

Jehoshaphat

2 Chronicles 17-20

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Jehoshaphat was the fourth king of Judah. There is a brief account given of his reign in the book of 2 Kings, but they have given the more complete record in 2 Chronicles. Jehoshaphat was the son of Asa, who was a good king. Scripture records of Asa that he "did what was right in the sight of the Lord." He had a very successful reign until the last three years of his life when he rejected the word of the prophets, was stricken with some sort of disabling disease and, during this three-year period, he reigned with Jehoshaphat as co-regent. We pick up the account of Jehoshaphat in chapter 17 verses 1 to 6, which tell us something of the opening years of his reign:

Jehoshaphat his [Asa's] son then became king in his place, and made his position over Israel firm. He placed troops in all the fortified cities of Judah, and set garrisons in the land of Judah, and in the cities of Ephraim that Asa, his father, had captured. And the Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days [i.e., prior to David's sins of adultery and murder] 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. And he took great pride in the ways of the Lord and again removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah.

Jehoshaphat did two things to strengthen his kingdom. The first was to establish Judah in a better military position. He garrisoned troops and set up defensive positions throughout the cities so that they would protect Judah from invasions from their enemies. In the closing verses of chapter 17 you have a more detailed account of some of his military activities - the appointment of various leaders in Judah and Benjamin, and the names of some of the commanders of his troops. They tell us there that he had more than a million men stationed in Jerusalem, apart from the others placed throughout the empire. He had almost twice as many troops as David had, and he took very careful steps to guarantee that Judah would be safe from invasions.

Just as an aside, one of his troop commanders is named for us in verse 16: "Amasiah the son of Zicri, who volunteered for the Lord, and with him 200,000 valiant warriors." This character is interesting to me, for the term, "volunteered for the Lord" is applied elsewhere in Scripture to the freewill offerings Israel presented to the Lord -- those above and beyond the regular sin offerings that were required. These offerings were given without any sense of constraint, with no strings attached. Israel just volunteered them to the Lord. And this man Amasiah gave himself as a freewill offering. The reason he did so, I believe, is contained in his name. "Amasiah" is composed of two Hebrew words that mean, "the load (or, the burden) is the Lord's." In this brief reference is the key to motivation. We can volunteer freely for anything if we understand that the burden is the Lord's, that the demands rest upon him. And this is one of the men Jehoshaphat had as a leader of his army.

The second step Jehoshaphat took had to do with the spiritual consolidation of the nation. It was not enough merely to raise and maintain an army of defense. The second step was to provide for the spiritual needs of his people. He did this by first taking heed himself of the Lord. He loved the Lord as David had loved the Lord in his earlier years. He put away the idol worship that had begun to creep into Israel because of some of the earlier kings, and he set his heart first to love the Lord, and then to teach in all of Judah. Verses 7 to 9 mention that in the third year of his reign, i.e., after Asa had died, he sent teams of priests and princes, the heads of families, throughout the nation of Judah in order to teach the law of the Lord. Verse 9:

And they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them. They went

throughout all the cities of Judah and taught among the people.

They moved in among the people and began to instruct them in the Scriptures. For Jehoshaphat knew that any awakening in Israel could only endure if it were followed by teaching of the Word of God. That is what causes revivals, restorations of faith, to endure. Awakenings have a way of fading rapidly unless the Word is taught, unless the people are instructed, told how to be dependent upon God and how to maintain their own spiritual life. We have seen recently what appears to be the demise of the Jesus Movement among young people. It is running rapidly downhill. It was a genuine awakening, but it has only endured where a base of teaching has been laid down, so that these young people and others who received the Lord through this movement of the Spirit can continue to cultivate their spiritual life and grow in their relationship with the Lord. They know the Lord, and they know his Word, so they have these two resources. As Paul said when he left the city of Ephesus, never to return, "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." He left behind the teaching of the Word, and it stabilized people. That is what Jehoshaphat did. He provided for the spiritual needs of the nation by feeding them the word of God. That is what causes these movements to continue and to endure.

These two things Jehoshaphat did: he took steps to protect them militarily, and he took steps to protect them spiritually. He saw that both were essential. Both were necessary to make any nation great and stable. Military might, in and of itself, accomplishes nothing. Nations do have the right to national defense. That is a right God has given the nations - to conscript young men to serve in a military force that is used for defensive purposes. God has given government and society the right to maintain law and order and justice through the use of the "sword," as Peter tells us -- through martial law if necessary, and through the instrument of capital punishment - because we live in a sinful world, and men would destroy one another apart from standing armies of defense. This is right and proper for nations.

But that, in and of itself, will never preserve a nation. No nation will endure which depends upon its military might. There is a verse in the book of Psalms that says, "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will trust in the name of the Lord, our God." It is only the nation that trusts in the Lord that will endure. Military might in itself is useless. History is filled with the accounts of empires that were strong and powerful, invincible, but which fell because they neglected the spiritual underpinnings that make possible a secure nation.

Jehoshaphat saw that it was essential for the nation to be on the right basis, and so he provided a basis of righteousness. That is how righteousness spreads through a nation -- by the teaching of the word of God. So he gave men the freedom, impelled them, to preach and teach the Word. And wherever the leaders of a nation will do that, will encourage righteousness, encourage the teaching of the word of God, that nation will be established. Proverbs say that it is righteousness that exalts a nation. It is where leaders will foster and encourage righteousness that a nation is secure. So these were the steps Jehoshaphat took in the initial years of his reign.

But in chapter 18 we read a very disappointing fact. Jehoshaphat was a good king. Scripture says so. Yet he had one failing that continued throughout his life. It was a tendency to make alliances with the nation of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. Three times in his reign he made alliances that had disastrous consequences in the life of his people. The first is given to us in verse 1 of chapter 18:

Now Jehoshaphat had great riches and honor; and he allied him self by marriage with Ahab.

Scripture gives us only this brief reference to this alliance, and no commentary is given, but it was a terrible thing. The consequences of this action were twenty years or more of suffering for the Southern Kingdom. Ahab was king over the Northern Kingdom, and he was married to Jezebel, the infamous Phoenician princess, daughter of Ethbaal the king of Phoenicia, who was high priest of Baal and who murdered his own brother in order to gain the throne.

The Phoenicians were known for their moral decadence. They probably came originally from the region around the southern end of the Dead Sea, where Sodom and Gomorrah were located. From their own historical traditions we learn that they left that area sometime around the period when Abraham lived, which suggests that they may

have been survivors of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, perhaps because they lived in the smaller cities surrounding that area, or that they fled prior to that time. In any case, they brought with them the moral awfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Phoenicians were widely known for this. They established colonies elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the best known of which was Carthage. The Carthaginians scandalized even the Romans with their wickedness.

It was from this nation that Jezebel came and married Ahab, and it was the daughter of this union who married into Jehoshaphat's family. Jehoshaphat thought that this was a very astute thing to do politically. It would lay to rest the animosity between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. But it was a disastrous thing to do. When Athaliah, Jezebel's daughter, married Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's son, she brought along all of her gods and all of her twisted morality, and introduced these into the life of her husband, and into the life of their son, Ahaziah. In fact, Jehoram was such a despised individual that the Scriptures say he died with no one's regret. They were glad to see him go. And when Ahaziah came to the throne, he reigned only about a year and died a very violent death.

His place was then taken by Athaliah. She became Queen Mother and ruled over the Southern Kingdom, where she introduced all of her idolatry and her wicked practices, killed all of the royal children, and tried to kill her own grandson, Joash. Eventually she was overthrown by the efforts of this grandson, and Joash again established Judah in righteousness. But this act of Jehoshaphat, in setting up this alliance with the Northern Kingdom, brought about all of this devastation. It seemed like the thing to do, but it was something that was forbidden. Judah was not to ally herself with Israel. But Jehoshaphat thought he knew better, and thus he brought about all of these terrible results.

In verses 2 and following we find the second alliance with the Northern Kingdom, which occurred some seven or eight years later:

And some years later he went down to visit Ahab at Samaria. And Ahab slaughtered many sheep and oxen for him and the people who were with him, and induced him to go up against Ramoth-gilead. And 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." Moreover, Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Please inquire first for the word of the Lord."

Ahab had a cause to pursue, and he induced Jehoshaphat to go with him. He wanted to recapture Ramoth-gilead, a city on the east side of the Jordan River that had once belonged to Israel but now belonged to Syria. Ahab wanted that piece of real estate. Now, to do this was a very treacherous thing, for Ahab had just made an alliance with the Syrians and had promised a peaceful relationship with them. They had been together in a war against the Assyrian nation just prior to this, and their relationship supposedly was a friendly one. They were at peace with one another. But Ahab was planning this treacherous attack to win back Ramoth-gilead, this city he thought ought to be his, just as he had dealt so treacherously with Naboth to gain his vineyard. He was motivated by greed, and he induced Jehoshaphat to go along with this cause.

And Jehoshaphat gave his word before inquiring of the Lord! He said, "I am as you are, and my people as your people, and we will go up with you against Ramoth-gilead. Oh, by the way, shouldn't we inquire of the Lord?" And Ahab says, "Certainly." So he brings out his four hundred prophets of Asherah, the female consort of Baal, prophets who worshiped sex. They had mingled together the worship of Jehovah with their worship of Asherah. And the four hundred prophets come and prophecy success to Israel in this venture.

But Jehoshaphat senses that something is wrong. So he says to Ahab, "Don't you have here a prophet of the Lord? I'm impressed by what all these prophets have to say, but don't you have one of the Lord's prophets here?" (We won't take time now to go into it, but I commend to you the reading of the story of Micaiah the son of Imlah.) Ahab says, "Oh, yes, there is one prophet of the Lord, Micaiah, but I don't like him because he never tells me anything good. He never tells me what I want to hear, but always prophesies evil toward me. Jehoshaphat says, "That's the man I want to hear!" So they send for Micaiah.

In the meantime, a false prophet, Zedekiah, puts iron horns on his head and begins to run back and forth in front of the king and prophesies that Ahab will gore the Syrians as an ox would gore anything that stood in its way. He evidently is harking back to a prophecy Moses had made about the tribe of Ephraim. Ephraim was the leading tribe of the Northern Kingdom, the tribe from which Ahab came. Moses prophesied that Ephraim would be like an ox that would gore its opponents. Of course, that prophecy was based on Israel's faithfulness toward God. If they were faithful to God, then that would be true. But they had long since departed. Zedekiah picks up this prophecy and predicts falsely that Israel will succeed.

Then Micaiah is brought to the scene, and the man who leads him before the two kings says to him, "Micaiah, please don't say the wrong thing. You're always in hot water because you don't tell the king what he wants to hear." Verses 13 and 14:

But Micaiah said, "As the Lord lives, what my God says, that will I speak." [Micaiah was one of a long line of rugged old prophets, like Elijah, Elisha, Jehu, and Hananiah, who feared only God and could not care less what the king thought.] **And when he came to the king, the king said to him, "Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall I refrain?" He said, "Go up and succeed, for they will be given into your hand."**

Ahab could hardly believe his ears. But there must have been something in Micaiah's voice that tipped Ahab off, for despite the fact that Micaiah's words coincided with the words of the false prophets, Ahab knew that could not possibly be true.

Then the king said to him, "How many times must I adjure you to speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord? " So he [Micaiah] said, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, Like sheep that have no shepherd; And the Lord said, 'These have no master. Let each of them return to his house in peace.' Then the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?"

Micaiah prophesied that Ahab would be slain -- that Israel would be scattered like sheep without a shepherd, and that they would return safely, but not Ahab. Immediately after this is the intriguing account of how Micaiah saw the Lord upon his throne, and saw him command to a spirit to deceive Ahab. It sounds strange that God would want to deceive a man, and yet it is clear from this passage that God gives a man what he wants. If he insists upon believing a lie, God will give him a lie. He would not know the truth if he saw it or heard it. And that is what happened to Ahab. He believed a lie. He was self-deceived. He bought the message of the false prophets. So he went into battle at Ramoth-gilead believing that he would succeed. As he departed, verse 27,

Micaiah said, "If you indeed return safely, the Lord has not spoken to me." And he said, "Listen, all you people."

You see, the real test was whether or not Ahab would come back safely. Ahab did everything he could to insure that he would. The first thing he did was to exchange clothing with Jehoshaphat. When the Syrians attacked, Ben-hadad, the king of Syria, said, "Don't strike down any of the people of Israel; it's Ahab that I want. Strike him down." Ben-hadad had had just about enough of Ahab's treachery. So when they saw Jehoshaphat in Ahab's clothing they pursued him. Jehoshaphat cried out and was miraculously saved. Ahab, dressed in a disguise, thought he couldn't be seen. But God saw him. The account records that an archer drew a bow at random and shot an arrow in the air. It struck Ahab and he died. Micaiah's prophecy came true to the letter.

Jehoshaphat went home a much wiser man. We do not know whether he had involved his own troops or not. We are not told in this account. But he almost lost his own life, and his decision to ally himself with Israel had disastrous consequences in the life of Israel. It cost them their king, and perhaps a few of their men, although the nation itself was spared and returned in safety, as the prophet had said. It appeared to be such an innocent thing to do. Yet it was contrary to the word of God and it brought about terrible consequences in the life of Ahab and in Jehoshaphat's life as well. In chapter 19 we read,

Then Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned in safety to his house in Jerusalem. And Jehu the

son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him and said to King Jehoshaphat, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord and so bring wrath on yourself from the Lord? But there is some good in you, for you have removed the Asheroth from the land and you have set your heart to seek God."

We can understand from this that his kingdom would again be secure. In the account that follows we read that Jehoshaphat did get the message. He went throughout the nation and again began to teach the people, to establish judges and to warn them to judge righteously, to listen to the Lord and do what the Lord said. We could wish that the story ended there, but it does not. Chapter 20, verses 35 through 37:

And after this Jehoshaphat king of Judah allied himself with Ahaziah king of Israel. He acted wickedly in so doing. [You would think that after two disasters he would have known better, but he did it again!] So he allied himself with him to make ships to go to Tarshish, and they made the ships in Ezion-geber. Then Eliezer the son of Dodavahu of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat saying, "Because you have allied yourself with Ahaziah, the Lord has destroyed your works." So the ships were broken and could not go to Tarshish.

The parallel account in 1 Kings tells us what their motive was. They were going to Ophir to get gold. Their motive was greed. Twice we are told in this account that Jehoshaphat had great wealth and honor. He did not need this gold. But the king of the Northern Kingdom did, and so he worked out an alliance with Jehoshaphat by which they would build ships in Ezion-geber and sail off to Ophir and gain additional wealth. But the Lord said, "Your venture will not succeed." And a storm struck the ships and every one of them was destroyed.

The account in 2 Chronicles does not mention it, but in 1 Kings you will discover that after this, the king of the Northern Kingdom went to Jehoshaphat and said, "Let's do it again." Jehoshaphat said, "No." He would not do it. It took three times, but he saw that he needed to let the Lord decide what was right and what was wrong, and that these forbidden alliances would only serve to destroy him.

It is interesting to me that there were three areas where Jehoshaphat allied himself: in a marriage, in a cause, and in a business venture. Those are the three areas where Christians may at times be tempted to form contractual relationships with unbelievers. The New Testament, in a passage in 2 Corinthians 6, says that we are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. The symbol "unequally yoked" goes back to the Old Testament, where the Israelites were prohibited in Moses' law from yoking together different kinds of animals, e.g., oxen with donkeys or camels, because the unequal gaits of the animals would cause the yoke to chafe them both. It was primarily a humanitarian gesture, but it was also intended to be illustrative.

And whenever we yoke ourselves to someone with a different gait, the result is that it always chafes both of us, the non-Christian as well as the Christian. For, you see, God loves non-Christians too. And to be mismatched causes distress in their lives. But oh, how much distress it causes in our lives as Christians! And how frequently we stray away from the truth, because we are linked in some kind of relationship from which we cannot extricate ourselves. God is not saying that we cannot have business dealings with non-Christians, nor that we should not associate with them, because we ought to be there in the midst of the world, loving them, accepting them, as God does. But we are not to be bound together in a relationship from which we cannot extricate ourselves. To be so means that we have to go their way and adopt their philosophy, and it always results in terrible distress and unhappiness and misery in our lives.

Instead, as Jehoshaphat did, we should let the Lord be the judge, let him decide, let him determine what is right, and follow him. Do you know what Jehoshaphat's name means? It means "the Lord is the judge." That was the great lesson he learned throughout his life -- to let the Lord decide, and not to trust in his own capacity. Because sometimes these alliances seem to be the best thing we could do, and the alternative seems pretty bleak. But what we do not see is that God is trying to spare us from some terrible disaster in our life.

That passage in 2 Corinthians goes on to say, "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord, [not separate geographically, but separate in your attitudes, not allied with them in their outlooks, their causes, their way

of doing things] . . . and I will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters." When we are willing to cast ourselves utterly on the Lord, then we can experience what it means for him to be a father to us, to meet our needs and to provide whatever we imagine an illicit alliance somehow might supply. So God's exhortation to us is to come out from among them and be separate, and he will be our Father.

Lord, we need to learn that lesson that you must be the one who decides for us. And we need to trust your wisdom and your understanding of things as they are, and be willing to do it your way, even though for the moment it may not appear to be the most astute thing to do. Teach us, Lord, to rely upon your word, and to let you be the one who discerns between truth and error in our lives. We thank you that when we are willing to rest upon you and draw from you, that you do indeed become a Father to us, and satisfy us with everything we require. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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