

Sermon 58, The Perfidy of Ahaz, 2 Kings 16

Proposition: The life of Ahaz shows us how hard it is to be faithful and how wicked it is to be unfaithful!

Outline

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come tonight to another full chapter on a king of Judah. We haven't seen our narrator give this much space to a Judean monarch since chapters 11-12, and only rarely before that. Clearly, there are things that we can learn from the life of Ahaz ben Jotham, king of Judah. We can learn indirectly, of course, that God is faithful to His promises and faithful to His threats as well. We can learn that a bad leader can make life difficult for generations to come. But I think that what the narrator is emphasizing to us is both how hard it is to be faithful and how wicked it is to be unfaithful. In other words, there's no sugar-coating on this text. This isn't a feel-good psalm about how wonderful our God is. Yes, He's wonderful — always. But our text tonight is really about the difficulty of going right and the attractiveness of going wrong. Brothers and sisters, you can't say you weren't warned!

I. Ahaz the Idolater, vv. 1-4

Our text begins with a look at Ahaz the idolater. Keep in mind that Jotham had been on the throne for the previous sixteen years. And then, just when the political situation began to get really hairy, Jotham died, leaving matters to his son Ahaz who was just 20 years old. And his response to the situation was to not do what was right in the eyes of Yahweh. First of all, he was a political supporter and even practitioner of abortion. Oh, in those days they didn't call it abortion, of course, and they didn't call the god to whom they sacrificed their children "convenience." But it boils down to the same thing. Burning your children in fire in order to please the god you worship is nothing new — but few nations in history can have done it on the scale that we do here in contemporary America!

How do you know whether someone worships idols? By whether they're sacrificing their children to them. How many Americans — how many of *us* — have sacrificed our children to convenience, to financial wants that we label "necessities," to our own pleasures and profits and agendas? Obviously there's a difference of degree between yelling at your child for interrupting your newspaper or TV show on the one hand and actually murdering him on the other. But brothers and sisters, the two sins are on a continuum! You may say, "I would never schedule an

abortion or do anything to hurt my baby like that.” Praise God! But if you yell at your children, you are doing something similar — committing a sin that ultimately culminates in murder. Or some of you might say, “I would have an abortion — that’s not a sin. It’s not wrong. It’s my body and how dare some man in a suit tell me what to do with my body! But I would never ever hit or hurt a child; that’s evil.” Well, I’m glad you would never hurt a child, but I must inform you that if you’re willing to murder a child you’re willing to hurt a child. Brothers and sisters, the main thing I want to get across here is that Ahaz’s sin is very much alive and well. People are still doing what he did so many centuries ago. This is not some Ancient Near Eastern barbarity that we would never commit; people like us sacrifice their children every single day. The narrator brings it up to remind us that though Israel’s doom has arrived, Judah’s is not far behind. Child sacrifice is what got the pre-Israelite nations kicked out of Canaan. And the further point is obvious: Child sacrifice will get Judah, too, kicked out of Canaan. God promised a land to His people forever, but they are doing their darndest to get sent away from that land. Do you know any Christians like this? Or better, are you ever a Christian like this? Do you know that God promised you sanctification and Heaven, yet still find yourself doing a lot to get out of it? I hope not. But if you do, the message for you is “Don’t!” Don’t try to run away from God; submit to Him, His ways, and His laws. There is great benefit in obedience, as Ahaz would have found if only he had tried it.

High place worship, too, is very much alive and well. We’ve talked about it a lot recently. It’s the idea that you can worship God on your own terms, in your own way. Ahaz completely embraced this idea, as we will see in a few moments. Yet at the same time, we need to understand where he was coming from. The chapter is not simply telling us “Don’t be like Ahaz.” It’s also highlighting the challenges involved in faithfulness to God.

II. Ahaz the Pragmatist, vv. 5-9

The events of v. 5 probably took place not long after Ahaz ascended the throne in 735 B.C. It appears from our knowledge of the broader history of the region that Assyria was attempting to expand toward the Mediterranean, and that the smaller states in that region were attempting to band together to fend it off. Two of the most powerful regional players, Syria and Israel, had joined forces to resist Assyria. It seems that Judah refused to join their alliance, thus making them mad enough to attack Judah in hopes of placing a friendly monarch on its throne. At the same time, Edom on the southeastern flank and Philistia on the southwestern flank were biting into Ahaz’s territory. Judah was literally attacked on all four sides. Even its southern tip was not exempt from Syrian harassment. Ahaz became king right around the time when all this material hit the fan. Isaiah met him while he was inspecting the city’s defenses, and promised him help from Yahweh. But Ahaz didn’t believe, and seemingly didn’t even want to believe that promise. He preferred to take the safer, more practical route. It was quite obvious by this point in time that Assyria was far more powerful than the small coastal states that sought to stand against it. Ahaz simply took the opportunity to say, “Hey Tiglath, I’ve got Israel and Syria pinned down right here at Jerusalem. You’re welcome.” Well, he didn’t put it like that. He sent a fat bribe and a

notice saying, “I am your servant and your son.” Remember how God promised to David that his descendants, the Davidic kings, would be God’s sons? “I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Samuel 7:14). That was the promise to all of David’s line. That’s still the promise to everyone who believes in Jesus. But what did Ahaz do with it? He looked for something with a greater cash-value. He sought Assyrian aid. He was content to be the son of Tiglath-Pileser so long as it produced real military help for him. He was happy to forfeit his status as a son of God in exchange for service to the mighty Assyrian.

Now, as one commentator pointed out, tactically Isaiah’s advice was perfectly sound. Jerusalem had the means to hold out against a fairly lengthy siege — one far longer than Rezin and Pekah could ever hope to make, seeing that it left their border with the Assyrian empire raw and exposed. Ahaz needed only to wait, and the aggressive Assyrians would be more than happy to take care of his problem for him. He would not need to issue an invitation or a bribe.

For a parallel case, one can imagine Poland and Hungary having a border dispute with Romania in June of 1939. It might seem really important to the three participants, but the fact of the matter is that within a few months the whole thing will be rendered completely superfluous. German tanks would be more than happy to wipe out all those borders.

So trusting God was not only good policy because God is faithful. Even from a military point of view, it’s easy to see that Ahaz didn’t need to fall all over himself to claim loyalty to Tiglath-Pileser. Yet at the same time, his policy worked. Apparently he didn’t need that sign Isaiah offered; apparently he didn’t need to trust Yahweh when he had some cold hard cash!

Brothers and sisters, it was hard to trust God in the situation Ahaz was in. It was brutal, in fact. It was much easier to work with a known quantity called the Assyrian empire. And you and I can so easily do the same thing.

- I don’t dare trust God for my finances; I’d better work on Sundays doing something that I know is not a deed of necessity or mercy
- I don’t dare trust God for my children; I’d better make them conform and bully them into believing in Jesus
- I don’t dare trust God for my health; I’d better become ortho-rexic (orthorexia: an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating)
- I don’t dare trust God with my future; I’d better become a worry-wart
- I don’t dare trust God with my pleasure; I’d better do something I know is illicit, like make out with my girlfriend or date someone who’s not a believer
- I don’t dare trust God with my stuff; I’d better not give anything away to anybody and especially not to the church!
- I don’t dare trust God with my time; I’d better use Sundays to catch up on my stuff
- I don’t dare trust God with my heart; I’d better find something safer and more manageable to love (e.g., a dog, a child, a TV show, etc.)

Whenever you think that God can't be trusted and that to be on the safe side you'd better put your hope in something you can see and control, you are thinking like Ahaz! Now, of course we are called to use means. But we must not use unlawful means — we must not do things we know to be wrong — and we must not trust in lawful means — that is, putting our ultimate hope in things like houses, cars, banks, our own fast-talking abilities, or anything else. Brothers and sisters, *it's easy to be pragmatic like Ahaz*. It's hard to be faithful when you're really suffering, when you're really feeling the pressure from all directions. I'm not here to preach that serving God is easy. Like the apostles before me, I want to preach to you that serving God is hard! There will be tribulation if you decide that you are going to trust God no matter what — that you are going to refuse to sin no matter what — that you are going to put your life, health, job, money, and children into the hands of a loving Father and not try to take them out every once in a while for safekeeping! But (not to depart too far from our text) the sign that God offered to Ahaz at this juncture is worth all the hardship. It's worth all the danger and suffering. It's the sign of a virgin conception and birth. It is the sign of Jesus Christ. Ahaz forfeited the opportunity to walk as God's son because he thought he would be better off as Tiglath-Pileser's son. Ahaz refused to look to the birth of God's Son because he calculated (correctly) that Assyrian intervention would meet his need for military security for the remainder of his lifetime.

God, I don't need you to supply my food; that's what the grocery store is for! I don't need you for my health; that's what the hospital's for! I don't need you for my children; that's what the local school district is for! I don't need you for my marriage; that's what chocolate and vacations to San Diego are for!

Brothers and sisters, that is the attitude of Ahaz. Ahaz was a pragmatist. And his philosophy worked in the short term. It was good enough to get him through a 16-year reign. Hence the larger point that faithfulness is hard!

III. Ahaz the Liturgical Innovator, vv. 10-18

But Ahaz was not just a pragmatist. He was a progressive. He saw the latest and greatest thing while he happened to be up in Damascus making a visit to his new buddy Tiglath-Pileser. It was a good-looking altar, one that would look great in Jerusalem. Who said Jerusalem had to be a backwater? It can have good public works and impressive altars just like Syria. (Never mind that Syria had just been beaten by Assyria. The fact is that, rather like Greek culture a few centuries later, Syrian culture was prestige culture in the Ancient Near East. Aramaic was the diplomatic language, and Damascus was an artsy place of cutting-edge design.) Ahaz got a set of plans worked up and sent them back to Jerusalem, where his priestly friend was happy to oblige in getting it all set up. The old bronze altar from Solomon's time? Well, frankly it was dated. The thing was over two centuries old! It was more than time for a facelift at the Temple of Yahweh. And indeed, Ahaz wanted other things kept the same. Grain offering? Check. Burnt offering? Check. Peace offering? Check. And he wasn't getting rid of the bronze altar; it was just shunted to one side, a perfect symbol of God's way of worship, sidelined and marginalized by Ahaz's innovations. Sure, the narrator never says outright "And thus Ahaz sinned terribly by putting in

this new altar because all change is a sin!” But the disapproval drips off the page. Why? What is so wrong about ripping off a great Syrian design and making the Lord’s House a little fresher, a little cooler, a little more relevant to the prevailing culture?

Basically, the problem is that God told them exactly how to worship, right down to the design of the altars. In the church, He has not told us how to make the furniture and where to set it. But in Israel of old, that’s exactly what He did. To change that was to say, “God, I know better than you.” Ultimately, of course, it’s attacking the very idea of worship. To worship God is to declare how great and awesome He is, and of course to obey Him as well. “You shall worship Yahweh your God, and Him only shall you serve.” To worship and to serve are parallel. To worship God is to do what He tells you to do. To deliberately change something that God has instituted is effectively to stop worshipping, even if you keep everything else the same (which Ahaz apparently did).

So what’s the parallel for us? It is introducing unauthorized changes in the worship of God for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment or for the sake of a pragmatic sense that if I change the way I worship, I’m more likely to get what I want. Ahaz adopted this new altar either because he simply liked its looks or because he thought the Syrians were better at getting what they wanted than he was. Either way, his motives were wrong because they were motivating him to do something evil — to change the worship of God.

What has God commanded us to do when we worship? To pray, to sing, to give, to hear His word, to receive His blessing, and to observe His sacraments. Pretty basic, really. To leave one of these out on a permanent basis, or to redefine one or more of them, is to be like Ahaz — to modify the worship of God based on our personal preferences. Don’t leave out the elements of worship — and don’t change them into something different that God didn’t command. Especially don’t do it because of what people might think! Ahaz changed around something with the architecture of the temple/palace complex in order to please Tiglath-Pileser. What motivates our worship? Not offending powerful people? Not offending weak people? The thoughts and attitudes of people in general? Or is our worship all about pleasing God?

Brothers and sisters, if your thought in coming to church is to please yourself, then you’re in trouble. You’re sinning the sin of Ahaz. If your thought in how to worship is to worry about what the world is thinking and how you can please them, you’re sinning the sin of Ahaz. Brothers and sisters, we are here to do what God desires. Seems like a simple idea. But really, it is a vitally important one.

IV. Ahaz the Father of Hezekiah, vv. 19-20

So we’ve seen not to be like Ahaz in his idolatry, in his pragmatism, and in his self-centered (or world-centered) worship. God has given him to us as a negative example, as a sign of what not to do. But the chapter does close on a note of hope. Good king Hezekiah followed Ahaz. And you know, I’m sure, that good king Jesus eventually followed Hezekiah.

Do you want to live like Ahaz? Or do you want the freedom and joy that Jesus brings? Do you dare to trust God with your identity, your future, your pleasure, your money? He is fully

trustworthy. He kept His promise to David. Because our God is who He has promised to be, worship Him truly. Love Him completely. And follow Him faithfully. Amen.