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Ahaz - Desecrator

2 Kings 16:1-20

Introduction

Every so often in the music industry the manager of an artist who is fading will get them to release a cover version of a much loved song. It usually sells well, but almost always invokes the ire of those who loved the original song. There will be shouts that the newer artist has “murdered” the song, that a much loved favourite has been “spoiled”, or in some cases that a work of art has been “desecrated”. Howard Blake used the term when his music for The Snowman was redone without instruments. He said “what you have done to my music is a desecration.”

It’s a word borrowed from religious life. When something that is seen as being holy is spoiled in some way, that is known as a desecration. We are warned about it right at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 22:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

[Revelation 22 v 18-19]

In our chapter from 2 Kings this evening we find a king who is handed down a pattern of worship, a way of following God, and he seems to do everything he can to desecrate it.

Good or Bad?

We’ve been followed the history of the kings of the children of Israel. Remember that after just 3 kings of the nation, it was split in two, to form the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Last week we were presented with a king sandwich. We heard about two kings of Judah, and in between we had six kings of Israel. This week we have just one king to consider: the son of Jotham, king of Judah, named Ahaz. It’s hard to keep a grasp of all the kings, many with similar names, but a handy way of remembering this one is that Ahab was one of the most ungodly kings of Israel, and Ahaz is possibly the most ungodly king of Judah.

Of course, we’ve seen a pattern as we work our way through this book, that each king is given a short summary of their age when crowned, their parentage, how long they reigned, and a thumbs up or down for their reign. We either read “he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord”, or “he did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord”. However it’s not a binary assessment, there’s a spectrum of good and bad. Several of the kings we’ve looked at recently did right in the Lord’s eyes, “but” they had some failings. In fact time and again their failing is to leave the high places and alternative means of worship rather than remove them.

Ahaz's assessment is as bad as it could get:

In the seventeenth year of Pekah the son of Remaliah, Ahaz the son of Jotham, king of Judah, began to reign. 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 his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices 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. [2 Kings 16 v 1-4]

Downwards Spiral

Ahaz takes a complete turn away from God. From bad to worse we read:

- He didn't follow the example of David
- Instead he walked in the way of the kings of Israel
- In fact he followed the despicable practises of the heathen nations
- And he resorted to worshipping other gods, even to the point of sacrificing his own son

Human sacrifice was of course wrong, and despicable in the eyes of the Lord. In Leviticus we read:

“Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name. [Leviticus 20 v 2-3]

How did Ahaz get this way, and how did God deal with him? For the first question we can lay some of the blame on his forefathers. The phrase “*the high places were not taken away*” is repeated again and again. We are reminded that when the children of Israel came into Canaan, they were told to wipe out the previous inhabitants. They were to extinguish their heathen practises, and keep themselves from being influenced by their neighbours. Instead we find that they thought it would be ok to let some of the tribes continue to live among them. They thought it would be fine to take the daughters of other nations for their wives. And the poison of these false religions crept in, so that it was easy for Ahaz to flip over and follow them. The altars were there, the rituals were known, there were priests among his own people to show him what to do.

This is a stark reminder of the dangers of letting sin into our lives, thinking that we can live a parallel life of holiness and worldliness. We might think we can keep it under control, but it can so quickly take hold of us.

Nations at War

The second question is how did God deal with Ahaz. For that we read on:

Then Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, came up to wage war on Jerusalem, and they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him. [2 Kings 16 v 5]

For context it helps to know the situation here. The Assyrian empire was on the rise, expanding down from the north and rapidly heading towards Syria and Israel, en route to Egypt. To try and protect themselves, Syria and Israel banded together, and they hoped to get Judah to join them to fight the Assyrians. Not being able to persuade them, they hoped to take Judah by force and install their own man on the throne. Gleaning more information from Isaiah 7 and 2 Chronicles 28, we find that Syria and Israel attacked Judah, killing 120,000 soldiers and capturing 200,000 of the people of Judah. However a prophet persuaded them to send the captives back, saying that God was already angry enough with Israel, and taking these people would only increase his anger. Despite these gains in battle, they couldn't take Jerusalem and lost out on their bid to put their man on the throne.

This would have been the perfect time for Ahaz to turn to the Lord for help, but instead he calls on human assistance:

So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, "I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me." Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him. The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Kir, and he killed Rezin. [2 Kings 16 v 7-9]

Ahaz took gold and silver from the temple and used it to try and gain Assyria's favour. Saying he was Tiglath-Pileser's "servant and son" was to put Judah under Assyria's control. The account here saying that the Assyrian king "listened to him" is generous when compared to the account in Chronicles, where we are told Ahaz *gave tribute to the king of Assyria, but it did not help him. [2 Chronicles 28 v 21]*. However the defeat of Damascus took the pressure off Judah.

An Altar Like Theirs

Now we see the dangers in Ahaz befriending Assyria. It might provide some physical safety, but it doesn't help their spiritual condition at all.

When King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus. And King Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar, and its pattern, exact in all its details. And Uriah the priest built the altar; in accordance with all that King Ahaz had sent from Damascus, so Uriah the priest made it, before King Ahaz arrived from Damascus. [2 Kings 16 v 10-11]

Again, the passage here puts a bit of a positive spin on things. The reason Ahaz went to Damascus would have been because he was commanded to go. As a new vassal state of Assyria he had to go and present himself to his new master. However Ahaz seems to have been fascinated by the altar there, and immediately sent a message back home - he wanted

one just like it. Not content to look to the Assyrians for help, he now looks to them for advice on religion.

Ahaz set up his new altar in place of the one in the temple - the one God had instructed Solomon to build, which was now relegated to a lesser position:

And the bronze altar that was before the Lord he removed from the front of the house, from the place between his altar and the house of the Lord, and put it on the north side of his altar. And King Ahaz commanded Uriah the priest, saying, "On the great altar burn the morning burnt offering and the evening grain offering and the king's burnt offering and his grain offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, and their grain offering and their drink offering. And throw on it all the blood of the burnt offering and all the blood of the sacrifice, but the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by." [2 Kings 16 v 14-15]

What has happened here? Ahaz has replaced the altar ordained by God, the place where the sacrifices and offerings were made, with his own altar. An altar to another god. The brazen altar was pushed to the side, left out of the picture, no longer the focus of worship, only to be used when the king wanted to inquire of the Lord.

Is this a danger for us? Is it possible to replace the focus of our worship, our sacrifice, our giving, our energy? Do we bow at the altar of career? Family? Financial stability? Personal pleasures? Political ideology? Do we just come before the Lord's altar when we want to ask him a favour? When was the last time you came before the Lord and it wasn't to ask for something?

Other Acts of Desecration

The altar was just one of the changes Ahaz made in the temple. We also read about the 10 basins and the laver (sea) used for ritual cleansing of the priests:

And King Ahaz cut off the frames of the stands and removed the basin from them, and he took down the sea from off the bronze oxen that were under it and put it on a stone pedestal. [2 Kings 16 v 17]

Why did Ahaz desecrate the basins and laver in such a way? Perhaps he wanted to use the materials for other things. Perhaps he didn't like the idea of cleansing being involved in the worship of God. Maybe the laver sitting on the 12 bulls offended his ideas of the other gods, often represented as bulls. Whatever the reason was, Ahaz changed and reduced the importance of the external symbols in the temple court. These were the visible things that all the people of Jerusalem could witness. What did he do with the interior of the temple? We find out in Chronicles:

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. [2 Chronicles 28 v 24]

He closed the doors and shut down the temple work of the priests. Instead he set up altars all over the city, encouraging the people to abandon the central place of worship decreed by the Lord.

A Light in the Darkness

What a sad story of the systematic destruction of the Lord's pattern of worship by a man who should have been a shining example to the people of Judah. He has:

- Sacrificed his own son
- Trusted in a foreign power for safety
- Brought the practices of other nations into Judah's worship
- Replaced the brazen altar with his own copy of the Assyrians' altar
- Torn apart the other items in the temple courtyard
- Shut the temple doors
- Set up altars all over Jerusalem and the other cities

It doesn't seem that it could get any worse. However like all reigns of evil, it had to end one day:

And Ahaz slept with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the city of David, and Hezekiah his son reigned in his place. [2 Kings 16 v 20]

And it turns out Hezekiah was a godly king, and would restore some of the proper practices of worship during his reign.

Even in the darkness of this king's reign, though, God still shines a light. The prophet Isaiah was sent to King Ahaz, with the message that he should go up and fight against Syria and Israel. Both these countries would soon be defeated and made desolate. Isaiah asks Ahaz to ask for a sign, but he doesn't want to, so the Lord gives him a sign anyway. And in the midst of the reign of one of the worst kings of Judah we get this ray of light:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. [Isaiah 7 v 14]

Danger to the Church

We face challenges as individuals and as a church. What are the dangers for us reflected in this passage?

- We can take our eyes off Christ as the focus and centre of our worship
- We can put our energy into other things, only coming before the Lord when we want something
- We can copy the practices of the world because they look new, exciting and even effective
- We can stray so far from God's way that we end up doing things that we would never have believed before

But there is a light in the darkness, and that Light is Christ. As the old hymn says:

There's a way back to God
from the dark paths of sin;
there's a door that is open

and you may go in;
at Calvary's cross is where you begin,
when you come as a sinner
to Jesus