

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Riches to Rags

Making the case for strong roots from the life of King Joash.

(2 Chronicles 21-24)

Sermon manuscript

Introduction: Trees that go splat...

A few years ago, after a stormy San Antonio Sunday night with lots of high winds, I got up on a Monday morning, walked into the kitchen and looked out at the back yard.

The sight that met me was pretty shocking. A large hackberry tree that had been giving good shade to the grandkids' trampoline and to the yard, and that had been upright the night before, was lying on the ground.

I knew I had some work in front of me. It was a big tree and would take a while to cut up. But I wasn't surprised to see it come down. The tree had a great canopy, gave much-needed shade...and had a root system about six inches deep.

The tree had grown over bedrock, so when the winds blew hard, they simply knocked the tree over, roots and all. No damage was done to the limbs or to the trunk. It was all perfectly intact, except that the tree was now parallel rather than perpendicular.

Funny, though. Other trees in other parts of the yard fared well. Mature oaks and cedar elms weathered the storm with no problem.

It turns out that it was the parts of the trees no one could see that made the difference. The trees with a good, deep root system stood. The one without, fell and fell hard.

This morning, as we explore the tragic life of an Old Testament king, we'll pay attention to the importance of a good, deep root system for the day that the storms come, when the props are knocked out from under us.

You may or may not know the characters we'll meet today: Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Athaliah, Ahaziah, Joash,¹ Jehoiada, Zechariah.

They all lived nearly three thousand years ago, but the plotline comes with a warning that makes this story 2023 relevant.

Immediate background...

This morning's story is set in the southern part of Israel we call Judah. And in the days of the Jewish kings, Judah was always ruled by one of the descendants of Israel's greatest king, David.

David was succeeded on the throne by his son, Solomon.² Then came other kings. Some of them godly, many of them not. One of the righteous ones was King ("Jumpin'") Jehoshaphat. He brought spiritual revival to Judah.³

After Jehoshaphat died, though, Judah went into a tailspin of wickedness, led there by wicked kings who didn't follow the Lord.

The REIGN OF WICKEDNESS in Judah (2 Chr. 21-23)

The Wicked Reign of King Jehoram (21:1-20)

Jehoram was next in line after Jehoshaphat. He was the very wicked son of a very righteous father.

Once on the throne, Jehoram killed all six of his younger brothers (!), to ensure that they couldn't take the throne from him.

¹ As you read through 2 Kings, you will note that Joash is called "Jehoash."

² David and Solomon reigned over the united monarchy of Israel. Following Solomon, Israel divided into the northern (Israel - always apostate) and southern (Judah - some brief seasons of spiritual health) kingdoms.

³ Read about Jehoshaphat in 1 Kings 22 and in 2 Chronicles 17-20.

And here is the Bible's opening summary of Jehoram's rule: **[2 Chronicles 21:6] He walked in the way of the kings of Israel, just as the house of Ahab had done, for Ahab's daughter was his wife; and he did evil in the sight of the Lord.**

THAT is a sad summary. And did you catch the comment about Jehoram's wife? He married the (as yet unnamed) the daughter of King Ahab.

That's important to know because King Ahab was the most wicked king of the wicked northern kingdom (Israel). Ahab's wife was the immoral, idolatrous, and cruel Jezebel. Judah's king, Jehoram, took the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel as his wife. And THAT tells us a lot about Jehoram.

No doubt, thanks in some measure to the wife he had chosen, Jehoram **[11] caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to be unfaithful, and led Judah astray.**

King Jehoram lived badly and died of a painful disease, which was the judgment of God. (2 Chronicles 21:18)

Here are the final words written about Jehoram: **[2 Chronicles 21:20] He was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for eight years; and he departed with no one's regret.**

With Jehoram dead and gone we say, "Good riddance!" and hope that better days are ahead for Judah.

The Wicked Reign of King Ahaziah (22:1-9)

Sadly, the nation of Judah went from bad to worse under the reign of Jehoram's (youngest) son, Ahaziah. Ahaziah **[4]...did evil in the sight of the Lord.**

How did Ahaziah get so corrupted? Well, his mother was Jehoram's wife, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and **[2 Chronicles 22:3]...his mother was his counselor to act wickedly.** (And, no, that is NOT a great text for a month before Mother's Day.)

Now, when the wicked King Ahaziah was killed (by Jehu), Judah was relieved of another miserable king, and we hope, again, for some righteous relief.

In fact, the situation turns from very bad, to very much worse.

After the death of a king, Jewish protocol held that one of the king's sons should reign in his place. So, after the death of Ahaziah, his son *should have* become king.

That is NOT what happened.

The Wicked Reign of Queen Athaliah (22:10-12)

When the wife of Jehoram / the mother of Ahaziah / Athaliah was her name saw that her son was dead, she was determined to become the queen of Judah.

The problem with this, of course, was that Ahaziah had sons. One of those sons *should have* become king. So...Athaliah killed all the royal offspring.

That's right, Athaliah became Judah's queen by killing all the grandkids. (Again, not a great text for a Grandparents Day sermon.)

The fly in the ointment of her plan was that one of the grandsons - an infant named Joash - was spared by the heroic efforts of a nurse (Jehoshabeath) and a priest (Jehoiada).

During the years of Athaliah's reign as queen, she made the same spiritual wreck of things that Jehoram and Ahaziah had.

She led the nation into the worship of the Baals (false gods of Canaan), into immorality, into violence, and away from the Lord.

Judah was in an absolute mess. Had you been a God-fearing Jew living under Queen Athaliah, you would have been grieving the nation's sin, fearing God's judgment, and crying out for revival.

Well, finally, help is on the way!

The RIGHTEOUS RULE of King Joash (23:16-24:14)

The Overthrow of Athaliah (23:1-15)

Orchestrating a coup (23:1-11)

We watch as the godly, old priest, Jehoiada (the one who protected the infant Joash) put together *coup* to get rid of Athaliah.

He gathered warriors who would back him, militarily, along with priests and Levites who would set things right, spiritually.

Jehoiada stationed soldiers at strategic places around the city. And with these armed men in place, Jehoiada started the ball rolling to set Joash on the throne.

[2 Chronicles 23:11] Then they brought out the king's son and put the crown on him, and gave him the testimony and made him king. And Jehoiada and his sons anointed him and said, "Long live the King."

So far, so good. But a takeover isn't complete until the usurper is overthrown. The Bible records Athaliah's last stand.

Athaliah is killed (23:12-15)

She heard the commotion in the city and went straight to the source of the noise, right into the temple, and saw Joash, surrounded by the military as all the people were rejoicing.

When Athaliah cried out, "***Conspiracy,***" Jehoiada commanded that she be seized, taken outside the temple, and put to death.⁴

⁴ This reminds us of the scene in the Wizard of Oz, where the Wicked Witch of the West was killed. There, in fiction, all the witch's henchmen rejoiced that the witch was dead. Here, in a true story, the people are happy to be rid of Queen Athaliah.

The whole thing was orchestrated by Jehoiada. Joash is now the king! But Jehoiada had not simply wanted a transfer of power. He wanted to pave the way for the new king to have a righteous reign.

So, with the wicked Queen Athaliah out of the way and Joash on the throne, the old priest moved to do just that.

Preparations for a Godly Reign for Joash (23:16-21)

[16] Then Jehoiada made a covenant between himself and all the people and the king, that they would be the Lord's people. [17] And all the people went to the house of Baal and tore it down, and they broke in pieces his altars and his images, and killed Mattan the priest of Baal before the altars.

With the negative removed, Jehoiada re-established the positive. Sacrifices were again offered on the temple's altar. Guards protected the holy places. And there was worship and song.

And the people rejoiced when Joash was crowned King because they were optimistic for a return to righteousness. And, as we will see, their optimism was well-founded.

The righteous reign of Joash began like gangbusters.

Joash's Righteous Acts (24:1-14)

Listen to this partial summary of Joash's reign: ***[2 Chronicles 24:2] Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord...*** Now THAT is different than anything we have seen thus far this morning.

What I haven't told you yet, but what you should know, is that Joash began to reign as king when he was seven years old.

He had been hidden in the palace by Jehoiada for the first seven years of his life, to protect him from his grandmother, Athaliah.

After he had been king for some time (at least into his teen-aged years), he decided to restore the house of the Lord - the temple. It had been misused and abused through the reigns of recent kings. So, he gave the command to the priests to start repairs.

Well, the priests didn't respond immediately. Maybe they were so shocked that a king would order them to do something righteous that they didn't believe him. So, he had to reissue the command. (v. 6)⁵

You can almost hear him saying, "*I am serious about this now, guys. Do it.*" They "got it," hopped to, and repaired the temple. Then Joash re-instated Moses' tax for the on-going support of the temple.

These and other reforms began to put the nation back on the right track of obedience to the Lord. Joash was leading the nation the way the king was supposed to lead the nation.

Sacrifices offered.
The priesthood supported.
The temple taken care of.
Righteousness exalted.
The Law of God revered.

And these reforms weren't just flashes in the pan, either. When we check in with Joash at age forty-seven, he is still on the same track.

A generation into his reign (he ruled for forty years) and he is still leading the people of God in the ways of God.

But, at about the forty-year mark of Joash's reign, a momentous event occurred. Joash's lifelong mentor, Jehoiada, the old priest, dies.

The WICKED Rule of King Joash (24:15-27)

The Death of Jehoiada (24:15-16)

Now, think with me about Joash's life. All his siblings had been killed by his grandmother.

⁵ The command was re-issued in the 23rd year of his reign when he was 30 years of age according to 2 Kings. Some have attributed this slowness of Joash in moving to restore the temple as a sign of spiritual apathy.

His father was dead, as was his mother (she was likely killed along with all her other children), as were his grandparents. Joash's primary adult role model and mentor has always been the old priest, Jehoiada.

Jehoiada died at one hundred and thirty years of age, which means that he must have been about ninety when he orchestrated the coup to overthrow Athaliah and arranged for Joash's coronation.

So, we expect that Joash would arrange an elaborate funeral and burial for Jehoiada - and he did. They buried him among the kings of Judah, a very special honor, because **[16] he had done well in Israel and for God and His house.**

We understand why Joash would want to honor Jehoiada. Just think about what Jehoiada had done for Joash. He...

- ...saved Joash from certain death as an infant.
- ...protected Joash for seven years from his wicked grandmother.
- ...saw to it that Joash got to the throne.
- ...provided Joash with what he needed to spiritually restore Judah.
- ...gave Joash direction all his life from the Bible.

But now, Jehoiada is gone, and Joash finds himself at a major life crossroads. What will he do? At age forty-seven, where will he go?

How will he act, now that the long, protective shadow of Jehoiada the priest has been swept away? We immediately get an answer to those questions.

The Apostasy of Joash (24:17ff....)

Marching to the beat of a new drummer (vv. 15-18)

All his life, Joash had listened to Jehoiada tell him about God's ways. He had his ear tuned to God's frequency. He had grown up listening to Hillsong and Bethel music. He heard the great praise songs and hymns all day long.

But, shortly after Jehoiada's death, some of the officials of Judah recommended that the king should listen to different tunes.

The conversation is not recorded for us. But, based on what Joash did, it isn't hard to imagine what they suggested.

[17] But after the death of Jehoiada, the officials of Judah came and bowed down to the king, and the king listened to them. [18] And they abandoned the house of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols.⁶

Joash changed spiritual loyalties as easily as we change clothes.

Without so much as a moment's hesitation, he abandoned the house of the Lord, and allowed the nation to revert to idolatry.

Instead of the peace and serenity and righteousness that had prevailed for the first forty years of his reign, there is now a debased worship system, child sacrifice, and the grossest immorality.

What happened? We'll address that question in a moment, but we have to finish this sad story first.

Joash's final hypocrisy (vv. 19-22)

Despite Joash's apostasy, God didn't abandon him. Instead, He warned the king through the prophets to return to the righteous path.

One of the prophets God sent his way was Zechariah (not the prophet who wrote the book by the same name). This Zechariah just happened to be the son of Jehoiada, the priest.⁷

Listen to Zechariah's bold words.

[20] Then the Spirit of God covered Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the priest like clothing; and he stood above the people and said to them, "This is what God has said, 'Why you break the

commandments of the Lord and do not prosper? Because you have abandoned the Lord, He has also abandoned you."

Now, what would you hope that King Joash would do when he heard the words of Zechariah, Jehoiada's son?

I would like to see him kneel in repentance. I would like to see him in sackcloth and ashes, pleading for forgiveness.

Well, that is not at all what we see.

Joash responded to the word of God brought by Zechariah by ordering his servants to stone him to death.

Unbelievable. He killed the man whose father had saved him as an infant and who had led him through decades of a righteous reign.

Zechariah had been there when Joash was crowned king. (See 2 Chronicles 23:11) He was one of those shouting, "*Long live the King!*" when Athaliah was overthrown.

Talk about ingratitude. Talk about biting the hand that feeds you. Talk about hypocrisy.

Yes, this is the Zechariah Jesus had in mind (Luke 11) when He rebuked the Pharisees for their *hypocrisy*.

[Luke 11:49] "For this reason also... [50]...the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, [51] from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God..." (also Matthew 23:35)

In other words, Jesus, in speaking to hypocritical Pharisees, identified King Joash as the best example of hypocrisy He could think of for ordering the assassination of Zechariah, the son of his mentor, Jehoiada.

Joash was a role model for all hypocrites for all time.

⁶ The text never actually says that he personally engaged in idol worship. But the task of the king of Judah was to ensure that the nation followed the Lord's ways. He is completely culpable for his capitulation.

⁷ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible identifies thirty-one men in the Bible who are named "Zechariah."

In the first century world, an actor in a play was called a *hypocrite*. It was not a negative term.

It was simply the Greek term to describe someone who was playing a role, pretending to be someone they were not in a drama.

At some level, in a very negative way, King Joash was acting when he led the nation in following God. He was playing a part.

Among the complaints those outside the faith, today, have against Christians is that we commit the sin of hypocrisy. They hate hypocrisy.

I do, too. Hypocrisy is ugly. And even though I have sometimes been guilty of the sin of hypocrisy, I still hate it.

More important to note is that Jesus hated the sin of hypocrisy. And so did the Apostle Paul.

When writing his letter to the Galatians, Paul mentioned the occasion when the Apostle Peter and Barnabas got caught up in the sin of hypocrisy in the city of Antioch.

Those two heavyweight Christian leaders held back from hanging with the Gentiles even though they knew perfectly well that hanging with the Gentiles was exactly the right thing to do.⁸

Every command to Christians to put away hypocrisy contains an implicit admission that it is possible that a believer in Jesus may not put away hypocrisy.

So, if we have to give a name to the sin of Joash, it would be hypocrisy.⁹

But how did it happen that Joash fell so hard and so thoroughly from playing a godly role into playing an idolatrous role?

Apparently, he crashed and burned over the course of only a very few days. What began - and continued for decades - as a life marked by service to God ended in spiritual wreckage and a disgusting abuse of power.

He started so well. He looked so good. He had so much going for him.

But, at year forty of his reign, he did an abrupt about face. (And, yes, this did bring me up short when I realized that Joash turned from God at the forty-year mark of his ministry...)

What happened?

Conclusion:

Before going any further, let me assure you that this story has real-time relevance to us. We know it does because of what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians living in Rome.

[Romans 15:4] For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The story of Joash has something important and something hopeful for us. The story is for us.

#1 - A vision for a life of faith that needs no props...

There is in the story a clue that tells us what had prompted Joash to live and lead righteously for a long season and to then quickly turn to embrace wickedness.

A few minutes ago, I read only the first part of a critical statement in the story. Now, listen as I read the whole statement.

⁸ The Apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:1) told his Christian readers to rid themselves of lots of bad things, including hypocrisy.

⁹ Or, as I've sometimes heard it referred to, *externalism*.

[2 Chronicles 24:2] Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord ALL THE DAYS OF JEHOIADA THE PRIEST. (my emphasis)¹⁰

When Jehoiada died, Joash fell as quick and as hard as the hackberry tree in my back yard fell after a violent gust of wind.

For his first forty-seven years, Jehoiada's voice was the closest and loudest voice speaking into Joash's life. With Jehoiada gone, King Joash listened to ***"the officials of Judah"*** who counseled him to forsake God - and he did. Just like that.

So, the motivating force in Joash's life was a desire to please the loudest voice around him.

As long as Jehoiada lived, HE was the loudest voice, HE was the external prop Joash leaned on. When Jehoiada died, he turned to idols, threw the true God off like an old coat, and followed those fancy gods of Canaan.

Here is the warning to you and me today.

It is possible that any of us might fall into the trap of "acting a part." Any of us might live to please the loudest voice around us rather than the One who saved us.

By saying this, I'm not making any comment about whether Joash was a saved man or not. I'm agnostic as to his salvation.

I do know, though, that the story of Joash is for our benefit, because Paul said so (Romans 15:4) and I know that it is entirely possible that a saved man or woman might fall into hypocritical living.

I know that because the Apostle Peter and Barnabas were saved men when they acted hypocritically.

That prompts me to issue the warning that if they could act as hypocrites, so might I. So might you.

¹⁰ We hear the same idea later, [14]...*And they offered burnt offerings in the house of the Lord continually, ALL THE DAYS OF JEHOIADA.*

It is as true today as it was for Peter and Barnabas that the Christian who is listening to what the loudest voices are telling him, runs a great risk of following in the footsteps of Joash.

None of us want that.

We want to be listening to the voice of the One who gave Himself for us. We don't want to depend on external props - a spouse, a parent, a friend, a leader, a podcast, a newsfeed - but on Jesus who leads us into an abundant life.

So, are there ways to keep from being a horizontal hackberry and instead become a strong, upright oak?

Yes, there is. Rather than rely on external props, we can learn to rely on deep roots.

#2 - Sending roots deep...

The New Testament talks a lot about the value of a good root system for developing a thriving faith.

Jesus' Parable of the Sower (included in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8!) tells us that the seed that fell on rocky soil (like my hackberry) withered because it had no roots.¹¹

And when Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, he told them the same thing he would tell us this morning:

¹¹ The Parable of the Sower is often taken as Jesus telling disciples how to tell if someone else is a saved person or not. In that interpretive scheme, the first soil is not saved and the last one is saved, and there are friendly (or not) discussions about whether the people represented by the second and third soils are saved or not. However, I don't think that Jesus gave the parable to tell who is and who isn't saved. He was arming His disciples with the truth that as they proclaimed the Gospel, there would be a variety of responses. He was preparing them for acceptance AND for rejection from those who listened to them.

[Colossians 2:6] Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, [7] HAVING BEEN FIRMLY ROOTED and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

Paul repeats that message in the letter to the church at Ephesus with the additional comment that ***“you, BEING ROOTED AND GROUNDED in love...”*** (Ephesians 3:16-19) He then continues praying that they will be able to comprehend the ***“width and length and height and depth”*** of the love of Christ.

I was frankly stunned this week as I looked more carefully than I ever had at Paul’s words in Ephesians and in Colossians.

I noticed that he wasn’t urging us to send our roots down deep. He was assuring us that the root system was already intact.

We have been firmly rooted...in love.

Having just finished a weekend remembering the love of God poured out on us in Jesus, that theme is fresh on our minds and filling our hearts.

Like the song we sometimes sing, *“Reckless Love”* says,
*“Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God
 Oh, it chases me down, fights ‘til I’m found, leaves the ninety-nine.
 And I couldn’t earn it
 I don’t deserve, still You give Yourself away
 Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God.”*

The essence of the root system God has given us is this: We are perfectly loved by a God who now calls us “son” or “daughter.”

Those roots will protect us against hypocrisy. Being loved by Almighty God, why would we ever want to pretend about anything?

Those roots are sufficient to steady us in the most violent storm or tragedy. They will keep us standing when the violent winds of

suffering and persecution blow. They will feed our souls with life-giving truth from God about His love when we need it the most.

Who needs the external props of status, peer acceptance, wealth, popularity, attention, when we have a crucified and risen Savior who is for us?

Don’t trust the props. Depend on the roots God has supplied.