

A Tale of Terror: The Wicked Queen

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to read God's Word together now, and our plan, God willing, is to spend the next four weeks in, I think, one of the most exciting bits of the Bible that we never remember.

We'll be looking over August at one extended story in the book of 2 Chronicles, the life of one of the Old Testament's great forgotten heroes. And tonight we'll begin that story with 2 Chronicles chapters 21 and 22. That's page 373 in the Visitor's Bibles.

And our passage tonight is setting the scene for a big drama to come, which means that in the run-up to the story now, we get through quite a few kings with a few confusing names.

But try not to worry about keeping track of them all. I think the trick here is to relax and immerse yourself in the story. And if the details are important, then I guess it's my job to keep us straight later on.

So then 2 Chronicles chapter 21 and 2, page 373. All of these were sons of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah.

[1 : 26] Their father gave them great gifts of silver, gold, and valuable possessions, together with the fortified cities in Judah. But he gave the kingdom to Jehoram because he was the firstborn.

When Jehoram had ascended the throne of his father and was established, he killed all his brothers with the sword. And also some of the princes of Israel, which there means Judah, the southern kingdom.

Jehoram was 32 years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. And he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, the northern kingdom, as the house of Ahab had done. For the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Yet the Lord was not willing to destroy the house of David because of the covenant that he'd made with David.

And since he promised to give a lamp to him and his sons forever. In his days, Edom revolted from the rule of Judah and set up a king of their own.

[2 : 33] Then Jehoram passed over with his commanders and all his chariots. And he rose by night and struck the Edomites who had surrounded him and his chariot commanders. So Edom revolted from the rule of Judah to this day.

At that time, Libna also revolted from his rule because he had forsaken the Lord, the God of his fathers. Moreover, he made high places in the hill country of Judah and led the inhabitants of Jerusalem into whoredom and made Judah go astray.

And the letter came to him from Elijah, the prophet, saying, thus says the Lord, the God of David, your father, because you have not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat, your father, or in the ways of Asa, king of Judah, but have walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and have enticed Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem into whoredom, as the house of Ahab led Israel into whoredom.

And also you have killed your brothers of your father's house who were better than you. Behold, the Lord will bring a great plague on your people, your children, your wives and all your possessions. And you yourself will have a severe sickness with a disease in your bowels until your bowels come out because of the disease day by day.

[3 : 50] And the Lord stirred up against Jehoram the anger of the Philistines and of the Arabians who were near the Ethiopians. And they came up against Judah and invaded it and carried away all the possessions they found that belonged to the king's house and also his sons and his wives so that no son was left to him except Jehoaz, his youngest.

And after this, the Lord struck him in his bowels with an incurable disease. In the course of time, at the end of two years, his bowels came out because of the disease and he died in great agony.

His people made no fire in his honor like the fire they made for his fathers. He was 32 years old when he began to reign and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem and he departed with no one's regret.

They buried him in the city of David, but not in the tomb of the kings. And the inhabitants of Jerusalem made Ahaziah, his youngest son, king in his place.

For the band of men that came with the Arabians to the camp had killed all the other sons. So Ahaziah, the son of Jehoram, king of Judah, reigned. Ahaziah was 22 years old when he began to reign and he reigned one year in Jerusalem.

[5 : 08] His mother's name was Athaliah, the granddaughter of Omri, a king of Israel. He also walked in the ways of the house of Ahab for his mother was his counselor in doing wickedly.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord as the house of Ahab had done. For after the death of his father, they were his counselors to his undoing. He even followed their counsel and went with Jehoram, the son of Ahab, king of Israel, to make war against Hazael, king of Syria at Ramoth Gilead.

And the Syrians wounded Joram and he returned to be healed in Jezreel of the wounds that he'd received at Ramah when he fought against Hazael, king of Syria. And Ahaziah, son of Jehoram, king of Judah, went down to see Joram, son of Ahab, in Jezreel because he was wounded.

But it was ordained by God that the downfall of Ahaziah should come through his going to visit Joram. For when he came there, he went out with Jehoram to meet Jehu, the son of Nimshi, who the Lord had appointed to destroy the house of Ahab.

And when Jehu was executing judgment on the house of Ahab, he met the princes of Judah and the sons of Ahaziah's brothers who attended Ahaziah and he killed them.

[6 : 30] He searched for Ahaziah and he was captured while hiding in Samaria. And he was brought to Jehu and put to death.

They buried him for they said he's the grandson of Jehoshaphat who sought the Lord with all his heart. And the house of Ahaziah had no one able to rule the kingdom.

Now, when Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah, saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family of the house of Judah.

But Jehoshaphat, the daughter of the king, took Joash, the son of Ahaziah, and stole him away among the king's sons who were about to be put to death. And she put him and his nurse in a bedroom.

Thus, Jehoshaphat, the daughter of King Jehoram and the wife of Jehoiada, the priest, because she was a sister of Ahaziah, hid him from Athaliah so that she did not put him to death.

[7 : 35] And he remained with them six years, hidden in the house of God, while Athaliah reigned over the land. Amen.

And may God bless to us this reading of his words. Amen. Well, do have your Bibles open.

Page 337, 2 Chronicles 21. And let's pray. Father God, we thank you that as our maker, you know just how to speak to human beings and work in us all that you want to achieve.

We thank you for the rich and exciting ways your word comes to us. And we pray that as we delve now into an unfamiliar story, you would shine more light on the rule of your son and the ways of his kingdom.

For we ask it in Christ's name. Amen. If history were taught in stories, said Kipling, it would never be forgotten.

[8 : 42] I think the love of a good story is part of what makes us human. We can't resist telling them and we never grow out of listening to them.

And so what better way to teach God's people the lessons of her history when they returned from exile in Babylon than by retelling their great stories.

That's what we have in the book of Chronicles. These are stories with bite. Stories meant to teach a nation to get back on her feet by learning from her past.

Now, I guess like most of us, I read Chronicles at best every couple of years when I'm forced into it by my Bible reading plan. And what I tend to remember are the long lists of names, the confusing kings and a general sense of feeling just a little bit lost.

But what I'm always surprised by are the stories like this one. So I'd love to persuade you tonight that the story we're beginning is one of the most thrilling stories ever told.

[9 : 49] It's the epic which has everything. Heroes and villains. Sheer terror and outbursts of joy. A wicked queen. A boy king. And men and women who risk absolutely everything for the sake of the kingdom.

And for much of the story, their hopes dangle from the thinnest, most fragile of threads. As our story opens tonight, there are four separate purges made on Judah's royal family.

Four attempts to exterminate every last son of David. So for the next month or so, we're plunging into one of the gospel's darkest days.

Were it not for the chronicler's hero, a priest named Jehoiada, well, absolutely everything might have been lost. Which is why this story would have echoed so powerfully in the chronicler's own day.

You see, the people he wrote for had lost their king and lost their temple. Why do we have two sets of history books in the Bible? Well, because they were written for different generations with different needs.

[11 : 05] And this generation desperately needed a champion like Jehoiada. A priest to restore right worship and rebuild the kingdom.

So these are the chronicles of a forgotten hero. Jehoiada, the faithful priest. And although he's only introduced very briefly tonight, there's no doubt at all in this story who the readers would be rooting for.

First, though, it's the villain who takes the spotlight and casts her shadow over the whole story. Tonight's tale is a tale of terror.

The wicked queen. As the story begins, we don't even learn her name. But already her stain is beginning to spread across Judah's history.

And by the end of our passage, she's not only massacred her own grandchildren. But she's stolen the throne itself. As villains go, this woman is unnaturally cruel.

[12 : 10] And yet she is very, very real. The question, though, which the chronicler wants people listening to his story to ask is how did it come to this?

How did evil so gain the upper hand that the Messiah's throne itself fell into the hands of the enemy? That's what these two chapters chart.

The rise to power of evil over the very kingdom upon which the gospel depends. And it all began when Judah quite literally got into bed with the enemy.

She let in the influence and corruption of her northern neighbor, the rebellious kingdom of Israel. And that influence was personified by one woman, our wicked queen, Athaliah.

If any woman was born to hate the gospel, it was her. She's the daughter of a northern royal couple so notorious that even today they're named a shorthand for wickedness, Ahab and Jezebel.

[13 : 19] And their daughter's influence will dominate this whole saga. But her rise to power tonight is told through three other characters, and each one takes their turn on the stage.

We've got a pragmatist and then a puppet and finally a princess. Firstly, then, as the story begins in chapter 21, we meet the king under whose rule Judah's collapse began.

It's the pragmatist who sold his kingdom, King Jehoram. And notice how the storyteller colors in Jehoram's character for us.

What's the very first thing we're told about him before even his age or how long he ruled? Well, it's that in the scramble for power of us for he murdered his own flesh and blood.

This man is a ruthless pragmatist, someone who will stop at nothing to secure his throne. But the terrible irony is that the seeds he sows will destroy everything he tried so desperately to grasp.

[14 : 28] In fact, just as his reign starts with him exterminating his rivals to the throne, it ends in verse 17 with the death of his own sons and successors.

Now, you might ask, what's so shocking about an ancient king killing off his rivals? After all, it was fairly common, wasn't it? In the Ottoman Empire, fratricide was even official policy for a short while. When a new sultan took power, his brothers would be judicially strangled with a silk cord. People will do barbarous things to grasp power.

But the shocking thing is that this is not just any eastern throne. This is Judah. And these are David's sons.

Jehoshaphat, the dead king, was one of the great godly reformers. Those sons in verse 2 were God's blessing on his reign. And Jehoram was his rightful heir.

[15 : 31] Heir to a throne God had promised to protect. So he just didn't need to behave in the same blind, desperate way as other kings, did he? It's an early sign of distrust in God's promise to David.

So how did things sink this low in Judah? How did the world's ways of power and tyranny become her ways? Well, the answer in verse 6 is that Judah had married into the world in its ways. Jehoram walked in the terrible ways of the kings of Israel, verse 6, because he'd made the worst of Israel's kings his father-in-law. It was a marriage alliance, which probably looked like a no-brainer, a way to cozy up to their closest neighbor.

But by getting into bed with the enemy, Jehoram sold his kingdom's future. The message is that our marriages matter, especially the marriages of our leaders.

The wrong partner can utterly derail a Christian's ministry. And Jehoram cannot shepherd his people with Athaliah as his wife.

[16 : 50] Before long, verse 11, he'd follow her right to the devil's altar, leading his people to whore after lies. Now, as a parent, there is one terrible truth in this story, which I find utterly heartbreaking.

You see, Jehoram learnt his pragmatism from his father. Jehoshaphat was a wonderful, God-fearing king.

But within a year of his death, he hadn't a single believing son left behind. Instead, the only legacy of that great, godly king was this disastrous marriage.

It was him, we were told back in chapter 18, who first made the marriage alliance with Ahab. Isn't that sobering? For all our gospel work, all our time and toil in the church, what legacy will you and I leave our children?

What will have the most effect on our next generation? The words we speak to them or the decisions we make for them? And the example we set of following Jesus.

[18 : 03] How tragic it was that a king who did so much to restore God's kingdom left the seeds of its destruction as his legacy through the foolish choices he made for his son.

It could be a crushing thought, couldn't it, for us parents? And without verse 7, I guess it probably would be. I cannot make my kids believe.

And the mistakes of even a godly father like Jehoshaphat can have tragic consequences. But verse 7 at least tells us that God won't allow our mistakes to derail his gospel.

He has promised to give a lamp to David and his sons forever. And so the kingdom would carry on with or without Jehoram.

Now that doesn't make our fears and failings as parents any less hard to bear, does it? It must have been devastating for Jehoshaphat to see his son walk away from the Lord.

[19 : 05] But as someone put it, that promise at least makes our mistakes hard to bear in a less crushing sort of a way. It at least wasn't the end of everything Jehoshaphat had worked for and hoped in.

And God, remembering his promise right here at this point in the story, at the very beginning, is setting up the conflict which will run over the next few weeks. You see, charming though Jehoram no doubt found his wife, her motives seem far more sinister than they look to him.

Surely it's more than coincidence that Judah's royal family go through four rounds of murder and violence under her influence.

You see, she's not just a bad example. The enemy's plan is to snuff out David's lamp forever and to steal his crown. It's what he's wanted to do right from the beginning.

By the end of tonight, it seems that's exactly what Athaliah has done. And so verse 7 is just a little spoiler, isn't it? No matter how bad it gets over these chapters, God is committed to the hilt to his Davidic promise.

[20 : 25] The chronicler was writing this story to a people returned from exile and conquered by foreigners. And it must have looked to them like the chances of a son of David returning to the throne were about as real as Father Christmas.

And of course, that's just how it often feels today, isn't it? Where is this king you Christians are waiting for?

And so verse 7 is an invitation to watch and learn, as the rest of this story unfolds, just how serious God is about the rule of his Messiah.

Well, the scene is set now for the great showdown between the seed of David and the seed of the enemy. But first, Jehoram will face justice.

God's blessings on his kingdom are taken away. First, they lose territory in verse 8, Edom and Libna. And then comes a surprising letter from Elijah. He's a prophet for the northern kings, not Judah.

[21 : 28] But Jehoram's marriage and his behavior makes them one and the same. And as Elijah warns, he dies in humiliating circumstances. He loses his own sons to the enemy, verse 17.

Just as he destroyed the sons God gave his father. And that dignity and power that he scrambled for is stripped away, verse 18. As if to remind him where it all came from.

And because he didn't lead like one of David's heirs, well, he's denied a burial in David's royal tombs, verse 20. And so Jehoram faces his maker with no one's honor and no one's regret.

What a sad final verdict that is on a shepherd of God's people. Well, so much for the pragmatists. Next comes the puppet king.

And Ahaziah is the youngest son. He's the only one left, isn't he? And he's a mummy's boy through and through. So secondly, in chapter 22, verses 1 to 9, it's the puppet who followed his mother.

[22 : 39] Possibly the most pathetic king ever to take the throne. And he manages to hold on to it for about a year before the Lord uses his own foolishness to bring him down.

And probably the most notable thing about his reign was that Athaliah, our wicked queen, uses it to come crawling out of the shadows. So far, she's only been called the daughter of Ahab, hasn't she? But by verses 2 and 3, we learn her name. And we begin to see how damaging her influence will be. Athaliah becomes her son's counselor in doing wicked.

What a title that is for a queen mother. And so before long, our puppet king is following all the pagan ways of Israel. In fact, the two nations become almost impossible to tell apart, don't they? When I was a young Christian reading these stories, I remember wondering why on earth these kings couldn't think of some less confusing names for their sons. Right now, we've got little puppet Ahaziah in Judah.

[23 : 45] And across in Israel is Uncle Jehoram, sometimes called Joram, because what's the fun in sticking with one simple spelling when two work perfectly well? And if that name sounds familiar, it's because Uncle Jehoram has the same name as Judah's daddy, Joram, the king who just died.

And perhaps God just wants to keep dyslexic preachers like me a little bit humble. But I think there's more to it than that. Surely the point is that Judah has begun to assimilate completely with her rebellious neighbor, Israel.

David's family are mixed up with Ahab's. Their kings flatter each other by sharing names. And if we can't tell them apart, well, my guess is folks then couldn't either.

Three times we're told about the wicked council. Ahaziah followed as his mother led him into the arms of Uncle Jehoram. And so the ruler of God's gospel kingdom becomes a little puppet to his worldly neighbor.

What a sad story it is. God's king was meant to lead the world. He was meant to extend God's kingdom from Jerusalem to all the families of the earth. But instead of leading the world, the world begins to lead him.

[25 : 05] And with him, all of God's people. Well, in the end, verse 7, God uses his own foolishness to bring him down. Isn't that so often how leaders are dealt with?

He follows Uncle Jehoram into a foolish war with the Syrians, bringing all his nephews along with him. And while they're stuck in the north, he gets caught up in God's judgment on Ahab's throne. Jehu is rounding up the northern royal family. And like the rest of us, he can't tell who's who either. And so he deals with the lot of them. First, verse 8, the nephews are put to death.

That's the third round of killings to hit David's sons. And finally, like his father before him, Ahaziah meets a shameful end. Jehu searches for him, verse 9, and finally finds him lurking in Samaria. Not Jerusalem, where David's kings ought to take their stand. No, he dies the way he lived, blending in with the world. I can't help thinking of those pictures of Saddam Hussein cowering in that little hole in the ground when the troops found him.

[26 : 20] God's king dying a coward's death. And for the first time since David, verse 9, he leaves behind no one able to rule the kingdom.

God's people, his precious people, left to the wolves. Well, what does our storyteller want us to learn from all that? Once again, his focus has all been on bad influence, hasn't it?

Earlier we thought about the influence of marriage. This time, it's the counsel we listen to. And of course, Ahaziah's mother must have seemed like the most natural person in the world to turn to.

But in fact, this was a woman who would stop at nothing to bring down David's throne. So it's as if the chronicler is asking his readers a question.

Who are you listening to? Don't allow the enemy influence, not even a drop of influence. We drink in the world's thinking all the time, don't we?

[27 : 25] It's the air we breathe. But the one we call king, he was no mere follower of others. He didn't grab hold of power the way the world does.

And he didn't use power the way the world does. And he called us to be his lights in a dark world. Not mere followers of the culture that we live in.

Because that culture, you see, may be far more hostile than it seems. On relationships, on career, on ambitions, on priorities.

The advice we swallow might seem wise or it might seem foolish. But what it often doesn't seem is fundamentally anti-Christ. It's only when you take a step back from this story that you see how destructive it was to the gospel.

The enemy plays a sophisticated game over these chapters. And the things our culture encourages us to think and do and buy into.

[28 : 33] They're not just bad news for us as individuals, are they? Because when kingdom people follow the world's counsel, well, it's the kingdom itself which suffers.

And so now God's people are left to the mercy of the most monstrous woman of all. I think it's hard to grasp just how terrifying an age this must have been for gospel people.

Not only is the throne itself snatched by a daughter of Jezebel, but in grasping hold of the crown, she smothers the last surviving hopes of David's line.

A final purge in which the victims are her own grandchildren. And yet it's now at the end of the passage when God's gospel promises begin to shine the brightest.

One flickering candle is left against the brutal terror of Athaliah's reign. And here's the most incredibly exciting thing. You see, just as the kingdom is brought to its knees through a wicked marriage, so its rescue will come through a godly marriage.

[29 : 43] One of the most beautifully complementary marriages I can think of in the Bible. And just as Judah's darkest moments came at the hands of a woman, so a woman will take the most courageous risk for the cause of her king.

Because our final character tonight isn't Jehoiada, the great hero, but his wife. Verses 10 to 12 tell of the princess who defied a monster.

And her name was Jehoshabeath, Hebrew for the Lord vows. And that is a very good name, isn't it? Because the Lord will use this woman's courage to keep the promise he remembered back in 21 verse 7.

It all happens, the action, in just a few sentences. But in them we're told the story of one of the most thrilling nights in the gospel's history. Athaliah hears that her son is dead, verse 10, and arises to water her bloodbath.

And just try to picture what comes next. Ringing through the palace corridors are the terrified cries of those poor children.

[31 : 00] While one princess desperately searches for an escape. And wrapped in her arms, she carries the last surviving son of David.

The hope of the kingdom reduced to one baby boy. Without whom there would be no king for Israel. And no cross for us.

She manages to hide him with a nurse until finally he can be smuggled out to the temple. And outside, anxiously pacing the courts, her husband Jehoiada the priest waits for news.

Well, somehow in God's care, Jehoshabeath made her way to the house of God, verse 12. And there, for six long years, she and her husband kept little baby Joash safe from harm.

A husband and wife working side by side for the sake of Christ. Our writer just slips Jehoiada's name into verse 11 as a little introduction to his hero.

[32 : 03] But although it's him who will get more attention over the next few chapters, our Bibles would end here, wouldn't they? If his wife hadn't been willing to sacrifice herself for the same goal.

So Judah's darkest day was a tale of two marriages, wasn't it? One alliance based on power and pragmatism. And the other, a partnership in the service of God.

For good or for evil, the marriages of kingdom people are tremendously important. Now this won't be the last time, will it, that Israel's baby Messiah escapes a massacre of the innocent.

In Egypt, in Jerusalem, in Bethlehem. Time and again, God shows his faithfulness in the same way. But surely this time, you and I have to be incredibly thankful for the marriage he used to do it. Well, for this week, we'll leave Joash there, secretly sheltered in the temple and waiting for the right moment to come. Outside, the terrors of Athaliah's reign carry on.

[33 : 17] And for all the world, it must have looked like the hope of David's kingdom was over. What nobody knows is that hidden inside God's temple is a baby boy and a faithful priest.

And I suppose that if people judged things by what they could see, well, they must have assumed that God had simply abandoned ship. So before we finish, let's ask again why the chronicler retold this story.

Already, he's reminded his readers, hasn't he, how things came to this in Judah. He's reminded those returning exiles in his generation to be very careful about the influence they accept.

Whether it's from parents or partners or simply the world around us, the things which influence God's people have great power to corrupt our witness and mission.

But there's more to this story than that warning alone, isn't there? It's written for a people who lived in an age when God seemed almost as invisible as he did during Athaliah's long tyranny.

[34 : 33] They were back in the promised land. But just as in Joshua's day, what nobody could see was a true king on the throne.

And people barely dared hope today that a son of David would return. So the chronicler wrote to teach them what God's people should hope in when, humanly speaking, it seems like a true king will never come.

And isn't that a story that you and I need encouragement from today? It's been 2,000 years. And nothing seems any better than when Christ went to be with his father.

Our friends and our family, they still laugh, don't they, at the thought that there's a king on the throne, let alone one who rules every soul. But the chronicler, he wants to remind us that however hidden it might be, David's lamp is burning on.

Our world might not see him. But wherever you look, the Lord has his Jehoshabeaths and his Jehoidas, risking everything because they trust his promise and love his Christ.

[35 : 54] So that one day, whether it feels true now or not, every knee will bow. And every tongue shall confess that Christ is king.

To the glory of God the Father. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that your son is on the throne. And that however hidden his rule may be now, there is no power in earth or hell strong enough to break it. Help us, Lord, to rejoice at the thought of his coming until that day to live gladly and distinctively under his rule as your holy and beloved children.

For we ask it in the name of Christ our King. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.