

“Is Your Pocketbook Baptized?”

On the wall of President Lyndon Johnson's White House office hung a framed letter written by General Sam Houston to Johnson's great-grandfather Baines more than a hundred years earlier. Sam Houston's signature makes the letter valuable, but the story behind it is much more significant. Baines had led Sam Houston to Christ. Houston was a changed man, no longer coarse and belligerent, but peaceful and content. The day came for Sam Houston to be baptized--an incredible event in the eyes of those who knew his previous life-style and attitude. After his baptism Houston stated he would like to pay half the local minister's salary. When someone asked him why, his simple response was, "My pocketbook was baptized too." (Randy C. Alcorn, Money, Possessions and Eternity, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989).

When God enters our lives, we become changed people. When our focus is on the Almighty, then nothing else can receive more attention. But when we lose sight of the One who has redeemed us, the One who gave his life for us because he loved us, when we focus on something other than Jesus, trouble is surely to follow. Such is the story of Joash.

Joash is not a character which is found in most children's story books. Most Children's Sunday School literature does not include his biography. He is obscure to say the least. His name is found in the lineage of David; he was in his blood-line and a successor to the Kingdom. As you may recall, the nation of Israel enjoyed its brightest days when David was their king. After he left the throne, his successors did not follow their ancestor's allegiance. They allowed other gods to enter the worship place; they sought the counsel of other royalty rather than the supreme wisdom of God. Eventually Israel was divided into a northern and southern kingdom, Israel to the north and Judah to the south. From that point, each nation had their own king. When Joash's grand-father died, there was a leadership vacuum in Judah, the southern kingdom. Athaliah seized the throne and killed all of the deceased king's children and grand-children ... all except Joash. As an infant, he was taken to the Temple by his great-aunt and great-uncle. They hid him there and raised him. Joash's great-uncle was Jehoiada, who was also the chief-priest. When Joash was seven years old, he was coronated king by his uncle the chief-priest, and the throne was rightfully taken from Athaliah and given to Joash.

II Chronicles 24 divides the forty-year reign of Joash into two sections: reigning with Jehoiada as advisor and then the reign after the death of Jehoiada. As long as Joash listened to Jehoiada, he did what was right in the sight of the Lord. As an adult, he was married and had children. In that society, children were interpreted as blessings from God; the Chronicler wanted his readers to know that Joash had received God's blessings. Joash was following God's directives.

Joash realized that the Temple needed some attention. During the reign of Athaliah, the Temple had been desecrated with worship of false gods. Baal worship had defiled the holy place; negligence had replaced reverence. Joash started a Temple renovation campaign.

He had a meeting with the Temple workers: the priests and the Levites. He ordered them to collect money from all over the countryside. The Temple was in urgent need of repair, and they were charged with seeking collections. They were to raise enough money so that the Temple could be kept under constant repair. The work was to be done annually, an on-going campaign so that the facility would not depreciate for years.

We know that Uncle Jehoiada gave his blessing to the proposal because later his secretary assisted with the counting of the money. King Joash put together a plan for Temple restoration. He had a chest constructed to collect the money. The chest would be set beside the Temple gate. This was a strategic site because the Temple was the nerve-center of activity in Jerusalem. Dropping

money into the chest would be readily accessible. Anyone could do it. The rich and the poor could give simultaneously. Also, those who were giving could take a look at the obvious Temple needs.

Next, he sent out the priests and Levites to communicate the need to the people. He then issued a proclamation to make it official. The proclamation was intended for the folks in town and out in the country. The urgency was for everyone to contribute so that the Temple could be repaired.

In our society, some people lament the fact that the church asks for money. The church should not have to *ask* for money. "That preacher is never satisfied," some might say. But the fact is that one should not give to please the preacher. One should not give to "look good" to his/her peers. We should be giving out of our love for God. The perspective of the giver shows where his/her treasure lies.

So did the nation of Judah lament when they received the plea for money? No, instead they rejoiced! They were *delighted* to give. Did you notice who was listed first as giving? Verse 10 reads, "And all the **officers** and all the people rejoiced and brought in their levies and dropped them into the chest until they had finished." The Chronicler first listed the leaders as those who rejoiced and gave.

As the chest filled daily, the Levites brought the chest to the King's officer. The king's scribe and the chief priest's officer would empty the chest, and then it would be returned to its strategic position. Much money was received. King Joash and Chief Priest Jehoiada apportioned the money for the needs of the Temple. Verse 12 says they "gave it to those who did the work of the service of the house of the Lord." The Temple was restored and refurnished by the goodness of the people.

All this was done because the focus of the people was upon God. After Chief Priest Jehoiada died, King Joash began listening to other influences. In the second half of Joash's reign, he murdered Jehoiada's son, a prophet who advised the King to return to the Lord. Judah and Jerusalem were invaded by an army from Damascus who killed the country's officials and greatly injured Joash. Because of the murder of Jehoiada's son, Joash's servants sought revenge and killed Joash while he was in his own bed. When Joash removed his focus from God, evil resulted.

Although he lived many centuries ago, the life of Joash offers many lessons. The primary lesson is that we will do what is right when our focus is on God. It is only logical if we think about it. If I have a goal of losing 15 pounds, I need to keep my focus. If I really want to lose that weight, I need to do certain things: exercise, eat right, cut back on fried foods, fats and sweets. If while on a trip, I am enticed by fried chicken, fettuccine Alfredo and hot Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and eat those delectable delights, then I will lose my focus, thus not losing my weight. Likewise, if our focus is on Christ, we will do what is right.

If our focus is on Christ, like Sam Houston, we will "baptize our pocketbooks." The story of Joash gives us some tips on how we should give if our focus is on Christ.

We should be methodical and regular in our giving. Joash had a plan for the people. The chest was strategically placed; a decree was issued; the people gave.

A daughter of the Rockefellers told a gathering on National Philanthropy Day in New York City that her father gave her an allowance of 15 cents a week. He had her make up three boxes: "mine," "savings," and "others." Each week she put one nickel in each box. At Christmas time, she and her father emptied the "others" box and counted it. After much discussion with her father, she selected a charity, went to the bank with her father, got a cashier's check for the amount in the box, and mailed it to the charity. She proudly proclaimed that she still followed her father's principle of "one third to charity." (Douglas M. Lawson, Give to Live California: ALTI Publishing, 1991, p. 72.)

None of us are as wealthy as the Rockefellers were. Most of us do not have enough discretionary income that we can give 33 1/3% of our income to charity. Or even that much into savings. But, I think there are some great truths in teaching our children about giving. As parents, we

should be teaching our children the importance of imparting to others. If you give your child an allowance, I encourage you to also set up a similar system, where some money is saved and some is given to charity. I was taught to give 10% of my earnings to the church. When I cut grass as a teenager, I got \$5/yard. My parents encouraged me to give \$.50 to the church. Because that pattern was started at an early age, it is easier to maintain it as an adult.

If you are not presently tithing, giving 10% to the church, then I encourage you to determine what percentage you can give this church year and seek to raise it in the years to come until you reach 10%. Write your check to the church as part of your routine. If your routine includes paying accounts at a certain time of the month, include your contribution to the church at that time. Be methodical, regular, and consistent. God should be worth more to you than what you have left over at months' end.

Another truth from our passage is that the officers led in giving but that *all* gave. Church leaders are to set the example in service. We expect our leaders to guide us in worship, in missions, in Bible Study, in Committee work, in Fellowship, and all aspects of church life. Our church leaders are to be examples at church and away from church. Our church leaders are also to be pacesetters in their giving patterns.

A new pastor was called to a church and met privately with three deacons, whom he perceived were leaders in the church. Wondering about the finances of the church, he inquired about the giving patterns. The first deacon said, "Well Pastor, when I get paid, I cash my check and then throw all the money into the air. What lands on heads I keep and what lands on tails I give to God."

"Hmm." The pastor thought that was an odd system, so he turned to the next deacon who said, "Well Pastor, my system is methodical as well, but takes a different slant. I have drawn a chalk line on my front porch. I cash my paycheck and while straddling the chalk line, I throw the money in the air. What lands on the right side of the line I keep, and what lands on the left side, I give to the church."

"Interesting," said the pastor. So he turned to the third deacon who said "Pastor, I have to confess to you: As a leader in the church, I realize that I should be setting an example. I heard about how these other two deacons were deciding what to give, and I also realized that my giving pattern needed to be unique. So I cash my paycheck and then go home. I throw my money into the air and say this prayer, "God, take what you want and let drop what you want me to have."

Leaders should be setting positive examples and certainly one of these positive examples should be their financial giving to the church.

A final truth of how we should give if our focus is on Christ is that we should give gladly. The people rejoiced at the opportunity to give, and they gave willingly.

Many people would call Charles E. Schmidt a foolish man. He gave away ten million dollars. That's right! Free and clear...to Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton for a new Fine Arts building and program in memory of his wife. At the time, it was the largest cash donation ever given to an academic program at any state university in Florida. "I decided to do something terrific, because she was a terrific person," he said.

The university president, Anthony Catanese, called it a "gift of love." Others would call it a "gift of foolishness." Ten million dollars for love? Yet, he was happy. ("What Kind of Fool Am I?" by C. Thomas Hilton, *The Clergy Journal*, February 1995, p. 22.)

Other scriptural references remind us about giving gladly. II Corinthians 9:7 reads, "God loves a cheerful giver," and Acts 20:35 counsels us, "To remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

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The primary truth of the story of Joash is to keep our focus on God. And if we do so, we will also give regularly for the work of the church, which is the Body of Christ. If our focus is on Christ, our church officers will lead in giving, but everyone will give; and all will give gladly.

So back to the title of the sermon, “Is Your Pocketbook Baptized?” If you have placed Christ as the Lord of your life, then *all* aspects of your life will be honorable to God including your giving. If you are keeping your focus on Jesus, then you can repeat the words of Sam Houston when he said, “My pocketbook was baptized too.” May it be so. AMEN.