

Women's Bible Study of Autumn Ridge Church

Women in Transition– Fall 2007

Athaliah: Misusing Power

2 Chronicles 22:2-23:21

Teacher: Michelle Harris

October 31, 2007

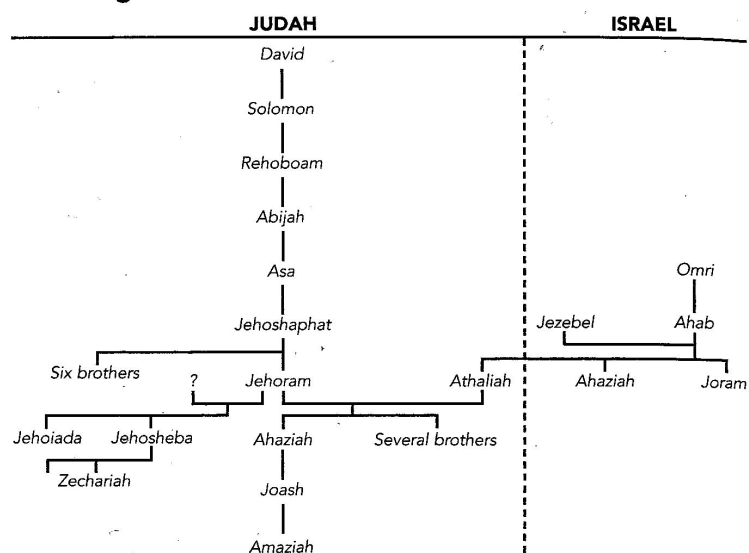


If you grew up going to Sunday school or vacation Bible school, you know that a person can become pretty familiar with the best-known Bible stories. I grew up in a Christian home and went to a wonderful church. And I remember by the time I was 8 or 10 thinking that I had probably heard just about every Bible story there was to hear. I have to admit that when a teacher stood in front of us kids and said, "Today we're going to learn about David and Goliath!" (or Daniel in the lions' den, or Noah and the ark, or the Feeding of the 5,000 . . .), I thought, "Not again!" It took some spiritual maturity to realize that there's always something new to be learned from every encounter with God's Word.

But today I'm fairly certain no one is saying, "Oh, no. Not the story of Athaliah again!" How many of you had never even *heard* of Athaliah before you started thinking about Bible study? I confess I knew almost nothing about her except that she was bad. My mom apparently knew something about her, because when she asked me about my topics for the fall, she said, "Oh, Michelle! Why did they give *you* the most horrible woman?!"

Athaliah's Story: We read about Athaliah in the Old Testament history books of II Kings and II Chronicles. The II Chronicles account is a little more detailed. But before we get into it, let's review Israelite history a bit. Remember that when God gave the Israelites the Promised Land, He wanted to rule them Himself. But they wanted a king. God granted their request with Saul, then David, then Solomon, and so on. And from David's line, God said the promised Messiah would someday come. After Solomon, however, the kingdom split into a northern kingdom (Israel) under King Jeroboam and a southern kingdom (Judah) under King Rehoboam. This chart shows all the kings of Judah and Israel's kings beginning with Omri. (There were several before Omri.) Jehoshaphat, one of the kings of Judah, was a good king who followed God, but he made at least one huge mistake.

Genealogical Table of Queen Athaliah



He agreed to a “marriage alliance” with King Ahab of Israel (II Chron. 18:1). King Ahab, you might remember, was married to Jezebel, a Phoenician woman who persecuted and killed prophets of Jehovah and encouraged Baal worship throughout Judah. Remember Elijah’s showdown with Jezebel’s prophets on Mount Carmel?

Well, this marriage alliance was between Jehoshaphat’s son Jehoram (sometimes written “Joram”) and a woman named Athaliah. Athaliah was the daughter of Jezebel and Ahab. This marriage was supposed to bring the two halves of the kingdom, Israel and Judah, together. (The confusing part about this history is that both branches—both Judah and Israel--had men named Ahaziah and Joram/Jehoram. We’re going to be talking mostly about the ones on the “Judah” side of the family tree.)

So go to II Chronicles 21 in your Bibles. In this passage Jehoshaphat has now died and he has given the kingdom to Jehoram, his firstborn. We’ll begin reading in verse 4:

When Jehoram had ascended the throne of his father and was established, he killed all his brothers with the sword, and also some of the princes of Israel. Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

Verse 11 says that Jehoram, influenced by his wife Athaliah, “**led the inhabitants of Jerusalem into whoredom and made Judah go astray.**” Because of this, Elijah the prophet sends a letter of condemnation predicting that Jehoram will die from a terrible disease. This does happen, and it happens exactly as God said it would. The disease causes his bowels to come out! Think how many of the really gruesome physical punishments in the Bible are because of sins of pride or idolatry. Miriam was struck with leprosy for challenging Moses’ leadership; Nebuchadnezzar was made to live like an animal for his pride, and Herod was eaten by worms for accepting worship like a god. Well, the end of chapter 21 says Jehoram dies “in great agony” and “with no one’s regret”--and Jehoram’s wives and children are killed by invading foreigners. Only Athaliah is left, along with the youngest son—called “Jeho-ahaz” in verse 17, but referred to as “Ahaz-iah” elsewhere.

Since Jehoram’s older sons have all been killed by these invaders, his youngest son Ahaziah is crowned king of Judah. Let’s read in chapter 22, verse 2:

Ahaziah was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Athaliah, the granddaughter of Omri. He also walked in the ways of the house of Ahab, for his mother was his counselor in doing wickedly. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as the house of Ahab had done. For after the death of his father they were his counselors, to his undoing.

Ahaziah followed the bad advice of these counselors and went to fight against the Syrians with the other Joram—the king of Israel. But God had chosen Jehu, a man who was to be the *next* king of Israel, to execute judgment on Ahab's house right at that time, and Ahaziah was killed by Jehu. Verse 7 of chapter 22 says, **"But it was ordained by God that the downfall of Ahaziah should come about through his going to visit Joram."** And so that is why Ahaziah's reign was so short—only one year.

At this point Athaliah, our subject for today, comes to center stage. Let's read in verse 10:

Now when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family of the house of Judah. But Jehosheba, the daughter of the king, took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the king's sons who were about to be put to death, and she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus Jehosheba, the daughter of King Jehoram and wife of Jehoiada the priest, because she was a sister of Ahaziah, hid him from Athaliah, so that she did not put him to death. And he remained with them six years, hidden in the house of God, while Athaliah reigned over the land.

Athaliah, who was the daughter of a king, the wife of a king, and a mother of a king, was now queen herself. She had to kill her own grandsons to do it, but she succeeded and reigned for six years. And though her reign was illegitimate, she was the only woman to rule over Judah. She, like her mother in Israel, spread Baal worship in Judah. She even broke into the temple of God, took the dedicated things there, and used them for the worship of Baal (24:7).

She thought she had killed all of the royal family of Judah, but unbeknownst to her, one grandson, Joash, was still living. He'd been hidden away in the temple as a baby when the bloodbath began by Jehosheba, Athaliah's stepdaughter. Jehosheba was Jehoram's daughter by a different wife. And Jehosheba, a very brave woman, was married to a brave man named Jehoiada. He was a priest in the temple, and together they sheltered their step-nephew until the time was right to stage a coup.

Well, after six years of Athaliah, the country is ripe for revolt. Chapter 23:1 says, **"In the seventh year Jehoiada took courage."** He gathers fellow Levites from all over the kingdom. He brings them to Jerusalem and makes a covenant with them to put the rightful heir on the throne. He supplies them with shields and weapons that used to be King David's. They surround Joash, only a 7-year-old, and have a coronation right in the temple.

Let's continue reading in verse 12 of chapter 23:

When Athaliah heard the noise of the people running and praising the king, she went into the house of the Lord to the people. And when she looked, there was the king standing by his pillar at the entrance, and the captains and the trumpeters beside the king, and all the people of the land rejoicing and blowing trumpets, and the singers with their musical instruments leading in the celebration. And Athaliah tore her clothes and cried, 'Treason! Treason!' Then Jehoiada the priest brought out the captains who were set over the army, saying to them, 'Bring her out between the ranks, and anyone who follows her is to be put to death with the sword.' For the priest said, 'Do not put her to death in the house of the Lord.' So they laid hands on her, and she went into the entrance of the horse gate of the king's house, and they put her to death there.

Joash goes on to become a generally good king. II Kings 12:2 says, "**Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all his days, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him.**" Joash is best known for repairing the temple—fitting, I think, since that was his hiding place from Athaliah.

Athaliah's Sins: Athaliah's life is one of almost breathtaking wickedness. Let's list the sins we encounter in this story. First, there's *murder*. We saw that she had her own grandsons killed. But remember that her husband had done a similar thing when he came to power—he had all his brothers killed—and Athaliah had a great deal of influence on her husband. Besides murder, there was *idolatry* in the spreading of the Baal cult throughout Judah. Another sin was overreaching *ambition* and the *pride* that goes along with that. Indeed, pride is probably at the root of ALL these sins, and perhaps all of our sins, too. It's clear that Athaliah would have done just about anything to be queen. Once she saw her opportunity, she was ruthless in securing the crown. And finally, we see the *abuse of power and influence*. Athaliah used the great power, authority, and influence that she had for evil instead of for good—not only the power and influence she had as queen, but as mother, grandmother, and wife. When her husband Jehoram's wickedness is mentioned, it is in connection with his wife: "**He walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.**" (II Chron. 21:6). And when her son Ahaziah's wickedness is mentioned, it is in connection with his mother: "**He also walked in the ways of the house of Ahab, for his mother was his counselor in doing wickedly**" (II Chron. 22:3). That has to be one of the saddest verses in the Bible.

The temptation with a study like this might be to think that since we haven't sinned so spectacularly, we haven't committed these sins at all. But we should remember how Jesus "raised the bar" on personal holiness in Matthew 5. Jesus said looking at a woman with lustful intent *is* the sin of adultery—heart adultery. And hatred towards another person *is* the sin of murder—heart murder. So lest we think we are innocent because we'd never murder our grandchildren, we should probably ponder a bit more.

What about *hatred*?—the sin Jesus considers to be murder in one's heart. I recently finished a book that contained many of C. S. Lewis's letters to a dear friend of his. One of the letters from Lewis went, "Pray for me to be made more charitable: we're in the middle of a Faculty crisis wh. tempts me to hatred many times a day" (VanAuken, Sheldon. *A Severe Mercy*, p. 148). C. S. Lewis? Tempted to hatred *many times a day*? And over a conflict with coworkers? I appreciated that Lewis, spiritual mentor to thousands, could call a spade a spade and admit he was tempted to sin in this way.

What about *idolatry*? If loving anything more than I love Christ makes that thing an idol, then idolatry is indeed a grave danger to me. Try this exercise: If the people closest to you had no propensity to give the "right," "churchy" answers, how would they complete this statement about you: "By the way my friend lights up when she talks about this, by the amount of time she spends on this, by the joy and satisfaction she receives from this, I know she loves (blank) best of all." Would the people closest to you put Christ in that blank? Now, there's an exercise for our small groups!

What about *pride or ambition*? The professional world is full of temptations to step on others to advance ourselves or to violate Christian ethics to gain material success and prominence. Those of you who have a career outside your home know that to be true. The world of office politics is often not a very nice one. It's tempting to gossip, to stretch the truth about our own achievements, or to speak negatively about a co-worker to make ourselves look more competent.

Those of you who don't have a career outside your home know you face temptations on both ends of the pride-and-ambition spectrum. On the one hand, you may be so "house proud" that you obsess about having the best-decorated, best-furnished house and the best-clothed and brightest children. On the other hand, you may chafe under the often menial nature of housework and child-rearing, which is a form of pride and ambition, too. After all, there's not a lot of potential for professional advancement when you're a housewife, and there's not a lot of room for unbridled ambition when your goal is supposed to be to serve your family.

For all of us, wherever we work, our model should be Christ. Here's the way The Message paraphrases Philippians 2:6:

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

Finally, what about *abuse of power*? You may not think you have any power, but we all do. Think of the unique power women have over men, both emotionally and sexually. Using tears to get our way is an abuse of feminine power. We can abuse feminine power when we dress immodestly. We can manipulate a man or tempt him to lustful thoughts with a low neckline or skin tight clothes. We can abuse feminine power when wives withhold sexual intimacy from our husbands because we're upset with them. Giving your husband the cold shoulder, making him try to guess why you're mad as you lie there in icy silence does not fulfill our mandate to be "one flesh" (I Corinthians 7:3-5).

Women also have power over anyone who's under our authority—at work or at home. And we can abuse our power over those people when we're harsh with them or too demanding in our expectations. We abuse our power over our children when we withhold affection to get what we want or try to manipulate them to be just like us, instead of recognizing that God created them according to His plan.

Athaliah also abused her power by influencing others to do wrong, specifically her husband and son. She exerted enough negative influence over Jehoram to negate the teaching of his godly father Jehoshaphat. And remember what we read about Ahaziah? "His mother was his counselor in doing wickedly." What a tragedy! But are we ever guilty of influencing others in doing wickedly? We certainly sometimes neglect to pray that those we love resist temptation. We might influence someone to think ill of someone else by a negative comment we make. A wife can influence her husband to go into debt or live beyond their means when she expresses discontent with their home or standard of living. She might encourage a spirit of bitterness in him by constantly nagging. She might influence him to neglect serving God by complaining that it takes him away from the family too much. Parents can influence their children to do wrong when they model sloppy ethics—like when they cross the line from helping with homework to *doing* the homework, or asking your kids to say you're not home when you really just don't want to talk to the telemarketer on the phone. Parents and teachers encourage wickedness when we fail to exercise biblical discipline of children, too. And we influence them wrongly when we hold them back from doing hard things for God. When I told my parents I was going to do mission work in a third world country right out of college, they supported me wholeheartedly. At the time I had no idea how hard it was for them to see me go. Or how hard it was for them several years later when they learned our first child would be born on a different far-off mission field, half a world away from his grandparents! I'm so thankful I had parents who influenced me to do right by never holding me back from doing what God wanted me to do.

So I hope you can see that Athaliah's most glaring sins—murder, idolatry, pride and ambition, and abuse of power—are all sins that tempt us, too.

Lessons to learn. To close today, I'll offer you a handful of observations and applications that have come to my mind as I've studied and pondered this passage. I'm sure you could add some of your own.

First, *God's purposes can never be thwarted.* Athaliah wanted to wipe out the royal line of Judah. She probably hoped to expand the influence of her own family, the house of Ahab, to all Israel. But God would not let her do that. He had established a covenant with David in I Chronicles 7, promising that one of David's descendants would rule forever—a promise which was ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Even when Jehoram was spreading wickedness, God didn't destroy his family. The text says,

Yet the Lord was not willing to destroy the house of David, because of the covenant that he had made with David, and since he had promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever. (II Chron. 21:7).

God preserved Joash, and the Messianic line was unbroken. God reminds us through the prophet Isaiah: **"My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. . . What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (46:10-11).** Athaliah is no match for the sovereignty of God, and neither are we.

Second, *we reap what we sow.* Violence and wickedness tend to run in families. Athaliah sowed evil and she reaped death, as did her mother Jezebel. In fact, their deaths were very similar—killed by their own subjects and left to die in the street. Jehoram was raised by a godly father, but because he married a wicked woman and followed her counsel, he, too, reaped death. We all can probably think of negative consequences that we have reaped because we've sown foolishness. God is always ready to extend mercy and forgiveness, but Galatians 6:7 remains true: **"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."**

Third, *be careful of those from whom you take advice.* Joash was a good king because he took advice from Jehoiada, the priest. Jehoram and Ahaziah were both wicked because they took counsel from Athaliah. To whom do you turn for counsel? Who or what has the most input into your life? Before you say, "The Bible, of course," be really honest. How much time do you spend reading books and magazines and taking in media that reflect a worldly perspective? Are you discerning? Do you always compare what you see and hear with what Scripture says? Or do you just assume that if Oprah says it, it must be true!

Finally, a line from Proverbs: *"The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down"* (14:1). The story of Athaliah is of an evil woman systematically tearing her house down with her own hands. In her marriage she and Jehoram formed an alliance that completely contradicted the picture that marriage is meant to be—the picture of Christ and the church. What a contrast their destructive marriage is to the marriage of Jehoiada and Jehosheba—the husband and wife pair who heroically worked to rescue Joash and put him on the throne. That was a marriage

committed to God's purposes, committed to *blessing* and *building*. In her mothering, too, Athaliah "tore her house down with her own hands." Contrast her to the New Testament women, Lois and Eunice, Timothy's mother and grandmother. Paul writes of them to Timothy:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well . . . Continue in what you have learned . . . knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise (II Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15).

Where did Timothy learn to be wise? From his mother and grandmother. I've been reading the journal of John Wesley lately, and in it he includes an excerpt of a letter written by his mother Susannah to his father. She writes: "In your absence, I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all the families both of heaven and earth. And if I am unfaithful to Him or you in neglecting to improve these talents, how shall I answer unto Him, when He shall command me to render an account of my stewardship?" ([The Journal of John Wesley](#). Moody Press, p. 102). That is the antithesis of what Athaliah did with her life and influence.

We've focused on a woman today who was guilty of murder, idolatry, pride, and abuse of power. May we instead live lives of love; may we worship only God; may we be humble instead of prideful, and may we use our influence and our power only for God's purposes.

Women's Bible Study
Women in Transition: Athaliah: Misusing Power
2 Chronicles 22:2-23:21 & 2 Kings 11:1-16
October 31, 2007

Discussion Questions

1. Think about the people over whom you have power or influence. Who are they?
How can you use your influence for God's purposes and not your own?

2. What do you learn about God through the story of Athaliah?

3. The people in this story all made choices that affected their families for generations. Think about the ways you've been affected by decisions made by your ancestors.

If you're a mother, think about and discuss the way your decisions have affected or will affect your children's children.

Women's Bible Study
Women in Transition: Athaliah: Misusing Power
2 Chronicles 22:2-23:21 & 2 Kings 11:1-16
October 31, 2007

STUDY INTENSIVE QUESTIONS:

The story of Athaliah is found in II Kings 11:1-16 and II Chronicles 22-23.

1. Place Athaliah on her family tree along with her husband Jehoram. You may want to draw a chart to illustrate family relationships. You may need to read an introduction to Chronicles in a study Bible. Bonus points if you trace Jehoram's line all the way back to David!
2. Why would God not have allowed Athaliah to completely destroy the royal line?
3. The people in this story all made choices that affected their families for generations. Is this a general Biblical principle? Give a supporting Scripture reference for your answer. Think about and list the ways you've been affected by decisions made by your ancestors. If you're a mother, write about the ways your decisions have affected or will affect your children's children.
4. What do you learn about God through the story of Athaliah? Are these truths reinforced elsewhere in Scripture? Where?
5. Think about the people over whom you have power or influence. Who are they? How can you use your influence for God's purposes and not your own?
6. Read Proverbs 14:1. Give 2 examples from Scripture of wise women who "built their houses" and 2 examples of foolish women who "tore their houses down with their own hands." How might you tear your house down? How might you build your house?