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A GOOD BOY GONE BAD

2 Chronicles 23 & 24

By

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Kings of Judah Lesson 5

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“For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’”

So wrote poet John Greenleaf Whittier (in *Familiar Quotations* [Little, Brown and Company], John Bartlett, p. 527.) There’s always something sad about seeing a person with great potential who starts well but falls apart. We’ve seen it in the sports world, when a young athlete blows a promising career because of drug abuse or a loose lifestyle.

But it’s the most sad when you see it happen spiritually. A young man or woman makes a profession of faith in Christ and begins serving Him with zeal. But something happens, he or she gets tripped up and falls by the wayside. If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, you’ve seen it happen many times over. It’s always sad and often somewhat puzzling. I often wonder, “Why did it happen? How could it have been prevented? Could it happen to me?”

When I was five years old my family began attending a church pastored by a promising young graduate of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (now Biola). He and his attractive, musically-gifted wife saw this little church in the L.A. suburbs outgrow its first building and build a beautiful new one that seated about 500 people. Eventually, as I recall, they even went to two services in the new building. He was the pastor who baptized me at age 12.

When I was 18, my dad, who served on the board of the church, confronted the pastor concerning what seemed to be impropriety with some funds. The pastor was using the church offices for his private counseling practice (for which he charged) and channeling the fees through a fund wrongly labeled “youth camp fund” to avoid the IRS. When confronted, the pastor blew up and called for a vote of confidence. The church backed the pastor, and our family left the church.

Shortly thereafter, the pastor left the ministry, left his wife and five children, and moved in with a young divorcee he had been counseling. He went into a private counseling practice and married the gal he had run off with. Later I heard that she had left him because he had lost their expensive home in a gambling debt. He was drinking heavily and not leading any sort of Christian life. How sad!

How does that sort of thing happen? How can you and I avoid the same thing? The story of King Joash gives some answers. He was a boy with a great potential. His life was obviously under God's providential care. At age one he had been rescued from death when his wicked grandmother, Athaliah, slew all his brothers. He was raised secretly in the temple precincts by his godly uncle Jehoiada and aunt Jehoshabeath. Like John Wesley, who as a child narrowly escaped from a burning house, Joash was "a brand plucked from the fire." At seven he was anointed as king, the wicked Athaliah was executed, and Joash had a lifetime of opportunity ahead for serving the Lord and leading His people.

And he started well. He began by restoring the temple which had been desecrated and had fallen into ruin under Athaliah. He had to reprove the priests and even the godly Jehoiada himself, who were not progressing on the rebuilding project as quickly as they should have been. Joash got the funds together and saw to it that the work was completed. Things went well as long as Jehoiada was alive.

But after Jehoiada died, the leaders of Judah tempted Joash, he listened, and they abandoned the house of the Lord and fell into idolatry (24:18). Joash resisted the attempts of the prophets to call him back to the Lord. Finally he murdered the son (or perhaps, grandson) of Jehoiada, his own cousin, who confronted him. They even did the dirty deed right in the temple precincts!

A small Syrian army came up against Jerusalem. Joash (2 Kings 12:18) stripped the temple of all of its treasures (which he had previously labored to restore) and sent them as tribute to the King of Syria. That held him off for a year or so, but then he returned, killed the officials of Judah, took more spoil, and left Joash himself wounded. Two of Joash's own servants conspired against him and murdered him on his own bed. Dead at 47, he was not

given the honor of being buried among the kings in Jerusalem. He was a good boy gone bad. Joash's tragic story teaches us that ...

Spiritual privilege requires spiritual reality
or else there will be spiritual consequences.

To whom much has been given, much is required. If people who have been given spiritual privilege do not walk in reality with the Lord, they and even those close to them (since sin always affects others) will reap severe consequences. Let's trace Joash's history and relate it to our own spiritual history in order to glean its lessons.

1. Joash was blessed with spiritual privilege; so are we.

As Joash grew to manhood, he had to be impressed with the fact that the hand of God was on his life in a unique way. Why were his brothers slaughtered and he alone was spared? He was only a year old at the time, so he certainly had nothing to do with it. And why was he saved by his godly aunt and uncle, who raised him in the ways of the Lord? His aunt was the daughter of the wicked King Jehoram, who had slaughtered his own brothers. She was the sister of the wicked Ahaziah who was slain. She easily could have been as self-serving as her wicked mother, Athaliah.

Or Joash's uncle could have easily decided that he enjoyed his position of power as the regent until the boy-king came of age. He could have refused to yield power, or he even could have poisoned the young Joash. But none of this happened. Truly God's providential hand was on Joash in a remarkable way. He was blessed with great spiritual privilege.

So are we. This is especially true of those of us who were raised in Christian homes. One of my earliest memories is that of kneeling with my parents when I was three years old and asking Jesus to be my Savior. My parents loved me and never abused me physically or verbally. They sacrificed so that I could attend a Christian elementary school for several years. They made sure that our family was in church every Sunday. I still have a badge I earned for seven years of perfect Sunday School attendance. My parents never pushed me into the ministry, but gave me the freedom to be whatever God wanted for me. They have been supportive, loving

Christian parents. My great-grandmother was a Cherokee Indian, and I've often thought that if I had been born 100 years before, I would not have been born into a family that knew the Lord and taught me His ways. I need to realize that I enjoy great spiritual privilege!

But some of you may be thinking, "Yes, but I didn't have it like that. I grew up in a pagan home. My parents abused me and each other before they divorced. I never felt loved or accepted. I never received any spiritual training or encouragement as a child."

But you, too, are spiritually privileged. That is shown by the very fact that you are sitting here in church today, hearing God's Word. You don't live in a country like Tibet that is 100 percent Buddhist, where there are no Christian churches. You live in a land where we are still free to worship God, where there are many churches which preach the gospel. You can read and you probably own at least one Bible (if not several); if you don't you can go into any bookstore (or even supermarket) and buy one. You can turn on your radio and hear programs where the gospel is preached and God's Word is taught. We all are people of great spiritual privilege!

We live in a culture that's encouraging us to blame our parents for being imperfect. Granted, some parents are more imperfect than others! Joash certainly had an imperfect family, including his "dear" grandmother who killed all his brothers and would have killed him if she could have gotten her hands on him! But if you focus on blaming your parents or your past, you're really blaming the sovereign God and not submitting to His providence. That root of bitterness and ingratitude will only defile you and many others and rob you of how God wants to bless and use you. Focus instead on your spiritual privilege.

2. Joash demonstrated early spiritual zeal; so should we.

Joash directed the priests to restore the temple. We don't know how long things dragged on, but in his twenty-third year (2 Kings 12:6; Joash was 30) things weren't moving quickly, so he even confronted Jehoiada (who was about 120 years old, which probably explains why he wasn't keeping the project moving!). They got the job done so that worship was restored (2 Chron. 24:14).

Just as Joash was zealous about the things of God as a young man, so should we be. Youth is the time when you've got the ideals and energy to pour yourself into serving the Lord. What a great thing it is to see young people with a burning zeal to see their junior high or high school or college campus reached for Christ!

But with the zeal of youth goes an inherent danger: it's possible to get swept away with enthusiasm to do great things for God, but in the process you fail to build a foundation for a lifetime of ministry. It's easier to build the temple than it is to walk in personal reality with God. People can see the temple and exclaim, "That Joash is quite a king! He must really love God!" But it's all outward. What people don't see, but God does, is whether you spend time each day with Him, whether you deal with sinful thoughts, whether you seek and submit to God in the trials of life. If you aren't growing in personal holiness and devotion for God, then all your zeal for serving God in your youth is just a hollow shell that will crumble under temptation some day.

The Christian life is not a chicken coop; it's a skyscraper. If you're throwing up a chicken coop, you don't have to worry too much about the foundation. But if you're going to build a skyscraper, you had better dig deep and make sure that the foundation is solid. Like the seed sown upon the rocky, shallow soil in Jesus' parable, it's possible to spring up quickly, but if you lack sufficient roots, in a time of temptation you will fall away (Luke 8:13). And you will face temptation!

3. Joash faced spiritual testing; so will we.

We read (24:2) that "Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest." But Jehoiada finally died and then Joash was faced with a spiritual test (24:17). This was a hinge-point in his life, and Joash failed the test.

Our enemy, the devil, is neither stupid nor impetuous. He is waiting in the wings, biding his time for the right moment to attack. The officials of Judah did not approach Joash while Jehoiada was alive--the time was not right. But as soon as he was dead, and Joash was vulnerable, they hit and he fell.

Joash's temptation was a common one. In Deuteronomy 31:29 Moses warned Israel that after his death, they would act cor-

ruptly and turn from the way which he had commanded them. In Joshua 24:31 we read that Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the leaders who survived Joshua, who had known all the deeds which the Lord had done for Israel. But then comes the book of Judges, when everyone in Israel forsook the Lord and did what was right in his own eyes.

The time comes for us all when we can no longer lean on those who have nurtured us in the faith. We must be weaned and learn to stand on our own spiritual legs. We must develop and maintain our own walk with God, or else we will fall when Satan comes, as surely he will, to tempt us. The story of Joash shows four dangers Satan often uses to test those who are spiritually privileged:

A. The danger of spiritual piggyback.

Those who grow up in a spiritual atmosphere are prone to ride on their parents' faith instead of developing a strong personal walk with God. Joash did fine as long as Jehoiada was around. But the fact that he fell apart immediately after Jehoiada died suggests that he was riding piggyback.

We've always hiked as a family, even when our kids were toddlers. At that age, of course, I used to carry them most of the way. As they grew older, though, they had to do more and more of it themselves. Now, they're too big to carry at all.

Spiritually, it should be the same. If you're growing up in a Christian home, it's great that your parents walk with God. But what about you? Do you have your own faith in Christ as Savior? Do you have your own quiet time with Him? Do you have your own desire to fellowship with God's people and to serve Him? The older you get, the more you need to be walking on your own.

B. The danger of making the holy commonplace.

Joash grew up in the temple. When he turned from the Lord, we find him giving the command for the godly Zechariah to be stoned to death in the temple precincts (24:21). Joash should have at least regarded that place as sacred. His uncle Jehoiada wouldn't allow Athaliah to be executed in the Lord's house (23:14), but for Joash, it didn't matter. When you grow up surrounded by the things of God, you're always in danger of treating that which is holy as commonplace. You become irreverent or even joke about

God, His Word and His church. You don't have a sense of awe about the Lord. It ought to be a warning light on your spiritual dashboard!

C. The danger of experimenting with sin.

We aren't told exactly what the officials of Judah said to Joash (24:17-18), but an intelligent guess is that they appealed to him to be more "free" than he had been under Jehoiada. Perhaps they said, "Listen, King! All your life you've been restricted by Jehoiada. You've been cooped up in the temple. You've obeyed the old man's rules. But you're missing out on the excitement of life. Be your own man! Be more open to other forms of worship." And he fell for it! The appeal of idolatry is that you can make a god in your own image, according to what you like and how you want to live, and you don't have to submit to the living God.

If you've been raised in a godly home, you face the same temptation of experimenting with sins that have been off limits. As you get into your teen years and beyond, your friends are going to say, "Listen, you've been missing out on the fun! You've never been drunk? You've never smoked pot? You've never had sex? You don't know what you're missing! Don't be so up tight! You're only young once! Enjoy yourself!" But, beware! It's Satan's lie!

D. The danger of ungratefulness.

Joash didn't remember the kindness which Jehoiada had shown him, but murdered his son (24:22). How tragic! Those who are born with spiritual privilege tend to take things for granted. They don't appreciate what a great blessing it is to know Christ. The parents know that God has rescued them from a horrible pit, but the kids have never known the hard side of sin. They're like rich kids who never know the value of a dollar because they've never had to do without.

If you come from a Christian home, you need to stop often and think about where you would be without the Lord. What if you had been born to pagan parents who abused you? What if you had been born under the domination of Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism? You would be without hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). That's why our Lord calls us frequently to His table--to

remember the kindness and grace which we've been shown at the cross.

Joash was blessed with spiritual privilege; so are we. He demonstrated early spiritual zeal; so should we. He faced spiritual testing; so will we. But when he failed, God didn't leave him to go his way without repeated warnings:

4. Joash was given repeated occasions to repent; so are we.

See 24:19-20. In His grace, God doesn't leave us in our sin and rebellion. He brings repeated opportunities for us to turn back to Him. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live (Ezek. 33:11).

But how strange is the human heart! Joash, who was so weak as to give in quickly to the evil officials proved to be strong and obstinate in his resistance to the Lord! Isn't it strange how a young person raised in a Christian home who weakly gives in to peer pressure can be so strong in resisting the loving correction of the Lord? And yet it's not so strange, if you know your own propensity toward sin. Let it stand as a warning to us all! God allows U-turns, but only for a while. If you repeatedly resist His offer of repentance, the time will come when you reap the consequences:

5. Joash reaped the consequences of his rebellion against God; so will we if we do not repent.

See 24:23-27. Note the correspondence between Joash's disobedience and the consequences: Joash forsook God; God forsook him to this invading army (24:20). Joash cast off God's rule; Joash's servants cast off his rule. Joash conspired against Zechariah; Joash's servants conspired against him (24:21, 25). Joash murdered a defenseless man; his servants murdered him as he lay sick and defenseless in bed. Joash did not heed the dignity of Zechariah's office as a prophet, but had him stoned; Joash's servants did not heed his dignity as a king, but had him buried outside the tombs of the kings.

"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap (Gal. 6:7; see also, 2 Pet. 2:20-22). How miserable are those who enjoy great spiritual privilege and then turn from God and refuse to repent! They suffer grave spiritual consequences.

Conclusion

As I have talked with my dad over the years about our former pastor who fell away from the Lord, it has become apparent to me that he was a man with great spiritual privilege who failed to walk in reality with God. My dad served on the board for years, and he told me of numerous board meetings where the pastor lost his temper. He never let God deal with his anger. His best friends in the church were those who pursued worldly pleasure and entertainment rather than God. On numerous occasions the pastor made comments about women that reflected a sensuality unchecked by the Holy Spirit. And so instead of seeing the deeds of the flesh replaced by the fruit of the Spirit, he had an outward veneer of religion, but no inner reality. He was like a tree in the forest that looks strong, but it falls during a storm. When you look more carefully you discover that bugs had eaten the life out of the tree and so its strength was gone.

Spiritual privilege requires spiritual reality or there will be spiritual consequences. How is it with you? God has graciously given you the spiritual privilege of hearing His Word. Are you walking in reality with the living Lord? Are you allowing His Word and His Spirit to confront sin in your heart? He is graciously seeking to bring you back to Himself so that you don't end up as a good "Christian" who goes bad.

Discussion Questions

1. How can Christian parents encourage their kids to develop their own walk with God? How do we often hinder them?
2. Can a true Christian fall away and stay away (like Joash), or does his refusal to repent reveal his true heart condition before God?
3. Does God's grace remove the consequences of sin if we repent? How does grace fit in with reaping what we sow?
4. What are the main ingredients of walking in reality with God? How can we guard against hypocrisy?

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