

# 1. The boy wonder who came to nothing

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at page 318, and we'll have a moment of prayer before we come to the words. Let's pray. God, our Father, who gave us the Scriptures, and whose Holy Spirit has inspired them not just for their own day, but for our day, I pray that you will take my human words, that you will use them in your power and by your Spirit, to faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Some of you may have seen the television programme called *After They Were Famous*, which is a programme which is on occasionally, which talks about people who briefly, perhaps in their teens, perhaps even earlier, shot upon the world stage.

They were famous, they were well known, and then after a little while, they simply dropped out of public attention. Now, sometimes their lives went in a pretty ordinary way after that.

Sometimes they made a perfectly good adjustment to their lives. But other times, there are sad stories of those who showed early potential, but through drugs, through abuse, and various things, totally failed to live up to what their early promise had been.

And even if that isn't the case, there's always such people a sense of unfulfilled potential, a sense that things had not worked out the way the early hope had promised.

[ 1 : 58 ] And this story that we have read is such a story. That's why my title is *The Boy Wonder Who Came to Nothing*. Young Jehoshaphat, who came to the throne with such promise, with such panache, simply fails to live up to the early promise, and indeed, and particularly if you study the parallel account in Chronicles, not only came to nothing, but came to real disaster.

It all began so well. The early promise was there, and yet it simply faded out. Now, I'm calling this series, *God's Power in Human Weakness*.

And the reason for that is because, first of all, this is the story of God about God. It's not just ancient history. If this is simply ancient history, you might well feel, well, what on earth is all this about?

You might well feel, as Henry Ford famously once said, history is mainly bunk. And you might feel these fragmentary accounts of ancient kings have little to say to us.

But these are stories about the people of God. At the end of the service, we'll be singing, *One Church, One Faith, One Lord*. This is part of the story of the *One Church, One Faith, One Lord*.

[ 3 : 22 ] In the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament. In other words, this is a word for our day. God the Lord, the Lord of history and of creation, is speaking to us.

But especially, as I say, it's the story of God's strength in human weakness. Now, over the next few weeks, and then a bit later on, we're going to be looking at the kings of Judah.

Some of them are mediocre. Some of them are downright bad. But we mustn't be too depressed by the mediocre, even by the dreadful, because it's not their story.

It's the story of God. Nor must we be overexcited by the occasional good king. They were good. Hezekiah and Josiah, whom we'll look at later on, were really wonderful people among the great figures in the history of the *One Church, One Faith, and One Lord*.

But it's not actually their story. They're part of the big story. They're part of the story that leads not just to the exile in Babylon, but beyond.

[ 4 : 25 ] But it does look promising, doesn't it? Look at verse 17 of chapter 11. Jehoiada made a covenant between the Lord and the king and the people, that they should be the Lord's people.

Everything seems to be going well. And there's an echo of Elijah here. They get rid of the temple of Baal, which Athaliah, Ahab's daughter, had established in the city.

And they start believing as if the Lord was God. Remember Elijah, if the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him. So they seem to have made their decision once again, the Lord is God.

There is a sense of celebration. Verse 20, the people rejoiced.

And then this phrase, the city was quiet. That's an interesting phrase. It has more implications than it might seem. This is exactly the phrase that's used in the book of Judges.

[ 5 : 25 ] The land had rest. When God destroys enemies, when God starts a new work, the land had rest. And then we come to Joash's reign.

There's a feeling of something lacking. I doubt when I was reading this a few minutes ago that you were feeling your heart strangely warmed about Jehoiada taking a chest and boring a hole in it and money being put in that.

That doesn't sound very exciting or very uplifting. Well, we'll come to that. There is something lacking. This is a yes-but story.

This is a not-good-enough story. We're going to have to look at what Willie often calls the necessary negatives. What's wrong in this story?

Why is the story of Joash so uninspiring? We're going to look at the stories it develops in three movements. Verses 1 to 3, then the main part of the story, verses 4 to 14, and then 17 to 21.

[ 6 : 30 ] And we're going to see, I believe, that this story has a word for today, has a word for us. So first of all then, verses 1 to 3, which I'm going to call, don't rely on someone else's faith.

Jehoash or Joash began to reign. He reigned 40 years, promising the same length of time as David or Solomon. And then verse 2, and I suggest that the NIV translation is better.

Jehoash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the days that Jehoiada the priest instructed him. They said ESV is possible, but the way the story develops shows us that the NIV translation is a better one.

Jehoiada was the priest who, along with the royal princess Jehoshabab, had saved the baby Joash from Athaliah's purge. And Jehoiada had taken his responsibilities very seriously.

He had instructed him. Now that word means that he had taught him the words of Moses. He had taught him the Torah, as we would call it, the law of God.

[ 7 : 38 ] This king had no excuse for not knowing what God wanted, because the teaching of the priest had put him in touch with the living word of God.

So you see, the first thing about this is that his faith is second hand. Now we all need mentors. We all need teachers. But the real test of faith is what happens when they go.

What happens when we are left, so to speak, to stand on our own feet? What happens when those whom we've looked to and admired who have taught us are no longer there?

One of the sad things I've found over many years, particularly in Durham, working with students, is to find people who were enormously keen at university. They were in CU's and CU execs and so on.

They were on fire for the Lord. Very often, ten, twenty years later, such people are nowhere. Oh, they haven't. They haven't really turned away from the faith.

[ 8 : 46 ] They haven't become apostate, but they've just gone off the boil. Because the mentors are no longer there. The teachers are no longer there. And that faith hasn't become part of them.

We need to make the teaching our own. Not enough to go to a Bible teaching church. We need to make that teaching our own. And we need to live according to it.

So you see, don't rely on someone else's faith. The first qualification is the yes but. But he only did it as long as Jehoiada was alive. There's another problem in verse 3.

Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away. Now right the way through the book of Kings, we find a number of kings who were moderately good.

Kings like Jehoshaphat, kings like Asa, and so on. But there's a but there. But the high places were not taken away. And we have to wait a long time.

[ 9 : 46 ] We have to wait, in fact, to Hezekiah. Very late on in the story before we find it said this was the one who removed the high places. Now the high places were sometimes hills, sometimes artificial platforms.

You might say, what's so bad about that? What's so wrong with worshipping on the high places? Well, high places really take us back to the Tower of Babel.

Let us build a tower whose top will reach to heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves. The idea that you're closer to God, the higher up you are.

The idea if you climb steps, you are closer to God. Now we know very well if we don't find God on the level ground, we're not going to find Him simply by climbing a hill.

And that seems to be the fundamental error of the high places. The idea that we can artificially reach God.

[10:46] And you see, God had appointed a particular place where He was to be met. And in ancient Israel, that was the temple. Remember the importance, we'll come to that in a moment, remember the importance of the temple throughout ancient Israel.

That's why Haggai the prophet after the exile tells them, you must rebuild the temple. Because if you don't rebuild the temple, you're basically saying you don't care whether God is among us or not. So, the high places were not removed. Verses 1 to 3, yes, a yes but. Don't rely on someone else's faith.

Now, Joash reigned for 40 years. He must have done a lot more in the 40 years than is recorded here. But both here and in the Chronicles account, in 2 Chronicles 24, the authors choose to emphasize one particular feature of his reign.

That was the repair of the temple. Verses 4 to 14, I'm going to call this don't over emphasize money and fabric. That's not ultimately what it's about.

[11:56] Solomon's temple was now over 100 years old. Athaliah had pillaged it to furnish the temple of Baal. It had been neglected.

It had decayed. I'm sure you'll agree with me. Verses 4 to 16. If you were choosing one of your favorite biblical passages, a purple passage which brought out to you the very essence of what this book was about, you probably would not choose a passage like this.

This passage is dull and it seems to me it's deliberately dull. And why is it deliberately dull? What's not there? Where's the mention of the word of God?

Where is the mention of prayer? Where is the mention of celebration? This is just a job that's to be done. There is no vision here. No heart involvement.

No sense that this is the place where the living God has chosen to reveal himself. That's why I read at the beginning from that great passage where Solomon says the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you.

[13:06] How much less this house that I have built but in your mercy hear your servants and they pray from this place. This is just a job to be done.

And when a church decides to rebuild simply in order to rebuild because something needs to be done to the fabric then nothing ever comes of it. Philip Jensen talks about those churches have thermometers outside them to show how unhealthy they are.

All the emphasis is on money on fabric. under God of course as we all know very well a great part of our life in the last year or two and symbolised by this pledge Sunday next Sunday is basically the refurbishing of this building.

But this has been soaked in prayer. This has been done so that the mission of the gospel can be carried out more effectively here in the centre of the city.

That's not what Jehoash is doing. There's nothing here. Jehoash doesn't say to the priests this is this honouring the name of the Lord we must rebuild and restore this place so that we can worship God fully.

[14:22] There is nothing of that at all. This is simply a building project. Let's look a bit more closely. Look at verse 6.

By the 23rd year of King Jehoash the priests had made no repairs on the house. Well Jehoash was 30 by then. Now I know he became king when he was 7.

You didn't expect a 7 year old suddenly to have visions of restoring the temple and re-establishing the true worship of God. Why wait till he was 30?

Later on towards the end of this season we'll come across the later and greater and true reformer King Josiah and there's a significant phrase about Josiah when he was yet young in his 16th year he began to seek the Lord.

That is why Josiah established a rebuilding of the temple so that God could be truly worshipped and his word truly honoured. There's nothing of that here.

[15:26] It's not soaked in prayer. As we sang in that hymn earlier on let us raise hymns of praise for his great salvation. There's no hymns of praise here.

There is no reading of the word. There is no humbling and repentance. It's all simply a job to be done. And then the lack of commitment by the priests.

Verses 7 and 8. Priests agreed they should take no more money from the people. They should not repair their house. Now the point of that is that the priests were lining their own buckets.

The priests did not need this money. In the law of Moses, priests were paid and they were sometimes paid in kind. Some of the sacrifices weren't totally consumed and the remains of the animals were for the priests' own consumption.

They were certainly not neglected. They were well looked after but here they appear to have been diverting money for themselves. In other words there's a total lack of integrity at the heart of this.

[16:31] Contrasting with verse 15, the workmen dealt honestly, or translated honestly as righteously, in fact the word translated righteousness elsewhere, it means these workmen, unlike the priests, were actually carrying this out for the glory of God.

As one of the commentators says, merely programmed religion is deadly. Genuine faith must be personal. a lack of commitment by the king, a lack of commitment by the priests, in other words a total lack of leadership.

Those who should have been taking the leadership were not taking it. And it came to nothing. At the end of it, I mean, verse 16, money for the guilt offered not brought into the house of the Lord, it belonged to the priests, reminding us that they were already being well paid.

But where is the mention of celebration? Where is the calling of people to a great celebration of God who had done this for them, the God who had appeared to them? So, that's why I say don't over emphasize money and fabric.

Because if we do that, we'll simply end up with a vacuum. That's why so many people find church boring, frankly. Because there is no heart commitment to the Lord.

[17:53] It's all about jobs to be done, all about organizing, all about material things. These have to be done, and they have to be done efficiently. That's glorifying to God.

But they're only done in order that other things can happen. The worship of God and the reaching out into the community, that's what we exist for, after all.

So something like this, there is no sense of the presence of God. And that is why these verses read in a very dull and very uninspiring way, because what was happening was not inspiring.

Do you know what I mean by necessary negatives? Because if we didn't have that necessary negative, you might well think this was a good thing in itself. But it was a good thing in itself in one sense, but only in order that the true worship of God, which has been driven underground, should be re-established.

So don't rely on someone else's faith. Don't overemphasise money and fabric. And it seems to me the point of verses 17 to 21 is don't become complacent in later life.

[19:07] Jewish's reign limps to its uninspiring, indeed to its tragic ending. And there's two things to notice here. First of all, the Reformation, such as it was, was undone.

Verses 17 to 18. Hazael, king of Syria, set his face to go up against Jerusalem. Now, if you were here and were doing the story of Elisha, you remember that the attacks of Syria were a major feature of life.

And these were judgments of God. And he was a judgment of God. And God sends judgment on Joash by the Syrian armies. And Joash prefers, bribery, to battle.

And what does he do? He undoes the very thing that he had done. He takes the sacred gifts, verse 18, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, his fathers, the kings of Judah, dedicated his own sacred gifts and all the gold that was found in the treasuries of the house of the Lord and of the king's house and sent these to Hazael, king of Syria.

This is a preview of what's going to happen at the end of the book when the temple is destroyed and the Babylonians take away the vessels. So an empty temple bears tragic witness to an empty heart.

[20:30] What's happened here? Joash has become completely complacent in later life. And that's a great danger in Christian life because the Christian life is a battle.

struggle. It's a struggle. There's a real danger to become complacent. Perhaps to look back on our earlier years with embarrassment. Perhaps to look back on days when we were much more enthusiastic.

I wonder how the Lord looks on these days. Does he look on them as days when we love Jesus a bit more than we do now? Don't become complacent in later life.

It's always a great, great danger. I mentioned this already. Not just in the student world, in every world. Because, as C.S. Lewis said, the year in the Screwtape letters, where Screwtape tells Wormwood that the years of middle-aged prosperity are great campaigning grounds for us. In other words, the devil doesn't just tempt through adversity, which he sometimes does, but he does tempt through prosperity, where material things become more important to us than anything else.

[ 21 : 44 ] Material gifts are gifts of God, and we must thank God for them. We begin to depend on them, to rely on them, to build our lives on them. But you can see how this follows exactly what Joash was.

If the temple is just simply a building, fabric to be repaired, then his idea of God becomes simply someone who gives gifts, rather than someone to be worshipped in his own right.

A cold and bleak complacency had taken its grip. And the second thing to notice, verse 19 to 21, the reign ends in judgment.

Verse 20, his servants made a conspiracy and struck him down. Now we're not told in Kings exactly why this happened, but I'd encourage you later on to read the story in 2 Chronicles, it's an even darker story.

The Chronicler tells us that after the death of Jehoiada, Joash not only was apathetic in his faith, but actually became an idolater.

[ 22 : 51 ] He turned to idolatry and it was Jehoiada's son, Zechariah, that's not the later prophet in the Old Testament, Zechariah is a common Old Testament name. Zechariah warned him, you cannot prosper because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you.

So the Chronicler emphasised that Joash had turned to idolatry, he had turned totally away from God. The King's author here, however, is emphasising something different.

Apathy and complacency led to this. Last time I preached to you at the end of November, we looked at that tragic picture of the church in Laodicea, the church that had completely lost its way because it was neither hot nor cold.

This is Joash. He did not care and because he did not care, it led to nothing. That's why I've called this the boy wonder who came to nothing.

So as we finish, I've got two things I want to say. Let's listen to warnings. Dull, uninvolved, lack of commitment will lead us nowhere.

[ 24 : 04 ] Our faith will become increasingly burdensome, we'll neglect the reading of scripture, we'll neglect prayer, and we'll become completely chilly and complacent.

Let's heed the warnings. I want to end on a more positive note because as I say, these necessary negatives are not there simply to depress us, they're there to warn us.

But I want you to notice, I mean, the very last words, Amaziah his son reigned in his place. We're going to be looking at Amaziah next week.

Now that's just a factual statement. Amaziah his son reigned in his place. You see what the author is saying. David's line did not die out.

Joash turned out to be a huge disappointment. Joash in fact turned out to undo all that he had tried to do.

[ 25 : 03 ] But the Davidic line survives. It hasn't been destroyed. Athaliah did not destroy through violence. Joash did not destroy through complacency.

The line of David is still intact. A new Davidic king has come to the throne. The king will come. There will still be a king. And not only that it gives us hope that down the long centuries down the many dark tunnels there will one day come a king.

And when this king comes he will not simply rebuild a temple. He will himself be the temple. What Jesus says in the gospels I will destroy this temple and in three days will rebuild it because that temple is not going to be bricks and mortar.

That temple is going to be his own body both in the sense of his physical body raised from the dead and also his body of church across time and space.

The living stones are going to be built into his temple. Don't learn from Joash's mistakes. It won't be depressed. It does not depend on Joash.

[ 26 : 16 ] It does not depend on you and me. It does depend on the king who has come and who will come again. Amen. Let's pray. Father we praise you.

The work is not ours but yours. The temple is being built as living stones are added to it. And one day Christ will present to that temple to you a glorious church without spot and wrinkle. As we look to that day, help us to heed the warnings and to follow the teaching so that we may indeed build on the foundation Christ Jesus.  
Amen.