

## The Reign of King Jehoshaphat

The Scriptures include a lot of material on the Monarchy. I suspect that's because that period spanned 4 centuries of constant conflict between good and evil. It was a crucial period in the history of the Nation of Israel when obedience of the king meant blessing for the people, but disobedience meant trouble if not disaster. Israel was a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" before the Lord. That describes what they were to be and what they were to do. God called them into existence to be His "son," that is, another Adam. Just as God brought Adam into existence by His creative power, so with the Nation of Israel. (Genesis and Exodus narrate the story of Israel's origin.) So Israel, like Adam, was to serve God by making all earth God's sacred space so that God could dwell among and be a blessing to all His holy people. Israel was thus expected to be holy and to take the knowledge of God to the Gentile nations in the expectation they would respond in faith and be transformed into holiness also. But anything that opposed God and His will had to be dealt with, violently if necessary, whether it erupted from within the community or from outside. So the role of the king during the Monarchy was to see to it that God's intention for the Nation was fulfilled. There were administrative duties, military duties and, most importantly, religious ones as well. The king was to see to it that the Law was obeyed, that justice prevailed in the Land, and that God was worshipped and served as He had instructed in the Law and as advised by the prophets that God sent when necessary. There was something else however: there was a corporate unity between the king and his people. The king was more than just a mediator. The king represented the people and the people identified with the king. The king was like a "son" to God, representing all the people to God and representing God's will to the people. Sadly, just as Adam failed, so did the kings. If the king was evil, so were the people, and vice versa. All 19 of the kings of the Northern Kingdom were evil. Only about a half dozen of the 20 kings in the Southern Kingdom were good, and Jehoshaphat was one of them. (Asa, Joash, Hezekiah and Josiah were also good kings, and a couple of others were OK). He's an important figure in the period of the Monarchy, so we should look at him and his reign.

First, something about the text. Both Kings and Chronicles are divided into two books because of their length; they originally were each one scroll. At the center of the Kings scroll is the Elijah/Elisha narrative, indicating all that could have been had the Nation, indeed, had the kings been faithful. The Book of Kings opens with Solomon ascending to David's throne in 970 BC, and it ends with the exile of Judah in 586 BC. The Exile reversed the Exodus, returning Israel into the grip of the Gentile nations, the seed of the Serpent, the very nations they had been tasked with rescuing for the Lord, but didn't do. First and Second Chronicles contain much of the material already in Samuel and Kings. First Chronicles opens with genealogies from Adam, which continue on into and beyond the Exile, and it ends with the David story. Second Chronicles opens with Solomon, documents 5 revivals, and presents the stories of 19 kings of Judah divided into 3 units by the long stories of Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah. It ends with the decree to return and rebuild the Temple -- a more positive ending than 2nd Kings' ending. Throughout Chronicles a focus is on the Temple, its priests and Levites. Much of the new material that's in Chronicles has to do with the Temple. The reason for Chronicles' emphasis on the Temple is God resided there in the midst of His people, and the behavior of the kings and the people should have been appropriately holy and obedient to His will. History is really the outworking of God's sovereign rule. In Chronicles there's nothing about the Northern Kingdom because they abandoned the Temple and the God who dwelt therein from their outset. And at the center of the Chronicles scroll is the building and dedication of the Temple; the lesson is, when a king did right with respect to God's dwelling in the Temple, in their midst, the king and the nation prospered and when a king did wrong, they suffered.

Just as the Gospel of Matthew explains the reason the promised and announced Kingdom didn't materialize, these two books, Kings and Chronicles, explain why the Nation of Israel never achieved the glory it should have. The books also document God's case against the Nation and why they were punished with exile. At that time, it was generally believed that a nation would prosper or not, win battles or go down in defeat, depending on the power of that nation's god. Israel's God however deliberately allowed His people to be defeated because of their refusal to obey Him. Wicked king after wicked king, the nation rebelled against their God. No one rebels against a holy and just God, or even dishonors Him, without severe consequences. There were only a few high spots in Judah in all those centuries. We want now to look at one of them.

Jehoshaphat's father was good King Asa. Jehoshaphat's reign began when he was 35 years old at approximately 870 BC and continued for 25 years until he died at age 60. His firstborn son, Jehoram, a terribly wicked king, succeeded Jehoshaphat. The first thing we're told about Jehoshaphat is that he tore down the idolatrous shrines that the people

had been using. And he continued his father's work of getting rid of the male prostitutes that were at those shrines. He eschewed the Baals that the Northern kingdom worshipped. And he fortified the border so that the Northern Kingdom couldn't invade Judah and bring their false religion. He had a zeal and loyalty for God and he understood his role was to enforce holiness in the land, to require that the people be faithful to the covenant, to the Law. As a result, the people brought him gifts and he became wealthy, very powerful, and highly honored.

Jehoshaphat's commitment to the Law led him to send Levites throughout the land of Judah to teach the people the Law. He instructed the priests and Levites in Jerusalem also to fear the Lord and to warn the people not to sin against Him, or His wrath would fall on them. Jehoshaphat instructed the judges in the rural areas of Judah to fear God and to administer justice in the land. "You are not judging for man but for the Lord, who is with you when you give a verdict. Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you," he taught. Enemies around Judah feared him, and so they left Judah in peace; some even paid tribute indicating Judah's sovereignty over them. That was because Jehoshaphat built up a formidable army. This king was being responsible, protecting the sanctuary that was the Land. He was doing exactly what Adam did not do but should have done on that fateful day in Genesis 3, viz., throw the wicked Serpent out of the Garden.

Later in his reign, however, Jehoshaphat did something he ought not have done. He made an agreement with one of the wicked kings of the Northern Kingdom to build a fleet of ships to carry out trade with other nations. A prophet denounced the venture, and it turned out, in God's sovereignty, that that whole fleet got wrecked and never sailed. This was the second time Jehoshaphat wrongly got involved with a Northern king. After the first episode (below), another prophet confronted Jehoshaphat, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?" The kings of the Northern Kingdom were idolaters. The seed of the woman, Jehoshaphat, was there to *oppose* the wicked seed of the Serpent, not to be friendly or work together with them. We today very much need to heed this instruction. We reside in a land of Serpent-seed, idolaters, pagans, and we're here to bring them to Christ, not to be one with them. We need much discernment in this matter!

Although the text doesn't bring this up, we can see another terrible failing on Jehoshaphat's part. He didn't teach his son to fear the Lord. Of course, children don't necessarily follow the instruction of their parents and are responsible in their own right. But there's a pattern in Scripture that children of godly parents often turn out wicked. Eli's sons, for example, and even Samuel's and David's didn't follow the Lord as their father did. It's possible fathers failed to teach their children as Deuteronomy 6 instructs. Our country is deteriorating morally with each generation, and it may be due to this same failure of not teaching our children to fear the Lord.

The author of Chronicles devotes much space to an episode that was evidently of great importance during Jehoshaphat's reign. We need to look carefully at it. Wicked Northern King Ahab saw an opportunity to aggrandize himself by using Jehoshaphat's army to militarily take back trans-Jordan territory that Arameans (today, Syria) had seized. Jehoshaphat's oldest son had taken Ahab and Jezebel's daughter, Athaliah, for his wife. She was every bit as evil as her mother, maybe worse. This created an alliance that NEVER should have occurred. So father-in-law Jehoshaphat went North, to Samaria, to visit King Ahab, who threw a grand party to honor the occasion. And Ahab asked Jehoshaphat to go to war with him to regain that territory. Jehoshaphat agreed but on the condition that counsel from the Lord be sought first. So Ahab brought in his 400 or so prophets, probably prophets of Baal, who all said, "Go to war and win." Jehoshaphat knew these men were phonies and asked for a real prophet's counsel. A true prophet, Micaiah, whom Ahab despised, was summoned. Micaiah not only prophesied disaster. He told this vision: He saw in the throne room of heaven the Lord asking for a spirit who would lie and deceive those false prophets into predicting victory when in reality there would be defeat. Not only defeat but the death of Ahab. Tragically, Ahab and Jehoshaphat ignored Micaiah's warning and together went to war against the Arameans. To protect himself, Ahab entered battle disguised, but in God's sovereignty, a randomly shot arrow hit him anyway, and he died. Miraculously, Jehoshaphat was protected and returned to Jerusalem, only to be rebuked by another prophet for getting involved with wickedness.

This unique vision that Micaiah had of the lying spirit that God commissioned, a vision that proved to be true, should not be troubling. God is the uber-Master chess player who moves circumstances and events in life so that His will is accomplished even while permitting humans to exercise their will. God also has made us so that we're vulnerable to spirit influences. Those spirits, even Satan and his army of demons, are all God's servants and must do His bidding. Thus God's will is executed on earth, whether to bless or to curse.

Let's think clearly about this. God revealed to Ahab that the false prophets were lying to him. He revealed what truth is. Ahab had to choose whether to act on what God revealed to be a deception or truth. Ahab rejected truth, to his eternal loss. God presents to us a choice; He sees to it that we choose between revealed truth, which is good and which honors Him. Or we choose a lie, which is evil and which dishonors God. And He holds us accountable for our decision. More troubling, though, is what Jehoshaphat said (18:3b), "I am as you are, and my people as your people." Yes, they were all Israelites from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they were NOT all the seed of the woman. Ahab and all those of the Northern Kingdom were the seed of the Serpent. There should NOT have been an alliance, nor going together into battle, nor doing *anything* supposedly in the name of the Lord. Do we understand this today? I suspect not. In grace, God rescued Jehoshaphat from his foolish decision to be allied with evil Ahab, from his foolish choice to disregard revealed truth.

There was one more episode in the reign of Jehoshaphat of very great significance. Moabites and Ammonites decided to go to war against Judah. They assembled a vast army and began advancing into the Land. This was a deliberate invasion of wicked Serpent-seed reprising the Serpent entering the Garden in Genesis 3 to overturn or at least sabotage God's will for His beloved human creatures. It would be Jehoshaphat's role to confront and repel or defeat this invasion of God's sanctuary land. But this was a *massive* army. What was Jehoshaphat to do? He proclaimed a fast and all of Judah came to the Temple to seek the Lord's protection. Jehoshaphat stood up and prayed to God for help. And what a prayer it is! He clearly knows God, he knows Scripture, he understands God's will, and he exercises faith. In response, the Lord sent a prophecy: "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's." That vast army of pagan, Gentile people were really, perhaps unwittingly, defying God. So the people joined Jehoshaphat in humble prayer and worship in full expectation of a deliverance. That is one of the very greatest examples of faith in action in all the Bible. 2 Chronicles 20 is one of the most exalted chapters in the Bible, worth reading again and again. What happens next is even more transcending.

The next morning, the Judean army went out to meet the invaders, with Jehoshaphat and all the people of Judah walking at the front of the army singing and praising God, giving thanks to Him for His *chesed* love. God ambushed the invading pagan army and they wound up killing each other. Not one survived, and the Judean army didn't have to fire even one arrow. The Judeans returned with musical instruments playing and with much plunder to Jerusalem, rejoicing heartily. And "the fear of God came upon all the kingdoms of the countries when they heard how the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel." God had covenanted to bless and protect His people if they would honor Him. That happened as intended: the people were faithful and God responded in love. And in justice, by the way, for these were unholy people attempting to trespass into a holy God's sacred space, so they suffered grievous consequences.

Conclusion: Three things. (1) As I look around at the state of evangelical Christianity today, I'm deeply concerned that we haven't entered into the reality of what God is offering in the Bible. We seem to be satisfied, complacent even, with a superficial understanding of salvation, as if it's a veneer of religion on the surface of our lives. What those Judeans experienced 2800 years ago, in contrast, was deep. It was an encounter with the living, all powerful Creator God who sovereignly rules His world and -- get this! -- invites us to participate with Him in that rule. He has, thanks to Christ's righteous life, atoning sacrifice and resurrection/ascension to heaven, purified us and made us priest-kings along with His beloved Son, to serve Him in holiness and to exalt and praise Him as we watch Him work through us. We can enter into such glorious victories as in Chapter 20 if we just humble ourselves, abandon selfish pursuits, and commit to obeying and serving Christ, the true Warrior-King.

(2) What happened in the reign of Jehoshaphat must instruct us. We need to actually live holy lives, because God isn't merely hidden deep in a Temple building but is *in us*. He knows our thoughts, our values, our motives, and our affections and passions; so we need to work on our sanctification. We need also to be discerning about our association with the pagan unbelievers that surround us. We're here to get them saved and taught, not to join them in a vain pursuit of happiness. And we need to defend God's honor by knowing and living out His truth, which means we need to know what God has revealed, reflect deeply on it, and willfully apply it to our lives. That's the powerful lesson of the King Jehoshaphat narrative.

(3) Jehoshaphat defended God's holy space and ensured the holiness of the people so that a holy God could dwell among and bless His beloved. That was proleptic of what Jesus will do when He returns, except that the holy space then won't be just the Land of Israel but the whole world. Paul pronounces a special blessing on those who cherish and anticipate with delight Christ's return (2 Timothy 4:8b). I hope that includes you.