

A LEGACY OF KINGS...ISRAEL'S CHEQUERED HISTORY

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CHAPTER 1 - THE KING THAT GOD APPEARED TO TWICE

Perhaps we're familiar with the teaching of the Lord Jesus when he said: "...seek first [the]...kingdom [of God] and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33). The wisest man in the Old Testament has given us an example consistent with that. For we read about the beginning of the reign of King Solomon in Second Chronicles that:

"... Solomon the son of David established himself securely over his kingdom, and the LORD his God was with him and exalted him greatly ... Then Solomon ... went to the high place which was at Gibeon, for God's tent of meeting was there, which Moses the servant of the LORD had made in the wilderness ... Now the bronze altar ... was there before tabernacle of the LORD, and Solomon and the assembly sought it out. Solomon went up there before the LORD to the bronze altar which was at the tent of meeting, and offered a thousand burnt offerings on it" (2 Chronicles 1:1-6).

This shows us Solomon's priorities - he was putting God first, just as Jesus later encouraged his disciples to do. At the end of the first book of Chronicles, Solomon's father, King David, had expressed the hope that his son would know and serve God with a perfect heart and a willing mind. The Bible verses we've just read

show that's exactly how Solomon did begin his career as king. He might have been so occupied with his own honour so as to have no time left in which to honour God.

But no, as soon as he was securely established on the throne, the first thing he did was to seek out God at his altar to give God the glory due to his name. It was the Lord Jesus, who taught us in John 4:24 that the Father wants us to be his true worshippers. This is our chief end: to glorify God. No worldly purpose can compare with this. Those of any age, who have set their heart to serve and worship God according to the pattern of his Word, may be assured by king Solomon's example that in God's estimate this is the main business and goal of our earthly life.

It's hardly a coincidence that when Solomon had offered a thousand burnt offerings on God's altar - in that very same night - God appeared to Solomon for the first time. Solomon was the king to whom God appeared twice during the course of his life. I imagine these two appearances were among the greatest highlights of his life. It's natural for us to link them both together. Let me remind you what happened on the first occasion. Solomon had honoured God and those that honour God, God will honour (1 Samuel 2:30). And God did honour Solomon as we read now what happened that night:

“At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon answered ...”Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. So give

your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for - both riches and honour - so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life" (1 Kings 3:5-14 NIV).

Obviously, Solomon's request pleased the Lord. Solomon had expressed a sense of his own inadequacy for the role God had given him. He realized he could only handle the leadership of the people of God if God also equipped him for it. He wanted to do it well - that was more important to him than personal greatness. To the degree we're focused on God's glory, to that same degree our desire for personal glory will fade into the background.

So Solomon was granted his wish. He was given wisdom to rule well. And following that first time when the Lord appeared to Solomon, Solomon did act wisely - especially in connection with the great construction project of his life: the building of the Jerusalem Temple. This was his outstanding mission in life. Building in relation to God's house on earth is the greatest hon-

our this life holds for anyone, because it's the intended setting for what we've already mentioned as being the main goal of our lives: the true worship of God. That's something we should pick up on from the example of this king to whom God appeared twice. In fact, it was:

“When Solomon had finished building the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had achieved all he had desired to do, [that] the LORD appeared to him a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. The LORD said to him: “I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there for ever. My eyes and my heart will always be there” (1 Kings 9:1-3 NIV).

What prayer was God answering? Earlier, Solomon had:

“... stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands towards heaven and said: “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below - you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it - as it is today. But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! ...” May your eyes be open towards this temple night and day, this place of which

you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays towards this place ...”

It takes a wise man like Solomon to really enter into the mind of God. This is what Solomon was doing here. In his prayer Solomon was quoting back God's own words. Concerning the splendid Temple Solomon had built for God at Jerusalem, God had promised: “My Name shall be there” and he'd added: “My name ... My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually” (1 Kings 9:3).

Solomon's wise discernment is shown by his grasp of this awesome reality that God's name was identified with the place where he'd built the Temple. He seemed to have been gripped by the wonder of that thought - and I've been gripped by it just through reading about it again. Solomon's prayer displays his wonderful God-given wisdom in that its focus was on the place where God had chosen to establish his name for a dwelling - just as God had promised to choose such a place back in the time of Moses: “But you shall seek the LORD at the place which the LORD your God shall choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come” (Deuteronomy 12:5 NASB).

Solomon was now doing exactly that in his prayer at the Temple. He was seeking God at the place where God had established his name. But what does this mean? What did it mean that God was going to place his name in a particular place? For God's name to be in a place signified that his presence was there. The same principle carries on into New Testament times. The churches that

formed from the original disciples being explicitly described in the New Testament as being 'of God': they were actually called in the Bible 'churches of God' - in other words, God was putting his name there.

As far as our Christian testimony is concerned, we, too, should put our names where God has put his own name. But what's in a name, you ask? Surely the answer's got to be, "Plenty, if that name is God's name!" The apostle Paul wrote to one of these churches, the Church of God at Corinth, and described it as characteristic of God's holy Temple (1 Corinthians 3:16). God's Temple on earth from New Testament times is, of course, a spiritual building - unlike the physical temple Solomon built for God on earth - and Paul showed that God's spiritual house or temple is the sum of all the local churches that bore God's name. He did that when, in Ephesians chapter two, he described them in their totality as growing into a holy temple in the Lord (vv.21-22).

When Solomon put God first, God appeared to him the first time; and then when Solomon in his God-given wisdom entered into the mind and thoughts of God regarding worship in the house of God on earth, God favoured him with a second appearance. From which we can conclude that we, too, will please God if we, in our own time-slot in history, put God first in our lives and worship him together with others in accordance with his own designated choice of spiritual association - the place where he's established his name.

CHAPTER 2 - THE KING WHO DIDN'T LISTEN TO HIS PEOPLE

When a country's leader is criticized for his choice of key personnel or appears to fumble the appointment of his successor, his judgement is often called into question. Such miscalculations are often costly in political terms. King Rehoboam, the king who succeeded Solomon, was one leader who couldn't count on his people's loyalty when he made an unpopular decision. Nor could he later count on God's support when he tried to recover the disastrous situation which was of his own making. His final miscalculation was in turning away from God. Taking them in order, we start with the time when he miscalculated how his own subjects would respond to his demands. This is what we read in the Bible book of Kings:

“... the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: “Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labour and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you.” Rehoboam answered, “Go away for three days and then come back to me.” So the people went away. Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. “How would you advise me to answer these people?” he asked. They replied, “If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favourable answer, they will always be your servants.” But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. He asked them,

“What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, ‘Lighten the yoke your father put on us?’”

The young men who had grown up with him replied, “Tell these people who have said to you, ‘Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter’ - tell them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.’” Three days later ... all the people returned to Rehoboam ... [and] the king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, he followed the advice of the young men ... So the king did not listen to the people” (1 Kings 12:3-15 NIV).

We, too, need to be careful about deciding whom we should ask for that all-important piece of advice. By not listening to his people, Rehoboam lost their support as the greater number of them defected. Ten tribes in the north broke away, leaving Rehoboam ruling over only two tribes in the south. His next miscalculation was to assume he could take it into his own hands to get his people back by force of arms. This time he was reckoning without the sovereignty of God, as First Kings 12:21-24 (NIV) tells us:

“When Rehoboam arrived in Jerusalem, he mustered the whole house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin - a hundred and eighty thousand fighting men - to make war against the house of Israel and to regain the kingdom for Rehoboam son of Solomon. But this word of God came to Shemaiah the man of God: “Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah, to the whole house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest

of the people, "This is what the LORD says: Do not go up to fight against your brothers, the Israelites. Go home, every one of you, for this is my doing." So they obeyed the word of the LORD and went home again, as the LORD had ordered."

At least Rehoboam listened to the counsel of the man of God when he told him that what had happened was God's doing. The reason for the defection of the majority of his subjects was more deeply rooted than simply being their reaction to his own miscalculation. For the king who had been before him in Jerusalem, the wise king Solomon, had ended his reign by displaying a lack of wisdom. He had disobeyed God's Word - which is always a foolish thing to do - and the result of this was: the promise God had made about securing his kingdom to his descendants after him was now not going to materialize because it had been a conditional promise. This was the deeper reason why the majority of the people rebelled against Rehoboam. He was reaping what his father had sown.

Having said that, it still doesn't relieve him of having to take responsibility for his own actions. His own disastrous miscalculation was the trigger for the rebellion, so he couldn't complain about what had happened. Nor should we ever forget that God's a sovereign God. His sovereignty and our human responsibility go hand in hand. The case of Judas, the betrayer of Jesus Christ, comes to mind. The way of the cross had been appointed in advance by God, but Christ said it would have been better for Judas never to have been born (Matthew 26:24). And, in our times, there may be those who appear to come far short in their obedience to the commands of Christ - for example those given

through his apostles regarding our church service - but we see their lives and witness seemingly blessed by God.

So it's not always easy for us to weigh these things up, not least because God's sovereignty lies behind them. Then again there's the fact that bad things can and do happen to so-called 'good' people. But do we deserve the blessings any more than we deserve the buffetings? We'd have to say no, however we're much more likely to question the buffetings as not being deserved by us. But these are hard lessons to learn in practice, and we're only touching on them because of this thought-provoking mention of a negative thing in Rehoboam's life being revealed in the Bible as occurring for deeper reasons than would have been obvious at the time.

The Bible tells us the man Job blessed the Lord in adversity. That was amazing. God's sovereignty in blessing us with salvation (Ephesians 1:3) should continually bring us to worship and adore him, for although we certainly had our part to play in receiving Christ, there was also the definite outworking of God's plan involving us. As real and responsible as our choices are, the Bible shows them to be influenced by the matter of divine sovereignty – and there we must leave it.

Coming back to King Rehoboam – the king who didn't listen to his people – it's sad to notice that he abandoned God after he became strong. In some parts of the world today material wealth has made many feel like they're self-sufficient, to the extent that God often fades out of the picture for many people. Rehoboam abandoned God when he became strong, it says in the Bible. That's a warning. Not only will he be eternally the poor-

er for that, but his actions robbed God by bringing about a devaluation in things connected with God's house on earth, the Jerusalem temple as it was then. How did that happen? Well, let's read about it:

“When the kingdom of Rehoboam was established and strong, he and all Israel with him forsook the law of the LORD. And it came about ... because they had been unfaithful to the LORD, that Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem ... Then Shemaiah the prophet came to Rehoboam ... and he said ... “Thus says the LORD, 'You have forsaken Me, so I also have forsaken you to Shishak'“ (2 Chronicles 12:1-5).

We could interrupt the story at this point to remind ourselves that our unfaithfulness is not the only reason why bad things happen to us. We've seen that sometimes God may have deeper purposes to work out in, and through, our lives – but here, certainly, the reason was Rehoboam's unfaithfulness. As we rejoin the story, we find:

“... the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, “The LORD is righteous.” When the LORD saw that they humbled themselves, the word of the LORD came ... saying, “... I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some measure of deliverance, and My wrath shall not be poured out on Jerusalem by means of Shishak. But they will become his slaves so that they may learn the difference between My service and the service of the kingdoms

of the countries.” So Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem, and took the treasures of the house of the LORD ... he even took the golden shields which Solomon had made. Then King Rehoboam made shields of bronze in their place” (2 Chronicles 12:6-10).

I wonder if we too need to learn the difference between handling spiritual and secular matters? We may also notice there’s a certain maneuverability within God’s will to accommodate our human response. But the main thing we want to focus on is how Rehoboam’s actions led to the gold having to be replaced with bronze – quite a devaluation. This is one of the arresting things in the record of this king – arresting because it makes us stop and take stock of our own contribution. For example, what is the net result of our actions in our local church service. To what effect are we using our gifts? Are we relating well to others? After all that’s a major part of Christianity.

When we move on, what will have been the net worth of our contribution? Will the testimony be richer or poorer? It’s right for us to think in these terms today – about our net spiritual contribution in the service of God, because God’s house on earth in this New Testament age is declared by the apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:5) to be a spiritual house - one which we can easily see from its context in First Peter is comprised of born-again believers, who have been baptized and are maintaining their obedience to the word of Christ. Even so, we may be in an unworthy condition, for if we’ve not put away all malice, if we’re not growing in respect of our salvation, then we’re hardly enriching the local Christian testimony, are we? Rather the reverse, which was

**A LEGACY OF KINGS - ISRAEL'S CHEQUERED
HISTORY**

13

Rehoboam's sad experience. Better if it can be said of us – as in the words of Augustus Caesar (cited in Suetonius) - 'I found it (Rome) a city of bricks and left it a city of marble.'

CHAPTER 3 - THE KING WHO APPEALED TO HIS OPPONENTS

After the disruption of the kingdom in Israel, the northern breakaway tribes, under the leadership of a man called Jeroboam, drifted further and further away from God. Jeroboam was cynical and calculating in the way he went about cementing the rift. He suggested that it was too inconvenient for his followers to go to Jerusalem to worship in the place of God's choice. He would provide alternative locations which gave him better political and military options. And so he did, complete with two golden calves. He even replaced the Levites with his own ordained priesthood, and invented special celebrations to replace the God-given ones dating from the days of Moses. God's will revealed in his Word counted for little or nothing.

It's interesting to compare historical departures from New Testament Christianity. The story of the first ever churches of God is traced in the Acts of the Apostles. The centuries that followed their initial establishment were marked by serious deterioration away from the truths of God's Word, the Bible. As early as the second century, there were major departures from even the most basic aspects of the original apostolic Faith (the body of doctrine). For example, the apostles had taught and practised that baptism was not required for salvation itself, but was intended to be a public testimony that a person was now acknowledging the lordship of Christ following his or her salvation (Romans 6:3-6).

But over the next 100 years or so, baptism became intermingled with salvation.

Around 200 AD, we have this quote from a Roman lawyer named Tertullian who converted to Christianity, he said: “the act of baptism, itself carnal in that we are plunged in water, has a spiritual effect in delivering us from our sins ... in this way ... a man descends into the water and, being immersed, with the utterance of a few words rises up out of it scarcely, if at all, cleaner in body but - incredible consequence - the possessor of eternal life”. Incredible indeed – and totally non-biblical! So, already, different doctrines were being practised in different places. Not only was there error, there was a lack of unity. In the New Testament churches the weekly Remembrance (or “breaking of bread”) on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) involved the mere emblems of bread and wine to symbolize the body and blood of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:20-29).

By the second century, however, only the presiding bishop was allowed to take the emblems and “administer the sacraments”, as it was called. Again Tertullian wrote: “from no other hands but the hands of the president”. Gradually the Remembrance came to be regarded, not as a symbolic reminder, but as a sacrifice itself. In AD 350, Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, said: “I adjure you my brethren not to consider them any more as common bread and wine since they are the body and blood of Jesus Christ according to His Word”. And so the presiding clergy was presumed to have the special power to make this happen. Failure to take the sacraments, they taught, could result in the loss of someone’s personal salvation.

Perhaps this was not so much motivated by political necessity as when Jeroboam departed from the ordinances prescribed by God's Word, but it was real departure just the same. But then we read something interesting back in the time of Jeroboam:

"In the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam, Abijah became king over Judah...Now there was war between Abijah and Jeroboam ... Then Abijah stood on Mount Zemaraim, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, and said, "Listen to me, Jeroboam and all Israel: "Do you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the rule over Israel forever to David and his sons ...? "Yet Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the servant of Solomon the son of David, rose up and rebelled against his master, and worthless men gathered about him, scoundrels, who proved too strong for Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, when he was young and timid and could not hold his own against them.

So now you intend to resist the kingdom of the LORD through the sons of David, being a great multitude and having with you the golden calves which Jeroboam made for gods for you. Have you not driven out the priests of the LORD, the sons of Aaron and the Levites, and made for yourselves priests like the peoples of other lands? Whoever comes to consecrate himself with a young bull and seven rams, even he may become a priest of what are no gods. But as for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken Him; and the sons of Aaron are ministering to the LORD

as priests, and the Levites attend to their work. Every morning and evening they burn to the LORD burnt offerings and fragrant incense, and the showbread is set on the clean table, and the golden lampstand with its lamps is ready to light every evening; for we keep the charge of the LORD our God, but you have forsaken Him.

Now behold, God is with us at our head and His priests with the signal trumpets to sound the alarm against you. O sons of Israel, do not fight against the LORD God of your fathers, for you will not succeed.” But Jeroboam had set an ambush ... Then the men of Judah raised a war cry, and when the men of Judah raised the war cry, then it was that God routed Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah” (2 Chronicles 13:1-15).

Down in the south, Abijah was taking his stand on the side of biblical truth. Praise God for bold men and women in every age who've taken a stand for the truths of God's Word and rallied people back to the ways of God. In reference to the story of Christianity we were comparing earlier, we find that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, more and more men and women began to want to look into the Scriptures for themselves. Martin Luther was a monk and also a professor at the University of Wittenburg in East Germany. He had come across a Bible as a young student and had been reading it.

As he was climbing what was known as “Pilate's staircase” in Rome, the truth of the scripture “the just shall live by (their)

faith” (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11) convicted him and he was saved. He had re-discovered the wonderful truth of justification by faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9), which was to be the cornerstone of the Reformation. Luther wrote 95 theses and nailed them to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31st, 1517 when he was 34 years old. This famous event was the start of the Reformation. He was summoned to a public hearing by the church authorities but refused to recant, despite the pressure, and his final statement to them was “the speech that shook the world”:

“Unless I am convinced by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments that I am in error - for popes and councils have often erred and contradicted themselves - I cannot withdraw, for I am subject to the Scriptures I have quoted; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. It is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against one’s conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. So help me God.”

The Reformers realized that the Scriptures, not the Church, were the ultimate authority. Their motto was “sola scriptura” - only the Bible. While the Reformation was hugely successful, it didn’t immediately result in the whole New Testament pattern being reformed. That would take several hundred more years. But they had rediscovered the first essential kernel of truth, namely salvation. Many years would pass before all the other six steps of the first church of God at Jerusalem were retraced. Count them with me from:

Acts 2:41: “those who had received his word [1] were baptized [2]; and that day there were added [3] about three thousand souls.”

Acts 2:42: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching [4] and to [the] fellowship [5], to the breaking of bread [6] and to prayer [7]” – the latter being the regular church prayer meeting.

The Book of the Acts where this description of original Christian practice is found, begins and ends with reference to the kingdom of God. So it would seem to be a reasonable conclusion that this expression which frames the content of the book is actually defined by the book's content – namely the New Testament churches of God whose progress is recorded there. Collectively, the disciples forming those churches in their various localities were the unique expression of the kingdom of God on this earth – and what was that kingdom but the spiritual rule of God over his spiritual people?

But in later Bible letters we read of some, who even in apostolic times, began to resist the truth. And in so doing, they were in actual fact resisting the kingdom of the Lord – the very accusation Abijah had brought against Jeroboam and his army. Jeroboam was clearly an extreme case, but if his example makes us check if the practice of our service is fully in agreement with the pattern of New Testament scripture, then, I believe, it'll have fulfilled the purpose for which God's left it on record.

CHAPTER 4 - THE KING WHO HAD A BLAMELESS HEART

I met a young woman recently who was telling me that her father deserted the family when she was still very young, and from the tender age of seven she had to work to help support her brothers and sisters. That's a really tough responsibility at that age. Responsibility came early in life to a boy called Asa as well. Asa was still very young when he came to the throne in Jerusalem – a boy king – but soon he was making his mark by putting right things that were wrong. He'd a blameless heart – that's God's estimate of him (2 Chronicles 15:17) – and for much of his life he was really devoted to God.

His devotion to God was put to the test, however, when early in his career, he had to face an army of a million men. Sometimes God allows us to be tested and tried when we're doing well. That was the case with the man Job in the Bible: he's an extreme example of a good man experiencing bad things. But, anyway, let's read about the way Asa dealt with this test at a time in his life when he was very devoted to God. The Second book of Chronicles and chapter 14 says:

“Now Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and 300 chariots, and he came to Mareshah. So Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up in battle formation in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah. Then Asa called to the

LORD his God and said, "LORD, there is no one besides You to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O LORD our God, for we trust in You, and in Your name have come against this multitude. O LORD, You are our God; let not man prevail against You." So the LORD routed the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled. Asa and the people who were with him pursued them as far as Gerar; and so many Ethiopians fell that they could not recover, for they were shattered before the LORD and before His army. And they carried away very much plunder." (2 Chronicles 14:1-13).

Today we're told that the United States, the world's undisputed super-power, has a total of one million men and women serving in its army, although it has to be said that fewer than 40% are combat soldiers (and fewer than 40% of those are active). The Ethiopian army facing Asa, however, had a full one million combat soldiers in its ranks. Asa can teach us the same lesson we find in Second Corinthians chapter four (v.18) which encourages us not to look at the things which are seen but at invisible things instead. The Bible tells us that's how Moses endured – it was by seeing him who is unseen (Hebrews 11:27).

And Elisha's servant was helped to do that by being allowed to glimpse the invisible forces protecting them (2 Kings 6:17). But we walk by faith and not by sight, and we have Asa for our example here. He didn't fix his eyes on Zerah or his million fighting men, but he looked to his God, really believing that he is almighty. It's a lesson in prayer which Asa gives us, as he confess-

es their own weakness before a mighty enemy and calls on God in the full realization there's no-one else to help. Let's read the prayer again:

“LORD, there is no one besides You to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O LORD our God, for we trust in You, and in Your name have come against this multitude. O LORD, You are our God; let not man prevail against You.”

That was a prayer of no confidence in themselves, but full confidence in God. As with all true prayer it was an expression of dependence on God – and God gave them a great victory against overwhelming numerical odds. On his return to Jerusalem, we read that:

“... the Spirit of God came on Azariah the son of Oded, and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, “Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: the LORD is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you ... But you, be strong and do not lose courage, for there is reward for your work.” Now when Asa heard these words and the prophecy which Azariah the son of Oded the prophet spoke, he took courage and removed the abominable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities which he had captured in the hill country of Ephraim. He then restored the al-

tar of the LORD which was in front of the porch of the LORD.

He gathered all Judah and Benjamin and those from Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon who resided with them, for many defected to him from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him. So they assembled at Jerusalem in the third month of the fifteenth year of Asa's reign. They sacrificed to the LORD that day 700 oxen and 7,000 sheep from the spoil they had brought. They entered into the covenant to seek the LORD God of their fathers with all their heart and soul ...

All Judah rejoiced concerning the oath, for they had sworn with their whole heart and had sought Him earnestly, and He let them find Him. So the LORD gave them rest on every side. He also removed Maacah, the mother of King Asa, from the position of queen mother, because she had made a horrid image as an Asherah, and Asa cut down her horrid image, crushed it and burned it at the brook Kidron. But the high places were not removed from Israel; nevertheless Asa's heart was blameless all his days" (2 Chronicles 15:1-17).

So Asa was the king who had a blameless heart. And God promised that his presence would be with him if he remained true to him. Asa was later given the encouragement that God 'strongly support[s] those whose heart is completely His' (2 Chronicles 16:9). That verse is a gem we can collect from the sto-

ry of Asa's life. A sense of God's presence and support became a cause for rejoicing and commitment. We, too, need to claim the promise of God drawing near to us if we will only draw near to him. It's every bit as vital today, for now God's people are engaged in a spiritual warfare: not against flesh and blood, but every bit as real. In this we've no strength and need to rely daily on God. We read that Asa "... brought into the house of God the dedicated things of his father and his own dedicated things: silver and gold and utensils" (2 Chronicles 15:18).

But what Asa brought in, he would afterwards be taking out! The best of men are only men at best. Many years after defeating that army of a million men in a wonderful triumph of faith, Asa faced a similar difficulty when the king of Israel opposed him. This time his faith failed. The Bible tells us:

"Baasha king of Israel went up against Judah and fortified Ramah in order to prevent anyone from going out or coming in to Asa king of Judah. Then Asa took all the silver and the gold which were left in the treasuries of the house of the LORD and the treasuries of the king's house, and delivered them into the hand of his servants. And King Asa sent them to Ben-hadad the son of Tabrimmon, the son of Hezion, king of Aram, who lived in Damascus, saying, "Let there be a treaty between you and me, as between my father and your father. Behold, I have sent you a present of silver and gold; go, break your treaty with Baasha king of Israel so that he will withdraw from me." So Ben-hadad listened to King Asa and sent the commanders of his armies against the cities of Israel, and conquered Ijon,

Dan, Abel-beth-maacah and all Chinneroth, besides all the land of Naphtali. When Baasha heard of it, he ceased fortifying Ramah and remained in Tirzah” (1 Kings 15:17-21).

This was a real sell-out! Asa had overlooked God's help entirely on this occasion! Is this the same man who when hopelessly outnumbered had trusted fully in God? It's a reminder that we can also be guilty of extremes. We prove God's help time and again, but then facing some fresh challenge, we follow a human strategy instead. It may seem to work, but the Lord has been grieved. Asa's last days were not his best days – someone has said: 'beware of a dirty sunset.' He ended his days raging at rebuke, out of touch with God, and prayerless in a time of illness. I know someone at this moment who has a terminal illness, but her radiant faith in God is sustaining her entire family. Their testimony is that her illness is healing others in different ways. How different from Asa.

Yet despite his 'dirty sunset' the Bible still records 'Asa's heart was blameless all his days'. The best of men are only men at best. The king with the blameless heart had his lapses in faith but still God recorded that tribute. One day soon, each believer will have his praise from the Lord (1 Corinthians 4:5).

CHAPTER 5 - THE KING WHO JUST COULDN'T SAY 'NO'

A chameleon is a lizard with the power to change colour to blend in with its environment. A Christian is not to be like a kind of spiritual chameleon. We're not called by God just so that we fit in with our background. No, God calls us to be different! He wants the world to see in us the difference God can make in ordinary lives. But it can be the hardest thing in the world to say 'no' to peer pressure. It's not a comfortable feeling when we find ourselves different from those around us. We now have an example of this - one of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem was a king who just couldn't say 'no'. In fact, there are two things we can trace right through king Jehoshaphat's life - the first was his inability to say 'no', his inability to stand up for his principles and be different - and the second was God's mercy to him: when in trouble, usually of his own making, he discovered again and again just how gracious God is to those who fall. We'll take the opening verses of Second Chronicles chapter 3 as our introduction to this king:

"The LORD was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days and did not seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did. So the LORD established the kingdom in his control, and all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor. He took great

pride in the ways of the LORD and again removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah” (2 Chronicles 17:1-6).

That’s a very positive assessment. So far so good. To say he was following the example of King David is quite a compliment. So we have this wonderful picture of a good man taking great pride in the ways of the LORD. But as we’ve hinted in our opening, there was a weakness in his character – one which begins to unfold in the very next chapter of the Bible:

“Now Jehoshaphat had great riches and honor; and he allied himself by marriage with Ahab. Some years later he went down to visit Ahab at Samaria ... Ahab king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, “Will you go with me against Ramoth-gilead?” And he said to him, “I am as you are, and my people as your people, and we will be with you in the battle” (2 Chronicles 18:2-3).

The wickedness of this man, Ahab, is legendary. We know what we mean by that: he was a very wicked man, one of the worst, if not the worst king who reigned in Samaria – but he was, of course, no legend. This is sober history from the pages of God’s Word, the Bible. Modern historians have to interpret the facts of history, and so sometimes we get revised views of what happened in the past. But this is the definitive story, for this is God’s view of history. And he’s given it to us, so that we can learn from it. From the way the record of Jehoshaphat’s life is recorded, there’s no doubting that we’re intended to take this as an example of the dangers of compromise. The Bible doesn’t only give us commands to teach us, but it records the failures of sometimes even

the great and the good so that we can see the consequences of not doing what God wants.

The king had committed himself to a course of action before he – too late - thought about consulting God. We need to ask God's guidance before we commit ourselves. By going where he had no business going – by going into battle as an ally of this wicked king – Jehoshaphat very nearly ends up losing his life. And he would have lost it if God had not delivered him out of this trouble that was purely of his own making – for his ally, Ahab, king of Israel, was a sly and cunning man and he:

“... said to Jehoshaphat, “I will disguise myself and go into battle, but you put on your robes.” So the king of Israel disguised himself, and they went into battle. Now the king of Aram had commanded the captains of his chariots, saying, “Do not fight with small or great, but with the king of Israel alone.” So when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, “It is the king of Israel,” and they turned aside to fight against him. But Jehoshaphat cried out, and the LORD helped him, and God diverted them from him. When the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him.

A certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor. So he said to the driver of the chariot, “Turn around and take me out of the fight, for I am severely wounded.” The battle raged that day, and the king of Israel propped himself up in

his chariot in front of the Arameans until the evening; and at sunset he died” (2 Chronicles 18:29-34).

God’s providence is a truly amazing thing. I’ve known times, while serving the Lord in far-away countries, when evil schemes have been devised against me, plotting against the work I was involved in for God, and I, too, have known the wonderful deliverance of God when the enemy has over-reached himself. God’s providence is often remarkable.

But you would have thought Jehoshaphat’s ‘near-miss’ would have taught him a lesson. Wrong! He goes on to repeat the same kind of mistake again and again – he just couldn’t say ‘no’ when he needed to. Let’s look at one more of these times (yet another is in 2 Chronicles 20:35; see 1 Corinthians 3:15):

“And King Jehoram went out of Samaria at that time and mustered all Israel. Then he went and sent word to Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, saying, “The king of Moab has rebelled against me. Will you go with me to fight against Moab?” And he said, “I will go up; I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses” (2 Kings 3:6-7).

This is wicked Ahab’s wicked son this time. Jehoshaphat should’ve stuck to his principles as we are commanded to in Second Corinthians chapter 6:

“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what

harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord" (2 Corinthians 6:14-17).

By not remaining separate from Jehoram, Jehoshaphat was once again headed for disaster – and it would have been a disaster if God hadn't intervened yet again. But let's end the chapter on a positive note from the life of Jehoshaphat for it's recorded there was 'some good' in him (2 Chronicles 19:3). For example, we shouldn't forget the emphasis he'd put on teaching his people the Word of God (2 Chronicles 17:7-9). It had always been God's intention that his people should be well-taught in the Word of God, and that remains the case. God honoured this king's national education policy. In fact, this was more effective than fighting because it led God to put his fear on the surrounding nations. The sword of the Spirit is our only offensive weapon today, let's study to use it. Ignorance of the teaching of God's Word will rob us of victory. And now one last good thing in Jehoshaphat:

"Then some came and reported to Jehoshaphat, saying, "A great multitude is coming against you ... Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah...and he said, "O LORD, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not

ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You. Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever? “They have lived in it, and have built You a sanctuary there for Your name, saying, ‘Should evil come upon us, the sword, or judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before You (for Your name is in this house) and cry to You in our distress, and You will hear and deliver us.’

Now behold, the sons of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom You did not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt...see how they are rewarding us by coming to drive us out from Your possession which You have given us as an inheritance. O our God, will You not judge them? For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You” (2 Chronicles 20:1-12).

This time it wasn't a difficulty of his own making. Jehoshaphat has to be congratulated for leaving us an example of how to call on God in any time of trouble. He began by recalling that God is almighty; and what he'd done for his people in the past; then notice how his thoughts turned to the temple and the associated hope of answered prayer; and finally, notice that he put everything into God's hands, confessing the fact he was weak and

helpless. That's the essence of true praying. Let's take that away as a positive thing from the life of King Jehoshaphat.

CHAPTER 6 - THE KING WHO WAS INFLUENCED BY OTHERS

Let me transport you back in time to the days of a king by the name of Ahaziah who once ruled in Jerusalem. In some ways these times were no different from the lawlessness of our own time. These were turbulent days, and when King Ahaziah was killed, his mother did a very wicked thing. She seized the reins of power and set about destroying everyone who had a rightful claim to the throne. Her foul plan was destined to fail because it was inconsistent with God's own plan to bring salvation through a Messiah who would come through the royal line of David. So the survival of one baby son of the king was kept secret by means of help from a worthy wife and husband, the baby's aunt and uncle.

And so baby Joash – a baby son of the king who had been killed - was hidden away in a bedroom while the slaughter of the king's descendants was taking place. And for the next six years he was kept tucked away from view, hidden in God's house, the temple at Jerusalem. This is how the Bible sums it up:

“So he was hidden ... in the house of the LORD for six years, while Athaliah reigned over the land. In the seventh year Jehoiada sent and brought the captains of hundreds - of the bodyguards and the escorts - and brought them into the house of the LORD to him. And he made a covenant with them and took an oath

from them in the house of the LORD, and showed them the king's son" (2 Kings 11:3-4 NKJV).

I find that inspiring reading: the man Jehoida, who was a priest, bringing in the military leaders into the temple and letting them into the secret - that for all of those six terrible, dark years of oppression there'd been a secret survivor - and that he was the rightful king! How those soldiers must have gasped with amazement, and with relief too, at the sight of the young boy who was born to be king - someone whose existence had been a closely guarded secret up till that moment. And from that moment something like a military style coup was launched to bring this young boy to the throne.

But let's stay a little longer with that moment of revelation in the temple. It certainly had come as a wonderful revelation to those soldiers: to get a glimpse of the king's son in God's house. I'm pausing with you at this point, because I can't help but see an illustration there of something that's right up to date. Do we not live in a time when Satan has usurped God's rightful place in the thoughts and lives of men and women? Late on in the Bible, the apostle John says: 'the whole world lies under the sway of the evil one' (1 John 5:19). In that sense they're dark days we live in, for this controlling influence is 'the power of darkness' (Colossians 1:13). It's tyranny and oppression of a spiritual nature and it's throughout the world system today.

But what a revelation is to be found in our Bibles! There's salvation found in a child born and raised in this world. Born outside of the royal palaces of his day. Someone whose identity was hidden from all but a few. I'm talking about Jesus Christ, God's Son

and the Saviour. He's the Son of the King eternal, God (1 Timothy 1:17). And something I've come to understand from God's Word, the Bible, is this: that when we come to appreciate the revelation of Jesus as he stands related to God's house today, then we've come to appreciate the full extent of God's good news for the people of this world. It's something I rejoice in as I share it with you - this vision of the King's Son in God's house.

Those soldiers in the house of the LORD, the Jerusalem temple, long ago, in the exceptional circumstances that saw them ushered in there - did they perhaps catch some glimpse of the glory of the gold in the temple interior? But even if they did, what they saw that day was something even more glorious. 'Yes, my friend,' - as the old chorus says - 'there's something more - something more than gold.' Something which puts all the issues surrounding our commitment to biblical teaching into perspective - and it's the glorious vision of the King's Son in the house of the LORD; the view we're given in the New Testament of the Lord Jesus as he stands related to the churches of God we read of in our Bible (cf. Revelation 2&3).

Well, if the first view those soldiers got of the king's son was of him standing in God's house; then the last view of him which the wicked queen Athaliah had was of him standing next to a pillar. The Bible records:

“When she looked, there was the king standing by a pillar according to custom; and the leaders and the trumpeters were by the king. All the people of the land were rejoicing and blowing trumpets. So Athaliah tore her clothes and cried out, “Treason! Treason!”

And Jehoiada the priest commanded the captains of the hundreds, the officers of the army, and said to them, "Take her outside under guard, and slay with the sword whoever follows her." For the priest had said, "Do not let her be killed in the house of the LORD." So they seized her; and she went by way of the horses' entrance into the king's house, and there she was killed" (2 Kings 11:14-16 NKJV).

But Jehoiada, the kingmaker, was an old man, and when he died, Joash seemed to be a different person. The Bible tells us he "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest." Without the old priest's influence and guidance, Joash, now in his thirties at least (see 2 Kings 12:6-7), began to reverse his earlier reforms. He undid the good he'd done earlier in life. He even forgot the kindness Jehoiada had shown him and murdered his son, Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:22). So the life of Joash gives us something to think about, and leaves us with some personal challenges. Do we attend church services or youth camps only to please our parents? Or have we become less effective in our spiritual service after some influential figure has moved away? By God's help, let's guard against that happening. When he died, Joash wasn't permitted a burial in the place of the kings, but Jehoiada, the priest, was buried there. It was almost as if he got the king's place. "Hold fast ... so that no one will take your crown", the Bible warns us (Revelation 3:11).

In the story of Joash we find a sad end to a life with a very remarkable beginning. We read in the New Testament about Christian disciples who had been doing well – as if they'd been running well like athletes until someone had cut in on them and

hindered their good progress. The apostle Paul writes in those terms to some in the churches of God in Galatia when he says: "You were running well, who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (Galatians 5:7). Paul hoped his Philippian friends would do better, saying about them: "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the Day of Christ Jesus" (1:6). Having been warned by the story of Joash, let's make that our aim too.

The story is told of some young trouble-makers who got off a bus. The driver called out as they were leaving. 'Excuse me, but you've left something behind ... it's a bad impression!?' I was reminded of that when I realized that the only New Testament reference to Joash – and it's an indirect one - is to the messenger he killed (Matthew 23:35; 2 Chronicles 24:20-22).

What will we be remembered for? Our works whether good or bad will meet us again one day (2 Corinthians 5:10) when the Lord Jesus Christ will assess the life and service of every born-again believer. As we read God's assessment of each of these kings, we see the things which really matter to God. These same things will likely feature in his future assessment of our service. That's the relevance of our present study. Against each king, God records their attitude to his house, the Jerusalem temple as it was then. Was the king concerned to restore the temple or, through indifference, did he allow it to fall into disrepair? Or worse, did he abuse it for idolatrous purposes? And was the king himself a good example to his people, as following in the footsteps of David his ancestor, or was he easily influenced by his advisors, or worse still, by the abominable practices of the surrounding nations?

As we relate these issues to ourselves, we might ask: 'To what extent are we imitators of David's greater Son, Jesus Christ; and what attention to do we pay to the service of God's spiritual house today?'

CHAPTER 7 - THE KING WHO TURNED AWAY FROM GOD

King Amaziah was someone who for a while at least did the right things, but he didn't love God with all his heart. God sees through our actions to the attitudes that lie behind them. He knows if it's the love of Christ which compels us (2 Corinthians 5:14). So while Amaziah is commended for doing what was right, he's not compared with King David, but instead is contrasted with him. He did right, but not like David who's always mentioned as the standard by which all others after him were later judged. The Bible tells us:

“Amaziah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem ... He did right in the sight of the LORD, yet not with a whole heart ... Moreover, Amaziah assembled Judah and appointed them according to their fathers' households under commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds throughout Judah and Benjamin; and he took a census of those from twenty years old and upward and found them to be 300,000 choice men, able to go to war and handle spear and shield.

He hired also 100,000 valiant warriors out of Israel for one hundred talents of silver. But a man of God came to him saying, “O king, do not let the army of Israel go with you, for the LORD is not with Israel

nor with any of the sons of Ephraim. But if you do go, do it, be strong for the battle; yet God will bring you down before the enemy, for God has power to help and to bring down.”

Amaziah said to the man of God, “But what shall we do for the hundred talents which I have given to the troops of Israel?” And the man of God answered, “The LORD has much more to give you than this.” Then Amaziah dismissed them, the troops which came to him from Ephraim, to go home; so their anger burned against Judah and they returned home in fierce anger.” (2 Chronicles 25:1-10).

Forgetting the lessons of history, king Amaziah tried to act in fellowship with the army of Israel in order to overthrow the (Edomite) enemy. He bought their support. They would become an army of mercenaries – people who go to war for money. But again God pointed out that Judah was to stand alone, for he wasn't with Israel. Putting a stop to this alliance, which Amaziah had attempted in error, ended up with Amaziah losing a lot of money as well as suffering their retaliation. Wrong actions can prove expensive. We waste money, time and energy when we expend them in ventures which don't have the Lord's approval. But our loss will be more than worth it if we allow ourselves to be guided back into a more righteous course of action. God's thoughts are not our thoughts nor are our ways his ways (see Isaiah 55:9). His are much more beneficial for us than our own schemes. He wants to give us much more than we could ever achieve for ourselves.

No one ever loses what they give up for Jesus' sake. Jim Elliott, the missionary who gave his life in reaching out to the Auca Indians, put it like this: 'He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.' These are wonderful words of truth, but few of us can say them with the same conviction he did. However, they echo our Lord's own words:

“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:25-26).

A person, in some sense, may gain the world: or at least its approval - the world may lie at his feet as he or she reaches celebrity status and fabulous wealth. Some even achieve world idolisation – but is that really worth very much? The message once addressed to King Amaziah comes back to mind again: ‘The Lord has much more to give you than this.’ Freddie Mercury achieved world idolisation late last century as the lead singer of the symphonic rock group, Queen, but asked the question: ‘Does anyone know what we’re living for?’ The Bible gives us the worthy example of Moses. Raised in Pharaoh’s palace, skilled in all the learning of those times, the world lay at his feet, but Moses came to realize that God in heaven had designs on his life which amounted to much more than all of that. So:

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the

reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

He knew God had much more to give him than all the wealth Egypt could provide. Later in history there’s the example of Saul of Tarsus who, through God’s grace, became the apostle Paul. Like an accountant working out a balance-sheet, Paul sets out in the third chapter of his letter to church friends at Philippi all that he gave up when he embraced the Christian Faith, and then off-sets it against all he’d gained. He summed it up like this:

“... If anyone ... has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:4-10).

The message 'the Lord has much more to give you than this' can surely apply at any time in our Christian experience. God has given us all in Christ, that's true, but how much are we really experiencing? Paul still had an appetite to know Christ better. We can never afford to be satisfied with our current level of discipleship. Like Paul we, too, can keep pressing on. Still there's more to follow. It was to his Ephesian friends that Paul wrote about knowing 'the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge' (3:19). There's infinitely more than we can ever experience in this life.

I've recently returned from spending time with young friends in the Far East who love to sing the song 'Standing on the promises of God'. We need to claim the promises God makes to us in the Bible – we do need to take our stand on them – if we're to enjoy in greater measure the foretaste of the age to come (Hebrews 6:5) which God intends for us now.

A man won a free return ticket for an Atlantic crossing on a luxury liner. He was poor, and decided to take dried biscuits and cheese in a plastic bag to live off for the crossing. He was content to eat his meagre fare while the others dined in the fancy on-board restaurants, because he was just so glad to be on the trip of a lifetime. When he was nearly home on the return journey, he thought he'd try just one meal in the high-class restaurant. He cautiously asked the waiter the price. The waiter was astonished: had he not read his ticket – all the meals were included for free! Sometimes we, Christians, can live like that: gritting our teeth and enduring for the sake of the hope of heaven to come. We don't count the blessings which are already ours as chosen, spiritually adopted, redeemed, forgiven and made heirs of glory (Ephesians 1). The blessings seem far away, and the promises

don't feel all that real in the here and now. If it's like that, it's not God's fault.

The Lord Jesus came that we might have life in all its fullness: not only an after-life that's guaranteed; but also in this life finding unending personal encouragement and companionship; together with strength to cope with the trials of life; all the while knowing a sense of purpose and direction; with the supernatural ability to find joy in the strangest of places. Often we don't access all that, perhaps because we get weighed down with the common difficulties of life. But God has freely provided these things for us, that we might with his help overcome present challenges. Our encouragement from the life of Amaziah is to access the God of the much more. There's much more to Christianity than salvation from the penalty of our sins. In our life of service there's always much more of God's unlimited resources for us to appreciate - as well as the thrill and privilege of what we can be for God in his kingdom and house on earth. Perhaps it's time we read our ticket again - all the details are in God's Word, the Bible.

Some time ago I visited someone who shared with me a fragment of Amy Carmichael's poetry - a fragment which captures for us something of what we've been saying:

'Great Wave of God, deal with us till we know

Something beyond all we have known before,

Far, far beyond all we have known before.'

(High-water Mark, Dohnavur).

CHAPTER 8 - THE KING WHO WANTED TO BE PRIEST

Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, said that it's not so much adversity that's a test of man's character as what he does when he's in a position of power. This was Joseph's great test. As the second most powerful man in the world he could have taken merciless revenge on his brothers who had previously mistreated him. I think it's true that Joseph's toughest test and greatest victory was in the palace and not in the prison. But not everyone passes the test of prosperity. Uzziah, the king we meet today, is the king who failed the test of prosperity. And there's no doubt he was prosperous, for we read:

“And all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king in the place of his father Amaziah ... He continued to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding through the vision of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God prospered him. Now he went out and warred against the Philistines ... God helped him against the Philistines ... The Ammonites also gave tribute to Uzziah, and his fame extended to the border of Egypt, for he became very strong. Moreover, Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate and at the Valley Gate and at the corner buttress and fortified them. He built towers in the wilderness and hewed many cisterns, for he had much livestock, both

in the lowland and in the plain. He also had plowmen and vinedressers in the hill country and the fertile fields, for he loved the soil.

Moreover, Uzziah had an army ready for battle, which entered combat by divisions according to the number of their muster ... who could wage war with great power, to help the king against the enemy. Moreover, Uzziah prepared for all the army shields, spears, helmets, body armor, bows and sling stones. In Jerusalem he made engines of war invented by skillful men to be on the towers and on the corners for the purpose of shooting arrows and great stones. Hence his fame spread afar, for he was marvellously helped until he was strong” (2 Chronicles 26:1-15).

So Uzziah overthrew the Philistines, Arabians and others. He reduced Ammon to tribute. He improved agriculture; he reorganised the army; and introduced engines of war for throwing stones. He was an expert agriculturalist and a military genius. In whatever he did, he prospered. The picture the Bible paints of this man is a picture of extreme prosperity, but in the test of prosperity, Uzziah failed. His experience is a relevant example for us all.

For how often do you see it – a young family man doing well spiritually. While money is tight, he keeps close to God in dependent prayer. Then the situation is eased when a better job comes along. But prospering financially often comes at a spiritual cost – even though there may be the same outward profession. In all we’ve read about King Uzziah there’s one verse that’s pivotal. It’s

the verse that says Uzziah was marvellously helped until he was strong. But here's something we can learn: in spiritual experience, our strength can be our weakness, just as our weakness can be our strength. We'll let the apostle Paul explain this paradox, as he gives us this personal testimony:

“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me - to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Paul tells us that when we're weak, we're strong. King Uzziah proves that the opposite is also true: when we're strong, we're weak. It's as Paul added elsewhere:

“... let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:12-13).

Seemingly, Uzziah didn't take the way of escape, and so we read that Uzziah's:

“... fame spread afar, for he was marvellously helped until he was strong. But when he became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the LORD his God, for he entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. Then Azariah the priest entered after him and with him eighty priests of the LORD, valiant men. They opposed Uzziah the king and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful and will have no honor from the LORD God.” But Uzziah, with a censer in his hand for burning incense, was enraged; and while he was enraged with the priests, the leprosy broke out on his forehead before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the altar of incense.

Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous on his forehead; and they hurried him out of there, and he himself also hastened to get out because the LORD had smitten him. King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from the house of the LORD. And Jotham his son was over the king's house judging the people of the land.” (2 Chronicles 26:15-21).

We need 'valiant men' like those priests – not those who'll indulge someone out of respect for their office or status and flatter them along with the crowd. When someone is acting in a way that's clearly contrary to the teaching of the Word of God they need to be challenged in a way that's biblical – and that regardless of any position of authority they occupy. Uzziah's mistake is a lesson for us all, especially if we think we're spiritually strong. We can never lose our eternal salvation, but what a disaster to be cut off from the privileges of God's house on earth in terms of our service here – as Uzziah was. The king was a leper until the day he died. Perhaps that seems a harsh punishment, and some might even say a disproportionate one.

Was it such a terrible thing for the king to want to offer incense to God upon the temple altar of incense? We remember that Moses was denied entry into the promised land for striking the rock instead of speaking to it (Numbers 20). Nadab and his brother were consumed by fire because they offered incense using fire that had not come from the copper altar (Leviticus 10). Uzzah was struck down for handling the ark of the covenant when apparently trying to stabilize it (2 Samuel 6).

What all these things teach us is this: when God gives detailed commands, it's important for us that we pay attention to the details. From King Uzziah and others we would do well to learn the significance of disobedience in seemingly small things. God may not act today in summary judgement as in the days of the Old Testament, but his actions then show us his unchanging attitude today if we should in a similar way be dismissive of what we might be tempted to regard as minor issues in the apostles' teaching.

How tragic if we should choose to ignore as irrelevant any Bible teaching for today, with the result that, like Uzziah, we deny ourselves the experience of service connected with God's earthly house! Struck down with leprosy, King Uzziah had to vacate his throne as well as being cut off from the house of the LORD, and his son succeeded him even before Uzziah actually died. But it wasn't any view of the throne at Jerusalem that God gave to the prophet Isaiah, when "in the year of King Uzziah's death [Isaiah said at the beginning of his sixth chapter] I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple" (Isaiah 6:1).

That was, of course, a vision of heaven's throne. The time of Uzziah's death potentially ushered in a time of instability and crisis at Jerusalem. At times of stress it's good to look above by faith and realize there's no vacancy on the throne of heaven. Whatever the crisis down here, there's no crisis in heaven. As the psalmist said: "The LORD sat as King at the flood; Yes, the LORD sits as King forever" (Psalm 29:10).

God is always in control. Whatever we're passing through, let's remember that.

CHAPTER 9 - THE KING WHO ORDERED HIS WAYS BEFORE GOD

The Bible tells us that King Jotham became mighty. This was evident in that he built towers and castles, and fortified cities, and conquered his enemies – he undertook a quite expansive building program as well as successful military operations. What is really of interest, however, is we're told how he was able to achieve this. The same secret of his success can in principle be applied in our lives too. Jotham's success was because he prepared his ways before the Lord his God; he ordered or directed, and guided them according to the Word and will of God. This led him to live his life with the fear of God always before him. Not much is written about King Jotham in the Second Book of Chronicles, so it's worth reading it all. Listen out for the reason for his achievements which we've just drawn attention to:

“Jotham was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Jerushah the daughter of Zadok. He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Uzziah had done; however he did not enter the temple of the LORD. But the people continued acting corruptly. He built the upper gate of the house of the LORD, and he built extensively the wall of Ophel. Moreover, he built cities

in the hill country of Judah, and he built fortresses and towers on the wooded hills. He fought also with the king of the Ammonites and prevailed over them so that the Ammonites gave him during that year one hundred talents of silver, ten thousand kors of wheat and ten thousand of barley. The Ammonites also paid him this amount in the second and in the third year.

So Jotham became mighty because he ordered his ways before the LORD his God. Now the rest of the acts of Jotham, even all his wars and his acts, behold, they are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And Jotham slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David; and Ahaz his son became king in his place” (2 Chronicles 27:1-9).

That really is a precious gem: he ordered his ways before the Lord. It's one great and vital lesson we can take away from the life of this man – a man who attained to greater power, because – another way of putting it is - he made his ways firm before the Lord. It seems the idea is that he prepared his ways in God's presence, so allowing God to direct and establish his path in life. The result was he walked steadfastly before God. Little wonder then, that unlike kings before him, he didn't become guilty by falling away into idolatry, or by over-stepping the mark like his father Uzziah before him. As far as the Bible's record shows, his personal life was without major fault, except that we might possibly conclude that he wasn't a brilliant leader because we're told that the peo-

ple continued to act corruptly, for Jotham did not go so far as to remove the so-called 'high places' where idolatry was practised.

But there's no mention of Jotham personally being involved in idolatry. By ordering his steps before the Lord, he made his ways firm, so that his feet did not slip into the ways of idolatry. Often in the Bible, the righteous are compared to a tree. One place which comes to mind is Psalm 1 where the happy man, the one who meditates in God's law, and doesn't keep company with the wicked, is pictured as a tree firmly planted by streams of water which cannot be moved. It's that last idea which is being emphasized because the Hebrew word used there (Psalm 1:3) for 'tree' has the basic meaning of 'firmness'. To our minds the illustration of a tree might conjure up many different images; but to the Hebrew mind here it would have presented the idea of firmness. King Jotham, by ordering his ways before God, made them firm so that his feet didn't slip. With Jotham's example in mind, we might make our ambition the same as that expressed in the hymn: "May our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace". 'Ordered lives' - just like Jotham: the king who ordered his ways before God.

But what does it mean in practice? How can we realistically do this? The book of Proverbs shares its wisdom with us here. In the early verses of chapter 16 Jotham's word surfaces twice in the sense of 'established' and 'directed': "Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts will be established ... A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:3-9).

This seems to expand helpfully on the process for us. Our part – and we assume it was the same in Jotham’s experience – our part is to commit our plans prayerfully in advance to the Lord – and allow him to establish proper thinking in us by which means our steps - our course of action - can be directed in a way that pleases the Lord. It’s an ordered life that glorifies God – not a muddle; and not a life ordered to suit ourselves as far as acquiring wealth and prestige or seeking pleasure is concerned; but ordered – before the Lord - by prayer – and by the Word of God. Obviously, reading the Bible and absorbing God’s values plays a big part in this. Using again this same word that was the key to Jotham’s success, the psalmist prays in Psalm 119, that great psalm which extols God’s Word: “Direct my steps by Your word, and let no iniquity have dominion over me” (Psalm 119:133).

So we were right to assume that the study of God’s Word, the Bible, as applied to our daily lives was at the heart of Jotham’s secret. John Bunyan got it right when he said: ‘Either the Book (meaning the Bible) will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Book’. The psalmist was determined the Book would keep him from sin, and so he ordered every step of his life according to what he read in God’s Word. That’s a terrific example. But, let’s remember, knowledge of the Bible won’t benefit us until we begin to apply it. The story is told of four men arguing over what was the best translation of the Bible.

The first man liked the King James Version because of its beautiful, eloquent language. Another insisted that the American Standard Bible was best because of its accuracy to the original text. A third preferred Moffat for its quaint, penetrating words and captivating phrases. After considering the issue, the fourth man

said, 'Personally, I have always preferred my mother's translation.' Tolerating the others' chuckles, he continued, 'Yes, she translated it. She translated each page of the Bible into life. It's the most convincing translation I ever saw.' The outcome of Bible reading that's life-orientated will be lives that are ordered according to God's Word and will - ordered in personal integrity, as well as ordered in family and home life, in church life, in business, and in all our decisions generally. So we have our part in this and God has his part. Psalm 37:22-24 makes this even clearer. Using the same word again, it says:

“For those blessed by [the LORD] shall inherit the earth, but those cursed by Him shall be cut off. The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him with His hand” (Psalm 37:22-24).

The idea is that we order our ways by inviting God into the process through allowing him to direct and arrange and establish our steps – as we prepare and make ready our plans prayerfully in his presence in the light of all we've read in his Word. That's how we make our heart to be fixed (see Psalm 57, same word) and our spirit to be steadfast (see Psalm 51, same word) so that we don't fall away from the ways and works God has prepared for us to walk in. In that sense we can do as the old hymn says and: “Leave to Thy God to order and provide”.

It seems so simple, so simple that we may often forget it or lose sight of it. It's simple, but it was the great secret of Jotham's life. It's the one feature of his entire life that stands out as endorsed

by God for each of our lives too. Many books have been written about how to be successful in life, how to be a winner – but this one verse, this single idea about ordering our ways before God is all we really need to know. Doing this may not make us a winner in worldly terms, but it's what we are in God's book that counts – and this truly is the secret.

CHAPTER 10 - THE KING WHO TRUSTED IN GOD

Eleven chapters of the Bible are written about King Hezekiah, so there's something important in the story of his life which God wants us to learn. Alexander the Great is not even mentioned by name in the Bible; and by contrast we don't learn about Hezekiah in school history curricula. But God has a different agenda from that of this world. He's impressed by very different things.

“... Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king...He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars ... He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan. He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. For he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses. And the LORD was with him; wherever he went he prospered. And he rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him” (2 Kings 18:1-7).

Hezekiah didn't confuse trust in religious relics with a trust in God. This is the outstanding quality that's recorded of Hezekiah's life: he trusted in the LORD. Hezekiah was evidently someone who called a spade a spade: in other words, he called things exactly what they were. Until his days the people had been in the habit of burning incense to the bronze serpent Moses had made (see Numbers 21). Hezekiah saw this practice for what it was: idolatry, or at least a violation of the second commandment. He called the bronze serpent 'Nehushtan' meaning 'a piece of brass'. That's all it was. And he broke it in pieces to put an end to the veneration of religious relics. It reminds me of Abraham Lincoln and how he once said: 'If we were to call a cow's tail a leg, how many legs would a cow then have?' Answer: Four. Simply calling the tail a leg doesn't alter the reality that a cow has only four legs and one tail.

The point he was making is: you can call 'sin' by any name you want, like 'indiscretion', but the reality is that in God's sight it's still a sin. I think Hezekiah would've appreciated that. John Bunyan, writing in his autobiography, said: 'Did any ever trust in the Lord and were put to shame?' Is this not God's purpose in devoting space to Hezekiah's example – to give us grounds for believing – and to highlight how very important trusting in God is?

When Hezekiah came to the throne things were at a low ebb. His father had not been a good king, the very opposite in fact. Hezekiah bucked the trend; he was instrumental under God in a wonderful revival. He cleansed the temple, and eliminated idolatry. At the very start of his reign (2 Chronicles 29:3), Hezekiah opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them. We too need to begin as we mean to go on. Give God and the

demands of his service their rightful place. In any new situation we find ourselves in, facing new sets of relationships or fresh demands and responsibilities, I've learnt from experience it's always best to be 'up front' about our Christianity and Christian principles right from the start. If you start a new school or job, start as you mean to continue. There are three outstanding events in Hezekiah's life. Let's read about the first in 2 Kings chapter 18:

“In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them ... Then the king of Assyria sent ... Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah with a large army to Jerusalem. So they went up and came to Jerusalem ... Then Rabshakeh said to them, “Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, “What is this confidence that you have? ... if you say to me, 'We trust in the LORD our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away, and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem'?

“Now therefore, come, make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria ... Have I now come up without the LORD's approval against this place to destroy it? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it'“ (2 Kings 18:13-25).

It's worth considering the enemy's challenging question: “What is this confidence that you have?” In any time of difficulty what do we put our confidence in? We're going to find Hezekiah gives

us an inspiring example of putting all his confidence in God, and trusting in God. He wasn't fooled either when the enemy claimed the Lord had spoken to them. We can't always take such claims at face value.

There's an amusing story told about an eccentric 18th century minister called John Berridge. One day a lady came to him and said she had a clear word from the Lord to marry him. After a moment's thought, he replied: 'Since this concerns me so intimately, I think the Lord would have told me also.' Claims that the Lord has said this or that need to be checked against God's Word. It's true that God would later use the Babylonians to punish the disobedience of his own people, but the Babylonians exceeded their remit. God's actions against the Assyrians at this point show that their spokesman was overstating the case. That becomes very clear when the enemy taunted the people with: "... do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you, saying, "The LORD will deliver us." ...'Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem from my hand?'" (2 Kings 18:32-35).

Hezekiah, for his part, when confronted with this crisis did what the well-known hymn tells us to do – he took 'it to the Lord in prayer'. Just as we read in Second Kings chapter 19:

“... King Hezekiah ... entered the house of the LORD
... Then Hezekiah took the letter from the hand of
the messengers ...and spread it out before the LORD.
Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said, “O
LORD, the God of Israel, who are enthroned above
the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the

kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God. Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. Now, O LORD our God, I pray, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, O LORD, are God" (2 Kings 19:1-19).

What an example of spreading our concerns before the Lord in prayer! And notice how, in his prayer, Hezekiah addresses God as the God enthroned above or between the cherubim. He was envisaging the mercy-seat in the holiest part of the Jerusalem temple – the place answering to where God had said he would meet and speak with Moses (Exodus 25:22). We've a similar promise for today found in Hebrews chapter 4, verse 16: "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

The throne of grace is the ground of all real prayer. With true confidence in the grace of the one upon the throne, we - like Hezekiah – can approach God as the all-powerful God and – again like Hezekiah – make it our aim to hallow God's name in prayer. Remember how Hezekiah did this by expressing his concern for God's reputation in that his name was being defamed by the enemy. When, in prayer, we sincerely put God's honour be-

fore our own desires, that's the kind of prayer God delights to answer. Only after ordering his prayer so as to put God's claims first, did Hezekiah finally make his appeal for deliverance. It reminds us of the model prayer the Lord gave to his disciples (Luke 11). And God certainly did answer Hezekiah's prayer – in a most dramatic way! God answered that prayer and told Hezekiah:

“Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, I have heard you” ... Then it happened that night that the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead.” (2 Kings 19:20,35).

The second significant event in Hezekiah's life was when he received the news that he was terminally ill. We don't know how we'd cope, do we – unless we've been there too. One woman, upon receiving the news she had cancer and only three months to live, said: 'No cause for tears when you receive the King's invitation!' Hezekiah's response was again to turn to prayer at the news: “... he turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, “Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart and have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly” (2 Kings 20:2,3).

Some have thought that was extravagant. But it seems he may have had no son and heir at this point – how could the line of David possibly die out – with the promise of a Messiah depending on it. That alone would justify such a prayer. But we take our

leave of Hezekiah on a less worthy note, and it's the third significant event in his life.

God did grant him recovery from his illness. And the Bible says he 'gave no return for the benefit he received, because his heart was proud' (2 Chronicles 32:25). When ambassadors came from the then world superpower, Hezekiah was flattered. As astrologers they were probably curious about the miraculous sign that had accompanied Hezekiah's recovery (v.31). He showed off to them all his treasures. We're told that at this point 'God left him alone only to test him' (v.31). Sadly, Hezekiah failed that test. By means of that incident, God showed to Hezekiah the pride that was lurking in Hezekiah's own heart.

Soon these well-wishers would be back to take all his treasure away to Babylon. Convicted by his pride, Hezekiah received notice of that judgement meekly. We too should pray: "lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:4).

CHAPTER 11 - THE KING WHO WAS RESTORED DESPITE HIS WICKEDNESS

It's some time since a UK politician famously spoke out against making immigration easier by predicting it would lead to 'rivers of blood' in the streets. Manasseh was a king in Jerusalem who really did manage to make the streets of that city run with blood. He was guilty of idolatry, star worship and unbelievable cruelty – to the extent of sacrificing his own children. He didn't listen to the prophets Nahum and Isaiah who prophesied in his lifetime. So God judged him by taking him away into captivity in Babylon. But Manasseh was wonderfully changed by the sovereign and amazing grace of God. It happened in the time of his affliction. He was taken prisoner and then led to Babylon in chains. But there God blessed him with true repentance. First of all, let's review the story of his life up until that point. The record is in 2 Chronicles 33:

“Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. He did evil in the sight of the LORD according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down ... and worshiped all the host of heaven and

served them ... he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD.

He made his sons pass through the fire in the valley of Ben-hinnom; and he practiced witchcraft, used divination, practiced sorcery and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him to anger. Then he put the carved image of the idol which he had made in the house of God ... Thus Manasseh misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the sons of Israel. The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. Therefore the LORD brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze chains and took him to Babylon” (vv.1-11).

We might well have expected that to be the end of the story – and a well-deserved ending at that, we might have concluded. But:

“When [Manasseh] was in distress, he entreated the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God” (2 Chronicles 33:12-13).

Manasseh's story makes me think of the hymn: 'Amazing Grace': "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound; That saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see". While a new believer around 1750, the author of that hymn, John Newton, commanded an English slave ship. Ships would make the first leg of their voyage from England and anchor off the African coast. There tribal chiefs would deliver to them, men and women, who had been captured in raids and wars against other tribes. Buyers would select the finest specimens, which would be bartered for weapons, ammunition, metal, liquor, trinkets, and cloth.

Then the captives would be loaded aboard, packed for sailing. They were chained below decks to prevent suicides, laid side by side to save space, row after row, until the vessel was laden with as many as 600 units of human cargo. Captains aimed for a fast voyage across the Atlantic's infamous "middle passage," hoping to preserve as much as their cargo as possible, yet mortality rates sometimes ran at 20% or higher. When an outbreak of smallpox or dysentery occurred, those affected were thrown overboard. Once in the so-called New World, the slaves were traded for sugar and molasses used in the making of rum, which the ships would then carry to England for the final leg of their "triangle trade"; then off to Africa for yet another round.

John Newton transported more than a few shiploads of the six million African slaves brought to the Americas in the 18th century. At sea by the age of eleven, he was forced to enlist on a British man-of-war seven years later. Recaptured after desertion, the disgraced sailor was exchanged to the crew of a slave ship bound for Africa. It was a book he found on board – one

by Thomas à Kempis, called "Imitation of Christ" which sowed the seeds of his conversion. When a ship nearly foundered in a storm, he gave his life to Christ. Later he was promoted to captain of a slave ship. Commanding a slave vessel seems like a strange place to find a new Christian. But the inhuman aspects of the business did at last begin to trouble him and he left the sea for good. While working as a tide surveyor he studied for the ministry, and for the last 43 years of his life preached the gospel in Olney and London. At 82, Newton said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour."

King Manasseh was a wretch to whom God granted repentance, just as he later did to John Newton. Amazing grace indeed! We've just said God granted repentance to Manasseh, and that his story illustrates for us divine sovereignty. For who could've predicted the ending? It's God who grants repentance (Acts 5:31; 2 Timothy 2:25), just as it's also God who grants faith to an individual (Philippians 1:29).

I'd like to explore with you that Bible word 'repentance'. The New Testament word for repentance means changing our mind so that our views and our values, our goals and our ways all change – and our whole life is lived differently. To repent of our sins is not to be confused with fear of punishment; and it's even much more than reproaching ourselves for not having done better. Repentance is a radical change in our attitude towards sin in our lives. Perhaps we can illustrate it like this:

American culture is known for its special relation with the gun. The famous author, Ernest Hemingway, grew up in that climate,

but it all changed for his family one day. Because his father took his revolver and went up into the attic and shot himself. Young Hemingway's grief-stricken mother told her son to take his father's gun, with which he'd committed suicide, and get rid of it for good. They could never again bear to have it in the house. Ernest Hemingway took it, and climbing a hill he threw it with all his might into the depths of the lake below. Once, perhaps, an object of fascination and pride for the youngster, it had become a hated and loathesome thing. That change of mind with regard to the gun may illustrate for us what true repentance is: a complete change of thinking with regard to our sin. The change occurred for the Hemingway family because of the revolver's association with the death of Hemingway senior. How much more should we now hate our sin because of its association with the death of Christ. And the death of Christ, together with the revealed fact that the Christian believer has died with Christ, features strongly in Romans chapter 6. The apostle Paul says in verses 12-14:

"... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you ..."

He's arguing that sin should no longer be lord of the believer's life. Basically, Paul says we shouldn't live as we once lived before our conversion because we're not the same person we once were. And Christian baptism is a public testimony to the fact that we're under new management. In place of the lordship of sin,

there's now the lordship of Jesus Christ. That's the dramatic effect of repentance: the evidence of true conversion.

Repentance and faith are as inseparable as salvation and discipleship (Matthew 16:24-26). Perhaps we don't hear as much about it today as we once did – but we should, for the call to repent was the first summons in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2), as it was in the preaching of Jesus Christ (Matthew 4:17). It was also the foundation of the preaching of the twelve disciples when Jesus sent them out (Mark 6:12), and it was every bit as basic to Peter's preaching at Pentecost (Acts 2:38) as it was to Paul's preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 17:30; 26:20) saying 'that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance'. And we remember the fruits of repentance which John the Baptist demanded as showing evidence of changed thinking under the rule of Christ: they were social compassion, honest dealings and financial contentment. Tears are not always proof of real repentance (Hebrews 12:17). They weren't in the case of Esau, but they were with David (Ps. 56:8) who prayed:

“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:3-5).

That's true repentance, and we should aim for it, by God's grace, being a daily experience in our lives as committed Christians - so that we don't fall into the error of the Pharisees (Luke 15:11-32;

18:10-14) who were smug in their self-righteousness. They teach us “there’s none so good as don’t need it”, just as Manasseh’s a reminder that “there’s none so bad as can’t have it.”

CHAPTER 12 - THE KING WHO OBEYED GOD'S WORD

Our final king is one who, remarkably, was prophesied by name 300 years beforehand (1 Kings 13:2). Judah was a land of images and idols when Josiah, at the age of 8, began to reign. He was another young king who came to the throne at Jerusalem, a teenage reformer who had a zeal to repair the house of the LORD, which was the Jerusalem temple in those days. It was natural that this young king should be devoted to purifying the temple, the temple David had so longed to build, for we're told that Josiah walked in the ways of his ancestor, David. The Bible makes special mention of his zeal when it says:

“Then the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the doorkeepers, to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels that were made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. He did away with the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had appointed to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the surrounding area of Jerusalem, also those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to all the host of heaven.

He brought out the Asherah from the house of the LORD outside Jerusalem to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and ground it to dust ... He also defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech. He did away with the horses which the kings of Judah had given to the sun, at the entrance of the house of the LORD, by the chamber of Nathan-melech the official, which was in the precincts; and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire.

The altars which were on the roof, the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars which Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the LORD, the king broke down; and he smashed them there and threw their dust into the brook Kidron. The high places which were before Jerusalem, which were on the right of the mount of destruction which Solomon the king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Sidonians, and for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom the abomination of the sons of Ammon, the king defiled. He broke in pieces the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherim and filled their places with human bones. Furthermore, the altar that was at Bethel and the high place which Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel sin, had made, even that altar and the high place he broke down. Then he demolished its

stones, ground them to dust, and burned the Asherah” (2 Kings 23:4-15).

That’s a horrific catalogue of the extent of idolatry practised in and around Jerusalem. And this purging by Josiah seems to have been the most far-reaching so far. What had produced such fervour in the young man? Where had he learned such hatred for the things God hated? In young Josiah there was a heart that trembled at God’s Word (see Isaiah 66:2). We see that made especially clear when during Josiah’s reforms, the high priest made an astounding discovery. The high priest’s own words are recorded in the Bible in 2 Kings 22:8, ‘I have found the book of the Law in the house of the LORD’. Imagine the Word of God having been lost! What would be the king’s reaction to the news of its discovery? Other kings had been indifferent to it – or worse than indifferent – but Josiah:

“... sent, and they gathered to him all the elders of Judah and of Jerusalem. The king went up to the house of the LORD and all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests and the prophets and all the people, both small and great; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the LORD. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to carry out the words of this covenant that were writ-

ten in this book. And all the people entered into the covenant” (2 Kings 23:1-3).

Josiah was absolutely thrilled by this discovery. The Word of God had been found! This was a momentous event. It reminds me of the prophet Jeremiah’s words: “Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jeremiah 15:16).

There’s a similar thrill of personal discovery here when Jeremiah says “Your words were found.’ That word ‘found’ is elsewhere used of a thief who’s surprised at being caught red-handed (2:26). With us, a Bible paragraph we’ve read many times suddenly arrests us. I realize we’ve moved away from the passive sense of that Jeremiah text, but isn’t this our perception in practical terms of what happens when we discover God speaking to us through his Word? At times like that it’s as if we’re apprehended and surprised by joy as we read! Perhaps it’s a window of revelation on the person of Christ that’s opened for us.

Often our eyes are ‘holden’, our insight restrained, as we grapple with the outline of obscure prophecies or get lost in the detail of types and shadows until all of a sudden, to the searching heart, the Lord reveals himself in some particular way. Like Mary in glad surprise on that resurrection morning we, too, turn and say ‘Rabboni’ or ‘Teacher’ as we sense the Lord speaking to us - as though personally - by name. But, sadly, many people are indifferent towards God’s Word – as those who came before Josiah must have been, so that the book of the law ended up getting lost. Many are less than enthusiastic about it.

It's said that there is no city in the world, perhaps, where the treasures of art are more appreciated than Florence, in Italy. But an American visitor to the Pitti Palace, after viewing some of the paintings there, said to his guide: "Are these the great masterpieces that everyone tells me about? I don't see much in them to arouse such enthusiasm." "It is not these paintings that are on trial sir," the guide answered, "but it is you who view them." So it is with the Word of God. There're scoffers, people who sneer at divine revelation, who say that they cannot feel much enthusiasm about the Bible. But the Bible is not on trial; they are – we all are.

The preacher Campbell Morgan writes of a time of crisis in his life when he admitted to himself his lack of assurance that the Bible was the authoritative Word of God. He immediately cancelled all his preaching engagements. Then, taking all his books, both those attacking and those defending the Bible, he locked them all in a corner cupboard, and went to a bookshop, bought a new Bible and returning with it said to himself: "I am no longer sure that this is what my father claims it to be – the Word of God. But of this I am sure: if it be the Word of God, and if I come to it with an unprejudiced and open mind, it will bring assurance to my soul of itself." It did, and he spent the rest of his life in the study of it and went on to influence many others to be equally committed to God's Word. Josiah also made a point of encouraging others – his subjects – to fully share his commitment to God's Word. Not only did he make a covenant to carry out the words of the book – which was as much of the Bible as they had back then – but we read: 'And all the people took a stand for the covenant.'

It was a case of like king, like people. What their king did, they did. King Josiah took a stand for the teaching of the book of the covenant – he took a stand publicly to practice all the truth he'd rediscovered from the book of the covenant. And the people followed his example. That's the outstanding feature in Josiah's reading of God's Word. He took it seriously. He took its message on board, and applied it to his life. We read that Josiah “made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and all his soul.”

It's one thing to read our Bible, but we need to believe it and obey it as well. Josiah gives us a tremendous example of our need to apply the Word of God to our lives, letting it bring about real change. Someone else who experienced the real power of God's Word was the prophet we mentioned earlier, the prophet Jeremiah who also ‘found’ God's Word. Jeremiah learnt the power of God's Word early on in his experience. We'll let Jeremiah himself take up the story: “The word of the LORD came to me saying, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” And I said, “I see a rod of an almond tree.” Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it”” (Jeremiah 1:11-12).

The almond tree, the first to wake from sleep, blossomed in January, and bore fruit in March. Behind the tender bud was the surging power of God breaking the winter's grip. Behind Jeremiah, and all other weak preachers, lies the power of God's Spirit surging through the Word that's living and active to awaken hearts that have been lulled into sleep. Let's continue to enjoy – or rediscover if necessary – the living and active Word of God! Then, like Josiah, let's commit to putting all we read there into practice.

Did you love *A Legacy of Kings - Israel's Chequered History*?
Then you should read *Abraham: Friend of God* by Brian Johnston!



Bible teacher, missionary and radio broadcaster, Brian Johnston's conversational and down to earth approach provides an informative biography and commentary of one of the most important characters in the Old Testament of our Bibles – Abraham the nomad. Abraham was known for his great example of faith and for being a "Friend of God", but his life was far from plain sailing. Brian draws out a number of lessons for our discipleship today in this helpful Bible study.

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About the Author

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God (www.churchesofgod.info). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit www.searchfortruth.podbean.com) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



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