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Different, Not Better II Kings 16:1-20

Intro: Last time we saw that **ch15** records Israel's mad dash to destruction and yet, their rush to ruin was bracketed before and after, with the accounts of the reigns of 2 Judean kings: Azariah (Uzziah) and Jotham. Both of their reigns exuded an air of stability in comparison to Israel's political chaos. Clearly, the grass looks a lot greener down there in Judah. Wouldn't it be better to make a run for the border and emigrate to Judah to avoid the coming destruction of Israel? Not really! At least not after we begin to crack open the events of **ch16** now that Ahaz is on the throne. In an obvious departure from the norm of **II Kings**, the author has devoted an entire chapter to a southern king. Apparently, no news is good news because, now that we have lots of news, the news is not good at all.

1-4 – The author wastes no time in telling us that things aren't looking very good for the home team! Clouds of spiritual darkness are gathering over the kingdom and the spiritual assessment of king Ahaz is blunt: he did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God (**2b**). Ahaz is the only Judean king to receive this particular evaluation. There were a few others of which it's said that they did evil in the sight of the Lord (Jehoram, Ahaziah), which is the normal evaluation for all the Israelite kings but for Judah, we're more accustomed to hearing that the king did right, even if it's in a qualified way (not like David).

Now, **v3** reveals why Ahaz dropped the ball on righteousness – he followed in the ways of the kings of Israel. It may be mind-boggling to us but here's a guy with an excellent example of godly living and the blessings it will bring in his own father king Jotham. He even had a pretty good example of the punishment that would result from a less than faithful following of Yahweh's Law in his grandfather Azariah. He had an even better example of the sad results of infidelity just by looking at the kingdom of Israel and the royal mess they were engaged in at the time. Sadly, Ahaz was looking to Israel; not to learn from their mistakes but to take them up and make them his very own.

When we look at the line of kings that ruled over Israel, we can see that they

are all consistently bad; they all fall short of true faithfulness to their covenant God, some Failed at it worse than others but they all failed. When we look at the Davidic line of kings that ruled over Judah we see a spiritual rollercoaster. David was the first and the best – he set the standard for all his other descendents to follow. Solomon made a great showing initially but he lost his nerve there towards the end. Wisdom must have skipped a generation because Solomon's son Rehoboam was as dumb as a sack of hammers and just about as righteous.

What this teaches us is that faithfulness isn't hereditary. Sin is hereditary, selfishness and self-seeking is just part of normal human nature. That's why it was so pervasive in the Israelite kings and popped up regularly in the Judean kings. Just because someone has godly grandparents or parents doesn't mean it will just rub off on them too. No, a life of godly faithfulness will only result from a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Each generation must enter into that relationship of their own accord through confession and repentance and then seek to maintain the intimacy of the relationship and the spiritual benefits that result from it, through their own efforts of daily personal prayer, Bible Study and worship. Godly parents, friends and ministers can influence us in discovering and building that relationship but they can't do it for us. Each believer must make the effort to pursue Christ on their own.

Now we see that Azariah as a pretty good king, his son Jotham was an excellent king and then Ahaz comes along. He didn't just fall off the wagon of righteousness; he was run over by it because the author tells us that his spiritual problems were much worse. He even caused his son to pass through the fire! It seems that the perversions of Israel wasn't enough to satisfy Ahaz; he also had to engage in the horrors of paganism – child sacrifice; whether it was for Molech or Baal, the result was the same. A metal statue representing the pagan god of choice was heated until it was red hot then a living infant was placed in the outstretched hands of the statue while beating drums drowned out the screams of the child until it burned to death.

V4 goes on to say that the king also engaged in worship practices other than that of the temple. This worship likely involved the illicit fertility rites cited as far back as [I Kings 14:23](#). This activity was normally associated with the worship of Asherah, a close associate and consort of the pagan god

Baal. Normally the terminology of **v4** is used to describe what the people of Judah did under a generally righteous king but here the verbs are singular – Ahaz himself engages in this obscene worship. Why does the author believe this is important to mention? Note the dark hint he drops at the end of **v3**. There's a subtle innuendo in that brief statement. If Judah feels free to share in the abominations of the previous inhabitants of Canaan, then she is free to share in their fate as well.

Just because this threat applies to the covenant nation of Judah doesn't mean that other secular nations are exempt from judgment. Of course, their abominations are so liturgical. In most modern, secular nations the fertility rites are more often celebrated in college dorm rooms or hotel rooms instead of Asherah chapels and Molech receives his offered sacrifices in sterile clinics rather than in religious shrines. The methods may be more tidy but the results and the intentions are still absolutely the same. The gathering darkness is not confined to Judah and no amount of political lobbying is going to change that. The only lasting change is a changed heart. The gospel is the only weapon, the only hope we have of transforming, of recovering our society.

5-9 – Ahaz didn't have to wait long to experience the initial consequences of his actions. The kings of Syria and of Israel show up and put a good beating on Joshua. It is believed that they initially wanted Ahaz to join them in an anti-Assyrian coalition but when Ahaz refused, they decided to overthrow him and place their own puppet ruler in his place. It may look like Ahaz gave as good as he got because they weren't able to take him down but if we cheat and glean further information from **II Chron 28** we find that Judah was literally imploding: Edomites were invading from the south; Philistines in the west had taken territory and cities; Syria and Israel were inflicting heavy losses in the war and now they were threatening Jerusalem itself. Ahaz lost 120K soldiers in this war and 200K civilian hostages were taken. It was a dark time for Judah and once again, it looked like the Davidic line would fail.

The prophet Isaiah was a contemporary of Ahaz and in fact, he approached the king at this time with a specific word of encouragement from Yahweh (**Isa 7:1-14**). So Ahaz is in deep trouble and he sends out an appeal for help – not to Yahweh, the covenant God of Judah but to Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria. In doing so, Ahaz acts more like a shrewd politician than a covenant believer. Like Esau of old, he sells his birthright at the first sign of

trouble. Yahweh had declared in II Sam 7:14 that the Davidic king would be His son. Yet Ahaz rejects this promise of the covenant as he licks old Tig's boots. He wants to accept the Assyrian as his personal savior (Come up and save me...). And, as usual in politics, a handsome bribe buys that salvation.

It may've been blatant unbelief but it was successful policy. Ahaz repudiates the Davidic covenant but he saves his own skin. Ahaz walks the way of human ingenuity. His thought process was, "My troubles are too complex for me to lean on Yahweh's assurances, but I see a clear and obvious way to solve this problem." Yahweh's help seemed too remote and ineffective. Pinned to the wall and attacked from all sides, Ahaz had to choose between pragmatism and promise (*Isa 7*). Do I go with what I am sure will work or do I wait for what God offers? Do I jump on the immediate solution or submit to what God requires? We meet these same questions regularly. Do we rely on our own wisdom or trust that our Father will give us what is good? This reveals if we're more a disciple of Ahaz than a disciple of Christ.

The damage was not too obvious at first. In choosing to trust in Assyria instead of Yahweh, Ahaz made Judah a subject of the kingdom of Assyria. He surrendered to one enemy in order to defeat another enemy. Ahaz now took his orders from the Assyrian king, sacrificing the independence of the kingdom of Judah. When a person calls out to the Lord saying, "I am Your servant and Your son. Come up and save me," then the Lord will save them for eternity. Sure, the Assyrian king answered and delivered Ahaz but it was only a temporary deliverance. He could have really secured his kingdom by surrendering and sacrificing to Yahweh in the same way.

10-18 – Ahaz's bad decision produces more sinister results. As a vassal king, he's called to Damascus to pay homage to his new savior. During this trip, Ahaz happens to see a fantastic Syrian altar that he becomes enamored with. There is no indication of any Assyrian pressure to accept this new form of worship but we know that Ahaz was very open to 'contributions' of deviant religious practices and *II Chron 28:22-23* indicates he already had a hankering for Syrian worship. So, for Ahaz, Assyria has become his savior but Syria forms his religion.

It may seem like the author is ambivalent to Ahaz's heresy but there is a subtle dig in *v12-14* that reveals his disgust.

3 times in v12 he explicitly mentions the king. He returned from Damascus, saw the altar, approached the altar and offered sacrifices on it. If we compare this text to that of I Kings 12:32-33, we see that the author is casting Ahaz in Jeroboam's image. The language here is strangely similar to that used to describe the institution of Jeroboam's bull cult in Israel 2 centuries before. As we mentioned last week, this was the original sin of the northern kingdom and she could never rid herself of this poison. So, if Jeroboam's heresy spells ruin for Israel, you can expect nothing better for Judah when Jeroboam's clone rules there.

The new altar isn't the only changes Ahaz makes to Judah's order of service. Besides pushing the original, Yahweh ordained altar off into a corner, he made alterations and rearrangements to other pieces of the sacred furnishings in the temple. He also did some remodeling – removing the Sabbath pavilion (?) and the king's outer entrance to the temple. If this is the same entrance that his father Jotham famously installed, then his removal of it speaks volumes. Whereas Jotham was celebrated for opening up and facilitating the unfettered line of communication from the temple to the palace, Ahaz shows his contempt for that idea by removing the unfettered access of temple to throne.

Why did Ahaz go to such lengths to dismantle Judaism in his day? The text says it was on account of the king of Assyria but history tells us that Assyria wasn't too interested in the beliefs and worship practices of their vassal kings. The only thing Tiglath-Pileser demanded of Ahaz was that he go to Damascus to meet with him. It appears then that it was simply travel that broadened Ahaz's mind. For the first time in his life he saw there was a big, wide world out there and it provided him with some new ideas. His religious policy is not under foreign control, just foreign influence. Never before has a king of Judah taken it upon himself to redesign Solomon's temple in such a way.

There are 2 implications we can take away from Ahaz's new practices. First, Ahaz's changes imply that the worship ordained by Yahweh was somehow deficient. Clearly, Ahaz believed temple worship could be improved; that it lacked something, that an upgrade was needed. He thought Damascus novelty could enrich Jerusalem worship and he would kick it all off himself in his new priestly capacity. The point here is that whenever we supplement or enrich worship we're implying that our current worship is inadequate or

deficient in some way. Basically, our worship is the same as OT Judah: prayer and praise based on atonement (sacrifice). This doesn't mean we can't have variety in worship or that it must be tedious. But when we get to the place where we must have a 10 piece band, the concert light show and the ever-present fog machine in order to truly enter into worship then maybe Ahaz isn't the only one traveling to Damascus.

Second, we see that evil is assisted by weakness as much as by wickedness. We see this in the actions of Urijah the priest. When Ahaz's grandfather Azariah attempted to enter the temple to burn incense in violation of Yahweh's Law, the high priest at the time opposed him adamantly (with 80 other priests). They weren't about to let the king get away with such abhorrent nonsense, not on their watch! But just a few generations later, Urijah acquiesces to every abhorrent request from king Ahaz. He does whatever Ahaz tells him to do! He raises no protests and takes no stand. He completely folds under the slightest pressure. Of course he had a lot to lose if he refused to go along with Ahaz's heresy but as he goes along to get along, he loses it anyway. He is no longer the high priest of a Yahweh-ordained religion; he's now just a toady over a heretical aberration instituted by a reprobate monarch.

Some of you may have faced similar situations in your professional or occupational life and if you haven't then brace yourself because it's coming down the pike. Christians in 1st world countries are experiencing persecution for their beliefs at a higher level than ever before. In so-called "developed" countries, Christian morals are being outlawed by edict, declared offensive by courts chaired by radical judges and they're being fined, forced from their positions and even incarcerated just for taking a stand for truth. It won't be long for us here either. But when it comes, and it will come; just remember that the Urijah style of peace never leads to righteousness; it just cooperates with wickedness. Whenever evil is present, our divine calling is to enter into conflict not cooperation. We don't resist because we love conflict but because spinelessness only shares in other men's sins.

19-20 – Sad to say but it's not all bad news about Ahaz because eventually – he dies! Along with this relief, there's a slim glimmer of hope in the last refrain of **v20**. We won't get to the details of Hezekiah's reign until **ch18** and his reign won't lack for its own problems but it will be a time of religious reform and national deliverance. Hezekiah's reign won't be the climatic end

to the kingdom of God but it will prove to be a time of refreshing for Judah, a time of restoration, a relief and a break from the intensity of wickedness they experienced under Ahaz.

Again, this is not the end-all-be all of the Davidic line but it is a reflection of the grace of God. God has a tendency to give these breathers to His people. How merciful He is that He usually doesn't give us Ahaz-after-Ahaz. How kind He is to respond to our need for relief. Such Hezekiah-times are not final solutions but they are gracious provisions and should be received as such. If we're being honest, we have received more than our fair share of these breathers in this country. What have they actually accomplished in the church? Have they made us more dedicated, more faithful in seeking the Lord or have they made us soft on sin and presumptuous of God's blessings?

Every individual believers situation is different but as a whole, as a body, the church in America is anemic and ailing. We're either so busy fighting other groups of believers that we've lost our burden for the lost or we're so busy trying to innovate the church experience that we've forgotten what the gospel is really about. We're so busy trying to decipher and address felt needs that we've forgotten how to address the greatest need of all, the problem of sin.

As a church, are we taking full advantage of the freedoms we have in Christ and in society or do we take them for granted? It may be that the only way to truly value our freedoms is to watch them be stripped away. If that happens, do we possess the strength of faith to continue to stand up for truth and walk with Christ? I pray that we do because there is nothing of real value to be gained by collaborating with the world and there's nothing of real value to be lost by resisting the world.

Your relationship with Christ and your eternal standing in Christ are far and above anything the world has to offer or threaten; whatever the case may be. They can give us what we need and they can't take what we have. Is this true for you today? Can you say with confidence that Jesus Christ is your savior and prove it by your lifestyle? 😊