

Royal Lessons from Judah – Ahaz
2 Chronicles 28;1-6, 16-25

Beginnings and first steps are so important in our lives. Steven Covey author of *The 7 habits of highly effective people*, as the second habit writes “Begin with the end in mind”. “Begin with the End in Mind means to begin each day, task, or project with a clear vision of your desired direction and destination, and then continue by flexing your proactive muscles to make things happen.”

Good advice. I would add beware of the importance of the first step that you are about to take, the path of action that you are about to follow! For the truth, philosophy, reasoning and the spirit behind it that you are about to employ are all important. Crucial even. How you begin and choose to approach, or react to a particular situation, or set of circumstances can end up determining the outcome, even the future course and destiny of your life. That is why asking yourself, “Where is this step going to lead and take me?” is so important.

Right now it is winter time. The ground has been wet and sodden. You need to be careful how and where you tread. Last Sunday I participated in the Adults versus DPCYouth Paintball Challenge. The sun was shining, the paintballs were flying and the ground was wet, muddy and in the first game the course sloping. I learned during the week that it might be to my benefit to wear soccer boots. So I did. And guess what. As I stepped out into that first game the odd person around me was slipping and sliding on the sloping course, but I wasn't. Red Alert should very well have had a sign up cautioning paintballers ‘Beware the slippery slope...’ literally speaking. When we use the term ‘The slippery slope’ figuratively it means ‘A course of action that will lead to something bad or worse, disaster or failure.’ For example as applied to the current debate on euthanasia, the slippery slope argument claims that the acceptance of certain practices, such as physician-assisted suicide or voluntary euthanasia, will invariably lead to the acceptance or practice of concepts which are currently deemed unacceptable, such as non-voluntary or involuntary euthanasia. Thus, it is argued, in order to prevent these undesirable practices from occurring, we need to resist taking the first step on what is none other than a ‘slippery slope’. If we take the example of Belgium and the Netherlands experience where euthanasia is legal the slippery slope argument from the stories and data I have read is proven to be true.

In our scripture reading this morning we have one of the ultimate slippery slope illustrations in the bible that becomes a story of a complete downward spiral to destruction. A story where through a series of thoughts and continued actions by a King of Judah feed back into themselves, causing a situation to become progressively worse.

Last week we learnt of the Jotham principle from Mr *Yahweh-Perfect* himself: Walk steadfastly before the Lord – Grow in Power! The setting for our reading today follows on from the story of Jotham king of Judah, from 732 BC to 715 BC. During which time the northern kingdom of Israel was beginning to be conquered by the Assyrians. Out of all the Kings from both Kingdoms from Saul down, it was only Jotham whom God has nothing negative to say. This king's character was in complete harmony with his name which meant, "**Yahweh-perfect.**" Turning this week to his son, the one and only "Mr. Grasping at Straws" who from the beginning of his reign stepped forward on to the slippery slope of a downward path to destruction while reaching out only to clutch at straws in seeking to avoid his own demise, along with that of his kingdom. The Name Ahaz means 'he has grasped' or 'possessor' ... in his case he's the proud owner of a piece of straw! This turn of phrase 'grasping at straws' which so aptly suits Ahaz and his kingly reign of Judah refers to a drowning person grabbing any floating object, even a straw, as in dry grass, in a futile attempt to save himself. It has been used by a number of writers in more recent centuries beginning with Thomas More in *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (1534).

Awaiting execution for treason against King Henry VIII after refusing to recognize the king as the Supreme Church Head of England, Thomas More wrote one of his greatest English works, *A Dialogue of Comfort*, to express his own thoughts on hope in the face of tribulation. A work that conveys More's belief that God is and must be our one and only path to comfort. This book is a lasting legacy of hope in the faithfulness of God - both for More, and for the reader today... such sentiments that would have been wasted on Ahaz. If the book was around in his day it would have definitely been on his 'Do Not Bother to Read List' because from the beginning of his reign he was on another path specifically choosing 'not' to do what was right in the eyes of or before the LORD V.2.

Ahaz assumes the throne at 20 years of age. He was young, fresh and was given the opportunity of a lifetime. He grew up having the best education and the greatest role model and good examples, both immediately in his father Jotham, and historically in his ancestor David. Ahaz clearly rejected these godly examples and walked in his own way. The kingdom was rich, strong, and religion was firmly established; and yet we see that in the few opening verses he was wretchedly corrupt. He had the chance to make an impact, lead a powerful example for centuries to come, but instead he steers the nation down the slippery slope of a very dark idolatrous path defiling and degrading the heart and mind of God's people. He forsook the Temple of the Lord. He sacrificed and burnt incense on the hills as if they would place him nearer to heaven. He even made idols and worshipped them. The next part is very, very hard to understand. Ahaz burnt his *own* children in the fire as a sacrifice to his idols. He was completely overtaken by evil.

It was one thing to reject the godly heritage of David and embrace the ungodly ways of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel, when Judah imitates Israel's apostasy, which is when you renounce your faith. He so easily took the next step down the slippery slope when he *burned his own children in the fire*. This describes Ahaz's participation in the worship of Molech the pagan god or demon, more accurately, behind this religion. In Leviticus 20:3 God pronounced the death sentence against all who worshipped Molech, and for good reason. Molech was worshipped by heating a metal statue, in this case a statue that Ahaz had had especially made representing the god, until it was red hot, then placing a living infant on the outstretched hands of the statue, while beating drums drowned out the screams of the child until it burned to death... Is this not one of the worst forms of monstrous child abuse and tortuous death that you have ever heard of? How could anyone do this to their own children, let alone let it happen to someone else's? ...Hold that thought.

In our own nation in the last year a number the same size of the population of Oamaru, 13,000, which represents Monday to Friday 250 a week. That is the approximate number of unborn children sacrificed to the god of Abortion, or the demon spirit behind abortion, right under our noses in our nation. Every working day 50 unborn children suffer the same fate because they were typically the outcome of a consensual sexual act between a male and a female, but were in no way planned for. Therefore are thought of

as an unwanted, unneeded problem. And as such an apparent big mistake it only takes two signatures, which are readily obtainable, to be given a state sanctioned, up to 19 weeks gestation, visit to a public hospital or clinic for an individual to offer the unborn child to the Spirit behind Abortion on a table in a surgical theatre, to the outstretched arms with hands ready to operate, that terminate the life of the unborn child in the most hideous and monstrous fashion, at least as far as that unborn child is concerned. And believe you me, if that unborn child senses this and is concerned you can bet that Almighty God seated in heaven with Jesus at his right hand side is even more concerned... Here it is that one mistake leads to another even more horrendous step on the slippery slope of moral relativism that treats the unborn child as non-human, and abortion as such, simply an extended form of contraception...

Ahaz didn't just practice child sacrifice; he kept stepping down that path on the slippery slope forsaking God and His protection. In response God delivered him into the hands of his enemies. Though he grasped at straws while promoting wickedness and being unfaithful to the LORD by asking a pagan king for help against all his enemies. Enemies represented by every nation and people that surrounded Judah at the time sensing and preying on its weakness. As a result of appealing to the most powerful king, Tiglath-Pileser, Ahaz ended up merely becoming a vassal to him. Because of this, the people suffered and their blood was shed, families were ruined, and the country was wasted. And yet Ahaz still didn't learn.

The next straw grasped was to shut the door completely on the God of Israel by closing the Jerusalem Temple where God's presence dwelt, destroying its furnishings and setting up in every town on every street corner and hilltop, places to burn sacrifices to other gods, especially to the gods of Damascus - gods that Ahaz perceived as having defeated him. During these events, in His mercy, God sends help and rebuke through his prophets including Isaiah. Even then, Ahaz continued in idolatry and sin to the end of his life dying ingloriously as a brazen, defiant unrepentant man.

To mark his reign after his death, he was not placed in the tombs of the kings of Judah. He was the third king whose wickedness resulted in the loss of honour at death with Ahaz probably counted in the history of Judah as the single worst of the three.

The Challenge for us then is to learn to walk not Ahaz's path but Jotham's path as followers of Christ so that we might do right and like him beat a well-trodden straight path to God. The result being we experience success and grow in God's power. In doing so, we will not be adverse to trouble, difficulties and challenges in life, but, neither will we suffer the slippery slope to destruction with its pathetic grasping at straws along the way in the futile hope of grasping our own salvation. So, there are lessons to be learned from Ahaz's doomed life.

Life Lessons from Ahaz:

1. One's upbringing doesn't guarantee salvation. Any child can choose to go their own way;
2. One person's single decision to disobey God can lead a multitude astray as happened with the people of Judah. Any leader, government or academic institution can do the same today. The tragic story of Ahaz is a solemn reminder and lesson to all that in the end, it is God's grace that saves one's soul, not their environment, education, or even Godly upbringing or nation's laws;
3. When one voluntarily places themselves in the hands of evil or the devil, that person is voluntarily taking oneself off of God's protection plan. That's a scary thought; and lastly.
4. In the time of his distress King Ahaz became increasingly unfaithful to the LORD. Times of trial and distress do not necessarily drive people closer to God. Sometimes people allow such distresses to drive them away from God. Ahaz was notable among that type, so much so that the Chronicler noted, that is 'that King Ahaz' v22.

So, as you seek to walk the path of life, do not look to Alternative Spirituality or Philosophy's seeking substitutes that will only lead to further diligent grasping at straws, and the suffering that accompanies these decisions and actions. Rather, we should begin afresh each day with the end in mind, which is eternal in Jesus Christ our LORD and seek to walk with God in 'The Heart of Worship' as in the song we sang first up this morning.

Beginnings and first steps are important. That is why asking yourself, "Where is this step going to lead and take me?" is very important. Maybe your first step this morning might be one of turning from the slippery path of Self and sin and turning in faith, choosing to put your trust, not in yourself, in your own strength and abilities, but in Jesus Christ as your LORD and Saviour. This is the path to God, his love mercy and forgiving grace. Even healing from the most horrendous decisions we've made and actions we've taken, including abortion. God's love is present to forgive and heal.