

Jehoshaphat: Judah's Good King Come Full Circle

You don't have to live long to meet or hear of one. They are painfully too plentiful in the Church. What I'm referring to are those prominent spiritual leaders who have fallen from the pinnacle of prestige and influence to the depths of despair and disrepute. In their wake they leave the faith of young Christians staggered, the mature shaking their heads in disbelief and the unbeliever scornful. But a story that often eludes us is what happens to those who have fallen. How many actually recover and return to productive ministry. How many shrink away into obscurity, the guilt, pain and insecurity driving them to forsake all hope of ever being used again by God. I have met a few former ministers that fall into the latter category. It is for them I write this article and tell this fascinating Old Testament account of "Judah's Good King Come Full Circle."

Jehoshaphat – A King With a Commendable Heart

In 2nd Chronicles, chapters 17-19, we encounter the story of King Jehoshaphat, Judah's fourth king after Solomon's kingdom was divided. The Chronicler is quick to tell us if kings were either good or bad as measured by their obedience to the law of God. Often we are also told of their spiritual influence and effect on the nation. Not surprising, then, we read that "the Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days and did not seek after the Baals, but sought the God of his father (Asa), followed the commandments and did not act as Israel did" (17:3-4). This commendation is followed by a statement that God established his kingdom and blessed him with riches and honor (v.5). The Chronicler then issues a supreme compliment when he writes that Jehoshaphat "took great pride in the ways of the Lord and again removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah (v.6). It seems that the good king had so internalized the law of God, that to obey became his passion and pride. The account goes on (vv. 8-9) to tell how Jehoshaphat sent officials (scribes perhaps) throughout Judah teaching "the book of the law of the Lord." Among the good kings of Judah, one is hard pressed to find any with a more commendable heart or praiseworthy beginning.

The Spiritual Decline of a Great King

Among God's blessings, Jehoshaphat's obedience and passion for God brought security for his kingdom. We read that "the dread of the LORD was on all the kingdoms of the lands which *were* around Judah, so that they did not make war against Jehoshaphat" (vv 10-11). What follows describes the blessings of God on Jehoshaphat's kingdom. Note the consequence of that blessing, "So Jehoshaphat grew greater and greater, and he built fortresses and store cities in Judah" (v. 12). What follows is a description of wealth, honor and an enormous standing army with few rivals (vv 14-19).

But sadly the opening verse of the next chapter (18:1) contains an incredible statement: "Now Jehoshaphat had great riches and honor; and he allied himself by marriage with Ahab." What? That's right! He made an alliance with Ahab, the wicked Baal worshipper whose wife, Jezebel, tried to kill all the prophets of God (1Kg 18:13)! Why would a righteous king do such a thing? Perhaps he thought such an alliance would bring even more power, prestige and security for his kingdom. However, in reading the

rest of the chapter, we find out that the alliance turned into disaster. After the battle that took Ahab's life and almost cost him his own, Jehoshaphat is confronted by the prophet Jehu who rebukes him with these words, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD and so *bring* wrath on yourself from the LORD?"

Somehow, unbelievably, between 2Chr 17:6 and 19:2, Jehoshaphat had experienced a disintegration of his spiritual life. Whereas he once took pride in the following the ways of the Lord, now he loved and aligned himself with His adversaries.

The Great Restoration

It is difficult to understand how one who had such a heart for God could fall so low. However, the prophet Jehu after issuing his rebuke went on to tell Jehoshaphat that God still saw good in him. After all, he had worked hard to rid Judah of idolatry and, he had "set your heart on seeking God" (19:3).

What follows is a summary of the last years of Jehoshaphat's reign. Remarkably, it looks very much like what he did at the beginning of his reign (17:1-9). Read his counsel to the judges in the land (19:6-11) and you hear a king whose heart is again set ablaze with the righteousness of God and zeal to obey it.

Lessons and Application

The story of Jehoshaphat underscores the fact that God continually seeks those whose hearts draw near to Him, for those whose delight is in the law of the Lord. His blessings follow obedience – obedience borne not out of ritual but out of a relationship of faith.

However, the story also demonstrates that even the most ardent follower of God is not immune from "backsliding." What is odd is that the road to spiritual decline is often paved with power, pride and success. The words of Prov 4:23 leap out and caution us, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." It is above all your heart that God is after; it is the one thing that He does not and cannot own. It must be freely given to Him by His true followers.

Finally, God knows the hearts of all, even that of a backslidden king – one who had made alliances with His worst enemies. Despite his spiritual decline, God saw in the hidden recesses of Jehoshaphat's heart, smoldering embers of a desire to seek and serve Him.

God is the God of the 2nd chance, and he works with us despite our imperfection, sin and rebellion. His goal is to restore us, to bring us back into fellowship with Him. His goal is that our lives and ministry might again be fruitful, as fruitful as when the fire of consecration first burned and we began to serve him.

