

"Idolatry"

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Would you turn with me to the book of 2 Chronicles?! Father, as we draw near to your Word now, we think of those words from the psalmist when he says, You have put more joy in our hearts than they have when the grain and the wine abound.

Lord, indeed, we are deeply satisfied in you because you have met our every and eternal need. So as we come now to your life-giving Word, would you continue to feed our souls? Show us again your goodness, your mercy, your power, and your grace, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Practices.

He built the upper gate of the house of the Lord and did much building on the wall of Ophel. Moreover, he built cities in the hill country of Judah and forts and towers on the wooded hills. He fought with the king of the Ammonites and prevailed against them, and the Ammonites gave him that year 100 talents of silver and 10,000 cores of wheat and 10,000 of barley. The Ammonites paid him the same amount in the second and third years. So Jotham became mighty because he ordered his ways before the Lord his God. Now the rest of the acts of Jotham and all his wars and his ways, behold, they're written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah. He was 25 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 16 years in Jerusalem. And Jotham slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David. And Ahaz, his son, reigned in his place. So I recently saw an interview with Harvard professor Arthur Brooks, and he was talking about a recent study about spiritual influence on children. And for a long time, sociologists have sort of known and studies have shown that the single biggest predictor of what sort of faith or religion kids will grow up to have, the single biggest influence is their parents. And according to Brooks, the father in particular has perhaps the greatest statistical impact on the faith of the kids. Now, if you're a parent, these sorts of studies can be both encouraging and terrifying. It can be somewhat encouraging because there are myriad influences in the world on our children, friends and teachers and social media and movies and TVs and music and sports. There's a whole host of voices that seek to capture the attention of the next generation, shape their outlook on the world and on themselves. But the good news is that amidst all those voices, parents still have the greater and more impactful role. So parents, don't live in fear. Loving and serving your kids is still going to be the most clear and influential voice in your kids' lives.

But at the same time, isn't that reality somewhat terrifying? I mean, what parent among us is sufficient for these things? Most parents I know, myself among them, regularly realize how far we fall short in loving and serving and teaching and being a godly example for our kids.

[3 : 51] But, but, as big as the role of the parent most certainly is, even their influence is not the final say.

Our passage today, 2 Chronicles 27 and 28, shows us that your spiritual upbringing doesn't determine or guarantee your spiritual future.

And that makes our passage a passage both of hope and of warning. It's a passage of hope to those without a good spiritual heritage, and it's also a warning to those with a good spiritual heritage.

So let's consider first the message of hope. The story of Jotham in chapter 27 that we just read essentially tells us that no matter how bad your spiritual upbringing was, you can still be spiritually strong. No matter how bad or inconsistent or ungodly your spiritual upbringing was, you can still be spiritually strong. Now, how do we see that in the life of Jotham? Well, consider verse 2, where it says, Now last week we saw how at the height of his strength, Uzziah, who was Jotham's father, grew proud to his own destruction. In other words, Uzziah set an example of pride before his son Jotham. An example that said, the good limits of God don't apply to those in power. An example

that said, the correction of others doesn't apply to those in power.

But the poor spiritual example that Jotham saw in his own father did not determine his future. The chronicler tells us that Jotham did not enter the temple of the Lord. In other words, he remained humble before God.

[5 : 55] And he remained humble even though the people in his day didn't follow the Lord. The end of verse 2 says, but the people still followed corrupt practices. In other words, and even though his contemporaries were all going astray, even though his own father had failed to model true godliness, Jotham still did what was right in God's eyes.

And he remained humble even though, like his father, God granted him success. Verses 3, 4, and 5 recount how Jotham flourished as a king, both internally as he kind of advanced the infrastructure of the kingdom and externally as he brought in more and more tribute from the surrounding nations. You see, unlike his father, who in his strength grew proud and whose pride led to destruction, Jotham stays humble and does what is right in the Lord's eyes.

Verse 7 is the summary of his life. So Jotham became mighty because he ordered his ways before the Lord his God. His father had left a crooked path to follow, but Jotham ordered his way before the Lord his God.

And because of that, he became strong. He became mighty. In fact, he became one of the few kings in 2 Chronicles of which the chronicler has nothing negative to say.

[7 : 21] Now, friend, I wonder, I wonder if you need this encouragement, this hope today. I don't know what sort of upbringing you've had. Maybe you look at your parents or your grandparents or whoever was most influential in your life, and maybe you don't see much help there.

Maybe you don't see much of an example to follow. And sometimes maybe you wonder, Am I just bound to repeat the past? Will my parents' failings be mine too?

Or maybe lacking a good example, you think, Am I going to stumble into just different but equally languishing fields of spiritual failure in my life? Friend, take hope from the story of Jotham.

Despite a bad upbringing, Jotham became mighty because he ordered his ways before the Lord his God. His spiritual vitality was not determined by the failure of the preceding generation, and yours need not be either.

And if that's true of us individually, it's also true of us corporately as a church. The spiritual dryness, the lack of prayerfulness, the doctrinal waywardness, or the moral failings that we might be able to see in preceding generations of the church, whether here in America or abroad, those need not be what determines our future.

[8 : 54] Rather, we can order our ways before the Lord our God and be strong. The Spirit can blow upon the faintest coals and light a fresh fire, you see.

Revivals often come when the prospects look most dim, when the fields seem most dry or overgrown from a previous generation's neglect.

There God gets the glory. He gets the glory when new growth shoots up through dry ground, and when a new work begins amidst the ruins of the old.

This, I wonder, I wonder if this is what the chronicler wanted his generation to hear in the story of Jotham. Because remember, his generation and a couple generations before his, they had all returned from exile.

The exile, which was the biggest marker of spiritual and moral failure in all of Israelite history. And you have to wonder if the chronicler's generation was asking themselves, would we repeat those same mistakes?

[10 : 02] But the chronicler saying, no, we can be like Jotham, ordering our ways before the Lord our God, and as a result, growing strong.

We are not destined for failure. The Lord our God is a God of new beginnings, of revival and renewal, of cities rebuilt, of families restored, of children walking in the paths of holiness and wisdom, even if their parents did not walk those paths before them.

That's who the God of the Bible is. The God who can take a valley of dry bones and make it live again. So this is a message of hope.

No matter how bad your spiritual upbringing was, you can still be spiritually vibrant and strong. But our passage continues with a warning.

If our spiritual heritage cannot determine our future for ill, neither can it guarantee our future for good. Let's pick up at the end of chapter 27 and continue into chapter 28, verses 1 through 7.

[11 : 20] The chronicler ends chapter 27 saying, And Jotham slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David. And Ahaz, his son, reigned in his place. And Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem.

And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done. But he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even made metal images for the Baals. And he made offerings in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.

And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree. Therefore the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him, and took captive a great number of his people, and brought them to Damascus.

He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with a great force. For Pekah, the son of Remaliah, killed 120,000 from Judah in one day, all of them men of valor, because they had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers.

And Zichri, a mighty man of Ephraim, killed Maseah, the king's son, and Azrakam, the commander of the palace, and Elkanah, the next in authority to the king.

[12 : 38] It's a great gift, isn't it? It's a great gift to have a godly father or mother. Many of us in this room can give thanks for the example of faithfulness, or courage, or perseverance, or prayerfulness that we have seen in those closest to us.

But if that is you today, realize that there is also a danger, a danger that your heart might think that because those who came before you follow the Lord, then your faithfulness will be guaranteed. But look at Ahaz. Ahaz's father was a godly man, and yet in the same number of years, both he and his father reigned 16 years, over the same number of years, look at how different the outcome was. No matter how good your spiritual upbringing, you can still fall prey to idolatry and be ruined. Do you wonder how it all started for Ahaz?

I mean, did it start as just outright rejection of the ways of the Lord that his father had modeled so clearly for him, these ways of the Lord? Did Ahaz just reject them outright? Or was it more gradual?

[13 : 55] Did Ahaz begin to think of himself as a bit more of a cosmopolitan ruler than his father was, a bit more open-minded, a bit more pluralistic?

You know, did he think at times, surely the northern kingdom has something we can learn from? He might have thought, yeah, surely the gods of the other nations can't all be wrong, can they? Why not build some bridges?

And then the attraction of power, the attraction of wealth, the attraction of worldly respectability starts to grow. And suddenly he finds himself saying, surely the Lord isn't the only God worthy of worship.

How narrow, how provincial. Let's build an altar to Baal. And tragically, Ahaz's heart begins a rapid decline.

And before he knows it, he's free-falling into the depths of apostasy and corruption, not just following the practices of the wayward northern kings, but taking up the evil practices of the nations that God had driven out hundreds of years earlier, sacrificing his own children to false gods.

[15 : 11] And so, desiring to be strong, desiring to be respected, desiring to be a man of renown, Ahaz becomes weak.

And his people pay the cost. Verses 5 through 7 tell us of a war, a war when the northern kingdom joined forces with Syria and attacked Judah, the southern kingdom.

And they were attacking Judah to try to force Ahaz into a joint alliance against the growing threat of the Assyrian empire, this massive empire that was waking up from its sleep and beginning to churn its way down south into their land.

And Ahaz tries to stand his ground against these petty kings trying to force him into an alliance, but the sad tragedy is he's actually forsaken the only real source of strength, which is the Lord God.

And Ahaz is defeated. And some of his closest family members and even his own son and his advisors die in the battle. But you know, here's the problem with idolatry.

[16 : 27] Idolatry is like a whirlpool. And the more you kind of swim in its current, the harder it is to get out, the deeper and deeper down it pulls you.

You would think that after the defeat of verses 5 through 7, Ahaz would come to his senses. But tragically, no.

Let's see how he responds a few verses later. Let's pick up the story in verse 16 of chapter 28, jumping down a little bit. 2 Chronicles 28, 16.

At that time, King Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria for help. For the Edomites had again invaded and defeated Judah and carried away captives. And the Philistines made raids on the cities in the Shephala and the Negev of Judah and had taken Beth Shemesh, Ijelon, Gederoth, Soko with its villages, Timnah with its villages, Gimzo with its villages, and they settled there.

For the Lord humbled Judah because of Ahaz, king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the Lord. So Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him.

[17:40] For Ahaz took a portion from the house of the Lord and the house of the king and the princes and gave tribute to the king of Assyria, but it did not help him. In the time of his distress, he became yet more faithless to the Lord, the same king Ahaz.

For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me, that they were the ruin of him and of all Israel.

And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and he shut up the doors of the house of the Lord, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem.

In every city of Judah, he made high places to make offerings to other gods, provoking the anger, provoking to anger the Lord, the God of his fathers. Now the rest of his acts and all his ways, from first to last, behold, they're written in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel.

And Ahaz slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city in Jerusalem, for they did not bring him into the tombs of the kings of Israel. And Hezekiah, his son, reigned in his place.

[19:00] You know, it's a bit like, it's a bit like taking a piece of metal and bending it, and bending it, and curving it round and round a staff. You keep curving it and bending it and molding it around this object until eventually the twist and the curve of the metal just can't be undone.

That's the heart of Ahaz. And that's how idolatry works. We go to it for help, like Ahaz went to Assyria, but it doesn't help.

We're in trouble, we're in pain, we're in distress, we're in affliction, so we turn to money or alcohol or sex or hard work or professional accomplishments. We seek help in some project or some object of our own choosing.

And maybe at first it sort of makes sense. Ahaz, going to Assyria, was actually kind of clever on the surface.

The Assyrians were bigger and stronger than everybody else. Why not cut a deal with them while he could? But ultimately, it didn't help. It didn't help.

[20:12] And then comes one of the most tragic verses in the whole of 2 Chronicles, verse 22. In the time of his distress, he became yet more faithless to the Lord, the same King Ahaz.

At this point in his life, Ahaz does the unthinkable. He takes everything of value from the temple, cuts it up, melts it down, shuts the temple completely in order to take all of that precious stuff to make even more altars to false gods.

And how long did it take? How long did it all take? How long did it all take for the temple to be desecrated and closed, for the people to be defeated, for the Lord to be forsaken?

It didn't take generations upon generations. It wasn't the work of centuries. It took 16 years. At the end of that 16 years, Ahaz had so twisted his heart around the idols of his day that he simply couldn't unravel himself from their ruin.

You know, we often think foolishly, I'll live how I want when I'm young. And you know, in our culture, young just keeps getting longer and longer, isn't it?

[21:34] 30s, 40s, we still think we're young. I'll live how I want when I'm young, and then when I'm old, I'll turn back to God. Then I'll do right. But friend, what makes you so sure that you'll even want to turn back to God then?

After living your life like Ahaz for the false gods of this age, after serving them and seeking them and sacrificing for them and twisting your soul around them all of your days, what makes you so confident that you'll even be able to recognize your need for saving on that day?

At that point, will you even want to swim out of the whirlpool? Or will you keep paddling headlong for the dark center where there is no return?

The chronicler wants us to heed the warning of Ahaz. No matter how good your spiritual upbringing was, you can still fall prey to idolatry and be ruined.

Your parents' faith, your grandparents' faith, the faith of your friends, the faith of your church community, it will not avail for you. You must choose who you will serve.

[23 : 00] Will you serve the living and true God? Or will you give your heart to idols? Will you worship the gods of this age and the gods of this age will demand more and more of you, but they will never really help?

Or will you worship the God who ultimately revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the God who fulfilled the laws every demand on your behalf, and who offers his gracious help to all who call on him in faith?

Friend, don't mistake having a good spiritual heritage for having living faith in the living God. Take hold of Christ for yourself today.

Surrender your life to him. He lived and died and rose again so that you might die to sin and live to God so that you might be free from the empty idolatry of this passing age and live for a kingdom that lasts forever.

Don't mistake a good spiritual heritage for living faith in the living God. And that's true of churches as well. The spiritual vitality of the previous generation will not be automatically credited to us.

[24 : 21] the history of revivals and renewals, the love of sound doctrine, the sacrifice for mission and heralding the gospel to the ends of the earth, the care for creation and for the poor, the devoted prayer for God's glory to be shown.

These godly examples of our heritage, they will not guarantee our spiritual vitality. We must take fresh ground. Let's not rest content to have good examples behind us.

The spiritual affections of a Jonathan Edwards, the missionary zeal of a Lottie Moon, the doctrinal courage of an Athanasius.

Let's not rest content to just have good examples behind us. Let's seek God for ourselves too. And by God's grace, let us leave a good example for those to come.

And brothers and sisters, friends, it is not too late to begin. We've said this passage is one of both hope and warning, but it's also a call to begin seeking God today.

[25 : 40] No matter what your spiritual background, you can heed God's voice today. today and begin again. In the center of chapter 28, verses 8 through 15, the chronicler places a story where we see just that.

And I think the chronicler put this story in the middle to make it stand out. In contrast to Ahaz, the bad king of Jerusalem, the chronicler shows us genuine spiritual repentance and renewal in the most unlikely place.

in the midst of the rebel northern kingdom, in the heart of Samaria, genuine faith is found. Let's read verses 8 through 15.

The men of Israel, that's the ungodly northern kingdom, took captive, they took captive in that same war previously described. They took captive 200,000 of Judah's relatives, women, sons, and daughters.

They also took much spoil from them and brought the spoil to Samaria. But a prophet of the Lord was there whose name was Oded, and he went out to meet the army that came to Samaria and he said to them, Behold, because the Lord, the God of your fathers, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand.

[27 : 01] But you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. And now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves? Have you not your own sins against the Lord, your God?

Now hear me and send back the captives from your relatives whom you have taken, for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you. Certain chiefs also of the men of Ephraim, Azariah, the son of Jonahan, Berechiah, the son of Mishillamoth, Jehizakiah, the son of Shalom, and Amasa, the son of Hadli, stood up against those who were coming from the war and said to them, You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring upon us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins and guilt, for our guilt is already great and there is fierce wrath against Israel.

So the armed men left the captives and the spoil before the princes and all the assembly. And the men who had been mentioned by name rose, took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them.

They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees.

Then they returned to Samaria. You see, friends, ultimately, it's not about your spiritual heritage. These leaders from Samaria, they had a checkered past, mostly bad, just like many of us.

[28 : 37] but they heeded God's word and they repented and they made things right. These prisoners of war at their gate, these women and children from Judah that had been stolen away in the recent war, they stood up and they refused to take them in.

They refused to subjugate them and turn them into servants. And instead, they did the opposite. They clothed them. They gave them sandals and food and drink and healed their wounds with oil and gave them transportation back home.

You see, for these Samaritans, it wasn't about their spiritual pedigree. It was about what they did with God's word and how they responded when their hearts were exposed by it.

When they were confronted with their sin, with their guilt before God, how did they respond? That's what matters. Are you soft and responsive to God's word?

And that isn't something that a godly heritage or an ungodly heritage will determine for you. In just a minute, we're going to take the Lord's Supper.

[29 : 53] And here, in the Supper, we see the gospel displayed in visible, tangible form, broken bread that speaks of the body of Christ, the poured-out cup that speaks of the shed blood of Christ.

These elements proclaim the gospel. His body was broken and His blood was shed for sinners.

Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God.

But look, friends, His broken body now means that you can eat and be full. And His shed blood means that you can drink and rejoice. All who come to the risen Christ confessing their need for a Savior, admitting their sin, and trusting in His death and resurrection for their rescue will be reconciled to God and filled with His Spirit.

They now become family members and have a place at the table. Friends, is that true of you? You are not just hearing God's Word this morning.

You are seeing it. No matter what your spiritual heritage might be, the Word of God is before you.

The Word of God that says, you are a sinner who deserves death.

[31 : 12] The Word of God that says, in love, God's Son died in your place to forgive you. The Word of God that says, to all who believe, God will grant a new heart and eternal life.

take hold of Christ today, and He will pull you from the whirlpool of sin and idolatry. He has the power, friends, to untwist your hardened heart, no matter what your spiritual background.

He'll receive you as His own, and your family will be the family of God, and your future will be the new growth and the fresh ground that only God's grace can produce.

And parents, when it comes to our kids, let this same gospel be our hope. It is not our example that's going to save our kids.

Our confidence is in the beauty of the gospel alone and in the power of Christ alone. He is the one who binds our wounds. He is the one who clothes our nakedness.

[32 : 17] He is the one who feeds our souls. He is the one who leads us home, carrying us all the way. May our kids see Jesus in all His beauty, and may they know God's grace.

And by that same grace, may we all order our ways before the Lord and be strong. Let's pray together. Father, we ask that by Your Spirit You would come and You would pour out, You would grant God repentance unto faith.

Help us in this moment to be grateful for our spiritual heritage where it is good. Help us in this moment to not feel trapped by our spiritual heritage if it be not so good.

But Lord, let none of us overly depend on those who have come before. Let us only depend on the One who has come before us, Jesus Christ.

And let us rest in Him. Amen.