

A Tale of Treachery: The Forsaken Son

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Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

[0 : 01] Well, we're going to read God's Word together now, and it's our final installment in these chronicles of Jehoiada the priest. Our passage this evening is 2 Chronicles chapter 24, verse 17 to the end of the chapter.

That's on page 376 in the Visitor's Bibles, 376. But we'll read again from verse 14, which we looked at last week, where we had Jehoiada's great noble death under God's blessing, a death the writer very much contrasts today with that of the kings.

It's an awful story tonight. So just listen out for the tragic word which rings out right the way through it. And I'll try to read it the same way each time it comes. 2 Chronicles 24, and I'll read from halfway through verse 14.

Judah offered burnt offerings in the house of the Lord regularly all the days of Jehoiada. But Jehoiada grew old and full of days and died.

He was 130 years old at his death, and they buried him in the city of David among the kings because he had done good in Israel towards God and his house.

[1 : 18] Now, after the death of Jehoiada, the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king. Then the king listened to them, and they abandoned, forsook the house of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols.

And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the Lord. These testified against them, but they would not pay attention.

Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the priest. And he stood above the people and said to them, Thus says the Lord God, Why do you break the commandments of the Lord so that you cannot prosper?

Because you have forsaken the Lord. He has forsaken you. But they conspired against him, and by command of the king, they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the Lord.

Thus, Joash the king did not remember the kindness that Jehoiada, Zechariah's father, had shown him, but killed his son.

[2 : 32] And when he was dying, he said, May the Lord see and avenge. At the end of the year, the army of the Syrians came up against Joash. They came to Judah and Jerusalem and destroyed all the princes of the people, among the people, and sent all their spoil to the king of Damascus.

Though the army of the Syrians had come with few men, the Lord delivered into their hands a very great army, because Judah had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers.

Thus, they executed judgment on Joash. When they had departed from him, forsaking him while lying severely wounded, his servants conspired against him because of the blood of the son of Jehoiada the priest, and killed him on his bed.

So he died, and they buried him in the city of David. But they did not bury him in the tomb of the kings. Those who'd conspired against him were Zabad, the son of Shimeath, the Ammonite, and Jehozabad, the son of Shimrith, the Moabite.

Accounts of his sons and of the many oracles against him, and the rebuilding of the house of God, are written in the story of the book of Kings. And Amaziah, his son, reigned in his place.

[3 : 51] Well, this is God's word to us, so may he bless it to us this evening. Well, do turn with me back to page 376 in the Blue Bibles, 2 Chronicles chapter 24 and verse 17.

And let me pray. Father God, we thank you again for the huge privilege we have to hear you speak. Give us soft hearts, Lord, that feel the tragedy of what we're reading the way you feel it.

And by your spirit, help us to respond rightly. In Jesus' name, amen. Perhaps there's no human tragedy more heart-wrenching than the waste of a young life so full of hope and potential.

And when all that promise is thrown away through a betrayal of love and kindness itself, well, I wonder if what we're holding in our hands tonight could be the saddest story in the Bible.

It's tragic enough, isn't it, when we read about the latest bright musician or young actor found lying lifeless beside an empty syringe. But how much more heart-wrenching when that life which is thrown away is one in which a whole kingdom had put their hope.

[5 : 16] And it wasn't simply a waste of his own future. He betrayed the very people who'd loved him the most. If you've been following this story with us over the past few weeks, well, you almost can't believe what you're reading, can you?

It's a tale that began years before in an age of terror and despair. The kingdom of Judah had fallen into the hands of a cold, savage queen who slaughtered every child who laid claim to the throne.

But one elderly priest and his wife stood against the darkness. They smuggled the last royal son, a baby boy, away from the bloodshed and hid him in the temple.

And one day, many years later, they restored him to his throne. The priest was named Jehoiada and the young king, Joash. And because of them, the kingdom dared hope.

In fact, in time, the nation learned to rejoice. Joash grew strong under Jehoiada's care and grew into the sort of king the people had longed to see. And together with the priest, he restored all the brokenness and put back together the pieces of their wonderful covenant with God.

[6 : 37] And at the heart of that relationship was a building, a temple where one small fragment of Eden still survived.

Inside, God ruled perfectly and lived right alongside his creatures. And so for the golden years of Joash's reign, they worked to rebuild that temple and restore the little foothold of heaven that God had given his people.

But Jehoiada grew old and at last he died. And the storyteller left us last week with that awful suspicion that if we keep reading to the end, his story would break our hearts.

But something in us human beings is drawn into tragedy, isn't it? And so we turn the page ready for the awful twist in the tale. And yet when it comes, somehow it is far worse than we could imagine.

The story begins with a seriously charged Bible word, doesn't it? After the death of Jehoiada, the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king. Then the king listened to them.

[7 : 50] It's the word which began the very first tragedy in the Bible. Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat, cursed is the ground because of you.

So just like Adam, weak King Joash listened to the whispers in his ear. He swallowed the lie that perhaps God's rule is just a little too restrictive.

And so in one verse, he turns his back on everything he and Jehoiada had stood for. And that's when the chronicler uses another word, which if you've been reading his book so far, you know is just as loaded.

It's one word that tells the whole story and it ricochets through the tale like a gunshot. Five times it comes in 11 verses, that word forsaken, abandoned.

We hear it first in verse 18, don't we? They forsook the house of the Lord, the temple, which everything up to now was heading towards. And they went and served the Asherim, the goddess of sexual liberation and fertility.

[9 : 04] But it wasn't just a building they'd abandoned, was it? It was a rejection of relationship. They'd forsaken God's whole loving desire to be close to his people.

Through the temple, he offered them gospel, covenant love, and they gave him the cold shoulder. Well, the next time we hear that forsaking word, it's verse 20, and it's God turning his back.

And that's how the story ends, verse 25, with God leaving Joash forsaken on a battlefield, but not before being exceptionally patient and merciful.

And that's where this story sinks into the deepest tragedy of all. Even though he burns with anger, verse 18, God does what God does right the way through his old history.

He sends prophets, literally, to turn them back to him. But the people say, no thanks. They listen to the princes, but not, verse 19, to the prophets.

[10 : 15] Not to the God who just, a few years ago, they were lost and afraid without. And the ugliness of that betrayal, the cold-heartedness of it, gets embodied by our storyteller in their reaction to one final messenger.

A boy who'd have grown up running through the temple courts hand in hand with the young king, Zechariah, Jehoiada's son. Our final tale, then, is a tale of treachery, the story of the forsaken son.

And it could be Jesus telling the story by now, couldn't it? God still had one more to send, a beloved son. He sent him last of all, saying, surely, they will respect Jehoiada's son.

God sends the son of the man and woman who King Joash owed everything to. one of the sons who just a chapter ago stood in the courtyard of the temple and helped crown him king.

And on that very same spot, verse 21, the very same courtyard, Jehoiada was so keen to protect from bloodshed and defilement, Joash has him stoned to death.

[11 : 36] What was the message that cost him his life? Well, it's our storyteller's message to his readers. God's consistent message that cheating on the covenant relationship means losing all its wonderful privileges.

Zechariah just preached a very simple Old Testament text, verse 20. He preaches Numbers 14. Why do you break the commandments of the Lord so that you cannot prosper?

It just doesn't make sense, does it? You have a God desperate to prosper and bless you. And you walk away from him. So having delivered his sermon, Zechariah applies it.

Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you. Turn your backs on relationship with God, and the only way is curse.

And as the tragedy plays out, that's precisely what we see. Joash learns what it's like to be forsaken by God.

[12 : 42] First, there's a war, which is a bit like David and Goliath in reverse. Judah is the big Goliath now, but without her defender, her huge army gets trounced, verse 24, by a teeny little band of Syrians.

And when it's over, Joash himself is forsaken on the battlefield. So that in the end, that boy wonder who so many had risked so much to put on the throne is killed by foreign slaves as he lies in his bed.

One more coward's death. Well, the story leaves us reeling with questions, doesn't it? How on earth is it possible for a boy who was so privileged, who knew so much of the Lord's grace, so much personal kindness and love to turn on the very person who that all came from?

How is it possible? As a young man, he seemed so on fire for the Lord, didn't he? How could he so quickly throw all that away? And if it could happen to Joash, well, what's to stop it happening to us?

I suspect those are questions our chronicler has worked quite hard to provoke because as he's told this story, he's done everything he can to make us feel the pain and the pathos.

[14 : 12] Just think about how he's told his story. Think about the language he's used and the characters he's built up and the foolishness of Joash's choices and the irony of where the murder takes place, right in the temple they've been building all this time.

All of that has been designed to build up the sense of heartbreak and tragedy. But why is that? Why is it that right from the earliest days of storytelling, us human beings have found ourselves drawn in to sorrow?

Whether it's Shakespeare or Spielberg, it's always the tragedies that leave the deepest mark on us, isn't it? Well, the answer people often give is that tragedy allows what the Greeks called catharsis.

It lets us recognize and give vent to our emotion. Or to put it in a slightly more biblical frame, tragedy allows us a moment of honesty about what humanity is really like.

Isn't that what happens when you read a story like this? You listen to verse 22 and you recognize something deeply, uncomfortably true. Thus, Joash the king did not remember the kindness that Jehoiada Zechariah's father had shown him but killed his son.

[15 : 38] A story like that lets us be honest about the sheer ugliness and heartlessness of humanity's response to our creator. James Philip called it a sin against love and faithfulness itself.

It's an ugly story. So now we face that betrayal. Let me make four observations which I think this story allows us to be honest about.

I think the first thing it lets us admit is that deep down in the kingdom all wasn't quite right. Church can be a wonderful thing can't it and when things are going well and the Bible is taken seriously it's easy to start believing that everything's rosy.

But isn't it sobering that the minute Jehoiada's out the way verse one those princes rear their heads whispering poison. Presumably they laid low right the way through those golden years of reformation but when the time came Jehoash made exactly the same mistake as his father.

He listened to the bad counsel and swallowed their lies. The truth is that resentment about God's rule just springs up constantly inside us doesn't it?

[16 : 57] There's always that temptation to begrudge his temple and his exclusive demand and so all through the years Jehoiada was busy restoring Israel's worship.

One or two resentful elders smiled and bided their time and festered away under the surface. And it's extraordinary isn't it?

How long we can let that last? How many churches close to our hearts found that out the hard way? For years even decades they had good evangelical ministries but in the moment of crisis people who had lain low all that time came crawling out of the woodwork to make trouble.

Deep down in the kingdom not everything was right. The truth was that their hidden resentment for God's temple spoke far too much about what they thought of God himself.

Just think about what it said to God to turn your backs on his temple where his whole gospel longing to be close to his people was focused.

[18 : 10] Just as today it shows something terrible if we've got no love for his church because it's here isn't it? With us that God's spirit lives alongside man.

If we're discontent with church it should make us ask whether deep down it's God we're beginning to resent. If we're lukewarm about his great mission of building his temple well even here things might not be quite as well as they look.

Secondly we're allowed to admit something about Joash himself. Deep down in the king all wasn't quite right. what this story lets us be honest about is that the Joash tragedy is far more common than we'd like to admit.

He really did look like the real deal didn't he? There's probably never been a king with so much privilege and hope and potential but you don't need to be a part of God's family for very long to see someone you love throw all that away.

Matthew Henry makes a painfully sharp comment here. It's easier to build temples he said than to be temples to God and the little religion Joash had was all buried in Jehoiada's grave.

[19 : 39] It's easy isn't it to get excited by the gospel and by the buzz about church and the next big project but it's quite another thing to be excited about restored hearts.

And changed lives. And sometimes it can be quite hard to tell how much of our excitement is really being propped up by other people. But then the student who led you to Christ leaves or your parents who love the Lord aren't around to keep watch or the wife you accompany to church all those years of marriage passes away.

And what's left? when the pastor we admire so much moves on or worse still when he falls from grace? Can we be sure we won't fall with him?

All of us depend on the people we look up to don't we? And God's given them to us for a short while but the risk is what one preacher calls spiritual piggyback.

One day we have to stand for ourselves. And when that day came Joash just jumped onto the next passerby. They told him to loosen up and he went along with the crowd.

[20 : 58] So it's worth asking ourselves whose approval really matters to us? When we do things we feel ashamed of who is it that we worry we'll find out? Sometimes when we ask questions like that we realize that deep down in us things aren't quite right either.

But as much as this story has to say about humanity it's also very honest about God. And thirdly as we read the tragedy unfold we have to admit that deep down in God everything really is right.

Every single time God acts in this awful story he acts in a way that is tremendously reassuringly right and good. I think there's at least three ways our storyteller shows us that.

First there's God's enormous restraint and patience. Do you see how often that comes out? They forsake him and he sends prophets to bring them back.

His wrath is kindled verse 18 but his response is to give them more chances to repent. They forsake his prophets and he sends yet more and finally they reject the precious son.

[22 : 16] Israel's whole history told him one story. Notice how even the very last verse that crushing summary of Joash's life emphasizes God's grace.

Not just one but many oracles were made against him verse 27. Countless merciful warnings. Isn't the Lord extraordinarily patient?

Next he reminds us about the way God's heart is bent towards his people. His nature and desire is simply to bless and care for Israel. His whole personality is geared towards covenant and relationship.

Isn't that the message Zechariah preaches? If the chronicler's readers wanted to prosper under God's care verse 20 all they had to do was be his people.

So his desire to be with us and bless us is utterly good. And finally there's something utterly good about the way God punishes.

[23 : 23] You see God cares about Zechariah and he cares about Jehoiada and he cares about the betrayal. He cares about all the things you want him to care about if you've been caught up in this story.

And that's exactly what Zechariah's dying words are asking for isn't it? Verse 22 he wants God to do right. May the Lord see and literally seek you out.

Avenge. Man hides and God seeks. Does rightly. Judges justly. So when his anger comes it is hot and it's personal but it's also settled and just.

He doesn't lash out the way you or I do. The point the chronicler makes is that it is precise as a razor. Did you notice that? Those princes were the first to lead Joash into trouble and so the princes verse 23 are the first to face judgment.

Next Joash forsakes the Lord verse 20 so Joash himself is forsaken on the battlefield verse 25 Joash conspired against God's prophets verse 21 and so Joash's servants conspire against him verse 25 and just as he killed Zechariah verse 22 they kill him.

[24 : 46] Same word measure for measure God does what is good and just and proportionate he doesn't just forget his servants in fact even Zechariah's name meant God remembers shouldn't that comfort his children in a world so full of fear and hatred God remembers and he does right and the one who made that clearest of all was Jesus himself Zechariah's death was an outrage to Jesus and Zechariah's prayer still burned in his mind so when Jesus was rejected himself he gave the religious leaders of his day a serious warning he would hold mankind to account for the blood of every rejected servant from the blood of righteous able to the blood of this Zechariah you see deep down in God everything really is right he hates wrong and he will call it to account and if we don't like that it's because we still don't feel this tragedy of mankind's rebellion and rejection the way

God feels it but lastly the awful disappointment of this story forces us to recognize one more thing and it's that only through God can things really be put right the story is just too bleak too ugly to leave us hoping for any other solution isn't it the cycle of human faithlessness of covenant breaking and grace rejecting is just too persistent and ingrained and even Joash after four chapters of anticipation four chapters of the most thrilling and dramatic build up even he turns out to be a crushingly disappointing messiah this could not be the king that Judah was hoping for but when a better king came he turned out to be far more than the answer to Joash's failings he came as the true hero even

Jehoiada only pointed towards the final priest who would open the way back to God forever and he came as the final Zechariah the final messenger of judgment and mercy God's last word to Israel his only son whom he loved so when that last word was rejected Jesus Christ became the forsaken son and that's why we can't help but compare Zechariah's dying words with those of Jesus Zechariah's death is almost an exact pattern of the way Jesus describes his own isn't it and yet his last words see and avenge are so very different to those words Christ cried from the cross so why is that it would be very easy to say that

Zechariah just wasn't as merciful and gracious as Jesus taught us to be but I think that would be a big mistake because when he talked about Zechariah's death the one thing Jesus made clear was that it was still an outrage to him he was still bent on avenging so it wasn't wrong for Zechariah to ask for that it would be a godly thing for Christians in Iraq to ask the Lord to see their pain and seek out their persecutors but what if Jesus had cried those words on the cross how would God have answered how could his hot settled proportionate fury have dealt with the death of his innocent son surely the only right response would have been to tear the heavens in two and blot mankind out of his world forever the end of covenant the end of God's special people the end of everything but that wasn't why

Jesus died he wasn't simply another martyr he is the whole purpose of his death was to redeem and so his words had to be those words forgive them father for they know not what they do only that way only through God could things really be put right well it's a terrible story isn't it and what a terrible solution it called for terrible justice and terrible but extraordinary grace so in the life of one king privileged heartless joash our storytellers shown his readers the only two ways to respond to that grace last week he showed us the response of love and thankfulness a response which led to all the joy and blessing God loves to give his people but he's ended his tale with the response which comes far more naturally to you and me cold faithless ingratitude the way which led nowhere but curse friends if we're sitting in church tonight we have known more grace and clarity and privilege even than joash you may not have had christian parents you might not have grown up in the care of a pastor like jehoiada but for heaven's sake most of us sitting here have 30 translations of god's word on the mobile phones in our pockets never before has a generation of god's people known more about his grace and patience and mercy we can look back in history and see the cross where our king made an end of our sin so to give him the cold shoulder to turn our backs on all that well that really would be a tragedy let's pray lord jesus we think with amazement at of the kindness you've poured out on us and the privilege it is to be yours we think of the kind of king you are never forsaking your people and never abandoning goodness and truth and love and so we ask that we would never abandon you help us to obey your law of love and prosper under your care to the glory of your name amen my