

Ascent, Apostasy, Assassination
2 Chronicles 24:1-4, 13-25

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Colton Underwood

Our text for this morning is found in 2 Chronicles 24. We'll read verses 1-4 and then move down to verses 13-25 of chapter 24. For many of us, the book — or, books, given that it's split into two for our ease — of the Chronicles is not exactly at the top of our “favorite books of the Bible” list. And, in some ways, that's understandable. If you read straight through the Bible, cover-to-cover, you'll work your way through a continuous historical account from creation through the time of the judges, the arrival of the monarchy in Israel with David as its height, and then the descent from Solomon on until the people are all taken into exile by the end of 2 Kings. Then, as you flip the page to 1 Chronicles, not only are you greeted by chapters upon chapters of genealogies, seemingly endless lists of names, but you're also confronted by the fact that we're going over the story again! With all that remaining true, I would encourage you to make use of 1-2 Chronicles. These accounts come to us from a later divinely-inspired writer when compared to Samuel and Kings. It's clear from context clues that this perspective comes from a time after the exile and return of the people to the land of Israel and Judah. The Temple, at that time, was rebuilt, its walls restored, and government set up to a degree. But where was the King to sit on David's throne? Much of Chronicles is spent looking for where that King might be, so much of the time in these accounts is hyper-focused on David, Solomon, and the kings of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, tracking through David's rightful descendants to find the promised Son of David. The particular account before us is that of Joash, king of Judah. From the days of David, these events occur about 200 years on, near the time of 800 BC. The Northern Kingdom had long since abandoned the True God for idols, but the Southern Kingdom, by God's grace, still had good and faithful kings here and there. This particular king is a bit of an enigma, with highs higher than most, and a low to breach rock bottom. It's here that we read of his ascent, apostasy, and ultimate assassination. It's a true story of subterfuge, betrayal, and tragedy, so there is much for us to learn. Before we read the word of God, however, let's first ask his help in prayer. Our God and Father, you who speak and it is done, speak and fulfill your will in this time, in our hearts,

now and forever. Let your Spirit breathe on us through these words, hiding your servant behind the cross, that your people might be wounded and healed, cut to the quick and comforted. May we be taught from your very voice this morning, for it's in Christ's name that we ask it, AMEN.

Hear the Word of the Lord, beginning at 2 Chronicles 24:1:

“Joash was seven years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Zibiah of Beersheba. And Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest. Jehoiada got for him two wives, and he had sons and daughters. After this Joash decided to restore the house of the Lord.”

And then moving down to verse 13 and on:

“So those who were engaged in the work labored, and the repairing went forward in their hands, and they restored the house of God to its proper condition and strengthened it. And when they had finished, they brought the rest of the money before the king and Jehoiada, and with it were made utensils for the house of the Lord, both for the service and for the burnt offerings, and dishes for incense and vessels of gold and silver. And they offered burnt offerings in the house of the Lord regularly all the days of Jehoiada. But Jehoiada grew old and full of days, and died. He was 130 years old at his death. And they buried him in the city of David among the kings, because he had done good in Israel, and toward God and his house. Now after the death of Jehoiada the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king. Then the king listened to them. And they abandoned the house of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the Lord. These testified against them, but they would not pay attention. Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people, and said to them, “Thus says God, ‘Why do you break the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you.’” But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the Lord. Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness that

Jehoiada, Zechariah's father, had shown him, but killed his son. And when he was dying, he said, "May the Lord see and avenge!" At the end of the year the army of the Syrians came up against Joash. They came to Judah and Jerusalem and destroyed all the princes of the people from among the people and sent all their spoil to the king of Damascus. Though the army of the Syrians had come with few men, the Lord delivered into their hand a very great army, because Judah had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers. Thus they executed judgment on Joash. When they had departed from him, leaving him severely wounded, his servants conspired against him because of the blood of the son of Jehoiada the priest, and killed him on his bed. So he died, and they buried him in the city of David, but they did not bury him in the tombs of the kings."

The account of Joash's life, on first impressions, is more fit for some fantasy epic, perhaps an Arthurian legend, than it is for the pages of Holy Writ. Yet, here it is, an intriguing narrative that begins in great promise and ends in utter disappointment. To give you a snapshot of the events of the previous chapters that provide the backdrop to our passage, 2 Chronicles 22-23, Joash's reign began rather unconventionally. His father, Ahaziah, reigned only one year before being executed by Jehu from the Northern Kingdom according to the word of the Lord, which left an immediate power vacuum into which stepped not a king, but a queen. Athaliah, Ahaziah's mother and Joash's grandmother, filled the void by seeking out and killing every male in the Davidic line. That is, except for one. In a bold act of rebellion, Jehoshebeath, the wife of Jehoiada the priest and daughter of the former king, Jehoram, found and stole away tiny little Joash, and much like Moses was saved from the slaughter of the innocents in Egypt, so Jehoshebeath saved little Joash, son of the king, by hiding him in her husband's place of work: the Temple. Jehoiada bided his time, and Athaliah built back up temples to Baal with altars and images to turn the people away from the Lord. Six whole years went by as the people lived under the thumb of an evil queen who thought she had stamped out all opposition, until the fateful day arrived. Jehoiada the priest had waited long enough, so he entrusted this secret — that a hidden heir to the throne was left alive — to powerful commanders in Judah and to other Levites who would consecrate themselves to serve Joash as king and to protect him against the queen. With influential men on his side and ample defense, the moment came, and Joash, the seven-year-old princeling, was marched out of the Temple for the first time and

Jehoiada placed the crown of the kings on his head, handing to the child-king the text of the covenant to symbolize his dedication to the LORD I AM, and anointing his head with oil to set him apart to holy monarchy, Jehoiada with his sons and all the people began to shout, “Long live the king!” Hearing the commotion of people running and shouting for joy, blasting trumpets in notes that sang their freedom from her tyranny, Athaliah ran to see what was happening and knew in that moment what had happened. Her shouts of treason were almost instantly drowned out by the roar of those who had gathered to celebrate the return of the Davidic king, and she was taken out to the gate of the palace, and there executed. From there and as we find it in our text, Joash began his 40-year reign at seven by leaning heavily upon his advisor, protector, and friend, Jehoiada the priest. It was through Jehoiada’s wisdom and advice that the temples to Baal were torn down and that the Temple of the Lord — which had fallen into disrepair under faithless monarchs — was restored. For years after his coronation, Jehoiada stuck close to Joash’s side and acted as his closest counselor. Through their partnership, the Lord restored order, religion, and prosperity in Judah. Yet, this dramatic climb could not last forever. We read in our text of a turn in Joash’s life and kingship, a turn that hinged upon one event: the death of Jehoiada. Jehoiada, so beloved by both the king and the people, was given a burial beyond the honor of any ordinary priest, as he was buried with the Davidic kings of old. In the wake of his passing, however, it became clear that Joash had leaned too heavily upon the man that was, to him, a father. Like a three-legged stool with one leg suddenly cut off, Joash came toppling down. First, he took poor advice. He listened to the princes of Judah who swayed him away from the worship of the Lord and brought Joash’s heart down into the pits of idolatry. Yet, even there, God was merciful. So he sent messengers, prophets to bring Joash back, but he would not listen. Then finally it came about that one such prophet, Zechariah the son of Jehoiada, who no doubt would have known Joash personally and amicably, prophesied against Joash in the presence of all the people. Rather than hear the earnest cry of one who would have been a brother to him, the king had him stoned to death, a holy man with a holy message slain in the holy Temple. So then the Lord sent another sort of messenger, but one of destruction and not of hope. A small foreign army, Syrians, came against Judah and shockingly and embarrassingly plundered the region, killing the wicked princes and somehow wounding Joash as they went. Left an invalid, Joash took to his bed, at which point men conspired against him and took his life. While his life

had started so nobly and with so much promise, Joash was left disgraced, and because of his wickedness was not even granted the right to be buried with his fathers, the Davidic kings. What are we to make of this tragic tale? What is there to learn from Joash's folly? How are we to find hope in such a dark spot in the history of David's throne? There are three things I want us all to focus on and contemplate as we consider this text of Scripture. That is, the nature of apostasy, the nature of true faith, and the nature of perseverance. The part of this account which I think most of us find most shocking is the depth of Joash's apostasy. When we think of apostasy, the act of "falling away" from faith, we most often think of those who live evidently duplicitous lives. They say they're Christians, but their deeds clearly contradict that statement. They might come to church every now and again, but their heart isn't there and their allegiances are clearly elsewhere before they are found in Christ. That's what we usually picture. But Joash's life and dive goes against that grain. He begins with the story of a hero, an innocent child whose life is saved by a noble woman from the clutches of an evil queen. Under the tutelage of a wise, older mentor, he grows in wisdom, attaining to the throne that was rightfully his. He then nobly undertakes the restoration of the Temple, an act that would paint him in the light of noble Solomon. That's the stuff of legends! Who would write the end of the story as we find it? You see, apostasy, falling away, is both real and deceptive. It's real because it isn't just some hypothetical idea. We as Calvinists, those who believe in the perseverance of the saints, too often shrug off and explain away the reality of apostasy, minimizing the warnings of Scripture to stay in the faith to the point of endangering those who are not truly in the faith! It's real because it happens all the time. Someone who looks like a Christian, talks like a Christian, maybe even ministers as a Christian minister, will turn out to be a fraud. And so apostasy is also deceptive. It can come from those who seem from the outside to be solid believers, massive sprawling oaks, but the core of the tree is rotten, dead. Any of you familiar with the shocking and, frankly, disgusting details of the underbelly of Ravi Zacharias' ministry will understand just what that means. This man was used of God to preach the gospel and to save many, but it wasn't until after his death that sordid and depraved habits were uncovered. I won't go into depth on his wickedness — you can research that on your own — but I mention it to show just how much a false professor can do for seemingly good reasons. It's somewhat like wax fruit, especially apples. Oftentimes, when you go into a home or business, there might be a bowl of fruit placed for decoration. These

fruit are made of plastic or wax but can be incredibly convincing. And that's because they're made to be that way! Apples sold in grocery stores have an edible, food-grade wax on the skins to protect them and to make them shiny and pretty. That also means that the somewhat-shiny plastic or wax replicas look a whole lot like the real thing. I've found myself at several points in my life, eyes fixed on the fruit in the basket, almost afraid to pick it up with the intention of eating it — apples are my favorite fruit and I eat several a day — because I'm afraid I'll be proven wrong the moment I bring it to my lips for a bite. False professors often look a good deal like real Christians, but the external shine belies the fake interior. Is your Christianity more than just a shiny wax coating on a fake apple? I can't see your heart, Barry can't, Darin can't, Whitney can't, Jaime can't, and not even Gerrit can. But you know your own heart motivations. That's why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13, "examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith." That's why time and time again in Hebrews we hear the call, "take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." That's why in the parable of the sower we see two examples of false faith before we get the real stuff. Joash, much like the seed among stony soil and among thorns, shot up immediately with the appearance of growth, of real faith, but he had no root in him. So when temptation came, when the pressure of the world and its cares came, he withered and fell. I press in on this questions and the issue of apostasy because it can be very tempting to rely on our good deeds for the sake of Christ and his kingdom as opposed to relying on Christ himself. As Matthew Henry puts it, commenting on Joash's life, "It is easier to build temples than to be temples to God." In other words, it's a whole lot easier to put on a face, a facade of Christian morality and piety than it is to actually live it. It's a lot easier to wear a cross around your neck than it is to pick your cross and to follow Christ daily. I know that about my own heart and I know you know it's true. Be warned, beloved, from the example of Joash, because apostasy is real and deceptive. It wrecks lives, families, churches. Examine yourselves. Now that we've discussed the nature of apostasy, falling away, I want us to use Joash's example as a contrast that we might examine the nature of true faith. Real faith, as you know, is active, personal, and rooted. Joash's false faith is proven by the fact that it was not active, personal, or rooted. In the first place, his faith was false because it was not active, meaning that although he appeared at the start to be doing good deeds, his later deeds proved it to be an act put on for the sake of the mentor he appreciated and

respected. He did what was right as long as it was convenient for him. Much like Mr. By-Ends in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Joash was all for following after God's way as long as the sun was shining and the way was easy. Once another, more practical or attractive option arose, he fell. We see his false faith, additionally, in the fact that his piety was not personal. He rode the coattails of his priestly advisor, much like a car being towed might move quickly down the highway as long as it's attached to a working vehicle, but the moment Joash's faith was detached from Jehoiada, it all came to a screeching halt and subsequent crash. Good advice is powerful and is so crucial for all of us — just read Proverbs and you'll get that impression — but good advice, good raising, good education, none of it makes a real believer if there isn't a personal, vital spark of faith. And, finally, we see Joash's faith to be false on account of the fact that it wasn't rooted. That is, it wasn't rooted in God's word. That's the sad part of his coronation story, that the book of the covenant was placed in his hand as he was crowned king, but he had no real love for what God had to say, and that was evidenced by how he dealt with the prophets. He ignored their warnings, silenced their rebukes, and even resorted to murdering one who once was likely a brother and friend in order to pursue his own ends. His faith was false because it was not active, personal, or rooted. Is yours? The Lord calls us to work out our faith with love and good works. Not all of us are doing that. Others rely simply on the fact that they were raised and baptized in the church, went to the right Christian school and still attend and give to First Pres, but none of these things make a Christian! Others still lean unknowingly on the faith of a loved one. If that loved one, say your father or mother, were suddenly taken from you, where would your faith be? And others of you come and receive God's word most Sundays with rejoicing. As long as the preaching is to your liking and on the right subjects, it's all yes and amen. But the moment the sword of God's word is aimed for your heart, when it hits you where you live, you evade, you harden your heart, you refuse to hear the word of God to repent, to die to yourself and to the world. Christ tells us that his true disciples will abide in his word, all of it. Strive for more than a dead husk of faith; seek true and vital faith that is active, personal, and rooted in God's word. Now all of this would be quite a heavy load to carry if it weren't for our final point, the nature of perseverance. The question should naturally arise, what makes me different from Joash? Who's to say that I won't fall away? What's my hope? What do I have to stand on? The answer can be found in two characters in Christ's ministry, Peter and Judas. What kept back Peter

from suffering the same fate as Judas? Both abandoned the Lord in his time of need. Both were ashamed of their association with him. Both betrayed the Lord of glory. Both were sorrowful for their betrayal. What made the difference? The Lord made all the difference. As we heard months ago toward the end of the Lenten series from Darin, it was the Lord himself praying for Peter that kept him from falling away. It was Christ's faithfulness, not Peter's, that kept him in the sheepfold and away from the wolf's maw. So why would you be any different from Joash? What ground do you have to stand on? Christ. Stand on Christ who can strengthen you in temptation. Stand on Christ who paid for your sins completely. Stand on Christ who alone conquered death. Stand on Christ who prays and intercedes for you even now. Stand on Christ who calls all who thirst to come to him and drink of living water, to eat the bread of life. Stand on Christ who promises to never cast out those who truly come to him. Stand on Christ who will lose absolutely none of the those the Father has given him. Stand on Christ who is coming to make all things new. Joash stood on Jehoiada, and so he fell. You are to stand on Christ and live. That is your hope for perseverance. That is your hope in life and death; that we are not our own but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ! That is why Jude ends his epistle of warning against false teaching, saying, "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen!"