easy to understand, but it's real.

[5 : 47] So I want you this morning, I need you to cooperate with me, because this is not easy stuff. And I don't want you just to switch off and go to sleep, because it's not the gospel.

Or it's not about Jesus dying on the cross. Specifically, the stuff we like hearing about, although obviously that is integral to it all. So go with me, use your brains and your hearts and your souls today, and wrestle with this. Remember, it's His living word. Yes, it's God's history, God's story, but it's also His living word.

And so we come to the book of kings, the book, well, the books of kings, first and second king, in the original Hebrew Bible there were one book. And we recognize it's not easy, but it's not easy because it's real. You know, if it was made up, whoever would make it up, you think would make it up to be easy, wouldn't you?

But it's not easy because it's real and because it's God dealing with His people before the coming of Christ. Now, we're only going to skim the surface for a few moments this morning. And I have to presume a certain amount of knowledge with you. But if you want to know more that you don't know or you don't know the back story, then please speak to me.

Come and speak to me, or speak to a Christian beside you later on, or speak to someone who's been a Christian for a long time. Because this book, the book of the kings, it was written much later than when it happened, okay?

[7 : 18] So it was written when the Old Testament people of God were in exile so they weren't in the promised land anymore. They're rebellion and their sin that led them into exile around 550 BC.

And this book, this book records the history of the kings, was written to a people who were devoid of hope.

They had been flung out of the promised land because of their own disobedience. The temple that was representing God's presence with them had been destroyed and they felt that God had abandoned them.

And the people, and we'll go on to see this in the story, the people were divided, completely divided. They were enslaved again, can you imagine it? After everything that happened in Egypt, they were enslaved again, they were weak.

And the reality of life was extinguishing all their dreams, all their trust in God. They'd lost sight of who they were and who God was. Is that familiar?

[8 : 20] Is that familiar with you today, in your life and your thinking? Is it that far away from our experience? But the purpose of this book, which is written to a people many years later, was to expose the destructiveness of rejecting God's love, which is what they did.

And also, the determination of God in His love to rescue them and to outwork His purposes. So the destructiveness of rejecting God, remember they were supposed to be different because they were loved by God and chosen and saved and redeemed.

They were supposed to be different, and that's no different from us. We too are supposed to be different because we've been touched by the grace and the goodness and the love of God.

Anyway, we'll go on.

The story of Kings. I'm just going to say two things primarily about this. The first is with one or two sub points. The first thing is hideous for the most part.

If you read through 1st and 2nd Kings, it's hideous. It doesn't make nice reading at all. It's hideous. We've seen this story so far. Very often they've rejected God's love.

[9 : 40] They've betrayed God's purposes. They didn't want Him as their leader, so they wanted a king just like all the other nations around them. We saw that for the wrong reasons. They wanted to be like everyone rather than different from everyone.

And yet God in His glory, He wove His eternal purposes into their wrong motives. And He established, He saw last week in Thomas Preach, established an everlasting kingdom through who?

King David. You know, we all know about King David, a man after God's own heart. And He promised from King David a king and a descendant who would reign forever.

Thomas went on to say that that was Jesus. Remember the genealogy of Jesus is a son of David from the house of David. So it was Jesus. It all links in with Jesus.

And so we've come to this point. David is reigning. Solomon is reigning. And from then on, the majority of the kings with all their difficult names, there's no Scottish names there or European names.

[10 : 44] They're all Jewish names, difficult to pronounce. The majority of them utterly rejected God's model of leadership. The model He had set down about the kind of kings they were to be.

They made their wrong choices. They wanted to have power and they wanted to have wealth and they wanted self-glory and they oppressed the people and the people were badly treated.

They didn't do what God wanted. So you can read about Solomon's pride or the brutality of Rehoboam, which we didn't really go into, or King Nadab, or Omri, or Ahab, many of you have heard of, or Manasseh.

And you know, it's like if kings was written as a poem or as a song, the chorus would be, all did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

That would be the chorus because it's repeated all through the book. This king and that king and this king and that king. They all did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They didn't do, they didn't follow the way God wanted to them.

[11 : 46] Most of them. And what happens is they are led into exile, out of the promised land, away from the temple. And I just want to highlight two main consequences of them rejecting God's way, because that's also the hindsight that this book was written for, for the exiles who were in many years later.

But it's also for us, because it's a living word as well. The consequences of rejecting God's way are twofold. One is division. Look at verse 16, we read that.

Maybe not that easy, maybe sometimes to just plonk yourself into that passage without reading what's around about it. When all of us saw the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king and said, what portion do we have with David and the kingdom of David?

We have no inheritance with you. Go home to your own house, Israel. And they left the cities of Judah. So what happened was unimaginable division.

Israel, God's people were divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom had ten of the tribes, and Jeroboam became their king.

[13 : 00] And the southern kingdom, which had Jerusalem, had two tribes, Benjamin and Judah. That was King Rehoboam, Jeroboam, remember the booms.

He was the remained king just over that rump of the nation Israel. Imagine the dynasty of David, two generations later.

All this is a couple of small insignificant clans around Jerusalem. There was civil war. It was division weakness. They lost division.

They became obsessed with survival. They were surrounded by enemy nations. They ignore God. They were fearful and they were poverty stricken. It's pathetic. It's a dreadful story of division.

But it's also a story of idolatry. In verses 28 to 30, we read that as well. That the king of Judah, of David's rump kingdom that was left Jeroboam, he said in verse 28, So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold.

[14 : 12] That rings a bell. And he said, look, just worship them. Just worship them instead. I don't want you going up to Jerusalem to where the temple is, because you might go back to that.

Just worship idols. So idolatry became something that was very real in that nation. Now in 2 Kings 17 verses 7 to 8, that may come up on the screen.

That's really the key verses for the whole of Kings. And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from

under the hand of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. So instead of being different, they became the same as the other nations. They were power crazy. They were divided. They worshiped idols, division and idolatry. And I think God used that. Remember, this was written much later to a people who by that time were all in exile out of the promised land, to remind them of their own, to give them hindsight, to remind them of their own history, and to remind them of why they ended up where they ended up. [15:28] To expose the consequences of leaving God out of their life, out of their hearts, out of their church, out of society. Do you not think that's still really relevant?

That we look back not only to the Scripture because it's living word, but you look back to your own life and you look back to your own family and to your own behaviour and see, well, what are the consequences when I leave God out of the picture?

And when I reject His love and when I reject His guidance and His grace and His goodness. Because we find these two same things happen, don't they? There's division and there's idolatry. Today, in our lives, not the same kind of division, not the same kind of idolatry, but they are still consequences of leaving God out. Satan's ploy has always been divide and conquer, isn't it? It's always the same way. You think about it. Think about it in your family, think about it in your marriage, think about it in the church, especially the church, think about it in society.

[16:32] How do people reveal and expose their power and their significance? Divide and conquer. Hatred, mistrust, abuse, suffering, personal relationships.

Satan divides us from one another because he's managed to divide us from God. It's hugely significant to remember the importance of unity.

And I'm just going to talk for a moment about the church. Division is God's way. It is Satan's way, isn't it? And over this last year, we've been forced to be separated.

I hope not divided, but definitely separated. And we've had virtual church. Now, virtual church has been great, but it's a really poor substitute for actual community and for gathering together.

And this is a sidebar, okay? But I would encourage, as we return, that you grasp and remind yourself of the value of being there, of not being separated and divided, but being together physically, because it represents something more than just gathering together.

[17:43] We're united in worship. Can I encourage you, if you've maybe never thought about evening worship, and over this last year, we've been separated, maybe think of the opportunity of coming together in the morning and maybe the evening as well, and to benefit from that extra hour, just of being together, building relationships and worshiping in God's name.

So there's unity, but also we recognize when we divide and separate and ignore God, that we become idolatrous as well, just as the Old Testament people did here in Kings.

Our hearts are idle factories, aren't they, without God? We make idols of our dreams, we make up our own objects of worship, we worship ourselves, we worship our own misplaced hopes, our pleasures, we make good things, which God has given us, we make them ultimate things, and we make them the only reason for living, and we can even do that with religion, so that it can be a Christless religion, and we think we are somehow, we make an idol of our outward legalistic ideas. Anything, anything that keeps His holy light exposing the darkness that's in our hearts, we deny Him and we deny His presence, we shut out His love and His closeness.

And I think that might be challenging for us today, that we can shut out God, because of the responsibility of what it means to know His love and to know His, the exclusivity of His love.

[19:28] So, that's the first of two. The story of Kings is hideous for the most part, and that's the Bible, isn't it? We don't like that, because it actually really exposes what we're like, exposes our sin, and exposes what we're like in choosing to reject God and go our own way.

And that's really what Kings is about. However, it's also an inspiration towards hope and towards faith. I really want you to remember that as well.

It's not all bad news, and we mustn't forget that, because there's jewels of light in the darkness of the story of the Kings, because there were some kings who trusted only actually from the line of Judah, from the small rump of two tribes that were left.

But some of them did follow, and that of course, if you remember what we've learned so far, that's also the line of the Messiah. Now, we don't have time to look at them, any of them really, but you remember Hezekiah's prayer, or think of, read if you can, Hezekiah's prayer, when their small rump

nation was about to be destroyed by the massive power of the Assyrian army, and He prayed in 2 Kings 19, and the angel of the Lord came and destroyed that army.

Or think about 2 Kings 22, verses 1 and 2, which I think come up on the screen as well, which tells us about the life of Josiah. Oh, no, that's wrong, that's 1 Kings 22, doesn't matter.

[21 : 04] 2 Kings 22 speaks about Josiah, that he was someone who followed God, he was a good king, he trusted in God's love and God's mercy, and he believed and lived by faith, and the nation under them was blessed during that time as well.

So we have the kings who trusted, but we also had the provision of the prophets. So amongst all the difficult stories of kings, you've got the fantastic stories of Elisha, or Elijah and Elisha, tremendous.

Or think of Elisha in 2 Kings 6, verses 16 to 18, when his servant was, again, they were surrounded by powerful armies who were going to destroy them, and Elisha said to his servant, don't be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.

It's one of my favorite verses in the Bible. Then Elisha prayed and said, oh Lord, please open the eyes of his servant so he may see, so the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots, chariots of fire, all around Elisha.

It's a great story of the invisible protection and power and might and will of God, rescuing them and redeeming them and bringing them back to himself.

[22 : 24] And the provision of the prophets are there to remind us what it means to be in God's side, to understand what it means to know his blessing and to know answered prayer and to know miracles in a day and generation that doesn't believe, because it was no different, it didn't believe.

And also that inspiration towards faith. That was encouraging, remember, to those to whom it was originally written, who were in exile, because it reminded them that God still was promising.

He'd promised to take them out of exile. He still promised a Messiah to come, so there was hope for them. And you know, I think that better was still to come.

The promise given to David about an everlasting kingdom to a people whose hope was about to be extinguished was huge, that God was faithful. He hadn't abandoned them, he hadn't just written them off and started with someone else.

He would preserve Judah's line, he would preserve the genealogy of Jesus. He would preserve the promise that this Messiah would come from the seed of David. And he promised, he preserved that all the way through the Old Testament.

[23 : 39] And in God's time, Christ the King of Kings came. And he inaugurated his spiritual kingdom. And the cost of his divine love, the cost of opening up new hearts and new lives towards God, was his death, the death of God the Son on the cross, which we know about, which we'll remember very shortly at the Lord's table.

And we have seen that, so we've seen the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus. So that should encourage you in your faith that God is faithful. And also warn us about just trying to turn our backs on God.

But also, we still have a hope to be realized. So we may sometimes feel a little bit in exile, or that God has maybe abandoned us in our lives. Maybe you feel like that today, maybe you've come today thinking, this is the last time I'm going to come here, or this is the last time I'm going to watch online.

Because God's abandoned me. And I just say, I hope that from God's living word, you realize He hasn't. And that His future kingdom is still to come.

And we recognize that the best is still to come. Hebrews 11 is all about that, using the Old Testament to remind us as believers that the best is yet to come. So, in a moment, we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper, the third of four times.

[25 : 02] It's great, maybe nearly all the congregation will have been separated, but together, celebrating the Lord's Supper over four weeks. It's the best we can do just now, but we would love to do it when everyone is together, obviously.

And as you sit at the Lord's table and think about that, or participate, remember the promise that comes through the Old Testament. And remember the presence that is symbolized in God being with His people, and as it was in the Old Testament, the temple that He had that was built by Solomon in Jerusalem.

So remember the promise that we are to trust in Him, and we're to fight division, two big consequences being divided.

And if you're not struggling with division in your heart, I think you're either an angel, or you're a liar. I think it's one or the other. We're all struggling with division in our hearts, and with my will and not someone else's will, and God just being out of the picture, maybe we do have some angels in our midst.

But I think we need to work out what it looks like to have Jesus in terms of division in your marriage, in your family, in your church life, work life, and how you deal with that as a Christian, how you show a different way, and also how you deal with idolatry.

[26 : 25] What we put before our relationship with God, are we rejecting His rescue? Are we rejecting His promises? Are we giving up because of bad circumstances?

Which is what this people had done. And remember His presence. The Old Testament, His presence was symbolized in His being in the temple that was built for Him.

In the New Covenant, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and He dwells not just with us, but in us, in the person of His Spirit. And may you meditate and think about that for a moment at the Lord's Supper.

It's something we do physically. It sharpens our senses because we taste and we eat and we feel. And as we do it rightfully, then also our spiritual senses should be sharpened as we confess our sins, and as we stop running.

You come into the Lord's tables about stop running away from God, stop avoiding Him, face Him head on in fellowship and friendship, and in His great love.

[27 : 35] So maybe today you and I need to fess up and just say sorry to God for running away and turn back to Him for His promises and for His presence. And for all He teaches us from the difficult, hard passages of the Old Testament which we've been looking at and continue to look at.

So let's pray briefly together. Lord God, help us to understand You better. Help us to love You more. Teach us from Your Word what it means.

And help us to wrestle with the difficult passages and the difficult sections of Your Word. But You've given us them. They were there for Your people as they read them many years later.

They're also there as a living word for us to learn about God and to learn about ourselves and to learn about salvation in Jesus Christ and all the promises that came true in Him.

May You be our King of Kings and our Lord of Lords, we ask. And bless us now as we participate in the Lord's Supper. Together we pray that it would be refreshing and renewing and reviving for us and that we would just have a moment or two just to think about You.

[28 : 44] We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.