

King Ahaz Has A Crisis: How To Lose Your Life By Trying To Save It

2 Kings 16

"May the Lord grant that we might meditate upon the heavenly mysteries of wisdom and progress in true piety, to his glory and our edification. Amen" (John Calvin).

A King in Crisis

Today we're going to start with a question: is the Bible pessimistic or optimistic? Of course, the answer is **yes**.

On the one hand, the Bible gives us a pretty bleak picture of humanity and the world. People are depraved, the world is headed for destruction.

On the other hand, the Scriptures speak of people as having this inestimable value. We were created to be Kings and Queens, made in his image to be rulers of God's good world. And for those with the eyes to see, the Bible speaks of a world that is groaning now, but also anticipating a grand renewal at the end of time.

And so the Bible is liable to the charge that it is impossibly gloomy and morbid; and at the same time Christians can be accused to hold to an impossibly unrealistic joy and hope. But herein lies the paradox of the Christian faith: only when we come to grips with the depths of our sin, and the ruin of the world, can we take hold of the glorious hope held out in the gospel.

One of the prayers of the puritans expresses this truth beautifully:

*Let me learn by paradox
that the way down is the way up,*

*that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.*

Here's my contention then about the book of Kings: 1 & 2 Kings are a long, and often steep, descent into the valley, so that we might be able to see clearly.

From the beginning of 1 Kings through til the very end of 2 Kings, this history of Israel reads like a series of unmitigated disasters.

There are moments of reprieve in the presence of the prophets and the rule of righteous kings. But even these can't prevent a seemingly unstoppable slide into further evil, and final exile.

And as this history of Israel takes us deeper into the valley, as they are hard-pressed and hemmed in by enemies on every side; we see the Kings of Israel reckoning with the realities of life around them.

In previous chapters we've seen the Kings of Judah live out a sort of insipid conservatism. They seem pretty content with the status quo; they look around the valley and conclude that it's actually quite nice – at least there's a lot of shade. They don't go rushing into rebellion, but they fail to deal with all the idolatry that remains in the land. "They failed to remove the high places", has been the repeated refrain of recent chapters.

Today, however we come to King Ahaz. And he is a man of action. 2 Kings 16 records his desperate attempts to scratch and crawl and scramble his way out of the valley. Tragically, however, in his self-reliance, Ahaz leads his people headlong into a full-blown capitulation to the cultures around him.

Ahaz is a man of progress. But the problem is that Ahaz is completely blind to the reality of his own situation, and of himself, and so he seeks salvation in completely the wrong place. 2 Kings 16 show us what it looks like to be blind in the valley. It's like a manual in how to lose your life by seeking to save it, to borrow the words of our Lord Jesus.

And so here's the payoff of 2 Kings 16: as we seek to live as Christians in a culture that is increasingly hostile, or just plain disinterested in the message of the gospel, how do we respond to this *crisis*? As we see church attendance continue to decline, and unbelief continue to rise, where lies hope for *revival*? As we feel hemmed in and hard-pressed, how can we move forward in faith, hope and love.

Is there a way to live in the valley; beyond an insipid conservatism, a contentedness with the status quo: "well at least *our* church isn't shrinking", without lamely compromising to the surrounding culture? Well, unlike Ahaz, we must see our **situation**, see our **selves**, and seek our **Saviour**. In short we must lose our life, in order to save it.

1. Seeing Your Situation

So firstly, to properly respond to crisis, we must properly assess the true nature of our situation.

It's easy to get lost in the details, or numbed by the repetition of the same old wickedness chapter after chapter. And as we read about Ahaz in 2 Kings 16 we could simply say, "yeh yeh yeh, he did evil in the eyes of the Lord, you can read about him in the annals of the Kings of Judah, etc. etc., nothing to see here can we just move on!?"

But perhaps we ought to cut Ahaz a little bit of slack. For King Ahaz finds himself in perhaps the deepest crisis of any King to this point in Israel's history. The tiny little nation of Judah is hemmed in on one side by the sea. A coalition of nations in the north are pressuring Judah into forming an alliance against the looming super-power of Assyria that hangs as an eerie shadow over the entire mediterranean.

In Isaiah chapter 7 we read about this exact situation. The prophet says that in view of all this: "the hearts of Ahaz and all his people were shaken, as the trees are shaken by the wind." (Verse 2). They are, with good reason, freaking out man.

Ahaz is in an impossibly precarious political position and what we read in this chapter is his desperate attempt to take matters into his own hands in order to secure the survival and the future of his people.

But there is a greater terror that Ahaz has completely ignored. Isaiah says to Ahaz in Isaiah 7: "be careful! Keep calm! Don't be afraid! Do not lose heart..." In Isaiah 8 he says, "Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear; and do not dread it. *The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.*"

The prophet's point is pretty clear: the real problem is not how close Israel's enemy's had drawn near. The real problem is how far Israel had drifted from their God. But Ahaz resists and he refuses to heed the warning. He plunges himself into these political alliances and leads his people into even greater rebellion. But what he really needed to do, if he could really see, was to go deeper into the Word of God and lead his people into whole-hearted repentance.

What do you consider to be the greatest challenge facing the church in Australia today? Maybe you think it is sexual agenda of the progressive left. Or maybe you think it is the self-interest of the conservative right. It could be media bias, or maybe social media. Materialism or just plain old apathy.

But again and again the NT writers are constantly telling us to turn our eyes away from the threats that lie *out there* and to give our attention to the threats *in here*. It's never the persecuted churches, but the passive and luke-warm churches that are in the greatest danger. And so it is not a materialistic culture we need to worry about, but the way materialism seeps into the church. It's not that our culture is moving away from a traditional sexual ethic, but that our churches themselves are not faithfully living what the Bible teaches.

An American pastor called Russell Moore recently wrote in response to a bunch of statistics about the number of young people abandoning belief and bailing on the church. He suggested that while 20 years ago a young person was likely to reject their faith because of intellectual doubts, or a desire to just live for themselves, what we're seeing now is something entirely different.

We now see young people walking away from evangelicalism not because they do not believe what the church teaches, but

*because they believe **the church itself does not believe what the church teaches**. The presenting issue in this secularisation is not scientism and hedonism but disillusionment and cynicism.*

This holds true in Australia too. Data from McCrindle says that the 5 biggest reasons why Australians are not interested in exploring Christianity are: *church abuse, hypocrisy, religious wars, judging others, and issues around money.*

We need to know our situation. The great danger of the people of God is **always** the slow drift away from hearing and doing the Word. "The repenting soul is the victorious soul" was the puritan prayer. May it be ours too.

2. Seeing Your Self

And just as Ahaz misunderstood *his* situation, he also misunderstands himself. In two ways: he forgets who he is, and he forgets who he is *called* to be.

Firstly, Ahaz doesn't really know who he is. Ahaz acts like he is a middle eastern mover and shaker, as he tries to manoeuvre himself into a position of safety and survival. And there's an element of delusion here. He seems to go into this alliance with Tiglath-Pileser the third, thinking he is somehow on equal footing with the Assyrian King. But Judah is a tiny speck compared to the greatness of Assyria. And it's obvious as the chapter goes on that TPIII is calling all the shots. In the end Ahaz finds himself with even less than the very little he had in the beginning.

If Ahaz saw himself rightly, he would have known himself to be totally outmatched, with nowhere to go but down on his knees before God in desperate prayer. Ahaz needed to see he was not a mover and a shaker but a little child, totally dependent on God for miraculous deliverance.

But there's another misunderstanding here too. Ahaz has obviously forgotten who he was called to be as a **KING OF ISRAEL**. For what God wanted for his people was something far greater than mere survival! Israel were called out of the nations, to be a blessing to the nations. They were to be separate from the world, for the sake of of the World. But here is Ahaz leading God's people to be *just like* the other nations. We've already seen this in Ahaz's political alliances, but what is most galling in this chapter are his religious reforms.

Of course the sacrifice of children strikes us immediately; a particularly despicable capitulation to the wickedness of the world. But what he does with the temple is just as revealing.

Ahaz, remember, completely guts the temple in Jerusalem to make it look like a huge Assyrian altar he saw in Damascus. We read in verses 17 and 18:

King Ahaz cut off the side panels and removed the basins from the movable stands. He removed the Sea from the bronze bulls that supported it and set it on a stone base. He took away the Sabbath canopy that had been built at the temple and removed the royal entryway outside the temple of the Lord, in deference to the king of Assyria.

[Yesterday we went to IKEA and got some new couch covers, but that is NOT what's happening here!] Ahaz is not just trying something new to freshen up the place. For the design of the temple was saturated with significance.

In 2 Kings 7 you can read how the panels on the stands were richly adorned with images of flowers and fruit – a reminder of God's provision for his people. The basins were mounted with lions and cherubims which represented God's protection. The Sabbath canopy represented the rest of God's people, and the royal entry the rule of God through the Davidic King. And that provision and protection, rest and rule were to flow out of Israel and into the whole world. But Ahaz's temple redesign was a wholesale rejection of that high calling. As one commentator says:

Israel, called to be the nation of twelve bulls that holds up the firmament, the nation where Yahweh places a sea of life-giving

heavenly water, the nation that bears the sea of Gentiles on its back, is becoming just one more nation among others. The more it resembles the Gentiles, the less reason it has for continuing to exist. By the time the Babylonians arrive, there is not much left to take. Judah has already stripped itself of nearly every visible sign that it is Yahweh's chosen.

Ahaz is leading Israel into an abyss of irrelevance as he removes any sign of distinctiveness from the life of the people of God.

So it is with the church. We must remember who we are and who God has called us to be. We are but little children. And any hope of revival and renewal will not come through our own strategy or restless activity, but through God's miraculous intervention. The only place we have to go is down on our knees before him, pleading for him to renew us and restore us, and by his grace to work through us.

For God has called us to not merely survive, but to be an outpost of his Kingdom in this world, for the blessing of the world. He has called us to be a light, shining in the darkness. In his mercy he has made us in all our weakness, "the object of God's special favour, ... the Eden of God, the holy mountain, the house of the living God." And he has given us the word of the gospel to proclaim to the very ends of the earth. And wherever the church is distracted from this word, or waters down this word, or speaks some other word, the church finds itself in an abyss of irrelevance.

[And so can I ask us all a question]

The world doesn't need a strong church, but a weak church, fully dependant on God. The world doesn't need a cool church, but a church that is clinging to Christ. The world doesn't need a church that tries to say everything, but a church that speaks one word and speaks it well: the word of grace given to us in the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

Martin Luther once prayed:

May a merciful God preserve me from a Christian Church in which everyone is a saint! I want to be and remain in the church and little flock of the faint-hearted, the feeble, and the ailing, who feel and recognise the wretchedness of their sins, who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help, who believe in the forgiveness of sin, and who suffer persecution for the sake of the Word, which they confess and teach purely and without adulteration.

May we see clearly who we are, and see clearly who we are called to be.

3. Knowing Your Saviour

And finally, then, we need to seek Our Saviour. Because Ahaz so misunderstood himself and his situation, he sought salvation in completely the wrong place. At one level Ahaz is trying to save himself. But this chapter shows us that his attempts to save himself lead him to go all-in with the Assyrian King. He becomes a puppet on the hand of Tiglath-Pileser. He holds Pekah and Rezin at bay, but in-so-doing gives everything away. And so here's the irony. By trying to save himself, he makes himself a slave.

Jesus' words ring true: *The one who tries to save his life will lose it* (Luke 17:33).

And so we come to the very root of the problem: unbelief. He looks around at the weakness of Judah and the might of Assyria and concludes that his God is nowhere to be seen, and the Assyrian gods are the place to be. Ahaz simply doesn't believe that the Lord can save him. In Isaiah 7, he refuses to even ask God for a sign, so great his pride, and so low his confidence that God would ever listen to him.

But apart from the Lord there *is* no hope for Israel. If 1 and 2 Kings reads as a series of unmitigated disasters; it is also a systematic dismantling of confidence in anything, or anyone, other than the Lord himself. Human wisdom, political alliances, the temple and even human obedience cannot save Israel. But Ahaz has not learnt the lesson. And so he seeks salvation in his own strategy and strength. He seeks to save himself, but like every wicked King before him, in trying to save his life he loses it. Ahaz scrambles out of the valley only to find himself like a cartoon character running in mid-air over the edge of a cliff.

What he needed to do was lose his life. He needed to let go of his delusions of grandeur and self-control. And instead of taking matters into his own hands, he needed to throw himself and his whole situation into the hands of God.

God is leading his people into the valley so they might lift their eyes to hills and see that their help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. And the books of 1 & 2 Kings are given to us that we might not place any hope in ourselves, or any other person or thing in this world. And that we would long for a true and better King. And that we would look to the Lord himself to come down. For God himself to be with us in the valley, and to share with us his victory. 2 Kings says: let go of everything else, take hold of Jesus.

For Jesus is the true and better King who does not sacrifice the little ones but freely offers *himself* as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Jesus is the true and better King who does not make an alliance of self-interest with his enemies, but who gave up his life in order to save his enemies.

Jesus is the true and better King who did not tear down the temple, but allowed himself to be torn down, rising again in three days in order fulfil single symbol of the temple.

In Jesus we find God's perfect provision and total protection. We discover eternal rest and his righteous rule. In Jesus we can be honest about who we are, and also receive the strength to be who he has called us to be. And so, Jesus says: "whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

The Church in Crisis

And so if you are here today and you are not a Christian; I don't know what it is that brings you to church. Maybe you feel yourself that you are in a valley and you are searching for God. God's Word to you is that the biggest crisis in your life is the reality of your sin and your separation from God. God's word to you is that it would be the height of folly to try and rescue yourself. But his final word to you in the gospel is that if you come to him on your knees, he will set you standing on your feet. If you confess your sin he will freely and fully forgive you. If you come to Jesus in faith he will be with you in every valley, and he will bring you safely home. Lose your life, and you *will save it*.

And brothers and sisters, as we conclude, we return again to a paradox. For there are two things we ought to take away from 2 Kings 16 as God's church.

Firstly, we must resist the drift into complacency. 2 Kings ought to wake us up! The life of our church must be characterised by a constant turning back in repentance, a constant turning to God in word and prayer, and a constant turning out to our neighbours with the gospel.

Let us not content ourselves with the status quo. "Be alert to the danger!" God says. We're in the valley, and so we must open our eyes to the reality of our situation and to ourselves. Let us be devoted to the Scriptures, dependant on God, distressed for the lost, distinct in our witness, determined in our proclamation of the good news.

But then secondly, we must also resist the panic. All of King Ahaz's rebellion is the restless activity of a man who is totally freaking out.

Ahaz epitomises the words of Ephesians 2:12 – he is without hope and without God in the world.

But not so with us! We have hope because we have God in Jesus Christ. And so we can relax. Even in the deepest valley we are not alone. Even in the deepest darkness we have the light of the glory of God shining in the face of Christ. And so we don't need to compromise on the truth, we don't need to make convenient alliances. We don't need missional, intentional, incarnational, contextualized, cutting-edge, relevant and revolutionary strategy – we just need to follow Jesus. We need the Spirit to work in us that we can hear and do and speak the good news. We can give up on restless activity, we can rest in his loving presence, and we can witness to King Jesus, the Saviour of the World.

The devil is running through the valley of this world and he's either whispering in our ear, "it's fine, everything's fine, don't worry 'bout it." Or he's screaming his head off: "Panic! Panic!"

But with this gospel awareness, we can say back to him, "Shut up, Satan! We know we're in the valley, but Jesus is here with us."

And with the puritans we can pray:

*Let me find your light in my darkness,
Your life in my death,
Your joy in my sorrow,
Your grace in my sin,
Your riches in my poverty
Your glory in the valley.*