

# Earthy Spirituality Part 6

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**God the Re-Builder**

**2 Chronicles 24:1-23**

**May 20, 2007**

Greatest comebacks in sports history.

It's not how you start; it's how you finish. It's very easy to start well and then to lose your focus and collapse. This is especially true in our life of following Jesus. It's easy to lose our passion. We used to have a very specific religious word for this phenomenon of forsaking the Lord: backsliding. It's a good term: it suggests that we've made progress, we've climbed a hill, we've walked on the road, and then we get off track and we slide backwards down the hill.

This is a story of backsliding; it's a story of losing passion for the most important relationship in the universe: our relationship with God. I have to warn you: this is one of the saddest stories in the entire Bible. This story describes a man who had everything – riches, power, influence, a rich spiritual upbringing, meaningful work to do, even a good track record with the Lord – but he threw it all away. But this story is also here to help us. Like every part of the Bible it's here to lead us to Christ. It's here to tell us about the Gospel – that we are worse off than we ever dared to admit; we are more loved than we ever dared to imagine.

This story starts on such an upbeat note. Verse 1 – Joash becomes king at the age of seven and he remains in office for the next 40 years. Now in case you're wondering: How does a 7 year old run an entire nation? Well, he probably had lots of help as he was groomed and trained to assume his kingly duties. Spiritually speaking, Joash started on the right foot: "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord." There's a marvelous simplicity in that phrase. When you get to the end of your life, there's only one audience that you have to please: God. It simplifies your life. And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord "all the years of Jehoida the priest." In other words, Joash attached himself to a spiritual mentor named Jehoida. As long as he submitted to his guidance, as long as that relationship was alive and growing, Joash did well with God. But as soon as Jehoida died, Joash's spiritual life started to unravel and there are disastrous consequences.

Here's the point: we need others to live the Christian life. It's not a solitary journey. We're always in danger when we don't have a spiritual mentors or at least spiritual brothers and sisters who speak truth and encouragement into our lives. Here's one law for the spiritual life: Learn life from someone. Have someone in your life of whom you can ask: "How do you pray? How do you resist sexual temptation? How do you handle money? How do you handle you love your spouse? How did you make it through suffering?" And then be open to be a mentor or a brother or sister to someone else. Everyone needs those relationships - no exceptions. As we'll see in this story, without his mentor Joash loses focus and starts to drift away from God.

So Joash begins so well. It begins in verse 4 – “Some time later Joash decided to restore the temple of the Lord.” There are two key words in this story: the word restore and the word forsake. First of all, the word restore serves as bookends to the first section of this story in verses 4 and 12. To begin with whenever Chronicles talks about the temple – restoring the temple – it’s really talking about restoring our life of worship. It’s talking about taking time to place the act of worshipping together at the center of our lives. It means not just dragging ourselves to worship services when we feel like it or when we like what’s happening; it means being excited about worshipping together because God is here and God wants to meet me here. It means coming with an attitude of openness and humility and repentance. It’s best summarized in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

So when we worship in the right way with the right attitude - with a seeking heart and a humble heart and a heart that is broken by our sin and our distance from God and our coldness towards others and our joy in the forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers us - it sets the tone for everything else we do together. Now notice that real worship has very practical consequences. It isn’t just about singing nice songs and being with our friends and receiving new information about God. It changes our lives. Worship changes the way we treat people. The children Israel knew that: their worship life was supposed to be a witness to the nations of the earth. We can’t keep condemning people, ignoring people when we say we’re worshipping God. In the Bible real worship has practical consequences – it makes us love the people God loves. Real worship makes us step out in radical and daring faith. It doesn’t separate us from the world, the material creation of people and things, it drives us deeper into the world that Christ died for. (Story).

Real worship has practical consequences. I said on one level this story is about worship renewal; but it’s also the story of the repairing of a building. It’s interesting that for a spiritual community (like TVC) one of the signs of spiritual vitality and doing what is right in God’s eyes boils down to this: do you care for your property? We sometimes say things like, “The church is not the building; the people are the church.” That’s true but people need to meet somewhere – so we need walls and the walls need to be painted and sometimes they need to be decorated. And the walls need a floor to stand on and those floors need carpet and the carpet needs to be maintained and cleaned. These are deeply spiritual activities – they are even acts of worship, offerings to the living God. So someone who volunteers to clean the toilets and pick up trash by the door and weed the garden is involved in activities that are every bit as spiritual as the sermon or the solo.

I said that worship is very practical and down-to-earth. Worship changes the way we treat and care for our building. So Joash ensures that the building, the temple, gets fully restored. Here’s one sign of a healthy community: they take care of their things. They want it restored. It should reflect something of the glory and beauty and excellence of God. In this passage we also find that real worship changes the way we handle our money (See verses 8-11). The king set up a huge chest and then he made an announcement: come and fill up the chest so we can rebuild the temple. Fabulous example of practical leadership skills: have a plan, be creative, help people see it, tell people how they can participate, provide clear communication, have a plan to see it to the

finish, then get it done and have people who can do it with skill and enthusiasm. That's just great leadership. But worship changes us on the level of giving. That's why problems with our church budget aren't just financial; they are spiritual issues. It's a worship issue.

And real worship even changes us on the level of our attitude. It makes us want to serve God with diligence and passion and enthusiasm. See verse 10 – they brought them gladly. There wasn't any guilt of manipulation or sermonizing: they did it because they knew it was important. So they did it joyfully. Then they recruited various craftsmen to complete the job. And they worked diligently. Notice the specific categories of workers mentioned here: carpenters, masons and smiths. All of these are spiritual jobs. Did you also notice that there was no mention of guilt of pressure or "why do I have to do this?" This is a community on fire with the reality of God's goodness. Sometimes we think that as long as we show up and work hard God must be pleased. That's certainly part of it, but God also wants to change our attitude – to give us joy and enthusiasm in what we do throughout our life. (106 year old bowler).

Do you see how practical real worship is? It gets into the nitty-gritty of our lives. We stay open and humble, we get excited about who God is and what Jesus has done for us and it changes everything about us.

So far this is a good story of worship and renewal and doing what is right and doing it with joy and diligence. But all of that will begin to unravel in verse 15-18a. There's the other key word in this passage: forsake. Rather than do what is right in the eyes of God, he turns his back on God. He abandons God. His spiritual life collapses and he starts to backslide. So in verse 17 after the death of Jehoida, a group of officials come from Judah to flatter the king and he listened to them. They abandoned the Lord and worshipped Asherah poles and idols. Asherah was a Canaanite fertility goddess, the wife of the god Baal, whose worship involved sexual orgies and religiously-sanctioned prostitution. Her symbol was a wooden pole which was used as an object of worship.

This seems strange to us but idolatry always lurks in our hearts. It's the chief means by which we backslide. The Bible calls idolatry the sin underneath every other sin. According to the Bible there are two things that top God's list of no-no's: #2 – Don't oppress the poor or the spiritually poor; #1 – Don't mess with idols.

What is an idol? The best definition I've ever heard comes from the great theologian Rocky Balboa – "I have to go the distance or else I'm nothing but a bum." An idol is anything or anyone of which you say, "I have to \_\_\_\_\_" or else I'm nothing but a bum." It moves to the core of your identity. You become it's slave and it becomes your master. Now what's really sad about idolatry is that God has promised to deliver us from slavery. **"I brought you out of slavery."** God told us to put him first not only for His glory but for our good. God wants us to be supremely satisfied in him so we don't have to be enslaved by idols. God made you for a rich life. Every idol enslaves and diminishes us. They rob us of joy and satisfaction. Jesus promised that when we place Him first in our lives, he will not rob us. The thief comes only to steal and kill; I have

come that you might have life (John 10:10). Christianity doesn't diminish your passion for other things; it unleashes your passion. It doesn't decrease your love for your friends or spouse or children or your job or hobbies; once we place those things in their proper place and allow God to be the deep satisfier of our heart, God unleashes a river of love and passion for those other things.

How does God deal with us when we abandon him? First of all, he isn't happy about it (see verse 18b). But, secondly, he doesn't give up on us easily. He pursues us. Notice verse 19 – God sent prophets, messengers “to bring them back to him.” Isn't that so kind and patient of God. God gives us a wake up call. (Check into a hotel and you get a wake up call – it's free. They don't have to do it for you. You should be able to wake yourself up, but they do it for you anyway). The key phrase is in verse 18 – “bring them back to the Lord.” God is always giving wake-up calls to his people. “Wake up. Come back. Return. Turn around. You're on the wrong track.”

I meet people that are so afraid of God. They think that God's just a big bully out to get them and make their lives miserable. They're convinced that if they say, “Okay, God, I surrender to you; I'll stop running and fleeing like the fugitive that I am” then God will make them utterly miserable. But God is always saying, “I am the Lord your God and I want to set you free from slavery. I want you to find real freedom – freedom from fear, and the stupidity of pride, and freedom from sin and selfishness and fear of death and fear of the future and freedom from hatred and bitterness and lust. I want to set you free.”

God is always trying to get our attention. Sometimes a whisper; sometimes it's a heart-to-heart talk; sometimes God shouts to us through the megaphone of pain (as C.S. Lewis so wisely put it). But notice what happens as God tries to get their attention: “they would not listen.” Okay, so now God will zap them with justice, right? God is going to nail them with anger, right? Wrong. Instead, God gives them another chance to come back. See verse 20. Here's what happens so often: the Spirit of God comes through on to and into and then through another human being. That's what happens in verse 20. I've seen it in my own life over and over and over again. God will always give one, two, three, sometimes dozens and dozens of wake-up calls – and it often comes through relationships. People are often God's instruments for our wake-up calls. That's why we have to be in community so people can see into your life. They know you – your struggles, your sin, your hopes, your dreams, your blessings and gifts and they can speak life into your heart. Sometimes they bring a prophetic word that stings or cuts or burns; at other times the prophetic word blesses and encourages, but the purpose is always to heal and build up and give life into you. The message for Joash was very direct: if you're not walking with God, if there is blatant sin in your heart, you will not prosper. In other words, you won't get ahead by ditching God. You'll always slide backwards not march forwards. And the second part of this prophetic message is this: there are consequences to our sin – i.e. because you have forsaken the Lord, the Lord has forsaken you.

Do you see how intensely God yearns for you? You matter to God. There are so many opportunities to repent and to wake up and turn around. How do they respond to God's wake-up call? Remember that Joash started out by doing that was right in the eyes of the

Lord (see verse 2). He rebuilt the temple and he became a leader in the spiritual community. His heart was right with God. He submitted himself to a spiritual mentor. He was busy with spiritual activities for God – but somehow his heart wandered away from God. He abandoned God. What did they do with this prophetic wake-up call? This could be the turning point in his life. How does he respond? He shoots the messenger (see verse 21). So right outside the beautiful temple that they've just finished repairing they take the prophet of the wake-up call outside in the parking lot and they murder him in cold blood. This was the son of the man who had served as Joash's spiritual mentor. See verse 22.

Now how in the world did Joash fall so far? Do you remember the way he started: doing right in the eyes of the Lord, serving God, doing wonderful things for God, serving as a leader ... And now he's leading the charge to murder the son of his former spiritual mentor. How in the world did this happen? Where's the Joash of old? Unfortunately, this isn't necessarily abnormal – backsliding happens often. Notice Revelation 2:4-5 – “Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen.”

Most of us don't plan it this way – we just slip into it. There are consequences to our sin and our backsliding. As the stones start flying at Zechariah's head he cries out his dying prayer: “May the Lord see this and call you to account.” Is this vindictive and unforgiving? Not necessarily. God is a God of justice. There are consequences to our sin and our backsliding. This story ends on a tragic note. It's so sad. He dies alone and abandoned, bearing the consequences for his sin and his backsliding.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Let's retell the story. First, as a Christian I believe certain things about God's love. Christ has already born the consequences for my sin, my coldness, my idolatry and my backsliding heart. It was all laid on him. I approach God as his son or his daughter. So when God gives a wake-up call it's a call to return to my Father's love. So let's back up to verse 20 because this is the key wake up call. At this point a choice to make: heed the wake up call or kill it, ignore it. What stops us from heeding it? Pain. It hurts. For a king to admit that he was wrong, that his spiritual life is horribly off-track, that he was once spiritually alive but now he's backsliding – that will bring pain. It's the same for us ... But the pain quickly turns to joy and authentic life. We simply have to face the pain, walk through the pain and tell God, “I've been backsliding for a long time, God. I look like a spiritual leader; I act like a spiritual leader: I started out so good and so right, but now I'm sliding backwards.” Hear the good news: God is giving you a wake up call. Don't ignore it. Don't kill it. Don't let your pride get in the way.

The greatest gift you can give to those you live? Spiritual reality and vitality.