

The Fire and Smoke of a Christian

1 Kings 22:41-53; 2 Chronicles 19:2

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We read that the Lord Jesus is a merciful Savior who will not break the bruised reed nor quench or put out the smoking flax (Matthew 12:20). Dear ones, there is both the fire of God's effectual grace in the life of a Christian, and yet there is the smoking flax of corruption that yet evidences itself in the life of a Christian. As Richard Sibbes states in his most excellent book (*The Bruised Reed*):

But grace is not only little, but mingled with corruption; therefore a Christian is said to be smoking flax. So we see that grace does not do away with corruption all at once, but some is left for believers to fight with. The purest actions of the purest men need Christ to perfume them; and this is his office... (p. 18).

We see the fire of Abraham's faith that he believed God's promise, and it was accounted to him for righteousness; and yet we see the smoke of Abraham's corruption in lying to King Abimelech to save his own neck. We see the fire of love for God in David (a man after God's own heart); and yet we see the smoke of David's corruption in committing adultery with Bathsheba. We see the fire of courage in Elijah as he stands fearlessly upon Mount Camel challenging the false prophets of Baal; and yet we see the smoke of Elijah's corruption in running in fear at the threat of Jezebel upon his life. We see the fire of Peter's faith in declaring Jesus to be the Son of the living God; and yet we see the smoke of corruption when he denies three times even knowing who Jesus is. The fire of grace and yet the smoke of remaining corruption is the story of every Christian (Romans 7:19). We love the fire but hate the smoke.

King Jehoshaphat was such a man that had the fire of God's effectual grace and yet had the smoke of sinful corruption. The main points are the following: (1) The Fire of a Christian (1 Kings 22:41-43,45-47); (2) The Smoke of a Christian (1 Kings 22:44,48-53).

I. The Fire of a Christian (1 Kings 22:41-43,45-47).

A. Now that the account of Ahab's wicked reign and his violent death is completed, there is a brief biographical summary of Jehoshaphat's righteous reign and peaceful death mixed together with his shameful compromise and unholy alliances. God does not hide the sins and weaknesses of the heroes of faith, for they were both fire and smoke—they were (like us) sinners saved by the grace of God alone. If Jesus could use them, He can certainly use you and me. Here is hope.

B. Jehoshaphat came to the throne of Judah after Ahab was seated on the throne of Israel (1 Kings 22:41). He was 35 years old when he began his reign, and he reigned for 25 years. He walked in all the right ways of his father, Asa, and persevered in not turning to the right or to the left (1 Kings 22:43). This is what characterized his life.

1. Dear ones, to walk in the ways of the righteous who have preceded us is not following mere man or following the traditions of man (like Roman Catholics). As parents, is this not what we should do? God commends doing so. God calls us to follow our spiritual fathers and mothers as they followed Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1; Hebrews 6:12). Thus, when the faithful Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland (1761) affirmed in their Fifth Term of Communion and ours that we approbate (or approve) of the faithful contendings of the witnesses and martyrs of Jesus Christ (especially Covenanters who suffered greatly and were treated like animals by church and state), we are simply adhering to scriptural teaching. As long as that for which they contended was agreeable to the supreme and infallible standard of Scripture, we must follow in

their footsteps. We only follow them as they followed Christ.

2. However, to make the past traditions of man that are not agreeable to Scripture to be that which we follow is to be like the Pharisees that the Lord Jesus condemned and like the Church of Rome which that exalts its tradition to be equal if not superior to the Word of God (Matthew 15:9). As Jehoshaphat walked in the righteous ways of his father, Asa, he did well, and so do we.

C. We read not only that Jehoshaphat was mighty in war, but also note “how he warred” (1 Kings 22:45). Note one particular instance of Jehoshaphat’s warring against the enemy (2 Chronicles 20).

1. The combined forces of the Moabites, Edomites, and Ammonites were on the border of Judah, ready for the call to attack. Jehoshaphat FIRST sought the Lord and called a fast to seek the help of the Lord. Jehoshaphat cried out to the Lord (2 Chronicles 20:12). God’s prophet, Jahaziel, told Jehoshaphat that Judah would not need to fight, God would fight for them. “Fear not, be still, and behold the salvation of the Lord (2 Chronicles 20:17). Jehoshaphat did not say, “That’s crazy. We must be prepared to fight this battle.” This is how he faced this battle (2 Chronicles 20:18). Is this how you face your battles?

2. Early the next morning, Judah went to meet their enemy that greatly outnumbered them not by putting their soldiers in the lead, but by putting the Levites in the lead, singing psalms unto the Lord. God caused the enemy to turn upon one another so that they literally destroyed themselves. Jehoshaphat warred against the enemy, looking not to the flesh, trusting not in his strength, but looking to the Lord.

3. Dear ones, your battle is not ultimately against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:10-12), but against the forces of spiritual darkness that use people, that use immoral websites, music, movies, books, magazines, the corrupt pleasures of this life, and the selfish ambitions of this life to deceive and lie to you that you will find satisfaction in them, but you never do because Jesus alone can bring satisfaction and joy now and for all eternity. The only way to overcome the enemy within (your lust, pride, fear, bitterness, hatred) and the enemy without (all outward temptations from the enemy of your soul) is to fall upon the mercy, love, and power of the Lord Jesus Christ through whose death and resurrection you are more than conquerors. This turning to the Lord cannot be just when you are in trouble, but must become that which characterizes your life. Your eye of faith and hope must daily be upon Him. You must surrender all to Him. Stop fighting against Him and His will and begin truly fighting against the world, the flesh, and the devil by means of prayer, the Word, surrender, and worship. That characterizes a Christian and not the occasional fox-hole prayer when you are assailed by trouble.

D. Finally, we see the fire of God’s effectual grace manifested in Jehoshaphat as a godly ruler in not tolerating the sodomites to live and dwell at peace among the people of God (1 Kings 22:46).

1. It is not a righteous nation that tolerates what God abominates in His Holy Law (Leviticus 18:22), nor does a Christian, a Christian family, or Christian church. It is righteousness in keeping God’s commandments that exalts a nation (Proverbs 14:34), not allowing God and His commandments to be trampled underfoot by those who are seeking to destroy every institution God has established (marriage and family, church, and state). In order for a nation to see real reformation, it must begin with acknowledging its sin, seeking God’s forgiveness, reforming the laws and institutions to conformity to God’s law.

2. The chief sin of this nation is not sodomy or abortion, but is idolatry, false religion, blasphemy, covenant-breaking, and Sabbath-breaking. May God grant us as a nation many Jehoshaphats that will turn this nation away from destruction and unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Is a land that is filled with sodomites worse than a land that is filled with idolaters, with adulterers, or murderers? It was the fact that each of these commandments was tolerated and excused in church and state that led to such rampant and defiant exaltation of sodomy. A Jesuit priest, Thomas Reese, columnist for “The National Catholic Reporter” has noted,

As someone who has traveled in church circles for most of my adult life, and who, for the past 22 years has spoken with clergy all over the country, anecdotal evidence convinces me that the number [of homosexual priests] is at least 50% and most likely much more”
<https://www.newwaysministry.org/2016/12/12/lets-find-out-the-real-number-of-gay-priests-in-the-church>).

4. When ecclesiastical leaders themselves become Sodom and Gomorrah, it will leaven families and governments in tolerating and exalting that sin (and other perversions like pedophilia) in politics, religion, news media, television, music, and sports. Make no mistake; it is not the agenda of this homosexual movement to find “equality. The goal is to destroy God, the Bible, the Christian faith, and every divine institution in this nation. Dear ones, we will have no effect in our testimony if we do not begin as God’s people with our own sexual sins and our own idols that we serve in the secret altars of our own hearts (1 Peter 4:17). We may not be able to clean the house of this nation, but we can begin by cleaning our own life and our own house of all such pollutions by God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Let us stop rationalizing that just because we only sin in our mind, or before our eyes in what we watch, or with our own hands and not with some other person, that we are not offending the Lord as others are (Matthew 5:28). God help us!

II. The Smoke of a Christian (1 Kings 22:43-44,48-53).

A. Have seen the fire of effectual grace evidenced in Jehoshaphat’s life and reign, let us now briefly consider the smoke of corruption that yet tainted the life and rule of Jehoshaphat. There were two ways noted by the Holy Spirit in which that smoke of sin and compromise revealed itself.

1. Jehoshaphat did not remove the high places where incense was offered to the Lord throughout the kingdom of Judah (1 Kings 22:43). He did remove the high places and groves dedicated to false gods (2 Chronicles 17:6). This was a violation of not of the First Commandment, but of the Second Commandment; for God commanded all sacrifices to be brought to the tabernacle or temple (Deuteronomy 12:14). We also read of the same compromise in Solomon (1 Kings 3:3), Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:31), Asa (1 Kings 15:14), and all the kings of Judah except Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:8) who both destroyed all of the high places.

2. The Lord may be longsuffering with our sins and weaknesses, but he does not approve of them. This does not reveal God’s toleration of sin, but rather His amazing mercy in spite of our sin and corruption. Just because God is merciful and longsuffering, should we reason that we can continue in our compromise, in our offenses against the Lord, or in disobedience to that which He has commanded? Can we make excuses for our sin that God will be merciful? Dear ones, this is simply putting the Lord to the test if you know what the Lord already commands you to do. It may have been because Jehoshaphat compromised in the matter of the high places that he set himself up to compromise in the matter of unholy alliances. Perhaps Jehoshaphat was simply following the will of the people who wanted their high places, but that is not a reason to offend the Lord. Better to offend man than God.

B. This now leads us to the final compromise of Jehoshaphat that is noted here in 1 Kings 22—his unholy alliance with the wicked kings of Israel (which likely began with giving his son Jehoram to be married to wicked Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel). From that unholy alliance came an unholy peace with Israel which led to other alliances that the Lord also condemned (he joined in war with Ahab against the Syrians in 1 Kings 22—2 Chronicles 19:1-2; he joined in a wicked venture with Ahaziah to build ships to go to Tarshish in 2 Chronicles 20:35-37—1 Kings 22:48-49—he joined in war with Jehoram against the Moabites in 2 Kings 3).

C. Dear ones, must we unite with other Reformed Churches who have fallen away from those

doctrines and practices that are agreeable to Scripture and were taught and practiced by our faithful forefather? Many believe that this is evidence of brotherly love.

1. However, our brotherly love is demonstrated not in following others in their course of defection from the truth, but rather in calling them to join us in standing for the biblical faith of our faithful forefathers (as summarized in our Terms of Communion).

2. We actually demonstrate our love for the Lord and for all our brethren in saying to them, unite with us as we follow the Lord Jesus. We love you and welcome you. We will throw our arms around you. That is real love. Any supposed love that advocates that we should follow others to do what God has not authorized and what would amount to betrayal of our covenant with Him is not the love of Jesus Christ, which calls us to keep His commandments.

Praise God for the fire of effectual grace in the life of every Christian, but let us not make excuses for the smoke of corruption, sin, compromise, and unholy alliances. Dear ones, our only hope is that Jesus Christ will not quench the smoking flax because in the smoking flax is the fire and heat of His effectual grace. Jesus will not put it out nor will He allow it to go out. It is His office and is effectual work to fan the embers in order that the fire of effectual grace will never die. As we sorrow over the smoking flax in us, let us not forget that we were all chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world that you should be holy and without blame before Him in love (Ephesians 1:4). That is the end and goal of the Christian life—the fire of holiness—not the smoke of corruption. Praise God—He is not finished with us. Jesus will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax. Amen.

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