



Theme Sentence

It is a very dangerous thing for the Lord's people to think that we don't need his salvation, and that we can improve on his commands.

To begin ...

Summarise the highlights/lowlights of 2 Kings so far ... what is your impression of the people who make up Israel/Judah?
Should we be feeling hopeful or hopeless as we come to another story tonight?

READ 2 Kings 16:1-20

Getting the story straight ...

Divide the story into paragraphs, and give each section a title.
What is it that Ahaz does that is wrong (according to vv 2-4)?
What is it that Ahaz does that is wrong (according to vv 5-9)?
What is it that Ahaz does that is wrong (according to vv 10-18)?

Read the summary of his son Hezekiah in 18:3-8 and compare him with his dad!

Questions

Look again at the language of v7 ... what is wrong here in what Ahaz says?
What should Ahaz have done?
In what way did Ahaz show that he thought he didn't need the Lord's salvation?

Why is so much of the Old Testament concerned with tabernacle/temple architecture and furnishings? ... and why do those things matter for us?
What is it really that Ahaz is doing that is so wrong (in 10-18)?
In what way did Ahaz show that he thought he could improve on the Lord's commands?

Thinking it through

Why might this chapter (ie about Judah) come immediately before the story of Israel's demise?
What is the warning to Judah?
What is the warning to us?

Application

In what situations do we attempt DIY salvation? what should we do?
In what ways do Christians sometimes do the equivalent of copying the designs of the altar in Damascus? do we do that too (or is it just 'other Christians')?
What is the equivalent appeal of 'the surrounding nations' for us?
What can we learn to avoid from Ahaz's bad example?

What is the significance of Ahaz's mention in Jesus' genealogy (in Matthew 1:9)?
In what ways does this story of Ahaz point us forward to him?

2 Kings 16:1-20

The bigger picture

The key to understanding 1 and 2 Kings is the two 'bookends'

- the promises made in 2 Samuel 7:4-17
- those promises fulfilled in Jesus, the King-for-ever.

As we read 2 Kings, we're looking at each king pondering if there's any way that he might be the fulfilment of the promises God has made ... and yet at the same time knowing that none of these kings could possibly be that King-for-ever.

Chapter 16 is a crucial moment in the story. We are one chapter away from the end of the 'Israel' half of the divided kingdom (in 2 Kings 17), at which point the promises will be carried on in the 'Judah' half whilst the 'Israel' half fades from history. Curiously, the focus here is on a Judah king, when we might expect a final nail in the Israel coffin.

What we discover is that Judah is poised on the same precipice: just as Israel walked in the ways of the surrounding nations (17:7-8), Judah now 'walked in the ways of the kings of Israel' (16:3) '... according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out'. We'll be screaming out 'don't be daft!'

[NS]

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It is a very dangerous thing for the Lord's people to think that we don't need his salvation, and that we can improve on his commands.

Application

Our 'Biblical theology' approach to 2 Kings means that, when it comes to application, we're not really looking to the kings or prophets for examples to follow. There may be times when they do the right or wrong thing, but this is not being told to us so that we copy them, or not. As in every bit of the Bible, we want to ask: what is God doing? why is he doing it? how do we respond?

- The Lord is so gracious. A Judah-like-this continues to 'carry' the Lord's promise, and an Ahaz-like-this is included in Jesus' genealogy ... wow!
- Beware of any attempt at DIY salvation ... when in distress, cry to the Lord.
- Beware any suggestion of DIY religion ... there is nothing to be learnt from any other 'tradition' to improve on what the Lord says on any topic.
- It is a very serious folly to want to become 'like the surrounding nations' (... we might say 'like everyone else'): nothing good can ever come of it!

Commentary

1-2 Chapter 15 has galloped through six kings; the two Judah kings (who top and tail the chapter) 'did what was right' (3, 34), just as all the Judah kings since Ahab's influence was removed (cf 12:3; 14:3). But lest we are tempted to think that the reigns of Azariah and Jotham mean that Judah is now a better place to escape to, the conventional summary phrase of v 2 warns that it's no better. Here's a king who turns from the good example of David his ancestor to copy the kingdom with only bad kings.

3 There is an ominous pattern: Israel became like the surrounding nations ... Judah became like Israel (which will mean, in turn, becoming like the surrounding nations). The tragedy of this is that their role (cf Exod 19:6) was to be different from other nations: 'holy as I am holy' (Lev 11:44). The chapter will now explain how Ahaz did verse 3.

4 Ahaz's evil is terrible in its depth ('despicable' 3) and breadth ('every' 4). The pagan god Molech was worshipped by heating a metal statue until it was red hot, then placing a living infant on the outstretched hands of the idol, whilst beating drums drowned out the screams of the child until it burned to death (hence Lev 20:3 cf 1 Kgs 11:7; 2 Kgs 21:6).

The prophecy of Isaiah 7 – including the announcement of the *Immanuel* sign – was the Lord's gracious word from Isaiah to King Ahaz during this invasion. The goal of the attack was to dethrone Ahaz and set up a Syrian king over Judah (7:6). Isaiah offered Ahaz a sign of assurance of God's help in the struggle (7:1-12), but Ahaz refused to trust in the Lord (under the excuse of not wanting to test him) and instead put his trust in the king of Assyria. Yet for the sake of David, God did not allow this disastrous attack on Judah, and against the Messianic dynasty, to succeed.

No wonder then that when the NT lists the genealogy of Jesus, Ahaz is one of the kings mentioned (cf Mathew 1:9), for he is a testimony to God's grace.

5-6 Judah is not totally conquered (for this is not yet the irreversible 17:6, 18 or 25:8, 21) ... but with a terrible foreboding, the border shrinks (cf 1:1; 8:20; 10:32-33), where it has only recently expanded (14:22, 25, 28). Elath represents vital trade routes (by land and by sea). This was a very dark time for Judah (cf 2 Chronicles 28, especially vv 5-8).

7 This event helps us to date 2 Kings with some accuracy - this is the Syro-Ephraimite war of 734BC - and Assyrian sources confirm the historical events described here.

What should a King of Judah do when faced with such a threat? Follow his father David (eg Psalm 18:6). Instead, like Jehoash (who stripped the temple rather than turn to the Lord 12:17-18), Ahaz turns to Assyria. We know from Assyrian sources that his desperate bid to buy her help included 'gold, silver, tin, iron, antimony, embroidered linen garments, purple woollen garments ... everything precious ... the desirable things of their countries'. With everything stripped away, both the king's and

(pertinently) the Lord's house would look bare. And so the stage is set for events that will have a devastating effect on Judah's spiritual heart.

Ahaz transfers not just his treasure, but his allegiance. The Davidic king is Yahweh's 'son' (2 Sam 7:14), so this message is a repudiation of the covenant in favour of submission as vassal state to the latest superpower.

9 At first glance, the 'present' (8) may seem a successful strategy: the enemy is killed, and the threat removed. But its unbelieving pragmatism (when he had the promise of Isaiah 7:3-9) paves the way for a far deeper, more insidious threat to the spiritual health of God's people as Ahaz's visit sets the seal on his submission as 'servant and son' (7).

10 Damascus is the capital of Syria. God had used Syria as his 'sword' to bring judgement on his people (eg Hazael 1 Kings 19:15-18 and 2 Kings 8:7ff, 28-29; 12:17-18). But it's an entirely different thing for a king of Judah to go for lessons on spirituality from the very 'nations whom the Lord drove out before the people' (3). Impressed with Damascus' altar, he sends back the 'Grand Designs' to his priest in Jerusalem. (2 Chronicles 28:23 explains why King Ahaz was attracted to the worship he saw in Damascus ... he was impressed by the idols, not merely following the latest fashions in altar design!) This is one point where we suddenly realise the significance of those lengthy chapters in the OT describing the detailed design specifications for the temple, its furnishings and fittings: the Lord has made crystal clear the way in which he is to be worshipped, to remove confusion about alternatives.

Dubious innovation:

10-11	the new altar
12-14	the new arrangements
15-16	the new regulations
17-18	the new rationale

12 The renovation of the temple court gives preference to the new altar. Ahaz then served as a priest of his own making at the altar of his own design, disregarding God's command that a king must not serve as a priest (Numbers 18:7).

Sinisterly, as Dale Ralph Davis points out, the writer's vocabulary here repeats what Jeroboam did in 1 Kgs 12:32-33. 'So 'Jeroboam', pioneer of deviant worship, is now in Judah' (and look what that led to ... 17:21-23).

16 Rather than restraining his wayward king (in contrast to Jehoiada's good example in 12:2), Uriah the priest participates in his wicked plans.

17-18 lists some items that Ahaz removes, not because he sends them to Assyria (since they are still around to be seized from Jerusalem in 25:13-14) but to de-emphasise their importance. Some things are simply put 'round the back' (cf 14) so they don't get in the way of his new DIY religion.

18 The end of the verse makes it clear that this is all the action of a vassal state *in deference to* the king of Assyria. It's not that Ahaz had to do any of the changes he implemented, but travel had so broadened his mind (!) that he looked back to his own temple and decided it could do with an upgrade. How dare anyone think they can improve on God's design!

20 anticipates something different: Hezekiah will bring much-needed reform.