



ROYAL MISTAKES

*Life Lessons from Some Seriously
Messed Up Judean Kings*

BRENT DAVID MILLER

Royal Mistakes

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Messed Up Judean Kings**

By Brent David Miller

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*This book is dedicated to my parents, William
and Mary Louise Miller, who loved me through
all of my mistakes.*

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‘...the people refused to listen to Samuel’s warning. ‘Even so, we still want a king,’ they said. ‘We want to be like the nations around us. Our king will judge us and lead us into battle.’ So Samuel repeated to the Lord what the people had said, and the Lord replied, ‘Do as they say, and give them a king.’ – 1 Samuel 8:19-22(a

Prologue

'Learn from the mistakes of others.

You can't live long enough to make them all yourself.'

Eleanor Roosevelt

Have you ever made a *royal mistake*? I'm not talking about something as insignificant as leaving your cell phone in a restaurant, spilling the milk or forgetting to feed the cat on time. I'm talking about forgetting your wedding anniversary. Missing your kid's school play. Recording a sports event over your wedding video. Pulling up to a stop light, realizing you are a little over the line, putting the car in reverse, backing up, forgetting to put the car back in drive and then, when the light turns green, reversing into the grill of the car behind you. You know, the kind of mistake that winds up being pretty hard to explain away.

History is replete with such mistakes. Gargantuan blunders that send sensational shockwaves reverberating through the corridors of time, or at least make laughing stocks

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out of the people who make them. Like when NASA taped over the original video recording of the Apollo Moon landing (which is only slightly less serious than taping over your wedding video). Or when the Trojans said, ‘Oh, how nice of the Greeks to bring us this giant wooden horse. Let’s bring it inside.’ Or when bodyguard John Frederick Parker, bored by the play, *Our American Cousin*, decided to pop over to the pub next door for a drink, providing John Wilkes Booth unfettered access to both the Presidential box and Abraham Lincoln. There are some mistakes that actually change the course of history.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who made such mistakes. A few years ago, while pursuing my goal of reading through the Bible in one year, I came to the book of 2 Chronicles. 2 Chronicles probably isn’t on too many ‘favorite books of the Bible’ lists, and it hadn’t been on mine. But as I read through it, I became intrigued by a group of Judean Kings who had the extraordinary ability to make a royal mess of things. With few exceptions, these guys were absolute idiots when it came to running their kingdoms. As I read their stories, I found myself enjoying them immensely, not out of *schadenfreude* (the perverse pleasure one derives

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from the misfortune of another), but because you can learn a lot from other people's mistakes. One of the great advantages of learning from other people's mistakes is that you can learn without having to make those same mistakes yourself. And so I discovered that 2 Chronicles was a veritable treasure trove of learning. I soon began preaching a series on the lives of these royal screw-ups, and had a ball doing it (OK, maybe I was experiencing a *little schadenfreude*). In any event, when I was done with the series, I felt I had something to share beyond the church I served, and so it came to pass that I wrote this book.

The main source for the stories of the Kings of Judah in this book is the book of 2 Chronicles, although I have also drawn from 1 and 2 Kings and the books of the prophets. I have not told the stories of all the kings. Some of them are relatively minor, and some simply repeat the mistakes of their forebears. Some readers may be disappointed that I did not dedicate individual chapters to the lives of the first three (and most famous) kings of Judah: Saul, David and Solomon. The reason I chose not to do so is simple: there is so much Biblical material on their lives that each one of them deserves a book of their own. And so I have chosen to begin these reflections

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with Solomon's son, King Rehoboam. Perhaps someday, if the Lord so leads, I will return to the first three kings of Judah and tell their stories in full. But for now, I pray the stories of Rehoboam, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Uzziah, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Josiah and Zedekiah will provide enough fodder for consideration as you attempt to travel through life while avoiding your own royal mistakes.

Oh, and watch the *schadenfreude*. It may be fun, but it really isn't healthy.

Chapter One

Rehoboam's Folly - 2 Chronicles 10-12

'Rehoboam went to Shechem, where all Israel had gathered to make him king. When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard of this, he returned from Egypt, for he had fled to Egypt to escape from King Solomon. The leaders of Israel summoned him, and Jeroboam and all Israel went to speak to Rehoboam. 'Your father was a hard master,' they said. 'Lighten the harsh labor demands and heavy taxes that your father imposed on us. Then we will be your loyal subjects' ...But Rehoboam spoke harshly to them, for he rejected the counsel of his older counselors and followed the counsel of his younger advisors.'

2 Chronicles 10:1-4; 13-14

Rehoboam had a lot going for him when he ascended to the throne of Israel. For starters, his father Solomon had been the wisest man on earth. True enough, Solomon had made some colossal blunders during his reign, but his reputation for wisdom was unparalleled. People came from all over the world to hear the pearls of wisdom that would

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drop from his lips. It is not bad at all to be the son of a wise man. Every son needs advice as he grows into manhood, and Rehoboam obtained it from the king who advised world leaders and wrote the majority of the sayings in the book of Proverbs.¹ Furthermore, his father had bequeathed to him a magnificent kingdom (See 1 Kings 4-8). Solomon had been an administrative genius who had organized an effective government (two words you don't often find in the same sentence). He had surrounded himself with wise counselors. His construction projects were as many as they were varied and included both his royal palace and the Temple in Jerusalem. He had expanded the borders of Israel and brought prosperity to his people. And to top it all off, Solomon had been exceedingly wealthy; so much so that the Bible describes him as the richest king on earth (1 Kings 10:23). Rehoboam was therefore a blessed man who had been given everything necessary to enjoy a long, peaceful and prosperous reign.

But for all that, there were problems. Solomon's military campaigns, coupled with his lavish building projects,

¹ Indeed, many of Solomon's Proverbs were written with his son in mind. See, Proverbs 1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1 and 7:1.

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had taken their toll on the people. They had fought in his army, served in his government, paid high taxes and worked long hours during Solomon's reign, and they were more than ready for someone to lighten the load. And so it came to pass that soon after Rehoboam's coronation, a delegation from the people came to speak to him about their concerns.

Now to be fair, the delegation was led by a man with ulterior motives. His name was Jeroboam. Jeroboam had been an official in the government of Solomon when he was told by the prophet Ahijah that because Solomon had worshipped the gods of his foreign wives, God had decided to give control of the ten northern tribes of Israel to him. Ahijah told Jeroboam that this would happen in the future, during the reign of Solomon's son (Rehoboam). Solomon apparently got wind of all this and tried to have Jeroboam killed, but Jeroboam managed to escape to Egypt (you can read all about this in 1 Kings 11:26-40). But after Solomon died, and Rehoboam became king, Jeroboam sensed his moment. Seizing upon the people's discontent and longing for some downtime, he positioned himself to be their spokesman, and led a delegation that sought an audience with Rehoboam. It is likely that all the people desired was a break,

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but Jeroboam, crafty politician and manipulator of people that he was, saw that desire as an opportunity to bring about the fulfillment of Ahijah's prophecy.²

In any event, Jeroboam and the others asked Rehoboam for a break. 'Look,' they said, 'your father really worked us hard and taxed us harder. We need you to lighten things up a bit. If you do, we promise to be your loyal subjects. It's not that we don't like or support you. We do, but doggone it, we're just plain tired.' There it was. Rehoboam faced his first test of leadership. How would he respond to the people's request for a break? Well, initially, he made a couple of wise moves. Unfortunately, he followed them up with a galactically foolish one.

The Wise Moves

First, the wise moves. *The first thing Rehoboam did was ask for time to consider the request.* 'Come back in three days for my answer,' he said (2 Chronicles 10:5).

² While God had already decided to give the ten northern tribes of Israel to Jeroboam, that does not in any way vitiates Rehoboam's responsibility for his mistakes. The sovereignty of God and human action work together in mysterious ways, and it would be through Rehoboam's royal mistakes that Ahijah's prophecy would come true.

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Apparently, some of his father's wisdom had managed to penetrate his skull. Proverbs 13:16 says, 'wise people think before they act.' It's always smart to consider your words before speaking. It's usually when our lips run ahead of our minds that we get in trouble. Rehoboam was off to a good start.

Wise move number two: *Rehoboam sought the advice of many counselors*. This too was a move that would have made his father proud. Proverbs 15:22 reads, 'plans go wrong for lack of advice; many counselors bring success.' And so, Rehoboam sought the advice of two very different groups of counselors.

First, Rehoboam turned to the old dogs: the men who had been his father's advisors (2 Chronicles 10:6-7). Think about these guys. They had been around the block. They had served under the wisest king who ever lived. They had seen both success and failure, including that of Solomon himself. Moreover, they knew how hard the people had worked for Solomon. Indeed, they had surely worked hard themselves, and were therefore in the perfect position to understand how the people felt. They were, in a word, *experienced*. Their advice? 2 Chronicles 10:7 records it: 'if you are good to these

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people and do your best to please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your loyal subjects.’ In other words, be good to them and they will be good to you. Such was the advice of the experienced counselors of Israel.

But then Rehoboam turned to his friends, ‘the young men who had grown up with him’ (2 Chronicles 10:8). Although these guys are described as young, they weren’t exactly kids. Rehoboam was 41 when he became king (2 Chronicles 12:13), so the guys we are talking about were grown men. It’s not like they had been born yesterday. Nonetheless, they were not exactly the old dogs who had been around the block a time or two either. When it came to the affairs of state, Rehoboam’s friends were, in a word, *inexperienced*.

Now, before you get too hard on Rehoboam, let me point out that it wasn’t a mistake to seek the advice of a younger generation of Israelites. Again, ‘many counselors bring success,’ and it is always a good idea to seek out fresh perspectives. One of the dangers of being part of ‘the old guard’ is that you can become so used to doing things the way you always have that you begin to mistake the edge of the rut you live in for the horizon. Moreover, we could point to any

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number of seasoned kingly advisors in both the Bible and the rest of history who gave bad advice. On the one hand, with age comes wisdom, but on the other, there is no fool like an old fool. So it was entirely reasonable, even wise, for Rehoboam to have sought out differing perspectives, including the fresh ideas of younger friends. One of the last things a leader needs to do is to surround himself with like-minded advisors who all say the same thing. Groupthink has been the downfall of many a leader in the history of the world.

But when the young men gave their advice, their inexperience showed. This is what they said:

‘This is what you should tell those complainers who want a lighter burden: ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist! Yes, my father laid heavy burdens on you, but I’m going to make them even heavier! My father beat you with whips, but I will beat you with scorpions.’ (2 Chronicles 10:10-11).

In other words, Rehoboam was urged to say, ‘if you thought my Dad was tough, wait till you get a load of me!’ The tone of the advice alone, let alone its content, was enough to make Machiavelli blush.

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Rehoboam's Mistakes

Yet almost incomprehensibly, Rehoboam took the advice of his friends. That this was a mistake is obvious but permit me to break it down for you a bit by examining four facets of Rehoboam's first royal mistake.

First, Rehoboam failed to listen to the experts. His father's counselors were experienced, and as everyone knows, experience counts. Experience produces experts. Not always but most of the time. When you are given the choice between listening to the advice of someone who has successfully managed the challenges you are facing or the advice of some tenderfoot who barely knows what those challenges are, you should almost always go with the former. A Head Coach wouldn't bench the quarterback who led his team all the way to the Super Bowl just because he has a passing thought (pardon the pun) that the rookie who hasn't thrown the ball all season might possibly do a better job. If he did, odds are that he would be looking for a new job in the off-season. Unfortunately, Rehoboam did not understand this simple principle that experience counts.

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Second, Rehoboam failed to realize that a leader needs to take care of those he or she leads. It is an egregious error for a leader to burn out his or her people. There is an ebb and flow to every organizational endeavor, whether we are talking about government, the business world or the church. There are seasons when you and your team may need to go like gangbusters for a while, but a wise leader will always follow up such seasons with periods of rest. Failure to do so produces burnout (for both the leader and the team), and ultimately rebellion in the ranks. The signs of both were right before Rehoboam's eyes, but he either failed to see them or just didn't care. Wise leaders recognize the importance of caring for those they lead. Rehoboam did not.

Third, Rehoboam failed to see that a leader needs to work with his people, not against them. Rehoboam approached leadership with the notion that his people were the enemy. To be fair, he may have known something about Jeroboam's intentions that clouded his judgment. But had he looked past Jeroboam to the people themselves, he would have seen that they were not his enemies. They wanted him to succeed. They just needed a breather. He could have given them one, or at the very least, if the season wasn't right for

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one, he could have explained the situation to them calmly and rationally and offered a respite down the road. Instead, when he announced his decision, he spoke to them harshly (10:12). He threatened them like a belligerent bully and dismissed their concerns entirely, leaving them bereft of hope. Talk about a royal mistake. Sometimes leaders may have to take people in directions they don't want to go, but the way to do so is with dialogue and kindness, not power plays. Sadly, Rehoboam was a power politician, one who saw anyone who even so much as dared to ask questions as his enemies.

And finally, the fourth facet of Rehoboam's first royal mistake was this: *he failed to ask God what to do*. Read through 2 Chronicles 10 or the parallel account in 1 Kings 12 and you will find that there is no indication in either that Rehoboam ever prayed or sought God's guidance. He failed to include God as one of his 'many counselors.' If only he had remembered his father's words, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take' (Proverbs 3:5-6). Rehoboam failed to turn to God, and whenever you face a decision and fail to do that, you are headed for disaster.

The Aftermath

Which is precisely what Rehoboam got. He informed the people of his decision, and their reaction was all too predictable. Burnout turned to rebellion. In one fell swoop, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel pulled out of the kingdom. Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to Rehoboam. Five-sixths of his kingdom was gone (2 Chronicles 10:16-19). Israel would henceforth be two nations, the northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Civil war between Israel and Judah would be the order of the day for Rehoboam's lifetime and beyond. He would be forever remembered as the king whose royal mistake divided the Nation of Israel.

And so it was that Rehoboam was left to pick up the pieces and march on as best he could. 2 Chronicles 11 and 12 tell us what the rest of his reign was like. He did manage to get some things right. After making plans to attack the ten northern tribes of Israel in the wake of their secession, he heeded the advice of God's prophet Shemaiah to not fight against his relatives and backed off. Instead, he adopted a more defensive posture and fortified the cities still under his control. He paid careful attention to his family, providing for

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all of his sons, so as to avoid inter-sibling rivalries. Thus, for a while at least, Rehoboam ruled Judah with both wisdom and respect for God.

But it only lasted for a time. 2 Chronicles 12:1 tells us, ‘when Rehoboam was firmly established and strong, he abandoned the Law of the Lord, and all Israel followed him in this sin.’ How did this abandonment of God’s Law happen? It started when the people of Judah built pagan shrines to false gods complete with prostitutes to service the worshippers (1 Kings 14:23-24). Whether Rehoboam personally participated in such pagan practices is unclear, but at the very least he did nothing to discourage them. He allowed the shrines to be built and the practices to continue. Rehoboam forgot two things: that Israel had been commanded to worship the Lord God alone (Deuteronomy 5:7) and that he, as king, was the role model for his nation. When the people of Judah saw Rehoboam participating in these pagan practices, or at least turning a blind eye to those who were, they figured it was acceptable for them to engage in them too, and soon enough, the whole nation descended into idolatry.

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As a result, God allowed Egypt to plunder Rehoboam's Kingdom. Egypt's King Shishak came against Judah with 1,200 chariots, 60,000 horses and countless foot soldiers. He conquered all the cities that Rehoboam had fortified and marched on Jerusalem. It was at this point that the prophet Shemaiah once again spoke to Rehoboam and his advisors, explained the reason why this was happening, and they, Rehoboam included, humbled themselves before God. God, being rich in mercy, allowed Jerusalem to stand, but not before Shishak plundered the Holy City. The Bible recounts all of this in 2 Chronicles 12 and 1 Kings 14 and includes one particularly poignant detail. Among the treasures Shishak took from Jerusalem were the gold shields that Rehoboam's father Solomon had made and hung in the royal palace (2 Chronicles 12:9). King Rehoboam, we are told, later replaced them with bronze substitutes (12:10). Just think: for the rest of his days as King of Judah, Rehoboam walked the halls of a royal palace whose very decorations were a constant reminder that his father had bequeathed to him a glorious, golden kingdom that had been his to lose, and he had lost it.

The Heart of the Matter

For seventeen years after the plunder of Jerusalem, Rehoboam held on to power this way. His life was a tragedy worthy of Shakespeare. He could have been so much more than he was, had it not been for his mistakes. How could he have been so foolish, first when the people came to him asking for a break, and later when he allowed idols in the land? How could the son of the wisest man who ever lived have made such royal mistakes? Well, the answer to that is simple. You need look no further than the epitaph we find for Rehoboam at the conclusion of his story. 2 Chronicles 12:14 says of Rehoboam: ‘he was an evil king, for he did not seek the Lord with his whole heart.’ There you have it: the royal mistake that lay at the heart of all the others. Rehoboam’s problem from start to finish. Had he *wholeheartedly* sought God, had he trusted in the Lord with *all* his heart, he never would have listened to his friends. He never would have countenanced idolatry in his kingdom. And he might be remembered as a great king.

It is nearly 3000 years too late for Rehoboam, but fortunately, we can learn from his mistakes. And so I pose the question: are you seeking the Lord with all your heart?

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Where do you go for advice when you face a challenging problem, are called upon to make an important decision or find yourself in a place where you have to take a stand? Do you turn to the time-tested and proven wisdom of the scriptures, God's principles, or do you listen to other 'friends,' to other voices, to the transitory and arbitrary moods and ideas of the times? What is it that you keep at the center of your life? Is God there? Or has he been displaced by an idol, by which the Bible means anything that takes first place in your life other than God? Jesus once said that we must seek first the Kingdom of God; that life only works as it should when we do (See, Matthew 6:33). Rehoboam's life is proof of what can happen when we do not. Learn from Rehoboam's folly. Seek the Lord with your whole heart. For anything less is a royal mistake.

Chapter Two

Forgetting God – 2 Chronicles 14-16

‘But watch out! Be careful never to forget what you yourself have seen. Do not let these memories escape your mind as long as you live! And be sure to pass them on to your children and grandchildren.’

Deuteronomy 4:9

Rehoboam inherited a magnificent kingdom from his father Solomon but bequeathed a fractured one to his son Abijah. Abijah inherited a nation plagued by civil war and idolatry (2 Chronicles 13; 1 Kings 15:1-8). His reign was short, lasting only three years, at the end of which the best that could be said of him was this: ‘he committed the same sins as his father before him, and he was not faithful to the Lord his God’ (1 Kings 15:3). Not much more to say then about Abijah that we haven’t already said about his father. We will therefore pass the reign of Abijah over and advance to the reign of his son, Asa. When Asa came to power, he inherited the same mess his father had: a fractured kingdom, a civil war and a land plagued by idolatry. The people of Judah were not right with God and there didn’t seem to be

much hope that Asa would get them back on the straight and narrow. Not only had Asa inherited a mess, but his role models, his Dad and Granddad, had hardly provided him with a godly example.

The Shining Star

Which is why it was so surprising when Asa proved to be a shining star. The opening verses of 2 Chronicles 14 tell us three amazing things about this young king: he did ‘what was good and pleasing in the sight of the Lord’ (verse 2); he tore down the idols and pagan altars that had been erected throughout the land (verses 3-5); and he commanded the people of Judah to seek the God of their ancestors and to obey his commands (verse 4). 1 Kings 5:12 adds that he banished the shrine prostitutes from Judah. Given his immediate ancestry (even his Great-Grandfather Solomon hadn’t done half so well) it is shocking to find Asa beginning so promisingly. His unexpected zeal for the Lord begs the question: ‘what motivated him to do all this?’ We cannot know for sure, but there is perhaps a hint given in verse 4, where we are told that Asa commanded the people of Judah to seek *the God of their ancestors*. My theory is that Asa looked around at the royal mess he had inherited and said to

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himself, ‘This can’t be right. Something has gone horribly wrong.’ This prompted him to wonder if there had been a time in the past when things had been better. And so he began to research the history of his people and their interactions with the God of his ancestors. He read his Great-great-grandpa David’s Psalms. He read the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He read about Moses, Joshua and the time of the Judges. As he read, he noticed a pattern: whenever God’s people walked with him, when they kept the law and obeyed his commandments, they tended to fare well. But whenever they failed to do those things, they tended to fare poorly. Asa didn’t need a Masters of Divinity to figure out which side of that equation he wanted to be on, and so he rightly concluded that things needed to change; that both he and his people needed to return to God.

Asa therefore issued a call to national repentance. He essentially told his people, ‘Hey guys, we have forgotten God! We have been looking for all sorts of solutions to our problems, but things are never going to be right again until we return to the Lord.’ Now I have to tell you: that’s a leader! The world needs leaders like that, leaders who dare to stand up and proclaim the hard truth that what is wrong in their

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country, or in their churches, or what have you, can't be fixed apart from a return to God. Sadly we don't see this kind of leadership much anymore, and more's the pity. Asa was the kind of leader who was willing to stand up and say what needed to be said, and the result of his call to national repentance was that God granted Judah and her people ten years of peace. Ten years to rest from their enemies. Ten years to draw closer to God. Ten years to get things back to the way they were supposed to be.

Trouble

Of course, getting right with God doesn't mean that life will forever be a rose garden, and so eventually, trouble came. An Ethiopian general led an army of one million men against Judah, a force that outnumbered Asa's troops by almost two to one. Most would have seen this as an impossible situation. But Asa knew the God of his ancestors. He knew what happened at the Red Sea (Exodus 14). He knew about Gideon's 300 who defeated the Midianites (Judges 7). He knew about the day when God made the sun stand still and enabled Joshua's armies to rout the armies of five Amorite Kings (Joshua 10). He knew that time and again in the past God had rescued his people from impossible

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situations. So rather than panic, Asa deployed his armies as best he could while doing the most important thing a leader can do. *He prayed:*

‘O Lord, no one but you can help the powerless against the mighty! Help us, O Lord our God, for we trust in you alone. It is in your name that we have come against this vast horde. O Lord, you are our God; do not let mere men prevail against you.’ (14:11).

God responded to Asa’s prayer. He came to Judah’s aid and enabled them to defeat the Ethiopians. With God at their side, Asa and his army kicked butt, took names and carried away all the Ethiopians stuff (14:12-13). It was an incredible victory, the kind reminds us to trust God, even in the midst of what seem to be hopeless situations. Asa did.

Enter the Prophet

Great story huh? But wait, it gets better. On the heels of his victory over Ethiopia he was visited by a prophet named Azariah, who told Asa four things. You can read the details in 2 Chronicles 15:1-7, but essentially, this is what Azariah said: first, stick with God and he will stick with you;

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second, abandon God and he will abandon you; third, remember your history – not just your history, but Israel’s as well, which teaches that when you walk with God, things tend to go well, but when you don’t, they don’t; and fourth, be strong and courageous. In other words, Azariah told Asa to stay the course. Keep the faith. Remember the faithfulness of God. No matter how hard things get, trust God in all you do, and everything will come out alright in the end.

Asa, upon hearing Azariah’s message, stepped up his game. He didn’t just rest on his laurels. He took things up a notch. In fact, after hearing these four pieces of advice from Azariah, he did four things of his own.

First, he went on another idol bashing tour of his kingdom. Apparently, even after his first go round, some had either survived or been subsequently erected by backsliders. Asa tore them all down.

Second, he rebuilt the altar of the Lord in the Temple. In other words, he saw to it that God was properly worshipped.

Third, he gathered all the people in his kingdom for a covenant renewal ceremony. It was so extensive and

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impressive that even some folks from the Northern Kingdom of Israel showed up. They could see that God was with Asa and wanted what he had. They were attracted by the way he passionately lived for God (by the way, that's usually what happens when you live passionately for God – people are drawn to you and yearn to discover what makes you tick). Together, the people sought God with 'all their heart and soul' (15:12) and celebrated as they made their promises to him.

And finally, to top it all off, Asa took on his Grandma. Asa had a grandmother, Macah, who wasn't exactly down with all he was doing. She kind of liked the idea of worshipping other gods and had gone so far as to erect an Asherah pole (an idol to the Canaanite goddess Asherah) on her property. Asa tore it down. Let me tell you, when a guy takes on his own grandmother you know he is serious. You don't normally mess with Grandma! But Asa did, for he knew that if he wanted right standing with the Lord, he could play no favorites. Not even Grandma could get a pass. All of this Asa did in the wake of Azariah's advice, and he was rewarded by God with 25 more years of peace throughout his domain.

Asa's Mistake

I know that by now some of you are thinking: ‘I thought this book was about kings who made royal mistakes? Here we are on chapter two, and all we are hearing about is how great Asa was. Why does this guy belong in a book about seriously messed up Judean kings?’ I’m coming to it.

In the sixteenth chapter of 2 Chronicles, we learn that in the thirty-sixth year of Asa’s reign, trouble came to Judah once again. King Basha of the Northern Kingdom of Israel invaded. Now remember, twenty-five years earlier, when Judah had been invaded by Ethiopia, Asa responded by crying out to God. He prayed and asked God for help. He told God that he trusted in him alone. And with God’s help, he won. But this time, he didn’t do any of that. Instead, he sent emissaries to King Ben-hadad of Syria and offered him treasures from the Temple of the Lord if he would help him attack the Northern Kingdom. Ben-hadad took one look at the silver and gold Asa offered and accepted. He attacked the towns of the Northern Kingdom, and King Basha backed down.

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Now you might think: ‘what was wrong with that? I mean, it was a pretty good plan. It worked. Judah was safe again. No harm no foul, right?’ But my friends, the ends never justify the means. Twenty-five years earlier Asa trusted God alone. But now here he was, trusting, not God, but the chariots of a foreign army. Trusting, really, in his own ingenuity, in his own ability to come up with a solution to his problem. You see, during those twenty-five years, something happened to Asa. He had done what Azariah warned him not to do. *He had forgotten God.* He had become self-reliant.

We probably shouldn’t get too hard on Asa. The truth is we all tend to do the same thing. When times first get tough, we may go looking for God to help us (there are no atheists in foxholes) but give us a prolonged period of peace and tranquility and we will tend to forget all about him. It’s the classic problem of redemptive lift. People in trouble come racing to God for help, find him, and walk with him for a while. But after God straightens them out, after their lives come together as a direct result of what God has done for them, they forget all about him. It happens in churches all the time. John and Susie suffer a loss in their life. They run to church, listen to the songs, cry some tears, get involved in

a Bible study, and maybe even find a place of service. But then, after time passes, and life gets back on a more or less even keel, they start coming less regularly, study their Bibles less frequently, and serve less willingly. Until finally, others in church start asking, ‘Gee, what ever happened to John and Susie? I haven’t seen them for a while.’ Something like this seems to be what happened to Asa. He had begun well, but after an extended period of God-given peace and prosperity, he forgot all about the one who had made it possible. Even worse, when trouble came into his life a second time, he couldn’t even remember the one he had turned to in the first instance.

Enter the Second Prophet

Having fallen into such a state of mind, things really got bad for Asa. A prophet of God showed up (funny how often it happens that when we mess up, God sends someone to speak truth into our lives). His name was Hanani, and he, like Azariah, told Asa four things (16:7-9). First, Asa, you blew it. You just got in bed with a foreign enemy who is going to be a thorn in your side for years to come. Second, you forgot your history. You forgot that when the Ethiopians came you relied on God, and God delivered you. Azariah

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told you not to forget that. You did. Third, Hanani said, ‘the eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him’ (16:9). In other words, if you had only trusted God, he would have seen you and helped you. And fourth, the punchline: Asa you are a fool! God had given you peace. But now you will know nothing but war.

How did Asa respond to this much deserved comeuppance? Sadly, he didn’t repent. Instead, he proved himself to be an even greater fool than Hanani accused him of being. Proverbs 12:1 says, ‘to learn you must love discipline; it is stupid to hate correction.’ Well, in his response to Hanani’s uncomfortable but needed correction, Asa proved himself to be not only forgetful, but stupid. Asa not only refused to accept the message, he attacked the messenger. He threw Hanani in prison and tossed him in the stocks, and as if that weren’t bad enough, Asa lashed out and began to oppress his own people. People do that you know. They mess up, and rather than take it on the chin and own up to their mistakes, they take their problems out on others.

Things just continued to go downhill from there. The final section of 2 Chronicles 16 tells us that in his later years,

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Asa became ill. But even then, he sought only medical assistance, not God's. And so it was that Asa died as a once mighty prayer warrior who couldn't even remember to pray when he was sick.

Poor Asa. It was bad enough to forget God in the first place, but to fail to remember him in the face of such good advice, and that from a prophet of God to boot, well, that really was a royal mistake. If only Asa hadn't been so forgetful. If only he hadn't forgotten the advice of Azariah. If only he hadn't forgotten what he had learned in the early days about walking with the God of his ancestors. If only he hadn't forgotten God.

Lincoln Brings it Home

Abraham Lincoln once said something that, for me, pretty much nails the essence of Asa's mistake. On April 30, 1863, on the heels of the terrible defeat of the Union Army at the Battle of Bull Run, Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for a day of 'national humiliation, fasting and prayer.' His words serve well as both a powerful critique of Asa's reign, and a prophetic warning to us living today:

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‘We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown, in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated by unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God who made us.’¹

Like I said, pretty much nails Asa, doesn't it? But the scary part is that it probably nails us too. At least some of the time. Don't ever make the mistake of forgetting God. You need him always, even when things are going well. Remember Azariah's advice: if you walk with him, he will walk with you, but if you abandon him, you will be on your

¹ *Proclamation Appointing a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer*, Abraham Lincoln, March 30, 1863.

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own. Don't be like Asa. Don't forget God. Because if you do, you might, like him, reach the place where you forget him for good. And that would truly be for you, as it was for him, a royal mistake.

Chapter Three

The Company You Keep

2 Chronicles 17-21

‘Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble.’

Proverbs 13:20

After Asa died, his son Jehoshaphat became king of Judah. His story begins in the 17th chapter of 2 Chronicles, where we learn a number of amazing things about him. Aside from his status as a champion high jumper (hence the name Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat – feel free to groan), we are told that like his father before him, *he began well*. He followed the example of his father’s early years and did what was good in God’s sight. He tore down idols, obeyed God’s commands and was otherwise committed to life on God’s terms. Indeed, Jehoshaphat came out of the box as *a man on a mission*. Desiring his people to pursue God, he sent teachers to the towns and villages of Judah to instruct people in the Law of God. Jehoshaphat took seriously his shepherding responsibilities toward his people and helped them know the

joy of walking with God. *He also understood the precariousness of his situation:* that he was surrounded by enemy kings who would have loved nothing more than to have taken him out, and so he spent considerable time strengthening his position, fortifying Judah's cities and raising an army to defend them. His combination of faithfulness and pragmatism enabled him to enjoy a time best described by a phrase from the third verse of this introductory chapter on his life: *'the Lord was with Jehoshaphat'* (17:3). You can't really ask for more than that, can you? God was with him, and he did well. You might say he had 'jumped' off to a good start (feel free to groan again if you want).

A Good King

To give credit where credit is due, it is only fair to say that, for the most part, Jehoshaphat continued to do well throughout his 35 year reign. For example, in 2 Chronicles 19, we learn that he not only sent others out as missionaries to the people, but engaged in missionary work himself, traveling throughout Judah and teaching people to return to God. He appointed judges throughout the land and held them to high standards of honesty and fair-dealing. On one occasion, Jehoshaphat had what can only be described as a

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golden moment. 2 Chronicles 20 describes how three armies, the Moabites, the Ammonites and the Menuites (these latter folks enjoyed ordering take out) marched on Judah. Outnumbered and outgunned, Jehoshaphat did the only wise thing to do in such a predicament: he turned to God. He sought the Lord's guidance, called upon his people to fast, and prayed. Boy oh boy, did Jehoshaphat pray. Standing before the men, women and children of Judah, he cried out to God, saying:

‘O Lord, God of our ancestors, you alone are the God who is in heaven. You are ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth. You are powerful and mighty; no one can stand against you! O our God, did you not drive out those who lived in this land when your people Israel arrived? And did you not give this land forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? Your people settled here and built this Temple to honor your name. They said, ‘Whenever we are faced with any calamity such as war, plague or famine, we can come and stand in your presence before this Temple where your name is honored. We can cry out to you to save us, and you will hear us and rescue us. And

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now, see what the armies of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir are doing. You would not let our ancestors invade those nations when Israel left Egypt, so they went around them and did not destroy them. Now see how they reward us! For they have come to throw us out of your land, which you gave us as an inheritance. O our God, won't you stop them? We are powerless against this mighty army that is about to attack us. We do not know what to do, but we are looking to you for help (2 Chronicles 20:5-12).'

Man, that's the kind of prayer we should pull out from time to time and use, don't you think? A prayer that recalls all God has done, his promises and his power. A prayer that acknowledges our total dependence upon the Lord for help. Jehoshaphat prayed such a prayer, and the results were awesome. The Spirit moved and the people were inspired. They turned to God and marched out to meet their enemies with royal singers at the front of their ranks, singing, 'Give thanks to the Lord; his faithful love endures forever!' (19:21). Long story short, the three enemy armies became so confused at the sound of singing they began attacking each other. In fact, they wiped each other out. It turned out that all

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Jehoshaphat needed to raise against his enemies were voices in prayer and song. The army's swords remained in their sheaths. We can forever thank good old King Jehoshaphat for providing us with one of many Biblical examples of how, when we find ourselves up against impossible odds, the best thing to do is to be still, and know that God is God (See, Psalm 46:10). This is how Jehoshaphat ruled, for the most part, during his 35 years as king. It is no wonder that at the end of his days, his epitaph would read: '*Jehoshaphat was a good king...He did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight*' (2 Chronicles 20:32).

Jehoshaphat's Mistake

But for all that, he had a problem. Just one, but one was enough to bring about disaster. Whenever I think of Jehoshaphat, I think of the words of Shakespeare in *Hamlet*:

'...these men,
Carrying I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,
Their virtues else (Be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo)
Shall in the general censure take corruption

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From that particular fault.’ (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene IV).

Jehoshaphat had the ‘stamp of one defect,’ and it was this: *he was not as circumspect as he should have been about the company he kept.* This defect manifested itself early in his reign at a time when things were going very well:

‘Jehoshaphat enjoyed great riches and high esteem, and he made an alliance with Ahab of Israel by having his son marry Ahab’s daughter. A few years later he went to Samaria to visit Ahab, who prepared a great banquet for him and his officials. They butchered great numbers of sheep, goats and cattle for the feast. Then Ahab enticed Jehoshaphat to join forces with him to recover Ramoth-gilead. ‘Will you go with me to Ramoth-gilead?’ King Ahab of Israel asked King Jehoshaphat of Judah. Jehoshaphat replied, ‘Why, of course! You and I are as one, and my troops are your troops. We will certainly join you in battle’ (2 Chronicles 18:1-3).

In other words, at a time when Jehoshaphat enjoyed wealth and adulation, he fell in with King Ahab of Israel.

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Remember, these stories of the kings of Judah all take place during the period of the Divided Kingdom. To the north was the Kingdom of Israel and to the south the Kingdom of Judah. Ahab was, during the reign of Jehoshaphat, the king of Israel, and you would have been hard pressed to have found anyone as evil as he at the time. You can read all about Ahab, his wife Jezebel, and the manner in which they terrorized God's prophets (including Elijah) in 1 Kings 16-22. For present purposes, suffice it to say that he was an idolatrous, murderous and thoroughly despicable excuse for a man. The Bible tells us that 'no one else so completely sold himself to what was evil in the Lord's sight as Ahab did' (1 Kings 21:25). He was the kind of man that Jehoshaphat would have done well to avoid. Unfortunately, he did not.

Now, on the one hand, given Jehoshaphat's many virtues, including his missionary zeal, I would like to think that his moves toward Ahab were at least noble in their intention. Perhaps he desired to make peace between the nations or win Ahab back to God. But even assuming that is how things started, Jehoshaphat wound up going too far in pursuing Ahab's friendship. It is one thing to seek peace and try to win someone over. It is one thing to give someone a

second chance. It is quite another to stand idly by as they continue to engage in despicable acts, to ignore those acts while making pleasing that person the primary goal of your life. Tragically, that is precisely what Jehoshaphat did.

Three Steps to Ruin

There were, I believe, three movements in Jehoshaphat's mistake, three stages through which he passed as he descended from a walk with God to a walk through the sewer. *First, he arranged for his son (Jehoram) to marry Ahab's daughter* (2 Chronicles 18:1). Apparently, he was so eager to get along with Ahab that he was willing to submerge his son into the life of a family thoroughly opposed to God.

Second, he compromised his principles in order to get along. Jehoshaphat partied with Ahab (18:2). Given what we know of Ahab and Jezebel from 1 Kings, we can well imagine what Ahab's parties were like. We're talking PAGANFEST 9th Century BC. You would think that a godly man like Jehoshaphat may have wondered if he had made a mistake as he sat and watched the debauchery taking place around him, but he apparently found a way to justify his actions as he traveled with Ahab across the slippery moral

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terrain in which he found himself. You can just imagine him saying, ‘Oh, this isn’t *too* bad. Sure, it’s pagan and all, but I must be tolerant of other’s lifestyles. Who am I to judge? One needs to be open minded about this sort of thing!’ You get the picture. People do it all the time. Jehoshaphat, in his desperation to get along, simply looked the other way as things took place around him that would have made a Roman Emperor blush.

Third, he entered into an intimate alliance with Ahab (18:2-3). We are told that Ahab ‘enticed’ Jehoshaphat to join forces with him in attacking Ramoth-gilead (Syria). The thing about associating with bad company is that they usually have an angle and know how to work it. Ahab got Jehoshaphat loaded up with meat and wine and then went for it. ‘What do you think Jehoshaphat? Will you help me attack Ramoth-gilead?’ Jehoshaphat was so wowed and weakened that he was only too happy to comply. ‘Why of course Ahab! You and I are one my brother! My troops are yours to command!’ Jehoshaphat was so eager to please, so desperate to get along with Ahab, that he abandoned all wisdom and good sense, and handed his army over to the control of a megalomaniacal king.

A Messenger from God

But even as Jehoshaphat entered into this intimate alliance, the remnants of common sense percolated to the forefront of his mind. For suddenly Jehoshaphat added a caveat: ‘But first let’s find out what the Lord says’ (18:5). Whew! Jehoshaphat remembered himself just in the nick of time! Well, not exactly. Sadly, this wise afterthought turned out to be nothing more than a last gasp of his dying common sense and faithfulness. For while there was obviously a part of him crying out for clear thinking and fidelity to the Lord, what happened next only serves to prove just how lost he had become. Ahab quickly agreed and called in a bunch of his prophets. Trouble was, they were not prophets of God; they were prophets of Baal. Moreover, they were ‘yes men’ who always told Ahab precisely what he wanted to hear (they knew, on the one hand, where their bread was buttered; and on the other, what happened to people who crossed Ahab). Which is exactly what they did on this occasion. They told Ahab, ‘yes, by all means. God will give you the victory!’

Jehoshaphat listened but bothered that Ahab’s prophets were prophets of Baal (his faithfulness wasn’t quite dead yet), asked if there was a prophet of God around. Ahab

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sighed and said, ‘yeah, we got one of those. But I don’t like him. He never tells me what I want to hear!’ Nonetheless, Jehoshaphat, who still had something resembling a spine, insisted, and Ahab brought in a prophet named Micaiah.

Micaiah was a straight shooter if ever there was one. One wonders how he managed to survive Ahab’s reign as long as he did. You can read about his brave stand in the balance of chapter 18, but here’s the gist of it. Micaiah told it straight: ‘Ahab, I don’t care what you do to me. I will only say what God wants me to say, and what he wants me to say is that this idea of yours is a terrible one. If you attack Syria, you won’t live to tell about it. Don’t listen to your ‘yes men.’ They are all lying. They don’t know the truth, and even if they did, they wouldn’t tell you because they are afraid of you.’ For this, Micaiah was slapped across the face by one of Ahab’s prophets, after which Ahab tossed him into prison.

Jehoshaphat sat there, taking it all in. He heard the truth. He saw the slap. He saw Micaiah hauled off to prison. Had he thought about it, he might have realized that what he had just witnessed had been a divinely orchestrated warning. God had told him, not only that the idea of attacking Syria was bad, but that the whole idea of trying to get along with

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Ahab was bad. God had shown him what Ahab did to righteous men who refused to compromise their values for the sake of getting along. The message was loud and clear: ‘Jehoshaphat – wake up! Don’t form an alliance with Ahab. Do the right thing. Get out of Dodge as quick as you can!’

But alas, Jehoshaphat didn’t get it. Instead, he rejected Micaiah’s warning. He turned his back on God. He went to war with Ahab. And thus was revealed the fatal flaw of Jehoshaphat’s heart, the very thing that led him to be less than circumspect with regard to the company he kept. In the opening verse of chapter 18, we read that Jehoshaphat visited Ahab at a time when he enjoyed wealth and high esteem. Turns out that wasn’t just a description of his status. It was a description of his heart. Jehoshaphat *enjoyed* wealth and being held in high esteem by his peers. More than he enjoyed being faithful to God. More than he enjoyed being held in high esteem by God. He wanted other people to like him. He wanted to get along and was willing to betray his conscience and his God to do so. In the end, for Jehoshaphat, being allies with Ahab was more important than being allies with God.

Consequences

There were, of course, consequences to all this. *First, the war did not go well.* It went just as Micaiah said it would. Ahab died. Jehoshaphat escaped, but with his tail between his legs. The battle itself was lost (See, 2 Chronicles 18:18-19:1). But far worse was the second consequence of Jehoshaphat's mistake: *he had set a bad example for his people.* The man who taught them the Law of God, the missionary who had demonstrated to them what was most important, their mentor in the faith, had now shown them it was fine and dandy to compromise their principles for the sake of getting along with others, even those who do evil. It is no wonder then that, as we learn a bit later in Jehoshaphat's story, his people never did fully commit to God during his reign (20:33). Of course not. Their teacher didn't either.

Third, Jehoshaphat fell into a pattern of complicity with evil. At the end of his life, Jehoshaphat was still cozying up to the wrong people. In the final verses of his story, we discover that he entered into a second ill-fated alliance with Ahab's son (20:35-37). That's the problem with compromise. You take one step away from your principles, and before you know it, the years go by, and you find yourself

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utterly lost. Once you compromise your principles to get along, you usually do it a second time. In fact, it usually becomes a hard habit to break.

And finally, perhaps worst of all, Jehoshaphat set a terrible example for his son. Remember how Jehoshaphat had arranged for his son to marry Ahab's daughter? Well, how do you think that went? Jehoram had been taught that compromise, even in the most intimate of relationships – even in the marital relationship - was perfectly acceptable. That political expediency was more important than either love or faithfulness to God. So we should not be surprised at all that after his father's death, Jehoram's reign was nothing short of a reign of terror (See, 2 Chronicles 21). He became just like the members of the family he had married into. He killed his brothers and all other potential rivals to his throne. When he died, no one was sorry. He wasn't even buried in the royal cemetery. He was, and is, remembered as a monster, and all because his Dad valued relationship with Ahab over relationship with God. All because his Dad hadn't been more careful about the company he kept.

The Wisdom of Paul

There is a very important, yet often overlooked verse in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that speaks to the mistake of Jehoshaphat: 'Don't team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness?' (2 Corinthians 6:14). The New International Version retains some of the original Greek's vivid imagery when it translates the first part of that verse, '*do not be yoked together with unbelievers.*' It is one of Paul's magnificent word pictures. A yoke is a beam or similar device used to harness animals together as they work to pull a cart or plow a field. The purpose of a yoke is to get animals, such as oxen, to work together as a team. The yoke goes around the head of the oxen and forces them to work in tandem at the same pace, toward the same goal. Of course, this only works if the oxen yoked together are of relatively similar size, strength and determination. If you yoke together a strong ox with a weak one, it is incredibly difficult for the team to work together. The stronger of the oxen will pull ahead while the weaker drags behind. Or, the stronger will lag behind and hold the weaker one back. It just doesn't work well if your oxen

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aren't equally yoked. To have an effective, powerful team of oxen, they need to be of similar size, strength and determination. Otherwise, the work will not be effectively done, and both animals will have a miserable experience.

Paul applies this principle to human relationships. Now, understand, Paul isn't saying that we should never be with people who aren't at the same spiritual level as us. Paul believed that Christians should go into the world, meet new people, build relationships, love those far from God and care for those who are weak in their faith. His entire life testifies to this. You can't win people to Christ if you never leave your cathedral. You can't help anyone if you wait for them to come up to your performance level. But balanced against that is something that is no less true: *you must reserve your most intimate relationships for those who share your values.*

You shouldn't, for example, as Jehoram did, marry someone who doesn't share your faith. I can't begin to tell you how many times I have listened to a man or woman whose spouse didn't share their Christian faith tell me of the heartache and pain they experience on a daily basis. Of the resentment their spouse feels toward them (or vice versa). Of the pain of being unable to share the most important part of

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their life with the one they love. Of the struggle to raise children who love Jesus when their spouse doesn't even like him. Of the agony of wondering whether they will see their spouse in eternity. These relationships rarely end well. Many Christians in such predicaments either give up trying to live the Christian life altogether, or at least compromise their most cherished beliefs for the sake of maintaining peace in the family. Others struggle on for years only to wind up dumped by their non-Christian spouse. No matter what happens, the kids are of course always confused. Any way you slice it, being unequally yoked in marriage doesn't work very well.

Beyond marriage, you should never, as Jehoshaphat did, enter into an intimate alliance with anyone who asks you to disregard your conscience. By all means, love people. Befriend them even. But when it comes to who you invite into the inner sanctum of your life, be careful of the company you keep. Do this for your own sake, and for the sake of those who, like your kids, look to you for moral guidance.

And by the way, this applies to more than just people. In an age where media offers us infinite choices as to what we allow into our homes, our eyes, our ears, our minds, and the minds of our children, it would behoove us to remember

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an old expression: garbage in, garbage out. If you fill your head with the wrong kind of music, stories, images and ideas, don't be surprised if you wind up emulating the trash you have taken in. If you drink out of a sewer pipe, don't be surprised if your breath begins to smell like sewage.

Be careful of the company you keep. Make sure the people and things you immerse your life in are the people and things that lift you up as opposed to pull you down. Make sure they enable you to walk with integrity, not compromise your principles. Make sure they draw you closer to God, not further away. To do otherwise would be (need I say it?) a royal mistake.

Chapter Four

Shallow Roots - 2 Chronicles 22-24

‘Joash was seven years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem forty years. His mother was Zibiah from Beersheba. Joash did what was pleasing in the Lord’s sight throughout the lifetime of Jehoida the priest. Jehoida chose two wives for Joash, and he had sons and daughters...But after Jehoida’s death, the leaders of Judah came and bowed down before King Joash and persuaded them to listen to their advice. They decided to abandon the Temple of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and they worshipped Asherah poles and idols instead! Because of this sin, divine anger fell on Judah and Jerusalem. Yet the Lord sent prophets to bring them back to him. The prophets warned them, but still the people would not listen.’

2 Chronicles 24:1-2; 17-19

Jesus famously told a parable about a farmer who went out to sow some seed. As he scattered it here and there, some fell on the footpath, some on shallow, rocky soil, some

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among the thorns, and some on rich, fertile soil. Things progressed pretty much as you would expect. The seed that fell on the footpath was quickly eaten by the birds. That which fell on the shallow, rocky soil never took root. That which fell on thorny ground managed to take root but was soon choked out of existence. Only the seed that fell on the rich, fertile soil developed deep enough roots to produce a crop. You can read the whole parable, together with Jesus' explanation of it, in Matthew 13:1-9 and 18-23. But for present purposes the important thing to glean from the parable is this: *if a farmer's plantings fail to develop deep roots, they will not produce a crop that lasts.*

Our next story proves that what is true for plants is true for people. If the roots of your relationship with God are not deep, then it is a certainty that when trouble comes, when the seas rise against you, you will not make it. Such is the lesson from the life of King Joash.

A Little Background

In order to understand Joash's story, we need to backtrack a bit. In the last chapter, we examined the life of King Jehoshaphat, who made the royal mistake of forming

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alliances with the wrong people, most specifically, with the thoroughly despicable King Ahab of Israel. In the course of forming that alliance, Ahab arranged for his son, Jehoram, to marry Ahab's daughter, Athaliah. After Jehoshaphat died, Jehoram became king of Judah, and as we noted in the last chapter, his was a reign of terror. Jehoram followed in the ways of Ahab and terrorized his people. Jehoram and Athaliah had a son, Ahaziah, who became king of Judah upon his father's death, and big surprise, he followed in his father's footsteps. Encouraged by his mother Athaliah, he did evil in the sight of God and continued to cozy up to his mother's family in the Northern Kingdom. This was to be his undoing.

On one of Ahaziah's jaunts to Israel, he became ensnared in a civil war. A man named Jehu had been called by God and anointed by the prophet Elisha to execute judgment against the family of Ahab, who had perpetrated so many crimes that something had to be done to stop them. Jehu took on his commission with a vengeance. He killed King Joram (Ahab's son), Jezebel (Ahab's wife) and all the rest of Ahab's family (including 70 of his sons). In the course of this bloody work, he came upon Ahaziah, and killed him too. In fact, for good measure, he killed 42 of Ahaziah's other

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relatives (the full story of Jehu's actions can be read in 2 Kings 9-11).

You can just imagine Athaliah's reaction when she heard the news. Her son, her brothers, her mother (assuming Jezebel was her mother; it is possible she was the daughter of Ahab and another wife), all her relatives on her side of the family and many from her husband's side had been killed. She lost just about everyone she ever cared about, and soon thereafter, lost her mind. It's generally a bad thing when anyone loses their mind, but when the person is evil to begin with, it's really bad. 2 Chronicles 22:10 tells us that she decided to destroy the rest of Judah's royal family. I suppose in her madness she figured that since she had lost most of her relatives, she might as well lose them all. Her plot included an attempt to murder her own infant grandson, the son of Ahaziah, Joash. With murderess rage, she plotted his death.

Joash Becomes King

But God had other plans for Joash (God did, after all, have a royal line leading to Christ to preserve), and through the agency of a priest and his wife, saved Joash's life. The priest's name was Jehoida, and his wife was Jehosheba.

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Jehosheba was Joash's aunt (Athaliah's sister-in-law). She whisked Joash away and brought him to the Temple, where she and her husband raised him in secret for the next six years. There at the Temple, Jehoida, a good man, enlisted the help of other priests to care for and protect the rightful heir to the throne while the wicked and mad Athaliah ruled Judah. Finally, when the time was right, Jehoida made his move to install Joash as king. In the midst of the Temple courts, he armed the Levitical priests, had them surround the seven year old Joash, placed a crown upon his head and had the people shout for all they were worth, 'Long live the king!' (2 Chronicles 23:11). When Athaliah heard the people proclaiming Joash king, she raced to the Temple and shouted with lunatic rage, 'Treason!' (23:13). This did her no good, however, for the troops of Jehoida took care of her. They took her into custody, brought her outside the Temple gates, and, well, let's just put it euphemistically: they ended her reign.

Such is the dramatic story of how Joash, at the age of seven, became King of Judah. Now, as you might imagine, at seven he needed all the help he could get running the kingdom. Fortunately, he had Jehoida to help him. Jehoida

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did two terrific things for the boy king. *First, he instructed Joash in the ways of the Lord.* 2 Chronicles 24:2 tells us that Joash did what was right in God's sight during the lifetime of Jehoida. 2 Kings 12:2 adds the reason: because Jehoida instructed him. Jehoida taught Joash the scriptures, provided godly advice and correction and did all the other things a young person needs to grow in the wisdom and knowledge of the Lord.

Secondly, Jehoida set a good example for Joash. As is the case for all who desire to impart lessons to children, the best teaching flows not from words but from actions. Jehoida's actions clearly demonstrated to Joash the way in which he should go. In 2 Chronicles 23, we find Jehoida setting a splendid example for the young king. Jehoida led the people as they made a covenant to serve God alone. He tore down the temple of Baal and other idols that had proliferated during the years of Ahab's influence over Judah. He reinstated proper worship at the Temple, including the regular provision of offerings and the raising of voices in song. Most importantly, he did all of these things before allowing Joash to take his seat on Judah's throne. The

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message to young Joash was clear: honoring God comes first. This was the godly example that Jehoida set for Joash.

It paid off. As Joash grew and took on more responsibilities, he followed Jehoida's example. He organized a capital campaign to restore the Temple, which had fallen into disrepair during Athaliah's reign, and enforced the peoples' stewardship obligations toward God. As a result, the Temple was repaired, and God honored. Jehoida, as any spiritual father would be, was thrilled. To see his son in the faith following the Lord surely warmed his heart with gladness. God blessed him with a long life, a life in which he lived to see the fruit of his efforts. His young charge was doing well. And so, at 130, Jehoida died a happy man, and was buried in a place of honor among the kings of Judah.

Joash A.J. (After Jehoida)

But after Jehoida died, things fell apart. Joash had lost his mentor, which is always a hard thing, and the next thing he knew, other advisors crept in to take Jehoida's place. A political system, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The problem was that these men were not good men who loved God as Jehoida had. Joash, after all he had learned and seen,

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should have known better than to listen to them. But he did anyway. They persuaded him to abandon the Temple and God in favor of the false goddess Asherah. How they did this we are not told. Perhaps they sold Joash on the idea of a more sophisticated, worldly religion. Perhaps they simply enticed Joash to try new things. Who knows? In any event, first Joash and then all of Judah turned from the worship of Yahweh to the worship of false gods.

God, as you might guess, was not pleased. His anger burned. He sent prophets to turn the people back to him, but they would not listen. Case in point was his sending of Jehoida's son, Zechariah. Zechariah cried out to the people, 'This is what God says: Why do you disobey the Lord's commands and keep yourselves from prospering? You have abandoned the Lord, and now he has abandoned you!' (24:20). Now I don't know what your experience has been, but in mine, people don't generally appreciate hearing such things, even when, as here, they need to hear them. Joash was no exception. He ordered that Zechariah be stoned to death in the courtyard of the Temple. Think about that. I mean, how bad can you get? Zechariah was for all practical purposes Joash's brother. The Bible sums up the affair with

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these words: ‘That was how Joash repaid Jehoida for his loyalty – by killing his son’ (24:22). Zechariah’s last words surely hung in the air, or at least in the ears of those present, as he died: ‘May the Lord see what they are doing and avenge my death!’ (v. 21). And wouldn’t you know it, before long, the Aramaens (Syrians) attacked and plundered Jerusalem. Joash was wounded in the fighting, and later assassinated by Jehoida’s friends (24:23-25). Thus ended the tragic life of King Joash.

God’s Grandchild

At first glance, it is hard to fathom precisely what went wrong. Here was a man, rescued by God as an infant, raised in his formative years within the very precincts of the Temple, instructed and mentored by a man of deep and exemplary faith, and who, under the guidance of such a man, began well. What went wrong? How could he have done so well while Jehoida was alive, yet failed so miserably after he died? How could Joash have turned so quickly from Jehoida’s faith?

Aha. There it is. Let me repeat that last question: *how could Joash have turned so quickly from Jehoida’s faith?*

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Do you get it? Joash never really had a faith of his own. Or, to give him the benefit of the doubt, he never had more than a superficial, inherited sort of faith, a faith that relied on others to tell him what to do.

Corrie ten Boom once said: *'God has no grandchildren.'*¹ She meant that you don't become a Christian simply because you are raised by Christians. You need to know Christ yourself. You need to have your own faith – not an inherited one. And that, right there, was Joash's problem. He may have grown up in the Temple and been instructed by a man of faith, but he never internalized that faith. He did all the right things when told to do them, but never entered into that much needed personal relationship with God that would have empowered him to stand on his own. So when things got difficult, when he lost his mentor, when he didn't have a man of faith around to tell him what to do any longer, he fell in with fools.

It just goes to show you. You can go to church all your life. You can keep a list of rules. You can do what the church tells you to do. You can do all the churchy things.

¹ Corrie Ten Boom, *Each New Day* (Revell: 2003), 137.

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But none of that means you have genuine faith. Standing in a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a jet propulsion laboratory makes you an aeronautical engineer. You are only a Christian if you have personal faith in Christ. And if you don't have personal faith in Christ, well, as Corrie ten Boom said, God has no grandchildren, and eventually, one way or the other, you will fall. Because in the end it is just as the Bible tells us, you are not saved by the things you do; it is by faith alone that you are saved (See, Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Got Faith?

So what about you? Do you have a genuine faith? Have you ever had a personal experience with God? Do you have a personal relationship with him? Let me tell you, you need one. The good news is you can have one. Indeed, since the time of Joash, God has made it easier for you to know him, easier for you to believe in him. He has come to us, in the person of Jesus Christ. You can surrender your life to him and know God as well as – no that's not right – *even better* than you know anyone else in the world. You can have him to lean on, to guide you, to show you the way in both good times and bad. Yes, that kind of relationship is available. It

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can be yours. All you need to do is believe and follow Jesus as you acknowledge him to be your Lord and Savior. If you do this, God promises to come and make his home with you (See, John 14:23).

Some of you may already have committed yourselves to Christ, to knowing God in this way. If that is your case, you already have a relationship with God. You already have faith. Great! But allow me to ask you a follow up question: *how deep is your faith?* For you see, I may have been a bit hard on Joash. Maybe his problem wasn't that he had no faith at all. Maybe it was simply that he only had a little; that his faith just didn't run very deep. That his problem was simply one of *shallow roots*. So, allow me to ask you again, *how deep are your roots?* Do you have the kind of relationship with God in which you actually experience his presence in your life on a daily basis? The kind that enables you to actually commune with him and feel him guiding you? Or is your relationship with God superficial? Perhaps the kind that only surfaces on Sunday mornings. Let me tell you, you want more than a superficial 'off and on' relationship with God. You want a deep and robust one that pervades every moment of your life. Because, as the Bible says, 'in this world you

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will have trouble' (John 16:33). The storms will come and the seas will rise and you will find yourself in places where you will be unable to stand on your own. If all you have is superficial faith, or worse, no faith at all, you will be in a world of hurt when that happens.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians in and around Ephesus, wrote these words:

'I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong' (Ephesians 3:16-17).

Paul understood what his people needed if they were to remain strong in the service of the Lord. They needed deep roots.

My prayer for you is the same as Paul's for the Ephesian Christians: that you develop deep roots. So that, when the storms come, you will be able to stand. So that, to borrow again from Jesus' Parable of the Sower and the Seed, you will be able to produce a good harvest with your life, and not end your days as Joash did, lost and adrift amidst the

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rising seas. So that you won't end your life as a person whose roots were shallow. Take it from Joash, you want deep roots. Failing to cultivate them is nothing less than a royal mistake.

Chapter Five

The Perils of Pride – 2 Chronicles 26

All the people of Judah had crowned Amaziah's sixteen year old son, Uzziah, as king in place of his father. After his father's death, Uzziah rebuilt the town of Elath and restored it to Judah. Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-two years. His mother was Jecoliah from Jerusalem. He did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight, just as his father, Amaziah had done. Uzziah sought God during the days of Zechariah, who taught him to fear God. And as long as the king sought guidance from the Lord, God gave him success...But when he had become powerful, he also became proud, which led to his downfall.'

2 Chronicles 26:1-5; 16

The ancient Greeks told a story about an inventor named Daedalus. He lived on the island of Crete and invented all sorts of wonderful things. The King of Crete

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enjoyed having a creative mind like Daedalus' around and resolved to make sure he never left. He took Daedalus and his son Icarus into custody and imprisoned them. Daedalus, ever the thinker, immediately began to search for a way out. One day, while watching the birds, he discovered it. He began to collect feathers, and using melted wax from candles, made two pairs of wings: one for his son and one for himself. They caught an updraft and soared out of the prison yard to freedom.

As they crossed the Mediterranean Sea, Daedalus warned his son against flying either too low, where he might be caught by waves, or too high, where the sun might melt the wax and cause him to lose his feathers. At first, Icarus heeded his father's advice, but soon grew tired of flying at a continuous altitude. Moreover, as he grew more confident in his abilities, he began to fancy himself an expert. And so, puffed up with pride, he flew higher into the sky until he was above the clouds. It was all very thrilling, until, just as his father had warned, the wax melted, the feathers fell off, and he fell into the sea and drowned.

It is a sad story to be sure. But it illustrates well the story of our next king, one who perhaps demonstrates better

than any other the proverbial expression, ‘pride goes before the fall’ (see, Proverbs 16:18).

Meet Uzziah

In our last chapter, we studied the life of King Joash, who made the royal mistake of trying to get by with a superficial, inherited kind of faith. In this chapter, we pick up with his grandson, Uzziah. The first five verses of 2 Chronicles 26 provide a brief biographical sketch. Uzziah became king at 16 and reigned for 52 years (the second longest of any Judean king). He initially did what was pleasing in the eyes of the Lord. He received instruction from a man named Zechariah (in other words, he had a mentor). And finally, we are told that as long as he sought God’s guidance, things went well for him. These facts are relatively straight forward, but the last deserves further comment. It is of course the general pattern we have seen in the lives of all the kings studied to this point. Generally speaking, whenever a king has sought God, things have gone relatively well, and whenever they have forsaken God, they have not.

That this is the pattern should not be read as a Biblical endorsement of the prosperity gospel, which holds that if you

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do as God bids, things will always go well for you, that you will be rich and healthy and trouble will never come to your doorstep. Nor should it be taken, as some have, as evidence that whenever trouble comes to your doorstep, it is because you have done something wrong. The prosperity gospel is absolute heresy and bad things happen to undeserving people all the time (just look at Jesus). It is simply a fact of life that when you arrange your life along the lines God has established, things tend to go better for you than if you had not. God doesn't promise you a rose garden in this fallen, broken world, but when you follow God's ways as you walk through life, you will be sure to find both fountains of blessing and joy in your journey. On the other hand, if you insist on ordering your life on your own terms, rather than God's, well, good luck to you, because luck will be all you'll have. You will be on your own, and I can guarantee that you will eventually discover your mistake.

Uzziah had only to look to his family history to understand this, and so, at least at first, he ordered his life as God wanted him to. He sought God's guidance in all he did a la Proverbs 3:5-6, and as long as he did so, he enjoyed a certain degree of success. 2 Chronicles 26:6-15 tells us that

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he was victorious in war, a successful builder, advanced his nation agriculturally and was blessed with excellent advisors and leaders to whom he delegated responsibilities. He was so successful that his fame spread far and wide, and God helped him tremendously.

Uzziah's Fall

But when Uzziah became powerful, something changed. The first part of verse 16 tells us that when he became powerful, he became proud, and this led to his downfall. What happened? How did this pride manifest itself? The rest of verse 16 and the verses following tell us the sad story of how Uzziah 'sinned against the Lord his God by entering the sanctuary of the Lord's Temple and personally burning incense on the altar' (verse 16b). To understand why this was such a problem, you need to know a few things about the Temple and God's rules governing the burning of incense on the altar in question.

In the Jerusalem Temple, there were various courts. The inner most court was called, 'the most holy place' (See, Leviticus 16). Only the High Priest of Israel could enter it, and that he could do only once a year on the Day of

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Atonement. That wasn't the sanctuary Uzziah entered (apparently even he knew better than to do that). But right outside the most holy place was another sacred space where the altar of incense stood. This was the altar Zechariah stood before on the day he was visited by the angel Gabriel (See, Luke 1:11). The Law was clear that only priests of Aaron's line (Aaron was Moses' brother and the first High Priest of Israel) were allowed to burn incense on this altar and that it had to be done properly (See, Numbers 3:10; Exodus 30:1-10). Two examples from Israel's history highlighted how serious God was on this point.

In Numbers 16, we find the story of the Korahite Rebellion, wherein a man named Korah and some others dared to approach the Tabernacle (the Tent of Meeting that served as the place God met his people in the days before the Jerusalem Temple). Their intent was to burn incense on the altar. Before they even had the chance to go inside, God opened up the earth beneath their feet to swallow them alive.

The second example is found in Leviticus 10, where we read the tragic tale of Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron who kindled the wrong kind of fire on the altar, thereby demonstrating a disrespect for God's commands.

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Their improperly kindled fire consumed them entirely. Together, these incidents drove home the point to all subsequent generations in Israel: don't mess with the altar in the sanctuary unless you are: (1) a descendant of Aaron; and (2) ready to do things God's way.

It is no wonder then, that as Uzziah approached the altar, he was immediately confronted by the High Priest Azariah and eighty other priests. 'Uzziah, get out of the sanctuary now! You are sinning! God will not be pleased!' they warned. Uzziah only became furious. You can just imagine the thought balloon above his head: 'Who are you to tell me what to do? I am King Uzziah. I am all that and a bag of chips. I can do whatever I want.' No sooner had he thought such a thing than he developed leprosy. The priests grabbed him and rushed him out (by this time he was eager to heed their advice). His thought balloon changed dramatically: 'Oh crud. What have I done?' But it was too late. Verse 21 ominously tells us that he lived the rest of his life in isolation, 'excluded from the Temple of the Lord,' while his son Jotham ran the kingdom. Such was Uzziah's story. A story that echoes the maxim derived from Proverbs 16:18, 'pride goes before the fall.'

Pride in Action

It isn't hard to see that Uzziah's royal mistake was his pride. So here's the lesson from Uzziah's life: don't be proud. End of chapter, right? Well, no, because we don't just want to name Uzziah's royal mistake, we want to learn from it, and thereby avoid making the same mistake ourselves. There are all sorts of ways to fall into the sin of pride, but there are four in particular that seem to affect a great many people. Four ways in which people come to think of themselves more highly than they should, and thus bring about their own destruction. If we would avoid Uzziah's mistake, it will behoove us to consider them.

The first of these is exemplified by what we might call *the self-made person*. This is the person who has a lot, who has come far in life, and thinks they have no one but themselves to thank. You don't have to be a king to fit this description. In our day they are usually non-royal persons who have successful careers, a nice houses, and great 401k plans. They've worked hard all their lives and believe they have what they do solely because of their hard work.

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A Biblical example of this kind of person is King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Nebby had it all: wealth, power, hanging gardens. Daniel 4 tells of how one day, while walking on the roof of his palace, he looked out across his empire and said, ‘Look at this great city of Babylon! By my own mighty power, I have built this beautiful city as my royal residence to display my majestic splendor’ (Daniel 4:30). Before he completed his sentence, a voice from heaven responded to this boast:

‘O King Nebuchadnezzar, this message is for you! You are no longer ruler of this kingdom. You will be driven from human society. You will live in the fields with the wild animals, and you will eat grass like a cow. Seven periods of time will pass while you live this way, until you learn that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone he chooses’ (4:31-32).

And that’s exactly what happened. Old Nebby spent the next seven years on all fours chomping grass like a beast. Such is the Bible’s warning to the ‘self-made person.’ If you think you are self-made, think again. You aren’t the reason for your success. There is a God who has provided you with

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your life and breath and talents, and what God has made possible for you he can take away in an instant. If you don't humble yourself, give God the glory and start ordering your life his way, he just might have to teach you a lesson the hard way, not entirely unlike the way he did for old king Nebuchadnezzar. Remember: pride goes before the fall.

A second type of proud person is *the self-sufficient person*. The difference between this type of person and the self-made person is one of chronology; while the self-made person looks at what they've done and says, 'I did it,' the self-sufficient person looks at what they have to do and says, 'I can do it.' They don't think they need God's help at all. We find such people everywhere. One of the strangest places we find them, and sadly we find them there often in my experience, is within the Church. That's right. Christians who study the Bible and really should know better often fall into this category (I have been guilty of this far too often myself). We see a problem, come up with a solution, make plans and get busy bringing them to fulfillment, without so much as stopping to pray and ask God for guidance, let alone waiting upon the Lord for his revelation as to where we should go, what we should do and how we should do it.

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Whether we express it or not, we have this heretical, prideful notion that we can get things done under our own power, that we can do it all in our own strength, rather than God's.

If you've ever found yourself doing that, let me ask you a question: how did it turn out? Chances are, not too well. A few Bible verses should suffice to offer all the correction we need on this one.

'...I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing' (John 15:5).

'Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain' (Psalm 127:1, NIV).

'God is our refuge and strength' (Psalm 46:1).

'I can do all things *through Christ* who strengthens me' (Philippians 4:13, KJV, emphasis added).

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Think you can do things on your own? Think again. That's pride people, and just as Uzziah's story teaches, pride goes before the fall.

Thirdly, there is the case of *the self-reliant person*. This person differs from the self-sufficient person in this: they do not say, 'I *can* do this on my own.' They say, 'I *have* to do this on my own.' They believe that no one, not even God, will help them. This too is a form of pride, and in some ways, the worst yet. Its roots go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3 tells the story of the fall of humanity. Most people know it, if not from church or Sunday School from the echoes it has left in pop culture. It is the story of how the serpent (Satan) tempted Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. When the serpent first approached them with the idea of breaking God's commandment not to eat of the fruit of that special tree, it explained that the reason God told them not to eat from the tree was that he knew that when they did, they would become like him (Genesis 3:5). In other words, the serpent told Adam and Eve that God was keeping their best possible future from them. In fact, he was suggesting, they

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shouldn't trust him. That they really had no one to rely on but themselves.

Adam and Eve fell for this, and ever since, we have too. We continue to doubt God. We fail to believe what he says. We fail to trust that he will take care of us as he promises. We all do it. We doubt God's essential goodness. Even if we know better, the truth is that every so often, especially when things go wrong, we doubt God's goodness and act as if we have to find our own way out, because, well, God just cannot be trusted to bring about what is best for us.

This too is a form of pride, born out of a lie straight from the pit of hell. The truth is that God can be trusted. As the saying goes, 'God is good all the time, and all the time God is good.' And if we could only believe that, we would trust and not be afraid. We would know that he knows the plans he has for us, the plans he has prepared for us (See, Jeremiah 29:11 and Ephesians 2:10) and we would know that his plans are always better than our own. We would know that in all things, even in the worst of things, we are not alone, nor do we have to rely upon ourselves, for God is working for the good of those who love him who are called according to his purposes (See, Romans 8:28). For goodness sake, we

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don't need to be so prideful as to think that we have no one but ourselves to rely on. For we can always rely on a God who is good.

And finally, there is *the self-saved person*. This manifestation of pride is by far the most serious of all, and it is unfortunately quite common in our day and age. I am always struck by the number of people I meet who scorn Christian faith (or any faith at all for that matter) yet believe that when they die, they will go to heaven. If you ask them what assurance they have of this, they typically say something along the lines of 'I am a good person.' Not too long ago, a prominent United States politician (who will remain nameless) gave an interview in which he recounted his charitable and public work, said that he was not religious, but added that if there was a heaven, there would be no question that he would get in, because, in his own words: 'I have earned it.' Now that's pride! God owes me because I am a good person!

The Bible teaches, however, that no one is good but God alone (See, Luke 18:19). There is no one who is righteous, not one (See, Romans 3:10). We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (See, Romans 3:23). The truth

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is that God doesn't owe us anything. Yet, by his grace, he has offered a way to salvation. For while the wages of sin are death, 'the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 6:23). We are saved by placing our faith in Jesus who died on the cross for our sins, by surrendering to him and his way of life. We aren't saved by what we do. We are saved by what he has done. In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, 'I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by the faith of the Son of God, who died and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20, author's translation). And so, for anyone who thinks that they will one day come before God and say they have earned their salvation, that they deserve to partake in the life of the age to come on the basis of all the good they have done, think again. There is no such thing as a self-saved person. Every last one of us needs to humble ourselves before the one who died in our place. Every last one of us needs to humble ourselves at the foot of the cross. If we do not, well, as we have been saying, pride goes before the fall.

So what do you think? Do you want to be proud? Or are you ready to humble yourself before God and let him have

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his way with you? Are you ready to acknowledge his sovereignty, admit your need for him, place your trust in him and recognize that without him, you can never hope to be saved? I know what I'm doing. I'm laying down my pride. I'm humbling myself before God and allowing him to have his way with me. And I take no risk in doing so. For whereas the Bible teaches that pride goes before the fall, it also teaches that when we humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord, he will lift us up (James 4:10). That, therefore, is clearly the way to go. To do otherwise would be to commit a royal mistake.

Chapter Six

The Fear of the Lord – 2 Chronicles 28

'Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. He did not do what was pleasing in the sight of the Lord, as his ancestor David had done. Instead, he followed the example of the kings of Israel. He cast metal images for the worship of Baal. He offered sacrifices in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, even sacrificing his own sons in the fire. In this way, he followed the detestable practices of the pagan nations the Lord had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the pagan shrines and on the hills and under every green tree.'

2 Chronicles 28:1-4

To fully understand the life of our next Judean king, Ahaz, it will behoove us to take note of three historical realities present in the decades preceding and during his reign. The first of these was *the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III*

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and the Assyrian Empire. Tiglath-Pileser III was one of the Assyrian Empire's greatest monarchs.¹ After consolidating power in Mesopotamia in the east he turned his eyes to the west, which placed both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah in his path of destruction. He, like many tyrants throughout history, made it his policy to deport conquered peoples so as to remove any lingering resistance to his reign. This policy was put into full effect in the Northern Kingdom of Israel after his death, when his son Shalmaneser defeated the Northern Kingdom. Following a three year siege, the people of Israel were exiled to Assyria (2 Kings 17:5-6). The Bible makes no bones about the reasons for Israel's fall. The people of the Northern Kingdom had worshipped false gods, engaged in pagan practices, and otherwise failed to obey the commandments of the Lord (2 Kings 17:7-23). The fall of Israel did not actually occur until approximately five years after the death of Ahaz (See, 2 Kings 16:2; 17:1 and 5-6). Nonetheless, the rise of the Assyrian juggernaut represented a clear and present danger to both Israel and Judah during his reign. Ahaz would have seen

¹ James Orr, M.A., D.D., General Editor, s.v. 'Tiglath Pileser.' International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1915.

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this threat coming even as a boy, and it surely haunted him all of his days.

The second historical reality that shaped the context for Ahaz's reign was this: *Gods people had plunged themselves into unprecedented levels of idolatry and social injustice.* Not just in Israel, but in Judah as well. We will turn to the precise nature of the idolatrous practices of the people in a moment. As for the injustice, the poor were being oppressed, the widows cheated, and the orphans neglected. Both Israel and Judah had become utterly corrupt and forgotten the whole love your neighbor thing (See, Leviticus 19:18).

This gave birth to the third reality that bears upon the reign of King Ahaz: *the rise of the big time prophets.* God had always used prophets to call his people to repentance, but it was during this period of time that some of the biggest names came on the scene. Israel had men like Amos and Hosea. Judah had Micah and Isaiah. These men were the conscience of the people in both Israel and Judah. Each of these men cried out against the idolatry and injustice they saw in the land, and each of them were, as prophets usually are, soundly ignored.

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Together, these three historical realities – the rise of Assyria, the rise of rampant idolatry and social injustice and the rise of prophets whose messages were ignored - created something of a perfect storm that set the stage for calamity to fall upon both Israel and Judah. It was, to be fair to Ahaz and the other monarchs who reigned during this period, a difficult time to be king.

As noted in the last chapter, after King Uzziah's fall from grace, his son Jotham ran the kingdom in his stead. Jotham would eventually take the throne upon his father's death, and for twenty-five years, he did a fairly decent job as king (2 Chronicles 27). Nonetheless, Assyria continued to rise, the people continued in their idolatrous, unjust ways, and the prophets continued to be ignored. And so it was that after Jotham's death, the final ingredient to the perfect storm that was to fall upon Judah was added: Ahaz.

Ahaz the Terrible

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became King, and he reigned for sixteen years. Ahaz's reign was, to put it mildly, a complete disaster. For starters, *Ahaz reveled in the idolatry of his day*. We are told that he 'walked in the ways

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of the kings of Israel' and made images of the false god Baal for the people to worship (2 Chronicles 28:2). Moreover, he engaged in the detestable practices of the pagan nations that had inhabited the Promised Land in the days before God used men like Joshua and Caleb to drive them out. Specifically identified as being among these practices was this: *Ahaz sacrificed his sons in the fires of the valley of the son of Hinnom* (2 Chronicles 28:3). This is a reference to a practice associated with the ancient false god Molech (See, Leviticus 18:21; Jeremiah 32:35). It included heating an image of Molech with fire until red hot and then placing the bodies of children in the searing hot arms of the idol. While this happened, flutes would be played and drums beaten to drown out the cries of the children.² No one less than Moses had warned the people against this practice, going as far as to say that anyone who engaged in it should be stoned to death, and that if such acts went unpunished, God himself would step in and execute judgment (Leviticus 20:5). The valley of the sons of Hinnom (*Gei Hinnom* in Hebrew) is referred to often in the New Testament, where it appears in the original Greek

² James Orr, M.A., D.D., General Editor, s.v. 'Molech; Moloch.' International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1915.

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text as the word *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* is a word our English Bibles translate as hell. That's right, what happened in the valley of the sons of Hinnom was so thoroughly evil that the valley itself, which in later days became a public garbage dump and incinerator, became the very metaphor for hell itself.³ That should give you a picture of how evil King Ahaz was. His practices were so wicked that they became the very image of hell, both in the sense of hell on earth and in the sense of the place of final judgment.

Well, whenever we find someone in the pages of the Old Testament behaving like that, you just know that God is going to step into the narrative and do something about it. And so it should come as no surprise that Ahaz soon found himself under attack from Israel, Syria (Aram), Philistia and Edom (2 Chronicles 28:5-18; 2 Kings 16; Isaiah 7). Isaiah describes how Ahaz and his people responded to these threats: '...the hearts of the king and his people trembled with fear, like trees shaking in a storm' (Isaiah 7:2). The reason

³ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 163. See Also, M.G. Easton, M.A. D.D. *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3rd Edition, s.v. 'Gehenna' (Thomas Nelson 1897); Orr, M.A., D.D., General Editor, s.v. 'Molech; Moloch' *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1915.

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why these things happened is set forth in 2 Chronicles 28:19: ‘The Lord was humbling Judah because of King Ahaz of Judah, for he had encouraged his people to sin and had been utterly unfaithful to the Lord.’ In other words, God was disciplining both Ahaz and Judah for their wicked ways.

A Chance to Repent

The good thing about the discipline of the Lord is that it is always restorative in its intention; its purpose is to give those to whom it is applied the opportunity to wake up and turn around. And so, in the midst of the turmoil Ahaz was facing, *God sent the prophet Isaiah to give Ahaz a chance to repent* (Isaiah 7). The account of Isaiah’s meeting with Ahaz is fascinating on many fronts. It includes, for example, the prophecy Christians read every Christmas about a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a son named Emmanuel, or ‘God with us’ (Isaiah 7:14). But for our purposes, suffice it to say that Isaiah basically told Ahaz, ‘Stop worrying about your enemies and start worrying about your relationship with God!’ (See, Isaiah 7:3-9). Good advice. After all, Judah’s history was chock full of examples of how, when kings and their people got themselves right with God, they had been delivered from their enemies. So, yes, things were bad, Isaiah

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was saying, but don't panic. There is hope if you choose to stand with the Lord!

Now, you might have thought that a prophet of Isaiah's caliber might have gotten through to Ahaz. But alas, he did not (remember – people almost always ignore prophets; it really is a frustrating job). Which identifies Ahaz's next big mistake: *Ahaz did not heed a clarion call to repentance*. Folks, when God gives you a chance to repent, and even goes so far as to send you a prophet to help you out, you better listen. Unfortunately, Ahaz did not. Instead of turning to and relying upon God, he came up with his own plan and sent a message to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria offering money if he would help fend off the threats from the other nations (2 Chronicles 28:16; 2 Kings 16:7-9). In other words, he invited the fox into his henhouse, leaving Isaiah no choice but to toss his hands in the air and tell Ahaz that his proverbial goose was as good as cooked (See, Isaiah 7:10-17). And cooked it was about to be.

The Chef-to-be, Tiglath-Pileser, was only too glad to help, and quickly came to Ahaz's rescue. But it soon became evident that Tiglath-Pileser was merely using the situation to make war against Israel, Syria *and Judah*. The Assyrians

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soon began to oppress and threaten Judah just as they did those other nations (2 Chronicles 28:20). Ahaz was completely flummoxed. It still didn't dawn on him that he could turn to God, and so he instead raided the Temple in Jerusalem and gave all of its treasures to Assyria as tribute (28:21). Ahaz had effectively made Judah a vassal state to the Assyrian Empire; little more than a tax-paying colony in Tiglath-Pileasar's expanding kingdom. Judah had lost her independence. Such was the result of Ahaz's failure to heed Isaiah's call to repentance.

Ahaz the Unrepentant

But it gets worse. Because even then, Ahaz didn't repent. Instead, he became more unfaithful (28:22). Specifically, he did two mind-numbingly stupid things. *First, he began to worship the false gods of his enemies.* At a meeting in Damascus with his new boss, Tiglath-Pileasar, he saw a statue of a god that impressed him, and so he ran back to Jerusalem and made a copy of it to worship there. His thought process was that this god had helped Syria against him earlier, so maybe it would help him now if he worshipped it (See, 2 Chronicles 28:23; 2 King 16:10-16). At the heart of this foolishness was a royal mistake that people make all

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the time. *Ahaz, it seems, saw religion as a means to get what he wanted.* People do this down to this day, don't they? They go to church because they think that if they do, God will be good to them. Or they send money to heretical television evangelists who promise prosperity if they do. It's all ridiculous of course. You can't buy God's favor, and you shouldn't try to use God like that anyway. That Ahaz grasped at whatever god he thought might help him suggests that this was perhaps the reason he had embraced idolatry in the first place: he never had any interest in glorifying God; he merely sought to use religion – any religion – to get what he wanted. And so, Ahaz began to worship yet another false god as his world fell apart around him.

The second mind-boggling thing Ahaz did was to declare war on God. Talk about a royal mistake! Beginning in 2 Chronicles 28:24, we read that Ahaz took all the utensils from the Temple and broke them to pieces. He shut the doors to the Temple so that no one could worship there. It wasn't enough for Ahaz to reject God himself; he went out of his way to ensure that no one else could worship him either! (Kind of reminds me of the tactics of some radical atheists today). Furthermore, he set up pagan shrines in every town

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in Judah to encourage his people to worship gods other than Yahweh. There is no way to interpret this as anything other than an attempt by Ahaz to erase any memory of Yahweh from the minds of his people. It's hard to fathom such hostility toward God. Maybe Ahaz blamed God for his troubles (although he clearly had no one to blame but himself). Maybe he felt God had somehow disappointed him as a kid or something. We will likely never know this side of eternity. But whatever it was, for whatever reason, Ahaz declared war on God.

Which was not only stupid, but also useless. It surely did him no good. He never for a moment experienced the peace God could have given him in the midst of his troubles. His reign was a roiling sea of chaos from start to finish. In the end, when he died, his people were so exasperated with him they could not even bring themselves to bury him in the royal cemetery (28:27). Such was the life of Ahaz. He died without ever experiencing a moment of peace, having lost both Judah's independence and the respect of his own people.

The Fear of the Lord

Ahaz's life was chock full of mistakes. But there is one that lay at the center of them all, and it is Isaiah who names it. Remember how Isaiah told Ahaz that he needed to stop worrying about his enemies and start worrying about his relationship with God? Well, on the heels of that meeting with Ahaz, Isaiah wrote of how God warned him not to think like those to whom he was prophesying. He wrote that the Lord told him: 'Don't call everything a conspiracy, like they do, and don't live in dread of what frightens them. Make the Lord of Heaven's Armies holy in your life. He is the one you should fear. He is the one who should make you tremble' (Isaiah 8:11-13). Mmm...remember how Ahaz, when beset by his enemies, trembled and shook with fear like a tree before a storm? It seems Ahaz feared a lot of things. *But he didn't fear God.* That, to me, is the one mistake of Ahaz that lay at the heart of all his others. Ahaz did not fear the Lord.

The Bible often speaks of our need to fear the Lord. I know that many people cringe when they hear that. They think that people who talk about 'the fear of the Lord' are saying that God is some mean old ogre out to get anyone and everyone who rubs him the wrong way. That he sits in

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heaven on the edge of his throne, anticipating the moment when he will get to smite someone. But that's not what 'the fear of the Lord' refers to at all.

Fearing God in the Biblical sense doesn't mean we need to be *afraid* of him. God loves us with a deep, abounding and unconditional love; there is never any reason to be afraid of him. But we do need to be *in awe* of him. When we think of God and his attributes – his sovereignty, love, justice, grace, holiness, eternal nature, omniscience and omnipotence – we should be overwhelmed by the disparity that lies between who we are and who he is. It's the kind of thing that should bring us, at least metaphorically, if not literally, to our knees. The Puritans spoke of the fear of the Lord as a 'filial fear,' by which they meant that when we think of how awesome and good God is, we should be so enflamed with love and devotion toward him that we become afraid to do anything that might disrespect him or hurt his heart. The fear of the Lord is in this sense a beautiful thing, for it drives us to a place of reverent submission and humble service, a place where we realize that all we do should be pleasing in his sight. Sadly, Ahaz never had such a fear. He never was in any such place. He never understood the

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awesomeness of God, nor did he understand his place in the universe God had made. His failure to understand any of that led to a life of royal mistakes.

Years ago, when I graduated from college, my pastor, James A. Smith, gave me a small Bible. That Bible is old and worn out now. Many of the pages have fallen out and been stuck back in. It's basically a loose collection of papers between two covers, held together by a rubber band. It's nearly impossible to read. But I still keep it in a drawer in the nightstand next to my bed. I have many other Bibles, but this one still means something to me, because inside the front cover is the handwriting of Pastor Smith. There, as an offering of advice to the 22 year-old version of me, is his paraphrase of Proverbs 1:7 – *'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of understanding.'*

Those words have served me well over the years. It's too bad no one ever gave Ahaz a gift like that.

But what's too late for Ahaz isn't too late for you. You can learn the lesson he did not. Fear God, not man. Open yourself up to his awesomeness. Cultivate in your heart a deep reverence for who he is. Fail to do this, and you will

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almost assuredly get into trouble. Do this, and you will go a long way toward avoiding a life filled with royal mistakes.

Chapter Seven

Hezekiah's Revival – 2 Chronicles 29-31

Hezekiah was twenty-five years old when he became king of Judah, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. He did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight, just as his ancestor David had done.

2 Chronicles 29:1-2

Abijah had a tough life. Her father (or possibly her grandfather) was Zechariah, most likely the same Zechariah who mentored King Uzziah in the days before Uzziah was overtaken by pride (2 Chronicles 26:5). Her name means 'the Lord is my Father,' and surely reflected the hopes and aspirations her parents had for her at her birth. From all the evidence, it seems she hailed from a godly family. But she lived in ungodly times. As noted in the last chapter, the Assyrian Empire was on the march and both injustice and idolatry were on the rise in Judah. It was a tough time to be a woman who sought to live with God as her father.

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And then there was the matter of her marriage. Abijah had married Ahaz, the monster whose story formed the subject matter of our last chapter - the king who reveled in idolatry, closed the Temple and ceded Judah's independence to Assyria. Worst of all, he sacrificed his sons, that is, *Abijah's sons*, in fire to Molech. We can only imagine her pain. It's difficult to say why she married such a lout. If her father was the same Zechariah who had counseled Uzziah, then the length of time between Uzziah's and Ahaz's reigns suggests that it he had likely died by the time she married. Perhaps she simply lacked the godly council of a wise father. Or perhaps Ahaz had been a smooth talker. Or perhaps, in her youth, she herself faltered a bit in her walk with God and fell for the proverbial bad boy. Or perhaps, as was usually the case in those days, she had no choice in the matter. Who knows?

It may take a little reading between the lines, but the one thing we do know about her is that she had faith. Perhaps she never lost it. I believe we can say this with a fair degree of certainty, if for no other reason than that as the world fell apart around her, she caused one of her sons to be named Hezekiah, a name which means, 'strength of the Lord.' I

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have no doubt it was Abijah who suggested the name. There is simply no way a monster like Ahaz did. And so it was that the woman whose name meant ‘The Lord is my Father,’ named her son in such a way that he might live in the awareness that the Lord was his strength.

Just imagine what it was like for Abijah as she raised Hezekiah. She loved God and she loved her son. The world was going mad around her. Her other sons were being sacrificed to Molech. Her husband was on a rampage against God. What sort of things do you think she did for Hezekiah? I am sure she held him close at night. I am very sure that she prayed for him. She prayed that God would protect his life. She prayed that God would protect him from the evil influences that raged all around him. And she prayed that one day, he might become a different kind of king; the kind who would understand, unlike his father, that Yahweh was indeed his strength.

The odds were against it. Hezekiah was born into a culture steeped in sin, and his father was the worst yet in a less than honorable line of kings. So you might think that Abijah’s hope was a fool’s hope. But you should never underestimate the power of a mother’s prayers. For Hezekiah

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would prove to be a bright spot in a lineage of despair. In fact, he would lead Judah in an unprecedented time of spiritual revival. The story of how he did so is an important one, not only because it helps us understand Judah's history but because it shows us some of the key ingredients necessary for revival to occur today. If you haven't noticed, we live in an age and culture in which spiritual revival is desperately needed. As we turn to study the life of King Hezekiah, we begin by examining the revival that took place during his reign with an eye toward identifying the ingredients of revival. Now, to be sure, Hezekiah wasn't perfect. He made his share of royal mistakes too. Those we will look at in the next chapter. But for now, we simply focus on the bright side of things. For after all, you can learn just as much from a king's successes as you can his royal mistakes.

Hezekiah the Believer

Hezekiah didn't exactly inherit a well-oiled machine when he took the reins of leadership in Judah. At the age of twenty-five, he assumed the throne of a nation where the Assyrians were calling the shots, injustice was all around and the people, having followed in his father's wicked ways, were worshipping idols. The situation seemed, in a word,

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hopeless. But then into that hopelessness came a voice of hope.

It was the voice of the prophet Isaiah, who had tried and failed to awaken Ahaz, but kept trying to awaken his son. Early in Hezekiah's reign, Isaiah stepped back onto the scene and pronounced many glorious prophecies. Among them were these:

‘The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness a light will shine. You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice. They will rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest and like warriors dividing their plunder. For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders. You will break the oppressor's rod just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian. The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned. They will be fuel for the fire. For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’ (Isaiah 9:2-6).

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Christians recognize these as words of prophesy concerning Jesus the Messiah. Hezekiah wouldn't have understood them as such, but he did know that those words carried within them the most priceless of all commodities: hope. Hezekiah heard those words and knew that God had not abandoned his people. Yes, the rod of Assyrian oppression was upon them, but God wasn't finished with them yet. God still had plans for them. And so it was that Hezekiah, who might otherwise have easily fallen into despair in the early days of his reign, found courage and hope to believe. Although he might not have realized it at the time, he had stumbled upon the first ingredient to a successful spiritual revival: *someone needs to believe*. Someone needs to look at the seemingly hopeless situation around them and say, 'Yes, things look bad. But God is on his throne, and he isn't finished with us yet. I believe that God can still make something beautiful happen.'

It is all too easy in our day to give way to despair. The news – even from Christian sources – is full of it. The reports seem overwhelmingly negative. Declining church attendance. Thousands of churches closing each year. Increasing numbers of atheists and agnostics. The

marginalization of the faithful. Threats to religious liberty. Compromised Christian leadership. So often, we hear Christians lamenting all of this and more, projecting a defeatist attitude that invades and infects the entire Body of Christ. But get this clearly: God has not abandoned his Church. Yes, in this world we will have trouble, but Jesus has promised to be with us always, even to the end of time (See, John 16:33; Matthew 28:20)! God is not finished with his Church. He still has plans for us. So, if we want to experience spiritual revival in our time, the first thing to do is to take off the mantel of despair, stop moping around and acting like nothing is possible, and believe that with God, all things are possible! Revival happens when people believe.

Telling the Truth

Once he believed, Hezekiah sprang into action. In the first month of his reign, he opened the doors to the Temple that his father Ahaz had shut. He straightened things up and removed the idols his father had placed there. He called together the Levites, the priests who worked in the Temple, and told them plainly, ‘we are in a mess, and the reason why is that we have abandoned God!’ In doing so, Hezekiah demonstrated the second ingredient for spiritual revival:

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someone needs to stand up and speak the truth, even if it is unpopular. I am quite sure that people then, no less than people now, didn't like being told that their behavior was the reason for their problems. They would have much preferred to have blamed the Assyrians or some outside agent for their problems. But the truth was that Judah was in the mess it was because her people had abandoned God, and if she was ever going to get her act together again, someone needed to speak the truth.

In our day, many Christians like to blame the world for the Church's problems. I hear things all the time like, 'well, our church isn't growing because our culture has abandoned God. People don't honor God anymore. It's the culture's fault.' As if the culture has ever, at any time in history, been friendly to Christ! (Seriously, go read the Book of Acts, or a book on the history of the early church, or one on the life of Martin Luther, or Martin Luther King Jr., or just about any book written by just about any missionary). The plain fact is that most of the time, when churches struggle, the problem is far more internal than external. The biggest problem may be that church members are not praying as they should be. In Acts 4:23-32, we read of a time when the early

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church was up against it. The authorities were threatening the church. Peter and John had recently been arrested. What did the Christians do? They gathered together and prayed, and by the time they were done, the room literally shook by the power of God, symbolizing how in the days, weeks and years ahead, God was going to shake the entire world through the lives of those faithful, prayerful believers.

Very often, when spiritual revival isn't happening, the reason why is that we aren't doing our spiritual work. We aren't praying. We aren't seeking God with our whole hearts. We become proud do it yourselfers who believe we can do things on our own, failing to recognize that without God we can do nothing. Or we refuse to open ourselves up to what God is doing, preferring instead to cling to our preferred way of doing things rather than submitting to what God actually wants from us. Or we only make time for God when it doesn't inconvenience the balance of our lives. Or we water down the truths of scripture because not doing so would require us to either take unpopular, politically incorrect positions or modify the way in which we live our own lives. If reading things like that bothers you - good! The second ingredient for revival is a willingness to tell the truth, so let

me say it: Christianity is in decline in our culture, and it's the Church's fault. That's the kind of thing Hezekiah said back then, and it is the kind of thing he would say today. It is what needs to be said if the people of God are to experience spiritual revival.

Putting Your Money Where Your Mouth Is

Of course, Hezekiah didn't *just* tell the truth. He acted on it. As noted above, he had the Levites help him in removing the idols and other inappropriate things from the Lord's sanctuary. They cleansed the Temple of the Lord and purified themselves. In other words, Hezekiah and the Levites didn't just talk about what was wrong, they took steps to correct it. They acknowledged their sin and took action to remove it from their lives. In other words, *they repented*.

The call to repentance is critical to revival. When John the Baptist first stepped onto the shores of the Jordan, he did so preaching a message of 'repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (See, Mark 1:4 NIV). When Jesus began his public ministry, his message was: 'The time promised by God has come at last...the Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!' (Mark 1:14). The

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word for repentance in the New Testament is *Metanoia*, and it refers to making a complete change of direction in your life. The word picture is of someone walking in one direction who abruptly does an about face and begins moving in the opposite direction. The idea is that when you become a part of God's family, you don't just talk about it, you act on it. You change your walk to match your talk.

That's what the people in Hezekiah's day did as well. They did this by cleaning up their act – by cleaning up the Temple and purifying themselves. When they had done so, they went on to lead all of Jerusalem in a service of national repentance. Hezekiah gathered the Levites and city leaders and conducted a worship service, complete with cymbals, harps, shofars and songs of praise. It really was quite a spectacle as the leaders of Jerusalem, both clerical and secular, set an example for the people to follow as they got themselves right with God. Before long everyone was doing just that, bringing their sacrifices and offerings to the Temple and demonstrating that they were turning their lives around.

One of the critical things to note in all of this was the way in which these festivities ended. The climax of the entire event was the offering (2 Chronicles 29:31). How

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interesting is that? In modern times, the climax of most church services seems to be the sermon. In Hezekiah's day, it was the offering. It makes sense when you think about it. The offering is that part of a service where the people have an opportunity to show God just how much he means to them. In Hezekiah's day, he obviously meant a lot. In fact, a little later in the story of Hezekiah, we learn that all of the people brought in their full tithe (ten percent) of their crops and grain to present to the Lord (2 Chronicles 31). Not just part of the tithe, all of it.

Interestingly, the Bible tells us that when they did this, everyone in Judah had enough to live on, and everyone was blessed by God (31:9-10). Just as God promises in scripture, when we present our best before God, when we give as God asks us to, our needs are always met, and we are always blessed (See, Malachi 3:10-12).

All of this, particularly the willingness of the people to give to God as they were asked to give, punctuates the third ingredient necessary for spiritual revival to take place: *a willingness on the part of God's people to put their money where their mouths are*. Folks, don't expect spiritual revival to take place if you aren't willing to surrender all to God that

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is God's. You need to surrender yourself, and you need to surrender that portion of your money that God asks you to give to him. You can't expect spiritual revival to occur without doing that. Whether we cling to our preferred way of doing things or our money, it is an indication that we really do not trust and honor God. As Jesus said, 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6:21). If you want revival, you can't play the game by halves. You must surrender to God. You can't just talk about the need for revival. You need to put your money where your mouth is.

A Passover for Everyone

After marking the people's return to God, Hezekiah arranged for them to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. The Passover of course celebrates how God miraculously delivered the Hebrew people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. This in and of itself was helpful in bringing about revival, for it is in remembering the mighty acts of God in the past that encourages us in our belief that he will continue to do mighty things in the present and future; that the God who has been our help in ages past will be our hope for years to come, as the old hymn goes. But what is really interesting about the way in which Hezekiah celebrated the Passover was

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that he invited, not only the people of Judah, but also the people from the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

That is no small matter. The people of Israel and Judah did not get along at this point in history. At the best of times, they were uneasy allies in the war against their common enemies. At most times, they were outright enemies. Yet Hezekiah invited them anyway. And to make matters even more surprising, when these outsiders showed up ceremonially unclean, that is, not properly prepared to take part in the Passover as all ‘decent people’ should be, Hezekiah allowed them to take part anyway. He simply prayed for them and invited them to the table.

Hezekiah’s open table approach to the Passover reflects yet another key ingredient to spiritual revival: *those who seek to experience revival need to have a ‘come as you are’ mentality*. If you pray for revival, don’t be surprised if people living far from God start showing up at your church. If people engaged in all sorts of ‘improper’ behavior start entering your doors. If you suddenly experience an influx of seriously messed-up people. If you truly want revival, you need to be down with that. Those are the people you have been praying for! You need, therefore, to be willing to

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embrace people who are not only different, but *extremely different* than you. You need to not just tolerate them but love them. You need to welcome them and help them in their walk as God works on them in his own good time. There are very few instant saints in the world. Revival requires a church to be openhearted toward the kind of people that all too often, the church frowns upon. Hezekiah was a man with an open heart. He welcomed the unclean, messy people to the Passover Table even though, as the text tells us in 2 Chronicles 30:18, to do was contrary to the letter of the Law of Moses. Hezekiah was more interested in adhering to the spirit of the Law, which is mercy (See, Matthew 9:13; 23:23).

The bottom line is this: if you want to experience revival, be ready to embrace the people the Lord sends to you.

The Confession of Sin

Of course, ‘come as you are’ doesn’t mean ‘stay as you are.’ Following the Passover, the people continued celebrating the seven-day long Festival of Unleavened Bread. It was during this time that Hezekiah saw the people make peace offerings and confess their sins to the Lord (See, 2 Chronicles 30:22 KJV). It should really go without saying

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but this too is a critical aspect of revival: *the confession of sin*. If you want to get to a place where God can use you mightily, you need to confess your sins and get your heart right before God.

Experienced church leaders know this to be true. Pastors, missionaries and other ministry leaders who have been around the block know that unconfessed sin within the church (or within themselves) is a major hindrance to revival. They know the truth of Psalm 66:18: ‘If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.’ They have witnessed the struggle of their churches and ministries to break through and watched as the barriers fell in the wake of times of confession. If you are a churchgoer, just ask your pastor. I guarantee he or she will confirm what I am saying. The bottom line is that if we want revival to take place in our context, we need to spend more time confessing our sins to God, and perhaps even to one another. That might not be easy, but it would make all the difference if we would.

Taking it to the Streets

2 Chronicles 31 tells us that when the people left the festival, they traveled across the land and smashed all the

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pagan shrines and altars. I love that. Now don't get me wrong – I am not suggesting that what we need to do today is pray for revival, confess our sins and then go out and start destroying everything around us that doesn't please God. Remember that in Hezekiah's day, the people of Judah were all on board – they were destroying idols and shrines and altars that they themselves erected, not the property of non-believers. But there is nonetheless a principle here that is vitally important. Revival isn't something you simply experience within the walls of your church. *It is something you take to the streets.* God's purpose for revival isn't that you hold meetings, pray a while, feel good about yourself, and be happy with whoever shows up for your Sunday morning church services. The purpose of revival isn't to benefit and transform the local church alone. It is to benefit and transform the world. People who have experienced personal revival go into the world and do just that.

That's what happened when Hezekiah was king. He initiated a revival that transformed a nation. He initiated a revival that gave birth to a missionary people – a people who were willing to take to the streets and make a difference. By the time his efforts were complete, Judah was no longer a

nation filled with idolatry and injustice. It was a nation that proclaimed the holiness of God to the world.

Where to Start

I don't know about you, but I would love to see something like that happen in our day. I would love to see people turning back to Christ's Church. I would love to see people on their knees, repenting of their sins and turning to God. I would love to see Bible-believing churches filled to capacity. I would love to see the people who attend those churches out on the streets, reaching the unreached, loving the unlovable, introducing people to Jesus, transforming the culture and changing the world. The question is – where does something like that start?

Maybe it will help to answer that question if we return to where we started this chapter. Remember Abijah? Remember her hopes and prayers for her son Hezekiah? Well, for my money, that is where the revival in Judah started. *Hezekiah's revival started, not with Hezekiah, but with his mother's prayers.* In other words, it started with one person, one mom, who may well have been the only person in Judah at the time with any faith at all. But as she held her

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little son in her arms, she prayed, her prayers went up to God and God used them to change the world.

And so, before moving on to the next chapter to recount Hezekiah's royal mistakes, I leave you with this: if you want to experience revival, you need to realize that revival doesn't start out there somewhere. It doesn't start when enough people come together to start one. It doesn't start when your pastor tells you what to do. *Revival starts with you.* So pray like Abijah. Believe. Hope. Speak the truth. Put your money where your mouth is. Embrace the outsiders. Confess your sins. Take to the streets. Change your world. If it can happen in Abijah's world, it can happen in yours. Revival is possible. And it all begins with you.

Chapter Eight

Hezekiah's Challenges – 2 Chronicles 32

'Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before or after his time. He remained faithful to the Lord in everything, and he carefully obeyed all the commands the Lord had given Moses...In all that he did in the service of the Temple of God and in his efforts to follow God's laws and commands, Hezekiah sought his God wholeheartedly. As a result, he was very successful.'

2 Kings 18:5-6 and 2 Chronicles 31:21

Our last chapter might lead you to think that Hezekiah could walk on water. He was certainly better than any of the other kings examined to this point. Not only did he lead a revival, but just get a load of the way the Bible describes him: he trusted God; he kept God's commandments; there never was another king like him; he sought God and did everything with all his heart. Geez O Pete, the guy sounds perfect! Well, not quite. Turns out that Hezekiah, for all his pluses, had a

few minuses too. In this chapter, we will explore three challenges Hezekiah faced in the latter years of his reign.

The Challenge of Assyria¹

As has been noted, the world power during the reign of kings Uzziah, Ahaz and Hezekiah was the Assyrian Empire, and by the time Hezekiah ascended to the throne, both Israel and Judah had become vassal states paying tribute to their Assyrian overlords. Shortly after Hezekiah became king, however, the Assyrian Empire faltered, and both Hezekiah and King Hoshea of Israel sensed opportunity. They decided to stop paying tribute to Assyria and formed an alliance with Egypt. The idea was that in the event the Assyrians attacked, Egypt would rise to their defense. It seemed a good idea, but before long, signs that it wasn't began to surface.

The first of these signs was a rather eccentric performance by the prophet Isaiah. God told Isaiah to take off his clothes and sandals and walk around naked and barefoot as a protest against the alliance (Isaiah 20). So, for

¹ The story of how Hezekiah dealt with the challenge of Assyria is drawn from 2 Chronicles 32, 2 Kings 18-19, and Isaiah chapters 20, 30-31 and 37.

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the next three years – three years! – Isaiah did exactly that. He walked around Jerusalem in his birthday suit prophesying against the alliance with Egypt (Did I mention earlier that being a prophet was a tough job?). Specifically, he spoke of two mistakes Hezekiah made in forming that alliance. *The first mistake was that he did not consult God in making the alliance, and the second was that he placed his trust in Pharaoh rather than God.* Isaiah said:

‘What sorrow awaits those who look to Egypt for help, trusting their horses, chariots, and charioteers and depending on the strength of human armies instead of looking to the Lord, the Holy One of Israel’ (Isaiah 31:1).

Folks, when a prophet with Isaiah’s credentials strips and tells you something like that, you know you’ve made a mistake.

The second sign that Hezekiah had made a mistake surfaced when Assyria invaded Israel. Guess what? Egypt was a no show. Pharaoh did not come to Israel’s defense. Assyria pummeled Israel for the next three years, and when she was defeated, carried her people off into exile.

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Thereafter, the third sign that the alliance had been a mistake manifested itself. Having taken care of business in Israel, Assyria marched on Judah. Once again, Egypt was AWOL, and Hezekiah knew for certain that he had made a royal mistake.

At first, Hezekiah panicked, but then he got his head on straight. He had his men dig what became known as Hezekiah's tunnel (it's still there to this day) in order to divert the local water supply so that it flowed inside the city instead of outside where the Assyrian troops had camped. In other words, he deprived his enemies of fresh water. Next, he fortified the city and encouraged his troops:

‘Be strong and courageous! Don't be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria or his mighty army, for there is a power far greater on our side! He may have an army, but they are merely men. We have the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles for us!’ (2 Chronicles 32:7-8(a)).

Hezekiah was becoming his old self again. After foolishly trusting in Egypt to save him, he was now realizing that it was time to once again put his trust in God.

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King Sennacherib of Assyria didn't think much of Hezekiah's plan. Through his subordinate he sent a defiant message to Hezekiah, stating that no god had been able to stand against Assyria before, and none would now. Hezekiah, now fully recovered from his former folly, called upon the prophet Isaiah for assistance. Isaiah told the king not to be afraid. The two men put their heads together and did the very thing Hezekiah should have done from the start: pray. They prayed all night. They called upon God to fight for them. The words to one of the prayers of Hezekiah are recorded in 2 Kings 19:15-19:

‘...O Lord, God of Israel, you are enthroned between the mighty cherubim! You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth. Bend down, O Lord, and listen! Open your eyes, O Lord, and see! Listen to Sennacherib's words of defiance against the living God. It is true, Lord, that the kings of Assyria have destroyed all these nations. And they have thrown the gods of these nations into the fire and burned them. But of course the Assyrians could destroy them! They were not gods at all – only idols of wood and stone shaped by human hands. Now, O Lord our God,

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rescue us from his power; then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you alone, O Lord, are God.’

Well, let me tell you, when you pray like that – when you pray in a way that recognizes that the only one who can save you is God – that’s when miracles happen. And wouldn’t you know it, that very night, one did. God sent an angel who decimated the Assyrian army. 185,000 Assyrian troops died in one night. We don’t know exactly how they died, but that’s largely beside the point. The point is that God acted when Egypt had not. God, not the horses and chariots of worldly power, saved Judah. The King of Assyria and the remains of his army were sent packing in disgrace. Hezekiah learned a valuable lesson that day, a lesson captured beautifully in the words of the 146th Psalm:

‘Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help...happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever’ (Psalm 146:3; 5-6 NRSV).

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Hezekiah had really messed up in making an alliance with Egypt. But in the end, he did the right thing. He turned to the Lord. He recognized that his hope rested not in Egypt, but in the power of the Living God.

Folks, learn from Hezekiah's mistake, as well as his subsequent correction of it. When you have battles in life, when you find yourself up against it, don't rely on your own wisdom to get you through. Don't rely on the power and promises of others. True enough, sometimes we need to use our heads, and sometimes we need the help of others. But relying on those things alone is folly. Let God fight your battles. Put your trust in him. For he, and he alone, has the power to save.

The Challenge of Illness²

Shortly after the victory over Assyria, Hezekiah became deathly ill. Isaiah went to visit him, as good friends do in such cases. Upon seeing his bedridden monarch he said, 'King, you don't look so good. You better get your affairs in order, because you are going to die.' This was no amateur

² The story of Hezekiah's illness is drawn from 2 Chronicles 32:24-26; 2 Kings 20:1-10 and Isaiah 38.

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medical diagnosis, it was a message straight from God. As Isaiah turned to go, Hezekiah, fresh from his lesson about turning to God when you are up against an enemy bigger than yourself, turned his face to the wall and prayed for healing. Suddenly, Isaiah was stopped by God in his tracks. A second message from the Lord had come! He turned to Hezekiah and announced that God had heard his prayer and granted him another 15 years of life. Friends, if you ever doubt the power of prayer, this is one story you need to turn to and read again and again. God doesn't always heal in response to our prayers (that's a subject for another book), and when he does, he doesn't always do it so quickly, but clearly, our prayers have the power to change things!

Hezekiah was so thrilled (and who wouldn't be?) that he wrote a poem of humility, praise and thanksgiving (Isaiah 39:9-20). For present purposes, just picture him singing something like *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. So far so good, right? Hezekiah had turned to God in a time of crisis, God had provided a miracle and Hezekiah said thank you. But then, something happened. 2 Chronicles 32 recounts the story of Hezekiah's healing, but then adds: 'But Hezekiah did not respond appropriately to the kindness shown him, and he

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became proud' (2 Chronicles 32:25). That's a bit of a tough verse to figure out. I mean, he said thank you. He even wrote a poem. How did he not respond appropriately? It's hard to tell from the text. We aren't told precisely what went wrong. The answer lies in those white spaces between the sentences of scripture.

I have a theory though. One of the things about scripture is that we don't always know how much time passes in those white spaces. It may be that although Hezekiah was initially thankful for what God had done for him, as time went by, he thought less and less about it. He became focused once again on himself, and forgot that everything he had, including the final fifteen years of his life, was a gift from God. You might say that *he failed to cultivate a long-term attitude of gratitude*. Instead, of being grateful, he became proud. This makes sense to me because, well, we all do this. We find ourselves in a tight spot, cry out to God for help, and then, when he comes through, offer a quick word of thanks (maybe even more than a quick word). But then, as time moves on, so do we. We forget all about what God has done for us and move on with our lives as if nothing happened.

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How do you suppose God feels when we do things like that? How would you feel, if, for example, you risked your life to save someone, and they said thanks, but then went on with their life and ignored you completely? If you gave someone one of your kidneys, and all they said when they saw you was thanks, but I have things to do right now? Not exactly right, is it?

God blesses us in so many ways. He gives us life. He gives us friends. He gives us family. He gives us health. He gives us a beautiful world. Sunsets. Singing cardinals in the morning. Stars. For crying out loud, he gives us salvation, going so far as to send Jesus to die on the cross so that we might be with him forever. Don't you think we should spend some time cultivating an attitude of gratitude for all he has done for us? Of course we should. We should spend time thanking God for all he has given to us. We should spend time counting our blessings, as the old hymn tells us to do. Doing so can help us cultivate an attitude of gratitude and go a long way toward preventing us from becoming ungrateful and proud.

The Apostle Paul wrote, ‘...give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus

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Christ' (Ephesians 5:20). We need to be thankful for what we have been given, for we truly do have a great deal to be thankful for.

Fortunately for Hezekiah, once again he realized the mistake he had made. After failing to respond appropriately to the Lord's kindness, and experiencing God's displeasure, 'he humbled himself for the pride in his heart' and turned back to God. Just a reminder that when you do mess up, the thing to do is turn to God. For with God, there is always forgiveness.

*The Challenge of the Visitors*³

By this time, Hezekiah's reputation had grown considerably. He was wealthy and respected throughout the world. And so it was that one day, ambassadors from Babylon came to visit him. Babylon was the new power on the world stage, and so a visit from them was no doubt flattering to Hezekiah. They had come because they had heard about the remarkable things that had happened in Judah

³ The story of Hezekiah and his visitors is drawn from 2 Chronicles 32:31; 2 Kings 20:12-19 and Isaiah 39.

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during Hezekiah's reign, chief among them, no doubt, the defeat of the Assyrians and Hezekiah's miraculous recovery.

Interestingly, the Bible tells us that at this time, God left Hezekiah to test what was in his heart. The idea of God 'leaving' Hezekiah is somewhat disturbing but understand it doesn't mean that God left him in any sort of permanent sense. It is more like what a parent does when teaching a child to walk. He or she may hold their toddler's hands as he tests out his wheels, but eventually, a parent must let go to see if the kid can walk on his or her own. On this occasion, God, in some sense, allowed Hezekiah to stand on his own for a moment to see what he would do. Why would God do such a thing? I mean, didn't God already know what was in Hezekiah's heart? Of course he did. But maybe Hezekiah didn't know. And so God left Hezekiah to stand on his own two feet for a moment to allow Hezekiah a chance to see himself for who he really was without God.

It turned out Hezekiah, apart from God, was nothing to write home about. For when his visitors arrived, he basically said, 'I'm so honored you have come to see me! Let me show you how wonderful I am!' He proceeded to show the Babylonian envoys all of his treasures. He bragged about

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how rich he was. He didn't say a single word about the remarkable things God did for him, the very things the envoys had come to hear about. It was all, 'Me, me, me.' It was, quite frankly, a bit embarrassing.

When the envoys left, Isaiah came by to visit. Seeing the Babylonians leaving, he asked Hezekiah, 'Hey, who are they?' Hezekiah told him. Isaiah's 'uh oh' meter started ticking. 'What did they want? What did you show them?' Hezekiah, no doubt beaming with pride, responded, 'They saw everything...I showed them everything I own! All my royal treasuries' (Isaiah 39:4 NLT; note the 'I' and 'my' in his words). Isaiah shook his head and said, 'Hezekiah, you are just too stupid to live. Don't you see? They'll be back someday to get everything. It won't happen in your lifetime, but it will happen to your descendants. They will lose the kingdom you've worked so hard to protect. They will be carried off to Babylon! How could you have been so foolish?'

Now, right off the bat, you can see part of what caused this royal mistake. Clearly, Hezekiah's pride had reared its ugly head again. No doubt that was part of what God wanted Hezekiah to see about himself. But there was something even

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worse. For when Isaiah told Hezekiah about the consequences that would fall upon his descendants as a result of what he had done, the king responded by saying, ‘this message you have given me from the Lord is good,’ but was secretly thinking, ‘At least there will be peace and security during my lifetime.’ (See, 2 Kings 20:19). The New Revised Standard version translates that last phrase as, ‘*who cares? At least it won’t happen to me.*’ Oh my. Earlier, when his own kingdom was threatened (and him along with it) he prayed to God to save his nation. Then, when he was facing a fatal illness, he prayed once again for God to intervene and save his life. But here, after Isaiah tells him that his descendants will lose the kingdom and be carried off to Babylon, the response of his heart is: ‘who cares? At least it won’t happen to me.’

No wonder God had wanted to test Hezekiah to reveal what was in his heart. *Hezekiah had become a selfish man.*

Hezekiah’s Royal Mistake

God tested Hezekiah so that Hezekiah could see the selfishness in his heart. But apparently, Hezekiah didn’t see. Hezekiah knew that on previous occasions, when he had messed up, he had turned to God and found forgiveness. Not

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only forgiveness, but deliverance as well. Hezekiah knew that prayer was powerful; that prayer changes things. So when he himself had been in trouble, he prayed like crazy. But when he learned his descendants would lose everything and be hauled off into exile, he didn't pray at all. He just said, 'well, at least it won't happen to me.'

Hezekiah's royal mistake was his selfishness. But we need to say more than just that. His was a specific kind of selfishness. Hezekiah's selfishness was the kind that is only concerned with the here and now – the present day. Hezekiah simply didn't care what happened to future generations. He didn't care about what happened to his children, his grandchildren, etc. He didn't care what happened to the generation of his children and grandchildren. The only thing that mattered to him was that things remained comfortable during his lifetime.

The people of God are called to be other-centered in all they do. Paul wrote, 'Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others too.' (Philippians 2:4). This doesn't just apply to those around today. It refers to those who will come after you as well. Christians should be people who live in such a way that they leave a better world

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for their children. We should be a people who invest in the lives of our children. We should be a people who live for the sake of future generations.

Years ago, while I was a seminary intern at Osbornville Baptist Church in Brick, New Jersey, I had the privilege of knowing an elder saint named Gene D'Alusio. Gene was a deacon in the church, and one Sunday afternoon, I joined him as he made visits to some of the elderly members of the congregation. On one such visit, I met a man who was, to put it mildly, cranky. On our way to this man's house, Gene had told me that this man (whom I had not yet met) was a friend who had not been to church in a while, and that part of the purpose of his visit was to find out the reason. When we arrived, it didn't take long to discover it. The man began to grumble and complain about the direction of the church: 'The young people are taking over,' he said. 'They are making us sing modern songs. They are using up the church's resources on their kids. They're taking over leadership positions. Everything is becoming about the youth and kids! In short,' he said, with a final flourish that would have done Mr. Micawber proud, 'The church has become youth oriented!'

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I will never forget how Gene responded. Gene was a tall drink of water, standing about 6'6". At the words, 'youth oriented,' he raised himself up to his full height in the chair and pointed his finger directly back at his friend as he said, 'Well, we darn well better be. I'm 76, and you're no spring chicken either. We're both on our way out. If we want our church to continue after we're gone, if we want our church to continue to be a witness for Christ in our community after we're gone, if we want to leave a legacy that will enable the church to tell the world about Jesus after we're gone, we darn well better be youth oriented!'

Gene's friend looked like a deer in the headlights. He shrank back, thought a moment, and mumbled, 'I guess you're right.'

Gene taught me two things that day. First, the church will always need senior saints like Gene D'Alusio. But second, and to Gene's point, the church needs to invest in the lives of its young people, for they are the ones who will carry the Gospel to the next generation.

I thank God that I serve in a church that agrees with Gene D'alusio. But I am aware of far too many that don't.

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One of the great tragedies of the modern church is the widespread resistance to changes that would reach a new generation. In too many churches, the spirit of Hezekiah's selfishness runs rampant. Too many are fighting to preserve things the way they like them, singing only the songs they like to sing, clinging to power, refusing to allow a new generation to share it, refusing to invest in the lives of the next generation – the generation that needs to be equipped to carry the Gospel to the world. Selfishness can be found in anyone and in all generations of course. Sometimes the young can refuse to help the old. But we are talking here about Hezekiah, whose mistake was refusing to care about the next generation. That is always a mistake. And it is always selfish.

Too bad Hezekiah didn't have a friend like Gene D'Alusio. Maybe he could have straightened the old king out. Maybe he could have inspired the king to fall on his knees and pray, as he had in former days, that God would relent and come to the rescue of the next generation. Maybe the old prayer warrior could have made a difference. But it was not to be. Hezekiah was never roused. He remained in

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his selfishness and let the consequences of his error fall upon the next generation. Such was Hezekiah's royal mistake.

The Bible records Hezekiah as being a good king. We should probably remember him that way as well. After all, no one is perfect. Hezekiah teaches us many things, about revival, prayer, and turning back to God when you mess up. Learn from all that. But while you are at it, don't forget to learn from his mistake as well. Take Paul's advice: put others ahead of yourself. And specifically, be someone who cares about the next generation. For to do otherwise is to leave the world a bigger mess than you found it. And that is always a royal mistake.

Chapter Nine

The Long Arm of the Lord

2 Chronicles 33:1-13

'Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. He did what was evil in the Lord's sight, following the detestable practices of the pagan nations that the Lord had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites. He rebuilt the pagan shrines his father, Hezekiah, had broken down...He built these altars for all the powers of the heavens in both courtyards of the Lord's Temple. Manasseh also sacrificed his own sons in the fire in the valley of Ben-Hinnom. He practiced sorcery, divination, and witchcraft, and he consulted with mediums and psychics. He did much that was evil in the Lord's sight, arousing his anger.'

2 Chronicles 33:1-3(a); 5-6

Hezekiah made mistakes, but he at least led a revival that saw the people of Judah faithfully return to God. Unfortunately, this revival did not last beyond his lifetime,

for the next king of Judah, Hezekiah's son Manasseh, quickly put an end to it.

Manasseh the Terrible

Manasseh's name means 'causing to forget.'¹ He certainly forgot anything good his father might have taught him. Manasseh became king when he was twelve years old and reigned in Judah fifty-five years, the longest reign of any king in either Judah or Israel. Unfortunately, it was a reign of terror. 2 Chronicles 33:1-9 catalogues his crimes.

First, Manasseh engaged in the twisted practices that the Canaanites engaged in prior to the arrival of God's people in the Promised Land under Joshua. Specifically identified among these practices was the renewal of the hellish crime of Manasseh's ancestor Ahaz – the sacrifice of children to the false god Molech in the fires of the valley of Ben-Hinnom. Manasseh actually sacrificed his own sons in those fires. Hezekiah had put an end to such atrocities. Manasseh revived them. He also reversed his father's work by rebuilding shrines to Baal and erecting Asherah poles throughout the

¹ James Orr, M.A., D.D., General Editor, s.v. 'Manasseh (1)' International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1915.

land, where, no doubt, the people engaged in any number of twisted pagan practices.

Manasseh further bowed down before the ‘powers of the heavens’ (v. 3). That is, he worshipped the sun, moon and stars, a practice prevalent among pagan peoples in those days and one Moses had specifically commanded Israel not to engage in (See, Deuteronomy 4:19). Manasseh not only worshiped them but went so far as to erect altars to these celestial bodies in the Temple itself (2 Chronicles 33:4-5). He also practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft and sought the advice of mediums and psychics (that this too was part of what aroused God’s anger provides a warning for those who think little of messing around with the occult).

And finally, as if all that wasn’t enough, Manasseh ‘murdered many innocent people until Jerusalem was filled from one end to the other with innocent blood’ (2 Kings 21:16). That is to say, during Manasseh’s reign, blood ran in the streets. Manasseh was a mass murderer. He killed children at the altars of Molech, and others on the streets of his capital.

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The Bible's verdict on Manasseh's reign is clear: of all the troubled kings who ever ruled in Judah, Manasseh was the worst. He was as evil a human being as you will ever find.

Warnings

It is important to understand that Manasseh's crimes were not committed in ignorance. His were the actions of a man who consciously rejected God. He received warnings about his choices from at least three different sources.

First, he received warnings from the history of his people. Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon had all issued warnings to the people to avoid the kind of behavior Manasseh was engaged in. Consider the following:

‘The Lord said to Moses, ‘Give the people of Israel these instructions, which apply both to native Israelites and to foreigners living in Israel. If any of them offer their children as a sacrifice to Molech, they must be put to death. The people of the community must stone them to death. I myself will turn against them and cut them off from the community, because they have defiled my sanctuary and brought shame on

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my holy name by offering their children to Molech. And if the people of the community ignore those who offer their children to Molech and refuse to execute them, I myself will turn against them and their families and will cut them off from the community. This will happen to all who commit spiritual prostitution by worshipping Molech' (Leviticus 20:1-5).

'If you abandon the Lord and serve other gods, he will turn against you and destroy you, even though he has been so good to you' (Joshua 24:20).

'Manasseh even took a carved idol he had made and set it up in God's Temple, the very place where God had told David and Solomon, 'My name will be honored forever in this Temple and in Jerusalem – the city I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel. If the Israelites will be careful to obey my commands – all the laws, decrees, and regulations given through Moses – I will not send them into exile from this land that I set aside for your ancestors.'" (2 Chronicles 33:7-8).

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The message from Israel's history was clear: there would be consequences for the kind of behavior Manasseh was engaged in.

Second, Manasseh received warnings from his family history. Not just from his ancestors David and Solomon, but from his own father and grandfather. His grandfather Ahaz, who had done many of the same things he was doing, had lost Judah's independence, reducing the nation to a state of vassalage to the Assyrian Empire. His father Hezekiah had led a revival based on the principle that it was only by returning to God and maintaining covenant faithfulness that Judah could hope to prosper. Manasseh didn't have to look far back through his family history to see that what he was doing was wrong.

Third, Manasseh had been warned by God. 2 Chronicles 33:10 tells us that God himself warned Manasseh and his people. We can imagine this happening in at least two ways. First, through the prophets. 2 Kings 21 tells us that God sent prophets to warn Manasseh that he was leading his nation to ruin, but Manasseh did not listen. Indeed, there can be little doubt that theirs was among the blood that ran through the streets during his reign. It was, for example,

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during Manasseh's reign that the work of Isaiah ended abruptly. Jewish tradition tells us he was sawed in half with a wooden saw under Manasseh's orders. And secondly, it is also possible that God spoke directly to Manasseh, or at least appealed to his conscience. But Manasseh stifled that still small voice as well.

There is a name for people like that – people who stifle the voice of conscience as they perform evil deeds. We call them sociopaths: people who psychopathically live without either moral responsibility or a conscience. That's the kind of man Manasseh was. He was a man without a conscience. A man who lacked even the most basic moral compass.

If there was ever a man about whom we might say, 'that guy is beyond hope,' it was Manasseh.

Rock Bottom

But something interesting happened to this man. Something that shows us, as clearly as anything ever will, that God never gives up on anyone. 2 Chronicles 33:11 tells us that the Lord sent the Assyrian army to execute judgment on Manasseh. It marched on Jerusalem and took Manasseh

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captive. The Assyrians put a ring through his nose and dragged him off as a prisoner to Babylon. Picture a bull ring connected to a chain that his captors tugged as they dragged him along. Ouch. It is a long way from Jerusalem to Babylon, especially with a ring in your nose. A journey like that provides a man with many moments of reflection. Every time he felt the tug, he surely pondered how he wound up in such a predicament. It would be safe to say that in making that journey, Manasseh hit what is commonly referred to as *rock bottom*. I mean really – you don't get more rock bottom than being dragged off to Babylon by a ring in your nose.

Most people work hard to avoid rock bottom. But sometimes it's the best thing that could ever happen to a person. Sometimes, you have to hit rock bottom before there is any chance of turning your life around. It's a tough lesson for many of us, but sometimes we have to let those we care for hit rock bottom before there is any chance they will turn their lives around. We see the truth of this in stories like the Parable of the Prodigal Son (See, Luke 15:11-32). It was only after the son had lost everything, all his money and friends, and was working as a pig boy who longed to eat the pig's slop, that he came to his senses and realized his need to return

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to his father's house. It was only after Jonah was in the belly of the whale, countless fathoms down in the deep darkness of the sea, that he realized he needed to tell God he was sorry for disobeying the call to go to Ninevah (Jonah 2). Sometimes the best thing that can happen to a person is to hit rock bottom, a truth expressed beautifully by Oscar Wilde in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

'Ah! Happy they whose hearts can break

And peace and pardon win!

How else can man make straight his plan

And cleanse his soul from sin?

How else but through a broken heart

May Lord Christ enter in?'

Manasseh hit rock bottom. He lost everything. He was in pain. He was humbled. His heart, wicked as it was, had been broken. It was the best thing that ever happened to him. He was finally ready to allow God into his wicked heart.

Manasseh's Cry

And so it was that in anguish, at the very end of himself, with nowhere else to turn, he humbly turned to God.

‘But while in deep distress, Manasseh sought the Lord his God and sincerely humbled himself before the God of his ancestors.’ (2 Chronicles 33:12).

And when he did, two beautiful things happened. *First, God listened to him* (verse 13a). Imagine that! Manasseh was so wicked. Thoroughly evil. A comprehensively reprehensible excuse of a man. And yet, when he prayed, God listened. There’s a song by Wayne Watson, *The Long Arm of the Lord*, in which we find these astonishingly true words of grace:

‘There are pagans at the corners of creation
Making light of the salvation that we know.
And with a small narrow mind I give them over
To the passion of the godless seed they sow.
But in truth we have just as much potential
To be Godly and perfected by the Word.

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Oh, cause no one in this world
Can ever slip beyond the reaches
Of the Long arm of the Lord.²

Isn't that amazing! God loves everyone. His desire, as 2 Peter 3:9 tells us, is for *all* to come to repentance. Even those who are as evil as King Manasseh. There is nothing you can do that can make God stop loving you. As the late Brennan Manning used to say, 'God loves you, and there is nothing you can ever do that will make him love you more or less.'³

Let that sink in a moment, will you. Especially those of you who feel you have done things that make it impossible for God to hear you when you call. Manasseh prayed, and God listened. Turn to God right now, speak to him. Do not be afraid. God loves you, and he will listen to you too!

And as if that isn't enough to bring tears to your eyes, the second half of verse 13 will do the trick. God listened to

² Wayne Watson, *The Long Arm of the Lord*, from the Album, *The Fine Line* (Word Records 1988).

³ This may be Brennan Manning's signature line. I had the pleasure of hearing him say those words in person on multiple occasions. If you ever need to hear words about the love of God (and we all do), there are no better books I can recommend than those authored by this man of grace.

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Manasseh, and then, he ‘*was moved by Manasseh’s request.*’ Wow. God was moved by the prayer of this awful sinner. He didn’t just listen. He was moved. Think of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the Samaritan was moved with compassion at the sight of a man lying naked and bleeding along the side of the road – moved not just to feel something at the sight of a person in distress but to do something about it (See Luke 10:30-37). That’s what we are talking about here. God saw Manasseh in his distress and was moved to do something about it.

My Night Under the Stars

Years ago, before I became a pastor, I was a lawyer (if you needed any additional proof that there is hope for everyone, there you have it). Discontented with the way my life was going, I turned to God to discover what he wanted me to do with it. There were many ways in which I sought God during this time, but by far the most significant was this: I would go out into my backyard and pray while looking at the stars. I did this for many months, night after night. I would stand outside, gaze at the wonders above me, talk to God, and hope for the moment when he would talk back.

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One particularly clear and crisp night, the stars were shining brighter than usual. As I gazed around, my attention was directed to the light of two planets. On my right was the gentle, yellow light of Venus. On my left the soft orange-red glow of Mars. A canopy of stars in between. I got to thinking of how I was a traveler between two worlds. Not just in the sense that Venus and Mars were on my left and right in the night's sky, but cosmologically speaking as well. I stood on a planet between two other planets, in a solar system of nine planets (now eight), in a universe filled with billions upon billions of suns. As I thought of this, an image of an old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon came into my mind. In it, Calvin, six year old philosopher that he was, stood out under a sky full of stars and shouted for all he was worth, 'I'M SIGNIFICANT!' only to add, in a subdued tone, 'said the dust speck.'⁴

I felt pretty small in that moment. But no sooner did I feel this than the lyrics of the song *His Eyes* by Steven Curtis Chapman and James Isaac Elliot came into my mind and heart:

⁴ Bill Watterson, *There's Treasure Everywhere* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1996), 30.

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‘Sometimes I look above me, when stars are shining

And I feel so small.

How could the God of heaven, and all creation

Know I’m here at all?

But then in the silence, he whispers,

‘My child, I created you too.

And you’re my most precious creation,

I even gave my Son for you.’⁵

It was in that moment that I felt God’s voice. I was overwhelmed by the sense that I was unconditionally loved by God. I was suddenly aware of what God wanted me to do. For I knew that if God loved me that much – so much that he gave his Son for me, he must love everyone else that much too (and he does). I knew that it broke God’s heart that there were people out there who didn’t know what I knew. And I knew that I had to do everything I could, to tell as many people as possible the glorious Good News of God’s

⁵ Steven Curtis Chapman and James Isaac Elliot, *His Eyes*. From the album *Real Life Conversations* (Sparrow Records, 1988).

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unconditional love for them. I had to do all I could to ensure that no one would ever stand between the worlds of Venus and Mars under a canopy of stars and feel, as Calvin did, that they are insignificant. Because in the eyes of God, we are priceless. No matter how broken, beat up, battered or bruised, we are all, in God's eyes, more precious than the stars.

Friends, there is a God who loves like that. A God who loves everyone. Even you. A God who, at the first sign of your distress, was so moved with compassion that he ran to you, trading heaven's throne for a cross, because, marvel of marvels, he couldn't stand the thought of being without you. Isn't that amazing? That we can move God's heart like that? No matter who you are, where you have been or what you have done – I'll say it again – GOD LOVES YOU, and there is nothing you can do to make him love you less. If you cry out to him, he will hear you. He will be moved. And he will move heaven and earth to find you.

Manasseh Comes Home

And so it was with Manasseh. Oh, we aren't told the details. Only that he 'finally realized that the Lord alone was

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God' and that God allowed him to return to Jerusalem and to his kingdom (2 Chronicles 33:13). But oh the images that spring to mind! I see the Father rushing down the road to greet the prodigal son, throwing his arms around him, unable to stop kissing him. I see the son, in this case Manasseh, tearing up - not just in his Father's embrace - but for the rest of his life every time he thought about what happened. I see the love of God working in his heart, transforming him, making him a new creation. And I imagine the moment when he died, and met Jesus face to face, and discovered that it wasn't just a dream. That he really was significant. That he really was loved – more loved than he had ever dared imagine. You know, the Bible doesn't say that there are no tears in heaven, only that God wipes them away (See, Revelation 21:4). So I would imagine that many eyes there, not just Manasseh's, will need to have tears wiped away on the day they meet Jesus and comprehend fully the depths of God's love and grace, for their eyes will be filled with tears of joy.

Do you get what the story of Manasseh is saying? I hope so. Because it's not just a story. It's the truth. And it is not just about Manasseh. It's about you. Anyone can be a

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new creation in Christ. No matter how far you have run. No matter where you hide. No matter how far gone you might be. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but might have whole and everlasting life’ (John 3:16).⁶

God loves you. No matter what. So speak to him. He’s listening, and he will move heaven and earth at the sound of your voice. Today could be your day. Let his grace find you and draw you close to him. He longs to embrace you, forgive you and erase every last one of your royal mistakes.

⁶ Author’s translation.

Chapter Ten

Making Things Right - 2 Chronicles 34-35

Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. He did what was pleasing in the Lords sight and followed the example of his ancestor David. He did not turn away from doing what was right. During the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, Josiah began to seek the God of his ancestor David...While they were bringing money collected from the Lord's Temple, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the Lord that was written by Moses. Hilkiah said to Shaphan the court secretary, 'I have found the book of the Law in the Lord's Temple!' Then Hilkiah gave the scroll to Shaphan. Shaphan took the scroll to the king...When the king heard what was written in the Law, he tore his clothes in despair.'

2 Chronicles 34:1-3(a); 14-16(a); 19

The Book of Romans is Paul's *magnum opus*. It is his most systematic explanation of what it means to be rescued by and follow Jesus Christ. In Romans, Paul waxes

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eloquently about the love of God in Christ. So eloquently in fact, that as he begins the sixth chapter of his work, he has to pull back on the reins a bit. After writing about the amazing grace that saved us while we were still sinners, Paul asks a simple question: ‘If God’s love is so great, does that mean we are free to sin as much as we want?’ He immediately answers this question with an emphatic ‘No! (See, Romans 6:1). For obviously, if we genuinely love God, we will do our best to live in a way that pleases him.

In our last chapter, I emphasized that God loves us unconditionally and reaches out to us no matter who we are, where we have been or what we have done. But in affirming this beautiful truth, we need to make sure that we do not misconstrue it as a license to disregard the way of life God desires for us. Sadly, there are many Christians and churches that have done so, and that is just plain wrong. For one thing, as I noted a moment ago, if you love God, you will do your best to please him. For another, we need to recall that Christ did not call the people of his Church to merely receive the benefit of salvation and look forward to heaven and the life of the age to come. He calls us to be disciples who follow him and reflect his love in such a way that the whole world

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might know of God's great love. Our mission is not to just go to heaven when we die. It is to proclaim Christ in all we do and work with him as he transforms the world. It is to partner with God, in prayer and action, to make things more on earth as they are in heaven (See, Matthew 6:10). As Peter wrote:

‘...you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light’ (1 Peter 2:9).

And as Jesus himself said:

‘You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father (Matthew 5:14-16).

For such reasons, it is crucial that we do not take God's love for granted. We must heed the call to obey God's commands.

From Manasseh to Josiah

Our last king, Manasseh, experienced quite a remarkable turnaround in his life. Unfortunately, his personal transformation did not rub off on his people. Decades of wickedness had created entrenched patterns of behavior in the people of Judah, and while they improved some, they sadly continued to practice a syncretistic faith that comingled the worship of Yahweh, Baal and Asherah (See, 2 Chronicles 33:17). Sadder still is the fact that when Manasseh died, his son Amon reverted to his father's former ways. He was so bad that his own officials assassinated him after only two years in office (See, 2 Chronicles 33:21-24). And so it was that Amon's son, Josiah, became king at the tender age of eight.

Josiah was unlike any other king mentioned in this book. In fact, in contravention of our theme, there will be no bemoaning his mistakes as we study his life. That isn't to say he was perfect; no one is. Near the end of his life, he mistakenly engaged in a battle he shouldn't have, and it cost him his life (See, 2 Chronicles 35:20-25).¹ But all things

¹ It is interesting that the one mistake Josiah made was fighting a battle God had not asked him to fight. Had he been content to let God fight for

considered, this guy was a choir boy compared to the rest of the kings of Judah. As it says in 2 Chronicles 34:2, ‘he did what was pleasing in the Lord’s sight...he did not turn away from doing what was right’ (just might be the beginnings of a rap song there). Josiah was, without doubt, a good king.

Josiah’s Early Life

The ensuing verses in chapter 34 reveal three critical movements in Josiah’s early life. *First, when he was sixteen, he began to seek God.* Every spiritual journey begins with the first step, and it was during Josiah’s teenage years, those tough years of becoming in which we all wrestle with the question of who we are and want to be, that Josiah did the smartest thing he could have done. He sought God. If you are a teenager reading this book, I hope you will take a lesson from Josiah on this score. You probably have a lot of questions about the direction of your life. You probably feel pulled in a thousand different directions. Don’t just go with what seems right in the moment. Seek God. For as the Bible

him, he would have lived. For those who today follow the way of Jesus, Josiah’s tragic death is a reminder that those who live by the sword die by it (See, Matthew 26:52) and that the best thing to do in the face of our enemies is to ‘be still’ and let God handle things (See, Psalm 46).

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promises, when you seek him you will find him, and he will show you the way to go (See, Matthew 7:7; Proverbs 3:5-6). (Come to think of it, this is good advice for more than just teenagers!).

Second, when he was twenty, he put his faith into action. His relationship with God led him to the conclusion that what was happening in his realm was not right, so he personally traveled throughout his kingdom and tore down pagan shrines and idols. He had discovered a cause worth fighting for and began to fight for it. This too, is good advice for the young. As you mature, and head out into the world, don't allow yourself to fall into a dull, mind numbing routine. Life is meant to be an adventure. God calls each of us to take our place in the story he is telling. Find that place, find your cause, and give it all you've got! Josiah had found his cause: restoring the rightful worship of Yahweh throughout Judah. He pursued it with a vengeance.

Finally, when Josiah was twenty-six, he began to repair the Temple. After six-years of itinerant idol smashing, he returned home, settled down, and began the business of purifying the Temple. What he didn't know was that this

endeavor would wind up rocking himself and his country to the core.

The Discovery

One day, while the Temple renovations were proceeding, the high priest Hilikiah discovered the Book of the Law. This was what is commonly referred to as ‘the Law of Moses,’ the Law God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments and the host of other regulations God had commanded his people to obey. It may have been the book Moses refers to in Deuteronomy 31:24-27:

‘When Moses had finished writing this entire body of instruction in a book, he gave this command to the Levites who carried the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant. ‘Take this Book of Instruction and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, so it may remain there as a witness against the people of Israel.’

It is nothing less than astonishing that something as valuable as this book could ever have been lost. But then again, people lose things of enormous value all the time. Twice at the seminary I graduated from, in 1990 and in 2005, original handwritten manuscripts of musical compositions, one by

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Mozart and the other by Beethoven, were found lying around in piles of documents in the library. They were worth millions, had become neglected, and had lain right under the noses of the folks running the seminary for decades before their discoveries.

Somehow or other, during the decades of wickedness that preceded Josiah's reign, the Book of the Law had been misplaced. Until Hilkiah found it. Just where he found it we aren't told. Perhaps it had been hidden in a false wall for safe-keeping during the decades of wickedness (the time of Athaliah's reign was especially dangerous – the Book of the Law was exactly the kind of thing she would have destroyed). Or perhaps, like many Bibles in 'Christian' homes today, it had been lost in plain view. Forgotten. Left to collect dust. Buried under a pile of magazines on the coffee table. (If any of that strikes home, feel free to correct the situation). In any event, Hilkiah discovered it, and having discovered it, he caused it to be taken to Josiah.

Josiah's Reaction

When Josiah received the scroll from his court secretary, Shaphan, and heard what it said, he was cut to the

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heart. He ‘tore his clothes in despair’ (verse 19). Why did he react this way? Well, for starters, you have to understand that while Josiah knew God, and was doing his best to follow him, he did not have all the information. Until this moment, he had not known God’s Law. And so when he found out what the Law actually said, he realized that he had not been doing all that he should have been doing. Josiah loved God. He wanted to please God. Moreover, he did his best to help his people please God. Yet, innocently enough, he had not been doing all that God wanted him to do. This broke his heart.

Additionally, we can easily imagine that as the Law was read, Josiah was particularly disturbed by certain parts. Consider these:

‘Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. For I command you this day to love the Lord your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy.

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But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods, then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live a long, good life in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy' (Deuteronomy 30:15-18).

You can almost hear the 'Gulp' in Josiah's throat as such words were read. For he knew the people had forsaken the Law for many decades. Thus, Josiah was plunged into despair. He raced off to find a prophet, Huldah, who confirmed that the scroll was right, and that, yes, a time of exile was coming. It would not come until after Josiah died, for he had done what was right in God's eyes. But it was coming.

Josiah's Next Steps

What happened next reveals why the Bible speaks so highly of Josiah. You may recall from chapter eight that when Josiah's great-grandfather Hezekiah had been warned of the exile that would happen after his reign, he selfishly shrugged it off by saying, 'Oh well, at least it won't happen to me.' Josiah's response was the opposite of such

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selfishness. It was entirely selfless. He knew that he could not stop the exile, but doggone it, he could save the people in his own generation! Maybe even some in the next one. And so he set about doing all he could to save as many as possible. Specifically, he did three things.

First, he called the people to repentance. He gathered them in Jerusalem and read the scroll to them. He explained that they had all (himself included) been unfaithful to God. He pledged himself to obey all the commands of the Law and called upon them to do the same. The people responded positively and committed themselves to live as God intended. *Second, he tore down the remaining idols in the land,* thereby assuring an environment for the people in which they would not be so easily tempted to turn from their commitment to God. *And third, he celebrated the Passover.* He called everyone together as a nation to celebrate the faithfulness of God in the Exodus.

In short, Josiah did all he could to draw his people into a position of covenant faithfulness with God. And by doing so, he saved a generation. All in all, you have to admit he was a good king. 2 Kings 23:25 sums up his reign perfectly: ‘Never before had there been a king like Josiah,

who turned to the Lord with all his heart and soul and strength, obeying all the laws of Moses. And there has never been a king like him since.’

Time for a Change

Josiah was such a good king, it is almost a shame to include him in the company of the royal screw-ups examined in previous chapters. But he is included because his story points to a royal mistake that many Christians and churches make today.

By far the most interesting part of Josiah’s story, the part he is best remembered for, is his reaction to the discovery of the Book of the Law. Imagine: what would it be like to discover that even though you thought you were faithfully following Jesus, you actually weren’t? One day you are cruising along believing you are doing just fine, going to church every Sunday, driving around with the outline of a fish on your car, listening to Christian radio, tithing your money to your local church and even sharing the message of salvation from time to time with people who need to hear it. But then, the next day, you discover that there are passages in the Bible – whole books in some cases – that you have

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never really considered, or at least not fully. And as these passages and books are explained to you, you suddenly realize that you haven't really been living as a disciple of Jesus. You haven't really been living the way he asked you to live. How might you react to such a shocking revelation?

Many Christians I know would probably read those words and have them roll off their backs like water off a duck. 'Thank God,' they would say, 'I don't have to worry about anything like that!'

But I wonder. I wonder for them, and I wonder for me.

If you look at the life of the early Church, you really do begin to wonder. In those early days, the first few centuries in particular, there were some remarkable things happening. For example, when a plague hit a city, as they often did in those days, most people fled to avoid contagion. But the early Christians deliberately stayed behind, risking their lives to take care of the sick.² When the Romans, who placed such little value on the life of newborn children,

² See, e.g., Dionysius, *Epistle XII: Festal Letter to the Brethren in Alexandria*, 4.

especially those with birth defects, laid them by the side of the road to die in the sun (they called it ‘exposure’), or threw them into trash dumps or the river, it was the early Christians who rescued them, adopting them and raising them as their own children.³ Then there is the incredible way they shared with others. Interestingly, unlike so much of the fare you find in Christian bookstores today, no early Christian writing exalts the pursuit of material success, or what we call today, ‘The American Dream.’ Instead, the record of the first three Christian centuries is unequivocal that the understood goal of the Christian life in the realm of finance was to work hard to earn money so that you could share it with people in need; the idea was that you were to live simply, not extravagantly, keeping only what you needed to meet your most basic needs, and give the rest away. And then there are the martyrs. When ordered to compromise their faith, even under threat of death, the early Christians gladly gave their lives for Jesus, and,

³ For original source material concerning Greco-Roman and Christian practices regarding exposure and rescue of children, see, Seneca, *Of Anger*, 1:15; Aristotle, *Politics*, 7:16; Athenagoras, *A Plea for Christians*, 35; Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 27; Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 3:4; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, Book 7; Tertullian, *Apology*, 9; Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*, 14. See Also, Camden Cobern, *The New Archaeological Discoveries, 2nd Edition* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls 1917), 427.

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which is even more incredible, they did so while loving the very people who took their lives.

This is the witness of the early Church, and lest you think it was some sort of deviation from what Jesus taught, I suggest you re-read the Gospels and the Book of Acts. In living as they did, the early Christians were doing nothing more than what Jesus had asked them to do.

It just might be time for the Church today to rediscover the Gospels and Acts. To dust off those Bibles that sit on our end tables. To delve deeply into them to discover what we have missed. To relearn the way Jesus asks us to live.

As I write along these lines, I cannot help but wonder: ‘is the Church today living the way Jesus calls her to live?’ Oh sure, we can excuse ourselves. We live in a different time than the early Christians did. They had opportunities for service that we don’t. But friends, that is pure and utter nonsense. Are there no sick people to care for? Are there no orphans who need homes?⁴ Are there no people in need with

⁴ There are as many as 153 million orphans in the world. There are approximately 400,000 children in the U.S. foster care system, approximately 100,000 of whom are legally available for adoption.

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whom we could share by simplifying our way of life and reducing our standards of living? Are there no brave stands to take? No enemies to love? I fear that many Christians, myself included, have done the unthinkable. We have, in many ways, lost what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We have exchanged the radical, selfless, sacrificial and costly faith of the early Church fathers and mothers – the kind of faith that once changed the world - for a lukewarm, comfortable faith that costs us very little, and consequently changes very little.

This might be why so much of the world doesn't take us seriously anymore. In the early days, the world looked at Christians and said, 'Wow!' Today, it is no small wonder that when nonbelievers look at us, they see little more than members of a slightly odd religious social club.

Talk about a royal mistake.

Admitting our problem is a good first step. But the hard thing we have to do is what Josiah did. He didn't just feel bad and tear his clothes. He went about the business of making things right. That is what true repentance does. It makes things right.

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And so, let me conclude Josiah's story by returning full circle to where we began. It is true that God loves you. No matter who you are, where you have been or what you have done. There is nothing, as Brennan Manning says, that could ever make God love you less. But if you love him, you will live to put a smile on his face. And when you see that what you are doing – or not doing – falls short of what he desires from you, you will do what it takes to make things right.

Chapter Eleven

The Last King of Judah - 2 Chronicles 36

'Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. But Zedekiah did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God, and he refused to humble himself when the prophet Jeremiah spoke to him directly from the Lord. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, even though he had taken an oath of loyalty in God's name. Zedekiah was a hard and stubborn man, refusing to turn to the Lord, the God of Israel.'

2 Chronicles 36:11-13

After the reign of the good king Josiah, things in Judah went downhill fast. Josiah was followed by three kings: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin, all of whom led Judah astray. It was during their reigns that Egypt and Babylon competed for control of the Middle-East. The long and the short of this dramatic period of history is that Judah became a vassal state to Babylon, with Babylon placing a man on the throne of Judah who would be the last king of that ancient kingdom. His name was Zedekiah.

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Apart from his age and tenure in office, the opening verses of 2 Chronicles 36 introduces Zedekiah by identifying three royal mistakes that characterized his reign. *First, he failed to keep his word.* Specifically, he failed to keep an oath of loyalty to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon that he made in God's name. The Law of Moses clearly states, '...A man who makes a vow to the Lord or makes a pledge under oath must never break it. He must do exactly what he said he would do' (Numbers 30:1-2). In other words, it was understood then, as it is understood now, that a person's word is their bond. Zedekiah did not prove to be as good as his word.

Second, he did what was evil in God's sight and led his people down a path of destruction. As we have seen in the lives of Zedekiah's predecessors, leaders are examples to their people. For example, when Josiah pledged to obey the Law of God, the people followed suit. The opposite was true during Zedekiah's reign. When Zedekiah did evil in God's sight, the leaders, priests and people plunged themselves into pagan practices, desecrated the Temple and otherwise lived contrary to the will and way of God. Zedekiah set a bad example for his people, and they followed him to their doom.

Finally, Zedekiah was a 'hard and stubborn man' who refused to turn to God (v. 13). This, despite the fact that God sent him one of the greatest prophets in the Bible (my personal favorite), Jeremiah. Zedekiah refused to listen to this great man of God.

These three mistakes ultimately brought disaster upon both Zedekiah and Judah. Just how it all happened is best discerned by examining Zedekiah's life through the lens of a series of encounters he had with the great prophet Jeremiah.¹

The Rebellion

As noted above, Zedekiah made an oath of loyalty to King Nebuchadnezzar. But it was not long after he made it that he rebelled. Several Middle-eastern kings had sent representatives to Jerusalem to discuss the possibility of throwing off the yoke of Babylonian rule. But as they gathered, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a man with a tough calling. When God called him to be a prophet, God essentially told him, 'you are to say everything I tell you to say, but no one will ever listen

¹ Many of the events in this chapter are recorded in Jeremiah 27-28 and 38-39.

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to you' (See, Jeremiah 1:4-9; 7:27). Can you imagine? It's one thing if God calls you to do something grand, like lead his people out of Egyptian slavery, and promises that as impossible as it seems, he will accomplish it. It's another thing altogether to be told that you are to speak the truth knowing that no one will ever listen. About all you can say about a guy who accepts a call like that is that he must truly love and honor God. Such a man was Jeremiah.

On this occasion, God told Jeremiah to get an ox yoke as a visual aid, put it on his shoulders and crash the meeting of conspirators against Nebuchadnezzar. He was to tell Zedekiah, in front of everyone, that the very idea of rebellion was madness and that he needed to submit to the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, he was to tell Zedekiah that if he did not so submit, Judah would be destroyed!

Now Jeremiah was no dummy, and he knew things were likely to go over about as well as they had on a previous occasion when God asked him to smash a clay jar into pieces and announce that God would do the same thing to Judah for her wickedness. On that occasion, Jeremiah wound up being flogged and placed in the stocks (See, Jeremiah 19-20). But Jeremiah was a faithful guy, and so he went on down to

‘Yokes ‘R Us,’ picked up what he needed, crashed the meeting and spoke God’s words to the king.

I.E.S.

Of course (surprise, surprise), hard and stubborn as Zedekiah was, he did not listen. In fact, having such a thing happen in front of company embarrassed him greatly. So, in an effort to save face, he called in one of his own prophets, Hananiah. Hananiah was the kind of prophet hard and stubborn kings liked to have around. He was the perfect ‘yes man’ who was always willing to back up whatever Zedekiah wanted to do. Hananiah came before the king and his guests and announced that within two years, God would break the yoke of Babylonian oppression. With dramatic effect, he took the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and broke it. Jeremiah then walked away, no doubt to the sounds of laughter and derision.

The incident highlights another of Zedekiah problems: *he had a bad case of I.E.S. - Itching Ear Syndrome.* This is a condition identified by the Apostle Paul (perhaps with the clinical assistance of his friend Dr. Luke) in 2 Timothy 4:3-4:

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‘For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject truth and chase after myths.’

As Paul’s words imply, this is not just a problem of the past. It is a problem Paul saw as coming in the future, and for my money, one that is clearly alive and well in the Church today. Indeed, the condition seems to have reached epidemic proportions. Many people, when they look for a church, look for one that will affirm their preconceived notions and beliefs, rather than one that will challenge them with Biblical truth. Let me tell you, a good church isn’t one that teaches you what you want to hear. A good church is one that teaches you the truth of God’s word, whether you want to hear it or not.

Zedekiah had a bad case of Itching Ear Syndrome, and he refused to humble himself before Jeremiah. Instead, he took the advice of his ‘yes man’ and ran with it. He broke his oath, joined the conspiracy and rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon.

The Siege

The result was catastrophic. Babylon came with guns a blazing, and laid siege to Jerusalem. And as it happened, Jeremiah kept doing what God called him to do. He called the people back to covenant faithfulness and explained that their only hope was to surrender. This of course, was not a popular position to take in war time. To put a contemporary spin on things, it was akin to walking around the streets of the United States in the weeks after 9/11 trying to explain to people that when Jesus said to love our enemies, he meant that we weren't supposed to kill them. (Some of you are mad at me for writing that. Good. You now have a flavor for how people felt about Jeremiah. Besides, those of you who are Christians probably needed to be reminded that you follow the Prince of Peace).

Zedekiah was particularly unhappy with Jeremiah's shenanigans, and he only became more deeply entrenched in his position. It was clear to him by this time that the rebellion had been a mistake, that Jeremiah had been right all along and that Babylon would eventually take the city. But alas, he still could not bring himself to do what was right. Indeed, he kept doing what was wrong. He had Jeremiah tossed into prison.

At one point he even allowed his officials to toss Jeremiah into an empty cistern (a reservoir for holding water). But still, Jeremiah remained faithful.

The Conversation

As the siege wore on, food and water became scarce. As supplies ran out, Zedekiah became increasingly confused about what to do. So it came to pass that one day, he relented and had Jeremiah brought to the entrance of the Temple for a private conference.

I can just picture it. Zedekiah standing near the Temple entrance. Jeremiah brought to him in chains. The conversation proceeded along these lines:

Zedekiah: I want to ask you something, and I want you to tell me the truth.

Jeremiah: Yeah, right. If I do that, you will kill me, and you won't listen to me anyway.

Zedekiah: Look man, I'm desperate. I promise to keep you safe.

Jeremiah: Alright then, you have only one hope. You need to surrender. If you do, you and your family will

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live. But if you don't, you will not escape, and Jerusalem will be burned to the ground.

There it was, as plain as day. Zedekiah needed to admit he was wrong and surrender. But Zedekiah was too afraid to surrender. It just didn't make sense. If he surrendered, he thought, the Babylonians would surely punish him for rebelling, most certainly by death (the Babylonians were not known for their leniency). Even if they didn't kill him, his own people might for having led them to such a pretty pass. But here's the thing: *God told him to surrender. God was telling him that if he did, things would be OK.*

There is a lesson here that we cannot pass by: when God tells you to do something, you need to do it, no matter how crazy it sounds. Sometimes God tells us to do things that don't make sense. Sometimes he asks us to do things that from our perspective, will surely lead to our ruin. You know, things like 'love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44) or 'sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor' (Luke 18:22). It sounds like madness. But the truth is that you never have to be afraid to do what God asks, even if it leads to trouble in the short term, even if it lands you in a cistern.

For as the rest of Zedekiah's story reveals, it is when you fail to surrender to God's plan for your life that you wind up in the deepest trouble.

The Consequences

Zedekiah did not surrender, either to God or the Babylonians. He had reached the point where his hard and stubborn heart had grown impervious to truth, even when it stared him right in the face. And so, after a two and one-half year siege of Jerusalem, during which time the famine inside the city became so great that the people resorted to cannibalism (see, Lamentations 4:10), Babylon broke through the city walls. They slaughtered people in the streets and in the Temple. Still, Zedekiah would not listen. Instead, he tried to escape. He, his family and the city guard fled under cover of night. But the Babylonians caught up to them on the plains of Jericho, took them prisoner, and carried them to King Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. There, Nebuchadnezzar pronounced his judgment. He made Zedekiah watch as Babylonian troops killed both his sons and nobles. Then, to ensure this ghastly sight would be the last thing Zedekiah would ever see, he sentenced Zedekiah to a living hell, gouging out his eyes and sending him off to Babylon to live

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out the rest of his days in exile, reliving again and again in his mind's eye the deaths of his sons, knowing that it had happened because he had not listened to God's messenger Jeremiah.

As for the rest of Judah, the judgment that had been warned about as early as the days of Moses had come to pass. The people had rejected God. They had embraced idolatry. They had forsaken justice. They had failed to care for the widow and the orphan. They had engaged in despicable practices. They had ignored the prophets. Thus, they were removed from the land, all except for the poorest of the poor. They were sent to live as exiles in Babylon, where they would languish for the next seventy years. The anguish of that exiled generation is captured well in Psalm 137:1-4:

‘Beside the waters of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem. We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees. For our captors demanded a song from us. Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn: ‘Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!’ But how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a pagan land?’

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And Jeremiah? Well, he survived the siege. It is believed that he went down to Egypt, where he surely wept for the rest of his days.

Learning to Listen

Kind of a rotten note to end a study on the kings of Judah, isn't it? But how else did you expect this to end? The story of Judah's kings is not a happy story. It's the story of God's people forsaking him. For hundreds of years, Judah had been warned. Its kings had been warned. Its people had been warned. But they all just kept on making the royal mistake of turning away from the Lord their God. As it says in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16:

‘The Lord, the God of their ancestors, repeatedly sent his prophets to warn them, for he had compassion on his people and his Temple. But the people mocked these messengers of God and despised their words. They scoffed at the prophets until the Lord's anger could no longer be restrained and nothing could be done.’

For those with ears to hear, let them hear. Read those words again. Think about the incredible patience God had

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for the people. Consider the fact that God, in his mercy, gave them opportunity after opportunity to turn back to him. And contemplate the fact that, eventually, God's patience ran out.

There are a lot of people today, both outside and inside the Church, who need to think deeply about this. God has shown us what is right. He has shown us what is wrong. In many ways. For one thing, it's all there in the Bible (someone once said that B.I.B.L.E. stands for Basic Instructions for Life on Earth). Sometimes, he shows us what is wrong and right through the voice of conscience. Sometimes he sends us messengers. Sometimes he even speaks to us directly with his still, small voice (See 1 Kings 19:12). But however it comes to us, however we hear his word, we are given a choice: listen, or face the consequences.

So here is the million dollar question: are you listening? If you are not, it's time to start. Because I hate to tell you, but judgment is not just an Old Testament concept. The New Testament is just as clear: our choices still have consequences. And even if you manage to skate through life and avoid the worst of them, one day, there is a final judgment, and an eternal valley of Gei-Hinnom, from which there is no escape. You do not, therefore, want to live your

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life in a way that makes you, like Zechariah, impervious to God's grace and truth. You want to listen to him right now.

Do me a favor. Bow your head for a moment, and just listen to what God is saying to you. Seriously, don't read another sentence of this book until you have taken at least a minute to do this. What is God saying to you? Anything? If he is, then here is my advice: Listen up. Turn to God. Surrender to whatever it is he wants you to do. If you do, you will find him, walk with him and experience his goodness. I'm not saying life is going to be a rose garden, for he has never promised us one. But you will experience blessing in your life and joy in your journey. You will find rest for your soul.

But if you don't listen, well, what can I say? That will be *your* royal mistake.

Epilogue

The Voice of the True King

'...the people refused to listen to Samuel's warning. 'Even so, we still want a king,' they said. 'We want to be like the nations around us. Our king will judge us and lead us into battle.' So Samuel repeated what the people had said, and the Lord replied, 'Do as they say, and give them a king.'

1 Samuel 8:19-22(a)

Back in the days before Rehoboam, before Solomon, David or even Saul, Israel was one nation under one King, and that King was God. God appointed Judges to lead and impart guidance to the people, but these men and women were not monarchs in their own right. They were merely representatives, ambassadors if you will, of the One True King. God was Israel's King. It was as simple as that.

At least it was supposed to be. But the people, fallen and fickle as they were, tended to forget who their king was. Whenever they did, it got them into trouble. The Book of Judges tells about the trouble they got themselves into in

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those days. The people would forget who their king was, turn their back on him, worship idols and wind up being conquered by their enemies. Then they would cry out to God for help and God would send a Judge to help them. The people would then turn back to God for a while, but before long they would forget him again, and the whole cycle would repeat itself. You know, lather, rinse, repeat. It was a troubling time in which to live. The final verse of Judges sums up the problem: ‘In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes’ (Judges 21:25).

Now you have to understand, Israel did have a king. God was the King. Israel just had a hard time following a king they could not see. What they lacked, they figured, was an earthly king, someone they *could* see, someone who would stand tall and strong and mighty at the head of a great army carrying a sword and shield, someone who would wave a flag and rally the troops, someone who would make them great like the nations that surrounded them. True enough, God had gone before them once in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (See, Exodus 13:21). But that had been a long time ago. And truer still, God still went before them in battle through

the means of the Ark of the Covenant. But doggone it, it just wasn't the same thing. What they needed was a true king!

Israel Rejects God as King

And so, on a day that would be remembered in infamy, the people of Israel approached the man God had chosen to be the current Judge of Israel, Samuel. 'Look,' they said, 'we want you to give us a king like the ones in all the other nations' (See 1 Samuel 8:5). They felt that if they only had that, all of their problems (you know, the problems they had because they refused to acknowledge God as their One True King) would be solved. All they needed was a tangible, earthly king. One they could see. One they could hear. All they needed was to hear the voice of this true king, and everything would be wonderful.

Samuel was heartbroken. He immediately turned to God, whom Samuel at least acknowledged as King, and asked what he should do. God told him to go ahead and grant the request.

'Do everything they say to you,' the Lord replied, 'for they are rejecting me, not you. They don't want me to be their king any longer...Do as they ask, but

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solemnly warn them about the way a king will reign over them.’ (1 Samuel 8:7-9).

Samuel warned the people. He told them that if they had a king like the nations, he would take their sons off to war, turn them into slaves, confiscate their property, tax them to death and otherwise make life miserable for them (sound familiar?). ‘If you put your trust in a human king rather than God,’ Samuel told them, ‘you will live to regret it.’ (See, 1 Samuel 8:10-18).

But the people would not be dissuaded. ‘Yeah, yeah, we still want a king. We want to be like the nations around us. We want a king who will lead us into battle. We want a king we can see and hear.’ And so Samuel checked with God again, and God again told him to go ahead and give them their ‘ideal’ king.

The First King of Israel

Samuel did as instructed. He found a king for Israel. His name was Saul, and at first glance, he seemed perfect for the job. He had the bearing of king. Tall and handsome, he stood head and shoulders above every other man in Israel (1 Samuel 9:2). He hailed from a wealthy and influential family

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(1 Samuel 9:1). And he was skilled in battle. Early in his reign, he led Israel to many victories. But for all that, there were problems.

For one thing he was a bit of a fraidy-cat. On the day Samuel went to anoint him King of Israel, he hid behind a pile of luggage (1 Samuel 10:22). And then there was his behavior during the whole David and Goliath thing. Goliath, the Philistine champion, taunted Israel's army for forty days, challenging them to send out the best man to fight. That man, of course, was Saul. But Saul never went, ultimately leaving the task of felling the giant to a shepherd boy who may have been no more than ten years old (See, 1 Samuel 17).

Saul was also a jealous man. As the years rolled by, and the young shepherd boy David grew to be a man, he led Israel's armies in battle with great distinction, winning many battles over Israel's enemies. But as the people began to sing David's praises, Saul became jealous (1 Samuel 18:7-9). In fact, before long he became a paranoid, homicidal lunatic, hurling spears at David and chasing him all over the wilderness in an attempt to kill him (See, 1 Samuel 19-26). When all was said and done, God was so disgusted with Saul that he stripped him of his kingdom. Saul himself met with a

dreadful end, falling on his own sword in battle (1 Samuel 31:4). It turned out that Saul had not been the king Israel had been looking for. His voice was not the voice of the True King.

Israel's 'Best' King

So Israel moved on to David, who was a much better leader. David was no coward. He was strong and courageous. He was a Warrior-Poet, a man from whose heart sprang forth the beautiful songs we call the Psalms. Best of all, he was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). That is, he cared about what God cared about. But even so, he was only human, and being human, he had problems. His biggest problem was his weakness for the ladies. His first six sons came from six different wives. The most infamous of his relationships was the one he had with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Alone one day, walking about on his royal parapet, he looked down and noticed a beautiful woman taking a bath. And he kept looking (it's the second look that gets you in trouble). He soon invited her to the palace, offered her a drink, and well, one thing led to another, and even though she was married, he slept with her. Things became complicated when she announced she was pregnant

(just imagine that conversation), and that her husband, Uriah, had been away at battle for some time, thus eliminating the possibility that he was the father. What did David do? He arranged the murder of her husband. David was not only a peeping Tom, he was a murderer. And this was but one of the moves by which David, the best earthly king Israel ever had, sowed the seeds of destruction for his own kingdom. No, not even David was the king Israel needed. Once again, his was not the voice of the True King.

Worldly Wisdom Personified

But third time's a charm, right? After David came his son, Solomon. Talk about a man who had what it takes to be king! Solomon was the wisest man on earth. As we noted in chapter one, people came from all over the world to listen to the pearls of wisdom that dropped from his lips (1 Kings 4:34). He was an administrative genius who created the most efficient government Israel had ever seen, and a master builder to boot (See, generally, 1 Kings 4). Moreover, he was amazingly wealthy; the Bible describes him as the richest king on earth (1 Kings 10:23). But even he wasn't the king Israel needed. Because if David had a weakness for the ladies, Solomon was weaker still. He had 700 wives and 300

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concubines (1 Kings 11:3), many of whom led him into idolatry and the worship of false gods. Yes, the wisest man who ever lived turned out to be a fool and set up the scenario that would eventually cause his kingdom to become divided during the reign of his son Rehoboam. Not even Solomon's was the voice of the True King.

After Solomon

And after Solomon, well, we've covered that haven't we? Years of royal screw-ups. A Divided Kingdom. War. Idolatry. Social Injustice. Defeat and exile. The northern kingdom of Israel defeated, her ten tribes led away by the Assyrians, erased from the pages of history. The southern kingdom of Judah defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, her tribes taken to Babylon for 70 years before being allowed to return under Persian rule. Then came the Greeks, a brief period of independence, and finally Rome. Eventually Rome gave Israel a king. His name was Herod, a brutal megalomaniac who murdered members of his own family to stay in power.¹

¹ James Orr, s.v., 'Herod.' International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1915.

No one in Israel ever made the mistake of thinking that his was the voice of the True King.

The longing for a king like the nations had proven to be an absolute disaster.

The Return of the True King

But God never gave up. He never gave up on his people. He never gave up on his dream of a people who would know him, and him alone, as their True King. A people who would be his own and show the world how he wanted people to live. And so, throughout this sordid history of earthly kings and empires, God sent the people reminders of his dream. Perhaps the best examples of these reminders are the ones that came from the mouth of God's prophet Isaiah. Isaiah, as noted in chapter seven, spoke of tough times, but also offered hope:

‘Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever...there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of

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deep darkness a light will shine. You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice. They will rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest and like warriors dividing plunder. For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders. You will break the oppressor's rod, just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian. The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned. They will be fuel for the fire. For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!' (Isaiah 9:1-7).

'Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot – yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel

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and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He will delight in obeying the Lord...He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment. In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all...nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord. In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place' (Isaiah 11:1-10).

In other words, God would bring beauty out of the tragedy that occurred on the day Israel asked for a king like the nations. The God who was Israel's True King would reveal to them and to the world what their hearts had truly been longing for all along. It was as if God, through Isaiah,

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was saying: ‘Hear O Israel! Your True King is coming, and when he comes, when you follow him, when you hail him as your True King, then you will know peace. Then you will know joy. Then you will know salvation. And this peace, this joy, this salvation, will be not just for you, but for the whole world! It is coming Israel! You shall one day hear the voice of your True King!’

The centuries slipped by in the wake of Isaiah’s words, and the people longed to hear that voice. They longed for the arrival of its owner. And for a long time, it must have seemed as if it would never happen. But then, at the dawn of what we now call the first century, an angel named Gabriel showed up. And he told an old man named Zechariah that the True King was coming. And he told a young girl named Mary that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit, and that her child would be the True King. And he told her carpenter fiancé Joseph, a descendant of David, that he should go ahead and marry her and raise the child as his own. And in the fullness of time, the angels broke forth in glorious song outside the little town of Bethlehem, the birthplace of David, as they announced that the True King had come. The King Israel should have wanted all along. God himself. God in

the flesh. God as one of us. God as our king. And so it came to pass that as Mary brought forth her child into the world on that still, not so silent night, a newborn baby's cry pierced the darkness of the Judean countryside, and Israel finally heard the voice of the True King.

The True King's Kingdom

The voice, of course, belonged to Jesus, whose kingdom was and is unlike anything else the world has ever seen. Jesus never had a kingdom like Saul, David, Solomon, or any of the nincompoops we've studied in this book. He never wielded a sword. Never carried a shield. Never waved a flag. Never exercised power in the conventional sense. Never had a palace. No, Jesus' kingdom was different. It was a peaceful kingdom, a kingdom whose power was based on the idea of just coming alongside of people and loving them. Even if they were enemies. He traveled up and down the land of Israel, teaching about the Kingdom of God, showing the world his way, revealing to the world the way of the True King.

Jesus died on a Roman cross for the sins of the world, and I suppose when that happened, it must have seemed as if

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once again, Israel had not found her True King. But then came Easter, and the glorious news that Jesus had risen from the dead! And then, forty days later, he ascended to heaven, from whence he rules and reigns now and forever, and from whence he shall one day come again to make earth and heaven one.

Until that day, his Kingdom expands. It expands one life at a time. It expands through those who dedicate themselves to living and loving in his name. It expands, as through the words and deeds of his followers, the world continues to hear the voice of its True King.

And, as Isaiah said so long ago, it will never stop expanding. The kings and kingdoms of the world will always fall. But the Kingdom of God and the Christ will endure forever.

What are We Thinking?

It is easy to look back over the history of Israel and Judah and ask, ‘what were they thinking?’ I mean, really, God wanted to be their king, and they rejected him in favor of the knuckleheads described in this book. So yeah, what were they thinking? But you know what? All these centuries

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later the world is doing the same thing. The world is still looking for the wrong kind of king.

I would be willing to bet that as you read the accounts of the Judean kings, from Rehoboam to Zedekiah, there were moments when it all sounded vaguely (or not so vaguely) familiar. For the truth is that to this day the world is filled with leaders and wannabe leaders who are just as stubborn, selfish, proud and foolish as the kings of Judah. Even as I write these words, the country I live in is embroiled in yet another election season. One of the more particularly odious candidates is promising, amidst the horrid spectacle that accompanies his flag waving, sabre rattling and hateful demagoguery, to make the country great again. It's the kind of promise we get from would be kings all the time. And people fall for them. They believe, just as the Israelites who approached Samuel so long ago believed, that if they just get a king like the nations, a powerful, sword wielding strong man (or woman), everything will be OK. But what do we get? War, violence, dissension, division, trails of broken promises and shattered dreams. You know, the very stuff Samuel warned Israel about.

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All we ever end up with are kings who don't live up to their hype. Kings who get us into trouble. Kings who never satisfy. Kings who are, in the final analysis, little more than a collection of royal mistakes.

Even the good ones (and to be fair there are some who have been *relatively* good) can't solve everything. They try their best, God bless them, but in the end, they are still working out of a playbook that asks them to be earthly-minded, power-wielding kinds of kings. And so, even when you get the occasional 'Josiah,' he or she still ends up leading us into the wrong battles, causing us to sing sad songs (See, 2 Chronicles 35:20-24).

Goodness people, when will we ever learn? When will we learn that the hope of the world isn't in the kings of the nations? That the hope of the world is only found in the True King?

The bottom line is this: we will never be satisfied until we heed the voice of the True King. We will never find peace until we step away from the way of the world's kings and follow the way of the True King. We will never discover true

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life, whole, abundant and eternal life, until we fall to our knees before the one whom the saints and angels adore.

Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to make Jesus your King?

My prayer for you, reader, is that you will. That you will heed the voice of the True King and follow him all of your days.

Prayer of Commitment

Jesus, I come now to ask you to be my King. I have followed so many others for so long. I have even placed myself on what should have been your throne. But I have never found peace. I have never found that which satisfies. I acknowledge now who you are: you are the Son of God, God in the flesh, who came, lived, died and rose again for me and my salvation. You are my peace. You alone satisfy. I want to live in the light of your salvation. I want to live as one of your peculiar people who show the people of this broken world another way - your way. I want to be your servant, a servant of your way, love and peace. I surrender my life to you. I make you my King.

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Forgive my sins and help me to forgive others. Help me to live as a child of the Father. Help me to hear and heed your voice, the voice of my True King. It is in your name, the name above all names, the name of the one who rules and reigns forever, the name of the King of kings and Lord of lords that I pray these things. Amen.

Welcome to the Kingdom.

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About the Author

Brent David Miller is Senior Pastor at the First Baptist Church of Collingswood. Before going to seminary, Brent was an attorney and spent several years as a prosecutor. His goal in life is to share with as many people as possible the Good News that there is a God who loves them unconditionally and limitlessly, and that He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. Brent currently lives in Collingswood, New Jersey with his wife Megen, daughter Kaeleigh, and son Caleb. You can follow Brent's blog, *Stars Above Me* at www.thestarsaboveme.com.

If you ever find yourself in the Collingswood area, Brent is always ready to hang out in a local coffee shop and talk about Jesus.

Also by Brent David Miller

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