**The Divided Kingdom: What puts community at risk?**

Well, we’ve been studying the first few kings of Israel and some weeks ago we looked at King Solomon and saw that under his reign, Israel grew to its greatest extent. But what began as the magic kingdom under David and then his son Solomon turned into the divided kingdom under their successors. The unity and community that had been experienced for over a hundred years was soon shattered by civil war. And this morning we are going to look at one of the saddest sections in the Old Testament in 1 Kings, where we learn about the demise of the community of ancient Israel.

Now, why do we study sections of the bible like this? There definitely more uplifting themes in the Bible, but Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians **<ENTER>**

*These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.*

One of the reasons we study the Old Testament is to learn from the past so that we will not make the same mistakes. Historians say the same thing; ‘*those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’* I also like this quote by the English Journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, ”*All new news is old news happening to new people*.” So this morning we will identify 4 risk factors that contributed to the downfall of the community of Israel. And it’s our job to see if we are repeating any of these risk factors in our own lives. Because we want to build a biblically functioning community here at Fishers Creek that is marked by a spirit of unity and that is not an easy thing to do.

Now, I want to give you a quick overview of this Kingdom period in the life of Israel which lasted about 500 years from about 1050 BC to 586 BC. And this period can be broken up into 4 distinct phases. **<ENTER>** The first phase was the United Kingdom Period under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. This period lasted for 120 years. **<ENTER>** The second phase was the Divided Kingdom when the country was split between Israel and Judah and there was civil war between them. This period lasted for about 200 years. In 722 B.C. the Northern Kingdom of Israel was attacked and destroyed and the survivors dispersed around the ancient world. **<ENTER>** This event marked the beginning of the 3rd phase – the Surviving Kingdom period of the southern kingdom of Judah. And for about 136 years Judah survived on its own, but then the Babylonians invaded. They destroyed Jerusalem and took many of the Jews to Babylonia as exiles. **<ENTER>** And this marked the 4th phase the Dissolved Kingdom. The Northern kingdom had been gone for generations and now the Southern kingdom was destroyed and the nation of Israel no longer existed. This lasted for 70 years until a remnant of the Jews came back to rebuild Jerusalem, but the history of God’s people as a nation with a human king from their midst was over. And this morning I’m going to concentrate on the 2nd phase when the kingdom is first divided.

Our text for this today is 1 Kings and we’ll start in chapter 15. Now as you read through the history of Israel in the book of Kings and Chronicles, you will discover that events are not always recorded in chronological order. Some people get concerned about this, but the Bible is not a modern history book where things get listed chronologically. However the Bible is historically reliable, but we need to remember that the Bible was not given to us primarily so that we could learn history, it was given to reveal who God is (His character). And it was given to us to change us; to help us become better people; the person God wants you to become. The Bible doesn’t tell us everything we want to know, but it does tell us everything we need to know for building a relationship with Him and for building community with other people.

Now, as you read 1 Kings, you see a pattern when it describes each king. And it goes like this; first we are told the name and the length of his reign. Then his reign is synchronized with the reign of the corresponding king in the other kingdom. Each king is compared to his immediate predecessor as either better or worse. And all the kings are evaluated against the benchmark of King David as either being good or evil in comparison to him. And we have a good example of this format in 1 Kings 15. **<ENTER>**

*In the eighteenth year of the reign of Jeroboam son of Nebat, Abijah became king of Judah, and he reigned in Jerusalem three years. His mother’s name was Maacah daughter of Abishalom.*

*He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been.*

And we have a tendency to do the same thing. Most nations compare their leaders against the benchmark of their predecessor. Were they better or worse? Or they are compared to the nation’s greatest leader in history. Now, I don’t know who that would be for Sweden, but in the USA there is one president who usually comes out in front during polls. No, it’s not Barack Obama. **<ENTER>**

Do you recognize this picture? It’s Abraham Lincoln. And he served as president during the worst time in American history during its own civil war, but he is remembered as one of its greatest presidents.

Now we tend to evaluate greatness by a leader’s achievements, but God evaluates greatness by a person’s character. And we read a simple and clear evaluation of each of the Kings by God. He either says, ‘This king was good’ or ‘He was evil’. Now of the 20 Kings of Israel, all of them ‘did evil’ in God’s sight. And only 8 of the 19 kings of Judah ‘did good’. The truth is that even kings and presidents and prime ministers answer to a higher authority. They may act like they are sovereign and have the last word, but they don’t. And neither do we! Every one of us should ask the question: ‘What will God say about my life when it’s all over?’

Well, let’s spend the rest of our time looking at the risk factors for building community. **<ENTER>** And the first one is *failing to be a servant leader*. Nothing ruins community quicker than a leader who takes advantage of people for selfish gain.

And one of the defining moments for the nation of Israel came when Rehoboam succeeded Solomon, his father, as King. At his inauguration, when the leaders of the 12 tribes came to crown their new king, Rehoboam had an opportunity to strengthen community, but instead he blew it. Open your bibles to 1 Kings 12 and starting in verse 4, where the Elders of the 12 tribes had one request.

"*Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you."* And Rehoboam responded by asking for 3 days to think about it, which was wise.Then it says *King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked*.

And in verse 7 They replied, "*If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants*."

But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. And in verse 10 we read their response, "*Tell these people who have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter'-tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions*.'

That was a pleasant first meeting with their new young king. Well, how do you think that went over with the Elders? Look at verse 16, *When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king: "What share do we have in David, what part in Jesse's son? To your tents, O Israel! Look after your own house, O David!*"

In other words, they basically said, ‘Forget you! We don’t need you. You go look after yourself and we’ll do the same. So, the 10 tribes in the North went together and appointed a new leader as King named Jeroboam; while Rehoboam remained King over the Southern 2 tribes. And his foolish, self-serving decision caused the people to rebel, and it divided the kingdom and caused a civil war that lasted 200 years. **<ENTER>**

Here’s a map over the area which shows the 2 Kingdoms. And what is so tragic about this split is that these 12 tribes were blood relatives. The 12 tribes all came from the sons of Jacob. This was God’s covenantal people and they began fighting and killing each other. It marks the beginning of the end for God’s dream of a nation that was supposed to be so loving and good and righteous that it would be a light of goodness to all the other nations of the world and they would all say, these are God’s people. This is what living in God’s community looks like.

But it ends in a divided Kingdom with Jerusalem as the capital in the South under Rehoboam and Samaria as the capital in the North under Jeroboam. It is interesting to note that by the time Jesus showed up about 1,000 years later the Jews hated the Samaritans so much that they wouldn’t even walk through that part of the country. Of course by that time, with all the wars, their wasn’t much Jewish blood left in Samaria, but perhaps that’s why Jesus used a Good Samaritan in his parable about loving your neighbors. The last thing to mention here in this picture is the two cities of Bethel and Dan up in the top. The king of Israel, Jeroboam, does something in these two cities that also was a risk factor, but we’ll come to that in 1 minute.

So Rehoboam failed to be a servant leader. He did not listen to wise counsel. He was more concerned about himself than his people, and he put the nation of Israel into a tailspin from which they never recovered. It was the defining moment in the life of Israel.

And in the same way today, leaders in businesses, churches, families, or any group of people have the same choice. Will I serve or demand to be served? Will I build community or destroy it?

You know we have the greatest example in all of history to follow here. Jesus was the ultimate servant leader. He said himself in Mark 10, ‘*For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*.’ And one of the very last acts that He did one earth at the last Supper was to wash the feet of his disciples. Now in those days of open toe-d sandals and no under ground sewage, this was not a pleasant thing. It was so bad that even Jewish servants could refuse to wash their masters feet and that is why Peter reacted so strongly when Jesus went to wash his feet. *No, you shall never wash my feet, Master*. And Jesus goes on to tell them that they should follow his example and wash each other’s feet.

Later on, the apostle Paul talks about this in his letter to the Phillipians 2 **<ENTER>**.

*5Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!*

 *9Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

What about you? Do you know what it takes to be a servant leader? That’s the attitude we are supposed to have. And it goes against everything that the world teaches you. Look out for number 1 we’re told, but Jesus said the first here on earth will be last in the kingdom of heaven and that the humble will be exalted in heaven. Where do you want your praise? On earth or in heaven.

**<ENTER>**Well, let’s move to the second risk factor which is *using spiritual language for selfish motives*. Now although the kingdom was divided politically into a Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam and a Southern Kingdom under Rehoboam, they were still united spiritually. Everyone was still expected to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship God in the temple that Solomon had built. But this caused a problem for Jeroboam in the North because Jerusalem was the capital of his rival Rehoboam in the South and he knew that his rule would always be in jeopardy as long as the people went to the Jerusalem to worship.

And his solution was to create two golden calves and set up his own places to worship and he put one in the city of Bethel and the other in Dan, if you remember the map the looked at a few minutes ago. **<ENTER>** Then this is what he told his people in 1 Kings

*It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.*

You know it’s amazing that he’s making the same mistake about making an image to be worshiped just like Aaron did when Moses was up on the mountain. Jeroboam even used the same animal – calves. We mentioned it earlier, but some people just don’t learn from the mistakes of history and they are not familiar with God’s Word. So Jeroboam makes a huge mistake and he’s using spiritual language for his own personal agenda. I’m your king and I’m telling you it’s OK to worship these calves, here are your gods.

And nothing destroys a community faster than when people use spiritual language to get what they want. It’s spiritual manipulation. And when someone says things like “God spoke to me and told me that you should ….” Or “God told me his plan for you is ….” Or “I have a word from the Lord that our church has to ….” When people say things like this, we ought to be real careful to determine if this is truly a word from the Lord or if not. Because it’s true that God does speak and lead people today, but we should take time, pray, and seek wise counsel to determine if this is truly from the Lord.

You know 2 weeks ago when we studied Job, one of his friends Eliphaz said this same thing to Job. I had this word in secret during a dream and this spirit told me to tell you this. This is a word from the Lord. And yet, at the end of the book we hear God saying, No, you were wrong. Job was right. Eliphaz did NOT have a word from the Lord for Job. He was sincere, but wrong.

And this type of thing goes on in churches all the time. My sister used to be a member of a church whose leaders regularly give these types of directives which usually fulfill some need in the church. They even told my sister that she should marry this pastor in South Africa. This was a word from the Lord. And you don’t disobey God, right? So she went, but she also has God’s spirit in her and she realized that this guy was not the one for her. This was not a word from the Lord for her. She has since married another man in South Africa and they have 3 children now. But it is so easy to misuse authority like this.

I read one more story about this type of thing from a pastor named Jim. And when he was a new Christian in college, he got involved with this group who met on campus. And in that organization there was this very attractive girl who one day came up to him and said, “*God told me that you’re the one for me*.” And he said that his first thought was “*Great! Who am I to argue with God? I mean if God told her than it must be true and besides she’s really good looking*.” And so, he fell head over heels in love with this young woman. And they dated for 3 months and then she broke up with him. And he was crushed and he asked her ‘*What went wrong? I thought God told you that I was the one*.” And he said he never forgot her response, “*I was wrong*.”

And he learned a hard lesson that day that we all would be wise to learn. Whenever someone uses superspiritual language, has a dogmatic tone, and is insistent that they know God’s will for you, you ought to be very cautious. It doesn’t mean that we refuse to let God speak to us through other people. What it does mean is that we should use discernment and ask God to confirm these words to us as well. We should ask for wisdom of the Holy Spirit who lives in us and seek godly counsel from people we trust.

And if God is giving you promptings that will help others, then don’t stop giving them. But question your own motives and humbly share what is on your own heart and let God move people as he will, but don’t demand that they obey you immediately. That is sin and God wants you to stop.

**<ENTER>** Risk factor number 3 is following God half-heartedly. God wants 100% from us. But when we give God only part of our heart, then it opens the door to so many other things to fill our hearts with and they tend to make us vulnerable to temptation and sin and all kinds of bad things. And we see this pattern in the lives of these kings. Those kings that were not fully devoted to God soon wandered completely away from Him. And what happens is that the other affections of our heart crowd God out over time.

We see this in Abijah who became King after Rehoboam. When we read about his life and how God evaluated him, we are struck by these words in 1 Kings 15 **<ENTER>**

*He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his forefather.*

And it is true of us today. Some people are fully devoted followers of Christ. They have made a complete commitment before God. When God leads, they follow. And they understand that there whole life is under the authority of Jesus Christ.

Other people are only half-devoted followers. When God leads, they go when it’s convenient. They want God, but they also want the things of this world. And there is this constant struggle between the two.

And maybe one way to illustrate this difference is to view it from the perspective of a dog or a cat. How many dog owners here this morning? How many cat owners? We’ve had both, but for now we just own a dog who is fully devoted to his master – me and Kathy I should say. When I come home, he is the first one to greet me with lots of loud barks and a wagging tail. When I call him he comes and when I tell him to stay he stays. When we have friends over, he’s right there in the middle of it all even if there’s young kids who like to pull his tail because you’re friends are his friends. There’s a reason why dogs are man’s best friend.

Now compare that to a cat. They come once in a while when you call and they come when they hear the electric can opener because they think you’re opening the cat food can. When you come home, they might come to say hello as they run out the door. And if you bring a stranger into your home, they are likely to go find their favorite hiding place and stay there a few days.

How about you? Are you a fully devoted follower of Christ? **<ENTER>** Jesus said ‘*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it*.’ The cross is a sign of complete surrender. To take up one’s cross is to lay down one’s life. The cross was a tool of execution. There are many other verses in the New Testament about this type of commitment level that God asks for like Galatians 2:20.

And there’s something to be said for the type of devotion that God has for us. You know, God’s love for us never wavers. He is passionate in his love for you all the time. It doesn’t matter if you mess up, if you turn to him seeking forgiveness, He’ll meet you with open arms. **<ENTER>**

And there is an amazing verse in 2 Chronicles that says, “*For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully devoted to Him*.” I mean God is searching all across the world for people and communities that are fully devoted to Him, so that He can strengthen them. What keeps a community of Christ followers strong? People whose hearts are fully devoted to Him. Following God with half a heart puts you and your community at risk to begin following something else.

**<ENTER>** OK, the last risk factor is *turning away from God*. Sometimes a follower of God does not understand something that has happened in their life or they sin and refuse to repent and seek forgiveness, and over time their hard heart becomes cold toward God and they turn away.

Asa was one of the kings of Judah who started out well. He ruled for 41 years and in 1 Kings 15:11 we read “*Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David has done*.” And for 35 years Asa trusted and relied on God. He had great victories over their enemies, but he was always at war. In the 36th year of his reign, the King of Israel took over one of the border towns that Asa governed. And Asa stopped trusting in God. He turned away from God and began relying on man. He turned to Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram for assistance. And he actually robbed the temple of gold and silver to pay this pagan king for military assistance to fight his own kinsman.

As you can imagine, God didn’t like this and he sent a prophet to rebuke Asa for what he had done. But Asa didn’t listen and he just got angry at the prophet and put him in prison and he oppressed the people. Asa doubted God and he took matters into his own hands and knowingly disobeyed God. Then when he was confronted, he refused to be humbled and to admit his failure and most importantly he refused God’s forgiveness.

The saddest thing is that Asa never turned back to God. 2 Chronicles 16 describes his last years and it says that he got a disease in his feet which was very painful, but he never sought help from God. He only turned to doctors.

How about you? Is there something in your life that has made you doubt God’s goodness? Have you taken matters into your own hands even though you know it goes against God’s Word? Can you identify failures like this where you continue to rationalize your wrong behavior rather than admit it to God and seek his forgiveness? Has something gotten between you and God? If it has, then maybe it’s time to deal with it. If you are no longer trusting Him, now’s the time for a change. If you’ve turned away from him, then let this be the day you turn back. **<Let us Pray>**

**<Sing closing songs>**