

Ahaz, the Ruined Priesthood, and Good News in a Dark Day

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King Ahaz — A Nation Under an Ungodly King

Second Kings 16 introduces Ahaz, king of Judah, as one of the worst in Judah's history. Of the kings before him, even those with significant failures, it could generally be said that they did some things right before the Lord. Of Ahaz it is written plainly: he did not what was right in the sight of Jehovah his God. He caused his sons to pass through the fire, sacrificed on the high places, and walked in the way of the kings of Israel.

The implications for the nation are worth pausing on. A whole country of citizens had to live with that fact — that their king was not doing what was right. Whatever they might think privately, the king's direction set the course for the whole nation. And God did not leave Judah without a word in those days. Isaiah was sent to Ahaz with a message in chapter 7: take heed, and be quiet — fear not — if ye believe not, surely ye shall not be established.

That was the word. Believe. Trust the God of Israel in the day of your trouble. Ahaz did the opposite. When the king of Syria and the king of Israel besieged Jerusalem, he sent messengers — and the gold and silver from the house of Jehovah — to the king of Assyria far to the north, saying: I am thy servant and thy son. Come and save me. He stripped God's house to bribe a foreign king, because he did not believe the word that had come to him.

Uriah the Priest — The Ruin of the Priesthood

The more searching part of 2 Kings 16 is not Ahaz, but Uriah the priest. When Ahaz went to Damascus to meet his new Assyrian ally, he saw an altar there — a foreign design, fine workmanship, large and impressive and multifunctional. He sent a detailed description to Uriah the priest in Jerusalem: the form, the pattern, all the workmanship. And Uriah built it. Before the king could return, the new altar was standing.

Uriah did this without any command from God. Without any direction from the Scriptures. Without any word from a prophet. He received a letter from the king, admired what the king had admired, and built it. And when Ahaz came back from Damascus and saw the altar — he was pleased. And he commanded that all the offerings of the people, all the morning and evening oblations, be made upon the great new altar. The brazen altar — the one God had ordained — was moved out to the north side, out of the direct line of sight from the temple. The new altar stood between God and the people.

This is the ruin of the priesthood. A faithful priest would be the go-between — going in to God with the concerns of the people, and going out to the people with the word of God. Uriah did neither. He received instructions from Ahaz and executed them. He innovated without divine sanction, improved the worship by the world's standards, and in doing so moved the people further from God rather than nearer to Him. The new altar had seven features worth noting: it was a foreign design, it was beautiful in workmanship, it was visible and impressive, it was multifunctional, it was placed further from God than the old one, it was not made of brass, and it was larger. Every one of those features made it more attractive to the eye and less suited to the purpose of drawing near to God.

2 Chronicles 28 — The Four Men Expressed by Name

Second Chronicles 28 covers the same reign of Ahaz but from a different angle, and it goes back chronologically to show what was happening when the ten tribes

of Israel came against Judah independently. They defeated the men of Judah, slew 120,000 in one day, and took 200,000 captives — women, sons, and daughters — and began to march them back to Samaria. The prophet Oded met the returning army and gave God's word: send them back. Their own trespass before God was great enough without adding the subjugation of their brethren.

And then four men are named. They stood against the warriors who were returning with the captives and said, you shall not bring them in here. And then these four men did something remarkable. They rose up and took the captives — all 200,000 of them — and clothed those who were naked, shod those who were barefoot, fed them, gave them to drink, anointed them, and carried those who were too weak to walk on donkeys, and brought them all the way to Jericho, the city of palm trees, and returned to Samaria.

The Scripture says they were expressed by name. That is a phrase that appears rarely in the Bible, and it marks these four as having done something that the Spirit of God wanted specifically identified and remembered. Four men, in a day when the king was wicked and the priesthood was ruined and one part of God's people was at war with another part — four men did what they could do, with what they had, for 200,000 people who had nothing.

And the men that have been expressed by name rose up and took the captives and with the spoil clothed all that were naked among them and arrayed them and shod them and gave them to eat and to drink and anointed them and carried all the feeble of them on asses and brought them to Jericho, the city of palm trees, to their brethren. — 2 Chronicles 28:15

The Names and What They Declare

The names of those four men, translated from Hebrew, carry a weight of meaning that is not accidental. Azariah son of Johanan: helped of Jah, son of Jehovah is a gracious giver. In a day when 200,000 people had nothing, this man's very name

declared what God is — a gracious giver, helped by Jah in what he did. What verse of Scripture comes to mind? For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.

Berechiah son of Meshullamah: blessed of Jehovah, son of reconciliations. Ten tribes fighting against two tribes, Israelites killing Israelites, no reconciliation anywhere in sight — and this man's name in the midst of it was son of reconciliations. The father said to his servants: bring the best robe, the ring, the sandals — for this my son was dead and has come to life, was lost and has been found.

Hezekiah son of Shallum: strengthened of Jehovah, son of restitution. Restitution is what the righteous king requires. And there in the garden of Gethsemane the Lord Jesus was looking forward to the cross where He would make restitution for all our sins: my Father, if this cannot pass from me unless I drink it, thy will be done.

Amasa son of Hadlai: burdensome, son of my forbearings. A burden that someone must carry so that someone else does not have to carry it. And at the ninth hour: Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani — My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? The Lord Jesus carried the burden so that none of those for whom He died would ever have to bear it.

What to Do in a Dark Day

The question this story asks and answers is: what should a man of God do in a dark day? When the king is ungodly. When the priesthood has ruined itself by following the king's innovations rather than God's word. When one part of God's people is attacking the other. When 200,000 captives are walking barefoot across Palestine with no one to care for them.

The answer is not: wait for better times. Not: find a more impressive structure. Not: innovate and improve and make things more attractive. The answer is what those four men did. They went to where the need was, they used what they had, they cared for each person in front of them, and they brought them home. What did they say to 200,000 exhausted and desperate captives? The text does not record their words — but what they did spoke clearly enough. We have good news for you.

Good news shines very brightly in a dark day. The gospel is always the gospel — the same gracious giver, the same reconciliation, the same restitution, the same burden-bearer. In days of ruin, when the institutions that should be carrying people toward God have failed, what four men with willing hearts and expressed by name can accomplish is not nothing. It is exactly what the Lord uses. May we be those men.