

The Dangers of Disunity

Today's families are busier than ever before. Our world seems to be spinning out of control. Men and women work hard simply to "keep up," let alone advance.

Our consumer society has evolved into a frenzy of demands, pulling us in a thousand different directions. How is a Christian to respond?

Studying and meditating on God's Word helps us to stay focused, as my life verse points out: "Teach me Your way, O Lord, and I will walk in Your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear Your name" (Ps. 86:11, NIV).

I think the phrase "Give me an undivided heart" aptly describes the battle we face in today's materialistic, fast-paced society. But what does it mean to have an undivided heart?

A NATION DIVIDED Let me answer that question by showing the effects of having a divided heart, as outlined in Judges 19-21. This passage recounts one of the most gruesome stories in all Scripture.

The story goes something like this: A Levite from Ephraim takes a concubine. She is unfaithful to him and returns to live with her father.

After four months, the Levite decides to retrieve her. He travels to her father's house where he is repeatedly detained by the girl's father.

Five days later, the Levite takes his concubine and heads home. Darkness falls as they approach Gibeah in Benjamin, where an old man takes them into his home for the night.

Wicked men of Gibeah come to the host and demand sexual relations with the Levite man. The old man tries to dissuade

the mob, but his attempts fail.

The Levite gives them his unfaithful concubine. The Benjamite men rape her all night, and she dies at the threshold of her master's resting place. When the Levite realizes she is dead, he cuts her body into 12 pieces and sends them throughout Israel.

The Israelites respond with horror. They rally "as one man" and punish the Benjamites for the mob's wickedness (Judg. 20:1).

This story concludes the book of Judges and records one of the darkest periods in Israel's history with a foreboding refrain: "In those days Israel had no king."

The story of the unfaithful concubine serves as a powerful allegory summarizing Israel's corporate failure. It also applies to us, offering a strong warning about disunity to the American church today.

The days of the judges should have been a good time for Israel in the promised land. Following years of captivity and wandering, they had finally come into their own.

Prior to his death, Joshua commissioned the tribes to complete the eradication of foreign peoples in their allotted lands. Initially the tribes fought together, but later it became the responsibility of individual tribes to conquer the enemy and complete the takeover of their own prescribed inheritance. Unfortunately, most of the tribes failed.

As a general rule, the tribes conquered the "easy" areas of the plains but failed to dislodge the enemy from more entrenched places where enemy nations had long been in residence. They eventually made treaties with enemy peoples and began to adopt the practices of those who had gone before them and now culturally surrounded them.

Their once united heart became divided, not only in practice but in their identity as a nation “under God.” Unger’s Bible Dictionary notes that the tribes transferred loyalty to themselves, became consumed with their own issues and lost their familial identity.

One by one, oppressive nations conquered God’s people. Each time, by the grace of God, a charismatic leader would arise among the Jews who was anointed to deliver the captives.

During the judges’ lifetimes, the people followed God and experienced peace. However, whenever a reigning judge died, the people turned away and again took up their idols.

RESULTS OF DISUNITY The story of the unfaithful concubine is a dramatic finale to the Israelites’ apostasy. Furthermore, it clearly demonstrates the results of divided loyalty:

****Improper relationship.** A concubine is defined as a “secondary wife of inferior legal or social status.”

In ancient times, concubines served to bear children, assist in household services or satisfy sexual pleasure. However, they did not possess the rights or the relationship of a legal wife.

In Judges 19, the concubine accurately depicts Israel’s attitude toward God. Similarly, this symbol applies to many believers today who are not living in the fullness of their legal “rights” in Christ. Like the Israelites, they may have entered in initially to salvation’s “promised land,” but they failed to “extend the borders” as far as God intended them to go (see Josh. 1:3-4). As a result, they are not experiencing the fullness of relationship with God.

****Unfaithfulness.** The Hebrew word for “unfaithful” is *zanah*, which means either adultery or idolatry. When the concubine chose to return to her father’s house (representing her former way of life), she removed herself from her husband’s covering.

Many in the church today are making that same choice.

****Resistance to repentance.** The concubine was gone for four months before the Levite went after her. He even tarried five days in her father's house. Still, the concubine and her father resisted him.

As a result, the woman ended up in Gibeah with disastrous results. For some, to suggest that Christ (represented by the Levite) would turn His bride over to marauders is heresy, and certainly our application must proceed with caution.

However, our Westernized view of "full coverage" grace tends to pervert our understanding of God's judgment. The Bible clearly states that God uses both mercy and judgment to refine the bride of Christ. We can understand this only when we realize how passionate He is to prepare a wholehearted lover for His Son.

Simply stated, God will not tolerate unfaithful concubines forever. He wants a wife, and He will employ extreme measures, if necessary, to get her attention and pluck her from the morass of divided loyalties and substandard living embedding her in the world.

What a shame that it took a gruesome act to arouse the indignation of the Israelites and reunite them! Only in crisis were they willing to confront their nation's moral and religious decline, their destructive tribal preferences and their loss of corporate identity (see Judg. 20-21).

The warnings of Judges apply to us today. What will it take for us to respond?

WHOLEHEARTED COMMITMENT We can take heart that after the book of Judges comes the book of Ruth, which begins: "In the days when the judges ruled." This phrase establishes firmly that even in the midst of national ambivalence, God continued

working.

Through the characters of Ruth and Naomi, God defines the bridal heart He is seeking. Moreover, He provides distinct initiatives for obtaining that path—the path of restoration, romance and revival for the body of Christ.

During the time of Judges, people sought deliverance through charismatic, and largely human, leadership. For a while, they would remember the Lord and their unique relationship to Him.

However, as evidenced by their repeated decline into idolatry, the people never fully embraced this covenant for themselves. Despite the judges' leadership, the people never really changed.

When we face division or compromise—whether at home, work or church—we must recognize that new leadership is not the answer. In such situations, it is tempting to think: Things would be different if we had a better my husband were a better spiritual leader of our our nation had more godly leaders.

As is often the case, the real problem in God's eyes lies with us. Until individuals, families, churches and the nation wholeheartedly commit to following the Lord, lasting change will not occur. The bottom line is: Divided hearts yield divided results.

Before his death, Joshua challenged the people of Israel, saying: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15).

God is looking for a covenant people who will embrace Him wholeheartedly, who will say with abandonment as Ruth did: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

In her devastation, Ruth determined to follow God, not knowing if or how her life would ever improve. Her situation was

grave, but unlike Naomi, Ruth was full of faith.

Whatever happened, Ruth was determined to go forward with God. As a result, she became the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Christ.

If you're experiencing the effects of a divided heart, draw near to God. You may not be able to change the circumstances surrounding you, but you can commit yourself to: (1) dealing with the idols and distractions of your own heart and (2) dedicating yourself wholly to God.

Like Ruth, you can humble yourself and go to work, when and where you're allowed to affect change. Change comes slowly, over seasons of planting and harvesting.

The important thing is to set our hearts on single-minded service—first to the Lord and then to those He may bring across our paths. With humility and perseverance, we can “conquer the land” and enter into the fullness of our bridal inheritance.

Julie Wilson is the author of Bible studies including *Women at the Well: Restoring the Spiritual Heritage of Christian Women* and *A Woman Fully Clothed: God's Plan to Recover the Church*.