

# Sermon 54, Politics, Religion, and the Curse of God, 2 Kings 12

**Proposition:** God kept to Joash both His promise to David and His threat to Ahab — and that duality is reflected in Joash’s ambivalence toward the Temple.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come tonight to the reign of Joash son of Ahaziah. He narrowly escaped being murdered by his own grandmother, and he was concealed in the temple for seven years until the day of his coronation. His ascending the throne meant that his grandma was killed in the street, and that sort of ambivalence marks his entire reign. You see, Joash was part David and part Ahab, and both parts get some attention in this chapter. We see God’s blessing and God’s curse, and we see above all His faithfulness. He kept both His promise to David and His threat to Ahab, and that duality is reflected in Joash’s ambivalence toward the Temple.

### I. The Davidic Blessing: Joash Reigns Well, vv. 1-2

We see first of all the Davidic blessing. After 7 years of Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, the reign of Joash is a breath of fresh air. He reigns forty years, like David and Solomon. He is a true descendant of David, not a usurper. As D.R. Davis comments on this passage, the familiar can be boring. We can start to wish that we weren’t showering, shaving, and eating breakfast again today just like we did yesterday and just like we will tomorrow, every single day! But in that familiarity lurks the blessing of God. Thank God for these formulas. Thank God that Joash did what was right for as long as the High Priest Jehoiada, his mentor, lived to instruct him.

Also, notice that though Joash’s grandmother was Athaliah, his mom was a Judean through and through. Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat may have married a northerner, but Ahaziah had married a southern gal — indeed, someone from the farthest southern town in Judah proper, Beersheba. (Yes, Ezion Geber is farther south, but it’s a different animal. It’s rather like saying

that Miami is more Southern than New Orleans. Well, it may be farther south, but culturally speaking, N’awlins is the more Southern of the two.) In the same way, Beersheba is the more Judean of the two. After the Northern experimentation of Jehoram, we are returning to a more Judah-focused royal house. Thank God! Though much is taken, much abides. Though the damage wrought by Athaliah is great, the promise of God is greater, and it triumphs. Joash reigns for forty years.

## **II. The Practice of the Presence of God: Joash’s Schizo Religious Policy, vv. 3-18**

But even in v. 2, we already get a hint that the goodness of his reign is mixed. It sounds rather like he stopped obeying God after Jehoiada the priest died — a reality which Chronicles makes explicit. Yet the major portion of the present chapter is given over to describing how solid Joash’s religious policy was.

### **A. Bad Practice: Worship at Local Shrines, v. 3**

The bad practice that flourished during Joash’s reign was this high place worship. What was that? I think we’ve talked about it before in this series, but it won’t hurt to look at it briefly again. Basically, in the ancient world it was popularly believed that the gods dwelt on high places — thus you get Mount Olympus as the home of the Greek gods. To really get into the presence of your deity of choice, then, you needed to climb a hill, and generally the higher the better. Gods were to be found at the tops of hills.

Now, in Deuteronomy God had specifically told Israel that once they settled in the land, they were to worship Him only in the way He commanded, at the central sanctuary (which was first at Shiloh and then in Jerusalem). So when the people worshipped at high places, they were worshipping Yahweh, or some false deity, according to their own ideas. They were worshipping in their place on their terms, rather than worshipping God in the way that He had commanded. So the correct parallel here is not to Christian camps as they are practiced today, or to family worship held outdoors. The actual parallel contemporary practice is the idea that you can meet with God on your terms, in your way. “I meet with God in my boat on the lake.” “I worship God by the process of artistic creation/artistic enjoyment” — e.g., the title of a book on my shelf, *Movies Are Prayers*. I know nothing about what the book says, but one way of understanding the title makes it sound like the book endorses high place worship. The creed of the high places is “I come into God’s presence in my way, or in the way dictated by my ambient culture.” That kind of thing flourished under Joash.

### **B. Good Practice: Repairing God’s House, vv. 4-16**

Yet Joash devoted a significant amount of attention to repairing God’s house. There are two facets here. First of all, then as now, large public works were a sign that a culture had some surplus energy beyond mere survival. They were something of a political statement about the wealth, power, and civic dedication of a particular society or civilization. So when we see that Joash has the time and energy to repair the temple, which was about 150 years old at this point in time, we understand that conditions in Judah were relatively stable and prosperous. Things are going well enough that we can afford to repair Solomon’s Temple!

Secondly, of course, the practice of repairing a temple is not solely a political or civic activity. To repair the Temple is to say that the centralized worship of God which Moses commanded is very important to you as a society. To fix up Solomon's Temple is to say that you want to worship God in the way that He demands to be worshipped. To build the Temple, ultimately, is to say that you want to come into the presence of God in worship on His terms. Yes, the Temple was a building, but it was more than a building. As we talked about at length back when we looked at Solomon building the Temple, the Temple is the residence of Almighty God. It is the sign of His presence with His people, dwelling in their midst. And so to invest in the Temple is to say that you want God to stay with you; it is to say that you desire His presence. You live to worship!

So what happened with repairing the temple under Joash? Well, Joash spelled out that from all the sources of their income, the priests were to set aside a certain amount and use it to undertake needed repairs on the Temple. But the priests do nothing, perhaps for decades. So Joash has a meeting with them, and as D.R. Davis comments, the cold note in v. 8 probably doesn't capture how warm and spirited the meeting was. Basically, what happened is that the palace reduced the sphere of priestly responsibility. The king would be personally responsible for seeing that the temple was repaired. Now, the new system was still done in cooperation with the priests. The money brought in by the capital campaign was bagged and counted by a royal official in coordination with the High Priest. But ultimately, it was the king that guaranteed that the work was done.

In this, of course, we can see both the benefits and bane of the separation of powers. If religious officials fail to do their job, it's possible for the civil government to step in and do it for them. When the priests fail, the king can take over! (For the record, I'm not sure how comfortable I am with the idea that a modern state can and should take over some functions of the church when the church is failing to discharge them. But that's another discussion for another time.) But at the same time, we see how foolish it all is. The priests shouldn't be fighting with the king; they should be on the same team! The priests should be supporting the Temple, rather than milking it to pay their own salaries. It should be enough to make you wish for the one who is the perfect priest and the perfect king rolled into one. It should also show you that no human leader is perfect or perfectly reliable — a truth which (as D.R. Davis says) will save you a lot of gnashing of teeth over the way the church runs!

Well, the beneficial aspects of the separation of powers triumphs, and the temple is rebuilt through free will offerings rather than through diverting money that legitimately belonged to the priestly salaries. There, perhaps, is another lesson for congregations. I've heard that a certain church of 500 here in town pays its senior pastor \$30,000 per year and spends most of the rest of its income paying off its mortgage. Well, Joash didn't do it that way. He didn't make the priests starve so that the building could flourish (even though the building had starved so the priests could flourish). He did not take the priests' ordinary income from them, but rather found alternate sources of funding for the building.

This is the major achievement of Joash. Indeed, it is the only achievement of his recorded in Kings. He repaired the Temple!

### **C. Bad Practice: Subordinating Religion to Politics, Yahweh to National Security, vv. 17-18**

Yet Syria, rampaging under Hazael, crossed Judahite territory and conquered Gath. Joash responded with a bribe, and Hazael took the money and went home. Why fight for plunder when you can get it without fighting? And indeed, military strategists tell us that bribing enemies is actually smarter than fighting them in many cases. But not here! What did this bribe say? Well, it wasn't just a political bribe. It would be one thing for Joash to empty his own treasury in order to spare his city from Syrian attack. But it's another thing entirely to give away the entire endowment of the Lord's House for the same purpose. In brutally simple terms, Joash said "National security is more important than Yahweh. Politics trumps religion. Military safety is more important than spiritual health. God, I trust money more than I trust you." Notice the parallel with Jehu. He obeyed God, but not wholly, and God began to take away his territory. So here: Joash obeyed God, but not wholly, and God began to take away his prosperity.

In a single stroke, Joash undid most of his signature achievement. He didn't actually damage the physical structure of the Temple, but he took back everything else that he and his family had given to God and used it to buy off Syria.

Which do you actually trust: God or money? When push comes to shove, when the going gets tough, where is your ultimate hope? God or mammon? Joash went with mammon.

### **III. The Omride Curse: Joash Assassinated, vv. 19-21**

And what happened? He was assassinated by two disgruntled servants. One commentator commented that this assassination was likely political, and that Joash's religious policy had nothing to do with it. What a silly comment! Perhaps, indeed, the assassins were mad about the political setbacks under Joash. But theologically speaking, why did Joash have to die? Because he was part of the line of the Ahab and not a single pisser against the wall would be left to Ahab according to the word of the Lord through Elijah. The punishment, per the fourth commandment, stretches to the fourth generation of those who hate God. And we have already seen Athaliah (first generation) and Ahaziah (second generation) struck down. Now we see Joash (third generation) killed, and his son Amaziah will be assassinated too (fourth generation). God promised descendants to David, but He also cursed Ahab's line. Not one of His words can fall to the ground. Joash reigned forty years like David and died in blood like Ahab.

### **IV. Application**

So what do we take from this story, now that we have seen that God keeps both His promises and His threats?

#### **A. How Do You Worship?**

First of all, don't worship at the high places! Don't insist on worshipping God on your terms or in the way that our culture endorses. Don't you dare say that you can meet with God and declare His goodness any way you choose, and that trekking through the Big Horn mountains with your

gun is just as worshipful as coming together with your fellow believers to worship Him in an organized church service. If you say that you meet with God in the mountains, in the movie theater, or in bed with your wife *in the same way* that you meet with Him here, you are a high-place-worshipper. You have neglected God's commands about how to worship Him. And the bottom line is that you are not actually meeting with the true God in the way that He commands. We must worship in His way, not the way that feels best to us.

### **B. What Drives You: Politics or Religion?**

Second, what drives you? Joash looked like he was religiously driven, motivated by a concern for the presence of God among His people. But when things in his life got scary, he decisively opted for politics. He chose to put his trust in money instead of God, in political machinations instead of in the Most High. What do you do in stressful times? How do you react when your life, your prosperity, your health, your child, your status is on the line? Do you revert to the known safety of worldly wisdom? Or do you actually trust God?

What might that look like? Well, it could look like continuing to give 10% (or some other proportion that you feel is right) to the church in a foreclosure situation, or at a time when you're paying for multiple children to go to college. It could look like telling your parents, "I am going to raise my children to know Jesus, even if you disapprove and look down on me for the rest of your life." It could look like giving up your Internet connection in order to fight against your pornography habit, even though the Internet is so incredibly useful. It could look like saying no to cool, fun, entertaining things your friends are doing because you don't think you can honor God by participating in those activities. It could look like choosing the more modest home and car because you want to invest most in God and His people, not in worldly status and foolish showing off. It could look like buying a gift for your wife instead of a gun or book for yourself because you want to love like Christ. It could look like listening to the Bible instead of talk radio on your daily commute. It could look like choosing not to participate in sports for the sake of family worship. Brothers and sisters, we will make choices all the time that show whether our deepest allegiance is to this world or the next.

### **C. Will You Dwell in David's House or Omri's?**

Another way of talking about that allegiance is simply to ask which house you want to dwell in. Do you want to be part of the cursed line of Omri (Adam)? Or do you want to be part of the blessed line of David (Jesus)? Joash could not overcome his split personality; there was a bit too much of Ahab in him, and God's relentless justice and curse overtook him at last. If you insist on remaining in Adam — if you insist on buying the toy for yourself, not your wife — if you insist on spending your time on pleasure rather than on God — if you insist on worshipping in a cool way rather than in a God-approved way — then you will meet the fate that overtook Ahab and his seed to the fourth generation. Don't live that way. Move into David's house. Embrace the promise directed to everyone in Christ, everyone who loves God and keeps His commandments. He shows mercy to thousands; He showed it to Joash, and to Joash's people, by continuing to live in the restored Temple and meet with His people there. Do you want to die with Adam or

live with Christ? Do you want to be assassinated with Ahab or live and prosper with David? This story is written to plead with us to choose David and live. Amen.