

3. Who do we trust?

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 322 and at 2 Kings 16, and we'll have a moment of prayer. God our Father, sometimes your word speaks to us in a very clear and unmistakable way.

Sometimes your word speaks to us in strange and puzzling ways. But we thank you that whether it speaks in an apparently simple or in an apparently difficult way, that your gracious Holy Spirit has promised to take that word and lead us by it to the living Christ himself.

That is our prayer today. Like those on the road to Emmaus, our hearts may burn, our eyes may be opened, that you will send us out into the world with the message of the Gospel, that can free the Gospel, that can deliver.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Who do we trust?

That's our subject today from 2 Kings 16. One of the great pioneer missionaries of an earlier day, John Payton, who went out to the New Hebrides in the Pacific, found that when he got there, that people were basically illiterate.

[1 : 32] But he wanted to teach them how to read the Bible. And the first task he had, of course, was to translate the Scriptures into their own language, which was a very difficult thing, because obviously the language wasn't written.

He had to pick it up as he talked to people. And one day he was trying to translate Hebrews chapter 11, a great chapter of faith. And he struggled to find a word that would sum up this word faith, this word trust.

He sat there at a little rickety table in a little hut kind of place, and he struggled. He could not find a word that would express the meaning of faith, the meaning of trust.

And just at that moment, one of his friends who'd been working in the fields came in and sank down very thankfully on a chair. And he said to John Payton, It's wonderful to have something I can rest my weight on.

And Payton realised instantly, that's what faith is. Having something or someone we can rest our faith on. Something or someone we can trust utterly.

[2 : 44] Particularly in times of difficulty, because the background of this chapter is a background of an increasingly troubled, an increasingly difficult situation for the tiny kingdom of Judah.

What's happening in the world scene is the growing menace of the Assyrian superpower. Assyria is basically the northern part of Iraq.

And the ancient capital Nineveh stood on the Tigris near the modern city of Mosul. You've heard about a great deal during the various news items on Iraq.

And they had been gradually growing in power and gradually gobbling up all the nations around them and were turning their attention to Israel and Judah, largely as a preparation for their attack on Egypt itself.

So this great war machine is threatening. And they are threatening the northern kingdom of Israel.

And as soon as we'll see in some weeks time, when we look at the later part of the story, they're about to launch a full-scale invasion on Jerusalem itself, on Judah itself.

[3 : 53] So that's the background. There is a huge problem, a gigantic problem, which isn't going to go away. And that, of course, raises the question, who does the king of Judah trust him?

And indeed, it's interesting, and you can look at this later, look at Isaiah chapters 7 and 8. The great prophet Isaiah has already begun his ministry when this king comes to the throne.

And faced with the threat, Isaiah says to the king, if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand firm at all.

He says, I know the scene is threatening. I know that, first of all, you've got Syria and Israel attacking you. There's behind them, there's the menace of Assyria. But, trust in the Lord. If you don't stand firm in faith, you will not stand firm at all. So this is a word for us today. It's not just ancient history. The question that's asking us is, who do we trust?

[4 : 56] Now, in the last two weeks, as you've been here, we've looked at a couple of yes-but kings, Joash and Amaziah, who followed the Lord, but rather half-heartedly. Ahaz here, this next king we're going to look at, is a very, very different proposition altogether.

This king militantly goes against the word of God. So I want us to look at the stories it develops. And the first thing, in verses 1 to 4, we have deadly disobedience.

That's what I'll call this section. Deadly disobedience. It's a dark and dreadful story. This king cuts himself off from the promises of God.

Notice what it says in verse 3. He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. Now, not only was that a bad thing spiritually, it was even a bad thing politically.

It didn't actually do him any good. Cosing up to Israel and walking in the ways of the kings did him no good at all, because all this led to was him being attacked by the king of Israel.

[6 : 01] And later on, in the next chapter, which we'll look at in a few weeks' time, Israel itself is going to be destroyed by Assyria. So walking in the ways of the king of Israel is not only spiritually wrong, it's politically stupid.

Much good it did him. But there are two particular aspects of these deadly disobedience. First of all, Ahaz is without ordinary human feelings.

Look at verse 3. He even burned his son as an offering. Child sacrifice, an evil and degraded practice which was very common in the nations that surrounded Israel and Judah.

Sacrificing children to the god Moloch, whom Milton in Paradise Lost calls Moloch, horrid god besmeared with blood. See, that's why Paul, in Romans 1, in his devastating indictment of human sin, describes sin as heartless, or literally without natural affection.

This is a word for our day, surely. In a world where child abuse is so common, where abortion is easy, and where so often human life, particularly vulnerable human life, is cheap.

[7 : 22] This is not ancient history. This is the kind of thing that's happening in our day, and it's as deadly now as it was then. Turning from God does not lead to kindness, to warm humanity.

When we turn away from the source of love, the source of grace himself, then it's going to result in this kind of behavior, even according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.

That's the first thing. He's without ordinary human feelings. Secondly, he's without self-control.

Verse 4, he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree.

Now, we've met the high places before. Joash and Amaziah, sorry, turn a blind eye while people worship in these high places. But look at the singular verbs here.

Ahaz is doing this himself. He sacrificed and made offerings. Ahaz isn't turning a blind eye to other people doing it. Ahaz is taking a lead in it himself. That's what's happening.

[8 : 30] He participates. Now, the high places, places of sexual orgies, and similarly, the green tree, fertility rites. You should read John Buchan's Witchwood if you haven't read it before.

Glad to say John Buchan's in print again after a long period of being ignored, where you have outward piety, terribly respectable behavior, but behind all that, there is devil worship.

It's a powerful and salutary book to read. John Buchan is talking there about 17th century Scotland, but when we turn away from God, we turn away from kindness, we turn away from compassion, and we indulge in self-control.

And that's going to lead to judgment. Look back again at verse 3. According to the decibel practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.

What was Ahaz doing? Ahaz was doing the very things that led to the Canaanites being dispossessed of the land. That's what Moses had promised.

[9 : 39] Leviticus 18, the land will vomit you out. Not a comfortable or happy phrase, but that's what happened. Judgment and exile are looming because of this deadly disobedience.

A word for, not just for then, but a word for now. In the second part of the story, verses 5 to 9, I'm going to call a dangerous alliance.

This deadly disobedience is followed by a dangerous alliance. Now, no doubt Ahaz and his spin doctors did not see this as a dangerous alliance.

Remember what's happening. Israel and Syria have attacked Judah. And in the passage in Isaiah, Isaiah says, the heart of Ahaz and of his advisors were trembling like leaves that tremble in the wind.

And in their desperation, they make a move which they think is politically shrewd. They are faced by a couple of bullies. So they summon a bigger bully.

[10:42] If Israel and Syria are going to attack Ahaz, then Ahaz is going to call on the help of Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria. You read about him in chapter 15, how he was already nibbling away at the northern kingdom, at Galilee, and darkness was falling on that land.

That's referred to in Matthew chapter 4, and quoting from Isaiah, there will be no more darkness. The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light. And that's referring initially to that invasion and to that exile which is going to happen.

So, he calls on the king of Assyria, Tiglath-Pileser, who is also called Pul, P-U-L. They did have odd names in those days, but with a name like file, I never feel I'm in any position to talk about anyone else's name.

But anyway, Tiglath-Pileser, he summons to help him. But there's more to it than that. It's not just politics, which he thinks are shrewd politics, but actually turn out to be very stupid politics.

Look at verse 7. Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son. Words which deliberately echo 2 Samuel 7.

[12:05] In 2 Samuel 7, Yahweh, God of Israel, makes a covenant with David. David is his servant and his son. See what Ahaz is doing. Ahaz is saying, Yahweh, I'm not your servant and your son anymore.

After all, you're far away, you're distant. I'm going to transfer my allegiance to Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria. You see, this is the way of human ingenuity rather than the way of faith.

Now we all meet situations which are Tiglath-Pileser-sized, if you like. Situations of bereavement, situations of loss of job, situations of anxiety about health, situations where we don't know where to turn.

These are situations, of course, which test us, don't they? These are situations where the question, who do we trust, becomes not just a theological statement, but a very practical statement.

Who did Ahaz trust? Ahaz trusted Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria. He did not trust in the Lord. But, when we come to Hezekiah, we're going to find that is the very thing for which Hezekiah is commended.

[13:17] It was in the Lord that he trusted. And that's the difference between him and his father. Moses, we are told, in Hebrews 11, endured because he saw him who is invisible.

So this is the situation and it seems very smart because after all, it seems to work. Because after all, Tiglath-Pileser delivers the goods, verse 9, king of Assyria, listened to him. He would be very, very flattered, wouldn't he?

You can imagine, you can imagine in the court at Jerusalem, the self-congratulatory pats on the back. And if they'd had newspapers and internet in those days, there'd be all kinds of statements put out about how influential we are.

Assyria listens to us. We've got the big boys on our side. Assyria conquers Damascus, kills the king, deports the people from Assyria never to return again.

Jerusalem is safe and Ahaz is alive and well. So it does seem that this dangerous alliance had worked. But let's look now at the third part of the story, which I'm going to call disobedient religion, verses 10 to 20.

[14:28] This dangerous alliance is followed by disobedient religion. Verse 10, when King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath the Lezer. Now you can see what's behind this simple statement.

Ahaz was summoned. There's no question of Ahaz deciding, well, I'd better go and see old Tiglath. He's been very nice to me. Tiglath the Lezer undoubtedly summoned him. So he goes up there.

I'm using the word religion very advisedly because religious activity often coexists with a spiritual vacuum. Very easy to engage in religious activities.

Now this passage is not altogether clear what all the words mean. As we were reading, you must have been wondering about this business, the outer entrance that caused to go round the house of the Lord and all that.

But, there's enough clarity in this passage to show us that religion without God is destructive and deadly. If you have a religion without God, it's going to lead to disaster.

[15:33] So one or two things. First of all, Ahaz invents his own religion. If you look at verses 10 and following, he sees an altar in Damascus.

He rather likes this altar. So he sends back messengers saying, build this altar. Verse 12, three times the king is mentioned.

Three times. So what is he doing? He's pushing Yahweh, the Lord, out of his own temple. But notice what he does. Verse 13, burnt his burnt offering, his grain offering, poured his drink offering, and through the blood of the peace offerings.

A parade of piety, a flurry of religious activity. Is it any surprise that Isaiah, in his prophecy, writes this? Isaiah, in chapter one of his prophecy, Bring no more vain offerings.

Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbaths I cannot endure. I hate your, I hate your new moons and your appointed feasts.

[16:39] You see what's happening here. It's no surprise that Isaiah is saying this because there is nothing more deadly and more dishonoring to God than empty religion.

Where did this empty religion begin? It began way back at the beginning of the Bible with Cain.

Cain who invented his own religion. Have you ever wondered why Cain's offering was not accepted by the Lord and Abel's was?

Well, the obvious reason is God must have revealed to them what was acceptable and what wasn't acceptable. Cain, on the other hand, thinks, I can do better. And when we have religion without the Spirit of God, the result is deadly.

I rather shudder when I hear a church described as busy. As if busyness in itself was a good thing. So and so described as a great worker for the church.

I always remember the words of the late William Still. God has only one worker, the Holy Spirit. And there's a profound truth in that. When we indulge in religious activity, when we make the church our goal, you know, it's nicer to have weddings there.

[17:51] It's a good place for community events and so on. We have the way of Cain and it's dead, dead, dead. That's why Jude talks about the way of Cain.

Now, the point to notice here is all these things Ahaz were doing, these grain offerings, peace offerings, these were divinely appointed. There's nothing wrong with the sacrifices themselves. Well, what was wrong was the spirit in which it was done, the way in which it was done simply as a parade of piety. Disobedient religion. So that's the first element in it.

Second element in disobedient religion is superstition. Verse 15, But the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by.

In other words, Ahaz ignores the word of God. He invents his own religion and surprise, surprise, this religion turns out to be magic and mumbo-jumbo and divination.

[18:53] See, the word inquire is an interesting word. It seems harmless. But this word inquire is exactly the word used in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy for interpreting omens, for a kind of magical mumbo-jumbo ritual which Moses forbids.

See, when we stop believing in God, we don't believe in nothing, we believe in anything. G.K. Chesterton is reputed to have said that. Perhaps he did. I've never been able to find it in G.K. Chesterton's work, but it does sound the kind of thing he might have said.

And so, when we ignore the word of God, what do we end up with? We don't end up with scintillating, mind-stretching, life-changing truth.

We end up with superstition and mumbo-jumbo. And very often what's called new and exciting is simply revival of some old heresy. Stuff we call new age thinking nowadays is just simply old-fashioned Gnosticism which plagued the church in the first few centuries.

So, Ahaz, in his new-invented religion, indulges in superstition and he introduces new kinds of worship.

[20:08] This seems to me the point of the puzzling verses 17 and 18. Not entirely clear what they mean, but once again the emphasis is on the king's personal initiative.

Now, when I say introduces new kinds of worship, I'm not meaning styles of service. I'm not meaning the kind of things we sing. I'm not meaning the order we do things.

These vary from place to place and from time to time. And these are not absolutes. These are ways of trying to apply the eternal gospel to our present situation.

What I'm talking about is a fundamental disregard for what God has said. A religion which builds its self on something other than the living word of God.

Taking, for example, the temple furniture, which was for the glory of God, for his personal use. Because remember, throughout the Old Testament time, and indeed, until Jesus turns his back on the temple, the temple remains the place where God reveals himself.

[21 : 16] That's why Haggai, after the exile, says, you've got to rebuild the temple, or you don't care whether God is among you or not. God had laid down regulations for the temple. So you see, he takes the temple furniture, uses it for his own purposes, and this business of a covered way, nobody knows what that means, or rather lots of people know that they don't agree with each other, so we don't actually know what it means.

But the important phrase is not interpreting what this outer entrance and so on means, but the phrase at the end of verse 18, because of the king of Assyria.

He is making it clear where his new, where his real allegiance lies. Behind all this religion, this parade of piety, he's saying, I trust in the king of Assyria.

Is that out of date? When you think about it, so often the church is desperate to please public opinion. So often we're told we're going along with the spirit of the age.

Well, as C.S. Lewis said, if you marry the spirit of the age, you'll very soon be widowed, because the spirit of the age keeps on changing. We mustn't do this, because it might offend influential people.

[22 : 38] If you don't like our principles, we've got other principles. We can keep on changing. It's a fundamental lack of trust, of belief in the Lord, and faith in his word, because of the king of Assyria.

That's a dark story, isn't it? Disobedience, dangerous alliances, and deadly religion. But God is gracious, isn't he?

Even in a situation like this. The rest of the Acts of Ahaz, have they not written in the book of the Chronicles? If you read in the Chronicles, you'll actually find it's even darker. The Chronicle most certainly does not whitewash Ahaz.

He paints him in even darker colours. But look at the last phrase of the chapter. Hezekiah, his son, reigned in his place.

Now there is a bright light beginning to shine, the brightest light that has shone since the time of David himself. When all seems to be lost, God has his man ready to put in place.

[23 : 43] The new David is on the horizon, because that's how the author is going to see Hezekiah as the new David. Who do we trust then? Do we trust Tiglath the Leiser?

Do we trust public opinion? Do we trust externals? Do we trust influential people? Or do we trust in the Lord? Well, if you read the first part of this story, if you stop this story at verse 9, it makes sense to trust in Tiglath the Leiser, doesn't it?

But if you read the whole chapter, and if you read the whole chapter in the whole book, and indeed in the whole of scripture, you see that Tiglath the Leiser and Ahaz are simply passing phases in God's purpose.

Hezekiah is not yet the Messiah. Serpent Crusher has yet to arrive. But the new David is on the horizon. So the final message of this chapter, while warning us against disobedience, warning us against bogus religion, warning us against dangerous alliances, the final message of this chapter is God is good.

His steadfast love endures forever. And because that is true, then we can trust him. Amen. God our Father, as we look at the story of Ahaz, we recognize in our own hearts the kind of impulses and the kind of feelings that lead to a reign like that.

[25 : 15] But we pray that in the midst of the perplexity of the world, we may trust in you. We believe that your king has been set on the holy hill of Zion and one day all the nations will come and give allegiance to him.

Amen.