

A Tale of Tenacity: The Battle for Joy

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[0 : 00] Now, for our Bible reading, we're turning again to the second book of Chronicles. Rupert started a series last week under the title Chronicles of a Forgotten Hero, and we're going to read chapter 23, but we'll begin in chapter 22, verse 10.

That's on page 374, if you're using the church Bibles. Continuing the story of the wicked queen who married into the Judean royal house, Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab, and murdered the royal family, who were, of course, her own grandchildren.

So, 2 Chronicles 22, beginning at verse 10, and reading on to the end of chapter 23. 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 Jehoshabath, the daughter of the king, took Joash, the son of Ahaziah, and stole him away from among the king's sons, who were about to be put to death.

And she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus, Jehoshabath, the daughter of king Jehoram, and wife of king Jehoiada the priest, because she was a sister of Ahaziah, hid him from Athaliah, so that Athaliah did not put him to death.

[1 : 28] And he remained with them six years, hidden in the house of God, while Athaliah reigned over the land. But in the seventh year, Jehoiada took courage and entered into a covenant with the commanders of hundreds, Azariah, the son of Jeroham, Ishmael, the son of Jehohanan, Azariah, the son of Obed, Masaiah, the son of Adiah, and Elishaphat, the son of Zichri.

And they went about through Judah, and gathered the Levites from all the cities of Judah, and the heads of father's houses of Israel, and they came to Jerusalem. And all the assembly made a covenant with the king in the house of God.

Jehoiada said to them, Behold the king's son. Let him reign as the Lord spoke concerning the sons of David. This is the thing that you shall do.

Of you priests and Levites who come off duty on the Sabbath, one-third shall be gatekeepers, and one-third shall be at the king's house, and one-third at the gate of the foundation.

And all the people shall be in the courts of the house of the Lord. Let no one enter the house of the Lord except the priests and ministering Levites. They may enter, for they are holy, but all the people shall keep the charge of the Lord.

[2 : 49] The Levites shall surround the king, each with his weapons in his hand, and whoever enters the house shall be put to death. Be with the king when he comes in and when he goes out.

The Levites and all Judah did according to all that Jehoiada the priest commanded. And he each brought his men who were to go off duty on the Sabbath, with those who were to come on duty on the Sabbath.

But Jehoiada the priest did not dismiss the divisions. And Jehoiada the priest gave to the captains the spears and the large and small shields that had been King David's, which were in the house of God.

And he set all the people as a guard for the king, every man with his weapon in his hand, from the south side of the house to the north side of the house, around the altar and the house.

Then they brought out the king's son and put the crown on him and gave him the testimony. And they proclaimed him king. And Jehoiada and his sons anointed him. And they said, Long live the king.

[3 : 51] When Athaliah heard the noise of the people running and praising the king, she went into the house of the Lord to the people. And when she looked, there was the king standing by his pillar at the entrance, and the captains and the trumpeters beside the king, and all the people of the land rejoicing and blowing trumpets, and the singers with their musical instruments leading in the celebration.

Athaliah tore her clothes and cried, Treason! Treason! Then Jehoiada the priest brought out the captains who were set over the army, saying to them, Bring her out between the ranks, and anyone who follows her is to be put to death with the sword.

For the priest said, Do not put her to death in the house of the Lord. So they laid hands on her, and she went into the entrance of the horse gate of the king's house, and they put her to death there.

And Jehoiada made a covenant between himself and all the people and the king that they should be the Lord's people. And all the people went to the house of Baal and tore it down.

His altars and his images they broke in pieces. And they killed Matta and the priest of Baal before the altars. Jehoiada posted watchmen for the house of the Lord under the direction of the Levitical priests and the Levites, whom David had organized, to be in charge of the house of the Lord, to offer burnt offerings to the Lord.

[5 : 18] As it is written in the law of Moses, with rejoicing and singing according to the order of David. He stationed the gatekeepers at the gates of the house of the Lord so that no one should enter who was in any way unclean.

And he took the captains, the nobles, the governors of the people, and all the people of the land. And they brought the king down from the house of the Lord, marching through the upper gate to the king's house.

And they took the king on the royal throne. So all the people of the land rejoiced. And the city was quiet after Athaliah had been put to death with the sword.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Well, friends, do turn back to that story in 2 Chronicles, chapter 23.

That's page 374 in the Visitor's Bibles. And while you're rummaging, we'll ask for our father's help. Father God, we ask that as we turn again to this thrilling tale of a day when the battle was dark and your king seemed almost invisible, we ask that you would teach us more about the way you work to bring blessing to your broken people.

[6 : 41] Help us, Lord, by your spirit to learn what your kingdom is like and how to live rightly under its king. Amen. It was the 4th of August, 70 years ago this month, that an unknown informant betrayed the hiding place of a young Jewish girl and her family to the Nazi occupiers.

And one thing that Anne Frank wrote during her years hidden in that cramped annex sounded, as I read it, like a distant echo ringing down the centuries.

Look, she said, at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness. We left the kingdom of Judah last week with one flickering candle left burning in the darkness.

One vulnerable baby rescued from the massacre of royal sons and hidden from the tyranny outside. And when the story's picked up in verse 1, he's grown into a seven-year-old boy.

For six long years, he's been sheltered secretly in the temple under the care of the priest and his wife, while on David's throne, ruling over the people of Judah, sits Athaliah, that wicked usurper who systematically liquidated David's sons.

[8 : 16] To all the world, it looked like God had forsaken his people and abandoned that promise he made last week to keep David's lamp burning.

Now the Messiah is dead and the devil reigns in Judah, a wicked queen without a drop of legitimate blood in her veins.

In fact, her only claim to David's blood was that it dripped from her hands. Well, tonight, the resistance movement begins to fight back.

And by verse 21, look, a land that for six long years has lived under tyranny and despair will at last rediscover joy and peace.

In fact, rejoicing bursts out all over the place in this passage. At first, in secret amongst a select band of brothers. But before long, verse 13, the songs of God's people are sounding out all over the land.

[9 : 18] Tonight's tale is a tale of tenacity. The kingdom's courageous battle for joy. And it's in our Bibles to remind us what it is that brings joy and peace to God's downtrodden people.

That's why the chronicler retold this tale for his generation. His readers were desperate to once again taste the joy of God's blessing.

They lived in an age where it was always winter and never Christmas. They're back in their homelands from exile, but without a king. And without the means to relate rightly to God through the temple.

And so the chronicler encourages them with a story of the day Judah cast off her chains. It's the story which shows God's people how to recover his blessing.

And really, it came down to two things. Right rule and right relationship. Joy and peace burst out when God's people are ruled by a true king and relate rightly to him through a true priest in faithful worship.

[10 : 34] Now, the action falls into two halves with a moment of massive drama beginning and ending each one. They both begin with God's true king being revealed alive and well.

First in secret, verse three, to the great joy of his resistance army. And then in public, verse 13, to the fury and horror of Athaliah, the pretender to his throne.

And each half ends with the king, too. And joyful celebration as Joash is crowned in verse 11, end of the first half. And then enthroned in verse 20 at the end of the second half.

But although you'd think the young king would be the star of the story, all the action in between is focused on another hero, Jehoiada the priest.

And in fact, it's the priest who is the great champion of this resistance struggle. First verses 1 to 11 tell the story of his daring plan to restore right rule to the kingdom.

[11 : 40] And in the second half, as he frees the land from Athaliah's tyranny and false worship, the focus is on right relationship, putting back together the pieces of God's covenant.

So let's begin with the battle for right rule. Jehoiada has been living in fear of Athaliah for six years, waiting for his chance to make a move.

And finally, the moment comes. Verses 1 to 11 are the battle plans of his resistance movement. It's a story of courageous loyalty to an unseen king.

And it all starts deep underground, verse 1. Jehoiada takes courage and enters into a covenant with some hand-picked military commanders.

And that word covenant is going to crop up a lot tonight. In fact, it's the key to our chronicler's message. Jehoiada is going to go through this covenant-making process three times.

[12 : 43] And really, each time he's swearing in different sections of God's kingdom. He's renewing their commitment to the big covenant bond which God made with Israel through David.

And then in verse 2, they go through the countryside, gathering others to the cause.

Not just military men this time, but representatives from all the families of the kingdom. And especially important in the chronicler's version of this story, lots and lots of Levites.

It's the priestly tribe, above all, who will do battle for the king. And once they're gathered together in the temple, verse 3, under smoky candlelight, he goes through the whole covenant thing again.

And so at last, cramming full the crypt of the temple, Jehoiada has his army. From all over the kingdom, he's managed to find men who kept hoping in God's promise.

[13 : 52] Even though it seemed utterly lost. They're members of a hidden kingdom, aren't they? Evil was on the throne and their king was nowhere to be seen.

Isn't that just how our world looks today? And yet somehow their trust was still in God's Davidic promise and in the rule of a king no one could see.

And few dared even believe in. Courageous loyalty to an unseen king. And in verse 3, they finally see with their eyes what they must have hoped for in their hearts all these years.

Behold the king's son. Let him reign, says Jehoiada, as the Lord spoke concerning the sons of David. While loyalty is sworn, they make a covenant with this young king.

And Jehoiada's first thoughts are for his protection. So in verses 4 to 7, he draws up his brilliant plan. It's the priests and the Levites all have the job of guarding the king because they can stay right with him in the temple.

[15 : 00] And the plan was to wait until the temple shift change on the Sabbath so that it didn't look too suspicious. And then when the off-duty guard would normally be dismissed, they'd spring into action.

And they had two jobs to do, verse 7. One was to make sure that the temple was kept holy so that nobody would be allowed to defile it during the coup. And their other job was to stick by the king wherever he went.

Weapons at the ready. Well, at last, the Sabbath comes, verse 8. And at the change of shift, all the people, notice, all the people do just what their priest commands.

And Jehoiada's been digging in the temple museum. And he brings out all the ceremonial weapons that belong to King David, verse 9. And he arms them to the teeth. Symbolism matters, doesn't it, at a time like this?

If Scotland were to fall to an occupying force, it'd be like arming our resistance fighters with swords that Robert the Bruce last used to defy the English.

[16 : 06] He's just reminding them, isn't he, what they're really fighting for. They're fighting to be ruled rightly by God's true Christ. And so in verse 11, the young king is brought out into the open.

And the crowds who are waiting patiently in the temple courts go wild with excitement. You see what the storyteller wants us to learn. It's the rule of a true king, which brings joy to God's people.

And so as he's crowned by Jehoiada and his sons, a copy of the testimony God's law is put into his hands. It's what Moses had commanded in Deuteronomy, remember.

The Levites were to give God's king a copy of the law for him to read and rule by all of his days. And here at last was a king the people hoped would govern them justly.

I guess today it's Christians in places like ISIS-controlled Iraq who tell you what joy that would bring. If you've lived under terror, well then you understand the joy of a true ruler, don't you?

[17 : 19] We talk a lot of sentimental nonsense about freedom today. Liberty is the ultimate human ideal. And we think that means freedom from authority and moral restrictions.

But as the chronicler sees the world, true freedom for human beings is found in bowing to a king. And for a brief moment here, he gives us a picture of humanity as it's meant to be.

God's people rejoicing under the rule of a true king and governed by his perfect law. God's people. Now one day the people would discover that Joash was crushingly inadequate as king.

The final tale in our story will be heartbreakingly disappointing. And so for all the joy at his coronation, the years of waiting weren't yet over, were they, for one who would finally ransom captive Israel.

But the chronicler wants to convince his readers that the hope of every generation of God's people lay in the rule of a true son of David. And so how much more cause for joy is there in our generation at the crowning of our king?

[18 : 42] Christ, the king who really is just and good and true, who always keeps covenant and rules by his law of perfect justice and grace.

And he shall reign forever and ever. True liberation for oppressed and downtrodden humanity, true freedom and joy doesn't come through self-rule.

It comes through submission to God's Messiah. The path to joy is still courageous loyalty to a king we can't yet see.

But Jehoiada's mission is not done yet. Because as well as right rule, restoring real joy to the land has to mean right relationship with the Lord.

So if the first half of the story focused on courageous loyalty, well, the second is all about committed love. Because that's what true relationship demands.

[19 : 51] Verses 12 to 21. Committed love to an uncompromising Lord. Now, at first glance, I'm not sure how obviously that stands out from the text.

It seems to be all about priests and covenants and death to tyrants and idols. But you see, real commitment between God and his people is what lies at the heart of a covenant relationship.

It's only when a relationship is faithful and committed and true that real joy and peace can be found. And that will mean destruction of two things which have stood in the way of right relationship all these years.

Firstly, Athaliah herself, the tyrant who usurped God's throne. And secondly, all the falsehood she introduced. The idols and priests who polluted Israel's worship.

So verse 11, the crowning of that unseen king. That seems to be the moment when the witch's power is broken. In verse 12, she hears the noise of the people rejoicing and praising their king.

[21 : 05] And she comes in person to investigate. And so for the second time in this story, there's a moment when hidden reality is revealed. There in the temple, surrounded by the captains and the trumpeters and all the rejoicing people of the land, stands the king.

It's a sight which every human being will one day be confronted with, isn't it? That hidden truth which we've either rejoiced in or suppressed all our lives.

That Christ reigns. And when Athaliah sees the people singing with David's weapons in their hands, well, she knows the game is up. But even then, her only thoughts are bitterness and rage.

Rather than fall to her knees, she has the audacity to look in the face of the king she tried to murder as a child and cry treason.

Many of us live our lives, don't we? Assuming that if we're wrong about Jesus, well, the eleventh hour will give us a chance to repent.

[22 : 21] But for Athaliah, even once she'd lost, the way she'd lived simply hardened in the end. And so Jehoiada orders the woman who enslaved Judah to be marched away from the temple and put to death in horse guards parade.

And unlike every other ruler in this book, the storyteller doesn't even give us her burial notice. Her power may have been very real. But as far as the author is concerned, she was always a pretender.

Well, with her out the way, Jehoiada swears the whole nation to a final covenant in verse 16, that they would be the Lord's people. It's God's best offer to mankind, isn't it?

Committed love to an uncompromising Lord. And because real relationship must be exclusive and uncompromising, the next stop in verse 17 is the temple of Baal.

Well, we cannot worship God in our hearts and still hang on to all the trappings of falsehood in our lives. Real worship, real commitment to Jesus is all or nothing.

[23 : 38] Well, by that point, we've worked through most of the story, but there's one thread which so far we've barely begun to pull on, which I think holds it all together. And I wonder if it's one that, as contemporary evangelicals, is a little bit foreign to us.

Today, we're very personal about our religion, aren't we? When we think of recovering Christian joy, we think of the feelings we have when our personal devotions are on fire or when the music touches us.

When we talk about right relationships, we tend to think of our personal relationship with God. And so something about this passage just seems a little bit foreign.

Because the relationship that brings real joy here is between God and a people. And for that corporate relationship to be mended, they didn't just need a true king.

They needed a faithful priesthood. I wonder if you noticed how much attention the chronicler has been given to Jehoiada and the Levites and the temple.

[24 : 48] Far more than they get in the book of Kings. In both halves of the passage, the priest instructs and the people obey. When plans were made to keep Jehoash safe, verse six, they take special measures to keep the temple pure.

When Athaliah is put to death, verse 15, Jehoiada's concern is keeping the temple undefiled. And in verses 18 and 19, the chronicler adds a whole section about restoring the sacrifices, just the way Moses taught.

And guess what that results in, verse 18? More rejoicing and singing. Doesn't that sound a little peculiar to our ears? The book of Leviticus is not where I'd go to inject a bit of joy to the church's worship.

So what's the point that the chronicler is trying to make? Well, as badly as God's people need a true king to rule us rightly, we also need somebody else.

We need a faithful priest. In the battle for joy, God's priest is central. It's the priest who's the key, you see, to right relationship.

[26 : 03] Because an uncompromising God can't be worshipped any old way, and he can't be approached by promiscuously hearted, sin-tainted people.

If the people were to worship God faithfully, well, they needed a faithful priesthood, someone to mend the relationship. Which is why when that big covenant renewal took place in verse 16, there were three sides to it.

The people, the king, and Jehoiada the priest. That was how God's covenant with David was meant to operate. God's people under the right rule of God's king, worshipping rightly with God's priest to guard the relationship.

And all three serve each other. That's how God rules his church. And that's the relationship which he blesses with joy and peace.

Sometimes Christians who talk a lot about covenants can make it sound like a lifeless, soulless thing. When I hear the phrase covenant theology, I tend to think of po-faced preachers in old sort of beardy Victorian photographs who look like they just need a good tickle.

[27 : 23] But you see, God's covenant is a wonderful thing. It's the relationship he's pledged to us and us to him to live under Christ as our king and priest.

So if the chronicler's readers wanted to rediscover that joyful covenant relationship as they rebuilt the kingdom after exile, well, the answer would lie in a true king and a faithful priest.

So where does all that leave us today? What does this ancient struggle have to teach you and me? On the one hand, it seems quite far away from us now, doesn't it?

It's a story about kings and tyrants and priests. And yet we know, don't we, that God kept these ancient stories to teach his people in all generations about the path to God's blessing and joy.

And the closer you get to the characters in this tale, the more you begin to feel what they felt. If the Messiah's throne seems deserted in Athaliah's day, well, surely it seems just as empty now.

[28 : 36] We Christians don't quite live at the end of this story, do we? In fact, our lives are lived somewhere around verse 11. Yes, we've come to know the true king.

We haven't seen him with our eyes, but we've crowned him over our lives and committed ourselves to his rule. But there's still a long way to go till his kingdom is at peace.

Athaliah is not yet dead, is she? And more than that, there are big battles ahead of us to guard right worship and committed love. The church is still full of us promiscuous, sin-tainted worshipers, isn't it?

And that means that Christian people like you and I still need a faithful priesthood. So where is our Jehoiada today? We have our king, but what about the other great hero?

Well, to answer that question, we need to look as we close at what precisely a priest does for his people in this story. What we normally think of is a priest's role in offering sacrifices to God.

[29 : 47] And you see that happening at last in verse 18, don't you? A priest stands between God and his people. He mends the broken relationship by offering whatever it takes to fix the wrong.

And so sinful people can worship rightly because we're represented before God by a mediator. So in that sense, of course, the one who stands before the Father as our great high priest is the very same Jesus who rules us as king.

The one who offered the final sacrifice of his own body, which makes the Lord Jesus a champion like no other. A hero who fills every need and every longing of God's downtrodden people.

But that isn't all which our story has to say about the work God's priest does in that battle for joy. Jehoiada's role in mending this broken relationship didn't stop there.

Yes, a priest is a mediator in right worship, but they also had another mission. And I think it's that which the chronicler focuses on in this story.

[31 : 02] Jehoiada's great role here was as the guardian of faithful worship. He's the one who kept Judah to the commitment and faithfulness that a real relationship demands.

The priests and the Levites were the ones whose job was to battle for purity and worship. It was they who would teach the people the truth of the gospel and take up arms against idols and falsehood.

So the priest in the Old Testament was meant to be the warrior of true worship. The one who not only mediates the relationship but maintains it.

So where's our Jehoiada? Well, yes, he stands before the Father interceding on our behalf, but he also takes his stand here on earth amongst us, guarding true joy and true relationship in the church.

When you and I keep each other to committed covenant purity, well, we're acting in a priestly role. We're following in the footsteps of Jehoiada, that great warrior for the king.

[32 : 16] when you and I demand exclusive worship, when we insist that love for Jesus demands better than cheap Sunday affection, well, we're being the priests that God's people need.

That's what the priesthood of all believers means, isn't it? That all Christian believers need each other to keep their relationship committed and faithful and real. Isn't that just what the New Testament teaches?

That you and me and the person you talk to over coffee are a holy priesthood. And just as they needed Jehoiada, well, we need each other to keep offering true worship.

Not temple worship, but the living sacrifices of our holy, acceptable lives. Because I, at least, need to be reminded what a holy and acceptable sacrifice looks like.

So my priest doesn't wear a funny costume and stand above me in church. No, my priest comes to me as a friend and a brother, urging me to guard my life and watch my doctrine.

[33 : 39] And I will need him to do that for me day after day, until our king reigns upon the earth and God's people rejoice in peace.

So let's pray together. but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

our father in heaven. We thank you so much that you've provided a king to rule us in love and a priest to cover our guilt and stand before you on our behalf.

and while his rule is hidden, we thank you for the great calling you have for us to be his kingdom of priests, proclaiming his excellency and calling others into his light.

Help us, Lord, to keep each other in faithful covenant, rejoicing in his reconciling rule until he returns to bring peace to every corner of this world.

[34 : 59] For we ask it in Jesus' strong name. Amen.