

The world's greatest relationships

In March, 1994, United States troops were involved in a humanitarian mission to Somalia. It had a similar ring to it as our on-going humanitarian mission to Haiti. Part of the picture of such a country, a part rarely told by the media, is how corrupt and in disarray the power structure of such a country can be.

In Somalia, in 1994, our troops faced corruption and bloody chaos like they hadn't seen since the days of the Vietnam War.

To continue the humanitarian mission, US forces knew they had to enter into – in what they hoped to be a very fast mission – the Civil War that had created the chaos and suffering in the first place.

The soldiers assigned the dangerous raid were the most well-trained and most elite our country has to offer. The Army provided Delta Force Ranger teams. The Navy came with its Seals. The Air Force supplied an elite group of Pararescue/Air Force Combat Controllers. In all, there were 160 men in an assault force of 19 aircraft and 12 vehicles.

As soon as the mission started, things began to unravel. Two US Black Hawk helicopters were shot down by rocket-propelled grenades, and three others were hit. While most of the mission team escaped, some were trapped at the crash sites and cut off.

Through a long, ugly night, an urban battle ensued, and the streets ran with blood. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Somali fighters were killed or wounded. No one has ever confirmed the numbers, and estimates vary wildly.

The Americans at the crash sites collected their wounded, waited for help, fought off attacks, and one by one, died in the streets of Mogadishu. In all, there were 18 deaths. Another 73 Americans were wounded. It would go down as one of the darkest nights in modern warfare for American troops.

It would also provide living proof that for many of those who wear the uniform of this country, the oath to care for fellow war fighters is taken very, very seriously.

Two Delta Force snipers, MSG Gary Gordon and SFC Randy Shughart, had been trained for just such a mission. Part of their code of honor? To leave no fellow American behind. Not if he was alive, wounded, or even dead. Gordon and Shughart volunteered to be dropped inside the kill zones, and they were. They fought valiantly all night, but when daylight came, they were among the 18 dead. Only one of their fellow soldiers managed to live through the attacks, but for that one man, they were willing to give their lives.

This, in the Army, is about brotherhood. It's about protecting one another, covering the back of the man or woman who fights on your side.

To call such a “relationship” a friendship is far too light a description. This relationship is the kind Jesus spoke of when he said: “Greater love has no man than this ... that he lay down his life for his friends.”

The men and women who serve with integrity, and especially those who have served in the thick of battle, understand that kind of love better than perhaps any people on the planet. For a lay-down-your-life love will, indeed, create the world’s greatest relationships.

A husband and wife getting it right can do this.

Here we are on Valentine’s Day, when every retailer in America is trying to get you to buy flowers, cards, candy, or even a matching washer-dryer set in the name of love. Before the weekend is over, it is anticipated that we’ll spend \$15 billion trying to express our love for one another. And all the time, Jesus keeps saying: “It’s *much more costly* than that.”

In the teaching for the early church, it was about mutual submission. “Submit one to another,” Paul wrote to the Ephesians. For the wives, he simply said, “Submit to your husbands.” To the husbands, he said, “Love your wife the way Christ loved the church. In other words, wash her feet. Die for her. Live for her.” (see Ephesians 5).

Couples who pull this off find that they soon develop that level of relationship that could, indeed, be called part of the world’s greatest relationships.

That kind of submissive, sacrificial, lay-down-your-life love can be seen in the church, among friendships, even in business relationships.

And most of all, it should be seen in our relationship with God.

Our example comes again from one of the kings of Judah. His name was Jehoshaphat, and he goes down in history as one of the good kings. By and large, he got it right. But Jehoshaphat was far from perfect. In fact, in the area of relationships, he made some mistakes that carried such bitter consequences, the ramifications would be felt all the way down to the third generation of his own family.

Let’s start his story with this simple truth:

The greatest relationships first establish a foundational relationship with God.

In the beginning, Jehoshaphat could do no wrong. Why? Listen to the Bible’s description of his life:

2 Chronicles 17:3-6, 10-13

3 The LORD was with Jehoshaphat because in his early years he walked in the ways his father David had followed. He did not consult the Baals 4 but sought the God of his father and followed his commands rather than the practices of Israel. 5 The LORD established the kingdom under his control; and all Judah brought gifts to Jehoshaphat, so that he had great wealth and honor. 6 His heart was devoted to the ways of the LORD; furthermore, he removed the high places and the Asherah poles from Judah.

10 The fear of the LORD fell on all the kingdoms of the lands surrounding Judah, so that they did not make war with Jehoshaphat. 11 Some Philistines brought Jehoshaphat gifts and silver as tribute, and the Arabs brought him flocks: seven thousand seven hundred rams and seven thousand seven hundred goats.

12 Jehoshaphat became more and more powerful; he built forts and store cities in Judah 13 and had large supplies in the towns of Judah. He also kept experienced fighting men in Jerusalem.

For a few years, in the early years, Jehoshaphat operated right by the book. The Word of God told him how to live, and told him how his people were to live, and he decided to do just exactly that. And as he lived out the plan, his life was blessed.

Now be very careful here. Sometimes, you'll hear a preacher go on and on about claiming God's blessings. If you get in his church, if you give money to his ministry – and that's the really important part – you can go to God and “claim” your blessing. You do the right thing, and apparently, God “owes” you.

I saw a very expensive luxury car in a parking lot recently, in our community. And the front license plate had the words, “The blessing of God” all spelled out in glittery letters. It was a clear indication that a godly life would be evidenced in the wealth that God provides.

Which is hogwash. Worse than hogwash. But I can't say those words in church. It's just garbage. Half the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day, and a whole lot of those folks feel like they've connected with the blessing of God through the grace they've found in Jesus Christ. And the Jesus of the Scripture owned so little, it should make every single American squirm in the midst of our wealth ... wondering what Jesus would do with the resources we have.

Another sermon for another day.

But here's the truth. Every choice does carry consequences. And if you line up with the choices God has already decreed, why wouldn't we expect that the consequences of those choices would be good? Maybe you'll never see a dime of blessing in the material sense. But if you have a good marriage, stand in awe of it. Most couples don't. If you have a friend or two, and I mean, a really good friend, count yourself blessed. If you can hear these words, comprehend these words, read these words, count yourself blessed. Some are born without the ability to ever understand simple communication.

If your family is with you today, if the children are well and the parents are nearby, count yourself blessed. I've been with two families this week who were ripped apart by deaths they never saw coming. One was a 52-year-old youth minister in the prime of life, and the other was a 14-year-old girl who never had a chance to see where life would take her. Those families are reinterpreting the blessing of God today. A quiet night at home with the people you love the most ... priceless. Priceless.

And to follow the God who laid down the instructions for our relationships ... the blessings will follow. For Jehoshaphat, it was only natural. It was God's math. Follow the instructions, reap the benefits.

But now we come to the most important part of the message. For this, I am afraid, is where most Christians who miss the mark in their relationships, have their core problem.

Bad company is a bad idea.

A little background. Here's what the Bible says about the king in the north. Remember, Jehoshaphat was in the South.

1 Kings 15:29-33

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.

Now, down in the south, during the same time period, Jehoshaphat becomes king of Judah.

1 Kings 22:41-44

41 Jehoshaphat son of Asa became king of Judah in the fourth year of Ahab king of Israel. 42 Jehoshaphat was thirty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-five years. His mother's name was Azubah daughter of Shilhi. 43 In everything he walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. The high places, however, were not removed, and the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there. 44 Jehoshaphat was also at peace with the king of Israel.

Let's re-word that. Jehoshaphat established a friendship with Ahab, who was married to Jezebel, a husband-wife combination that still rings of the most evil leadership Israel ever knew. Together, they brought Baal and Asherah worship to an all-time high of popularity. It was just in frenzy. Sexually, nothing was barred. Anything and everything was on public display, hoping to lure the pagan gods to be more active in their own acts of

fertility. And the thing that tipped the scales, the thing that brought Elijah into action, was the introduction of child sacrifice.

It had come from Phoenicia, the home of Jezebel. And Ahab intentionally brought Jezebel into Israel, God's land. This was bad company of the worst kind. Disaster was the only logical conclusion. Ironically – tellingly – for most of those years it didn't look like disaster was coming. These were heady days. These were days when the northern kingdom was getting richer by the year. They were becoming more and more powerful. The people misinterpreted their material blessings as a stamp of approval from God for what they were doing in the land.

But it was exactly the opposite of what God had commanded. Burning children in the fire? "It never entered my mind!" God said through one of the prophets. It was detestable. It was unthinkable. And a wise man of God would have kept far, far away from this kind of leadership, these kind of people.

But Jehoshaphat not only didn't keep away. He went to Ahab. He went to Jezebel. He came into their palace and proposed an alliance between the two countries. Listen to the conversation in the throne room of Israel, when Jehoshaphat traveled to enemy territory and sat down with the most evil man of his generation..

1 Kings 22:4-7

4 So he (*meaning Ahab*) asked Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to fight against Ramoth Gilead?"

Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, "I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses." 5 But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, "First seek the counsel of the LORD."

6 So the king of Israel brought together the prophets—about four hundred men—and asked them, "Shall I go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?"

"Go," they answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand."

7 But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there not a prophet of the LORD here whom we can inquire of?"

He's torn. He keeps asking: "What about the Lord?" But he's in a place that doesn't care about the Lord. So he's pulled in two directions ... *because of where he is, and with whom he's made a friend*. This friendship, this relationship, is already making him compromise his core value relationship with God.

The end result? The two kings go to battle. Their troops are destroyed there, and Ahab loses his life. Jezebel is not far behind him in losing her life.

Jehoshaphat manages to live through the experience, but he makes *another* alliance with the next king of Israel, Joram. When they consulted Elisha the prophet, the first thing Elisha wants to know is why Jehoshaphat is surrounded by the men of Israel. It's bad company. They win the next battle, but Jehoshaphat is losing in more ways than even he can see.

2 Kings 8:16-19

In the fifth year of Joram son of Ahab king of Israel, when Jehoshaphat was king of Judah, Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat began his reign as king of Judah. He was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years. He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for he married a daughter of Ahab. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD. Nevertheless, for the sake of his servant David, the LORD was not willing to destroy Judah. He had promised to maintain a lamp for David and his descendants forever.

This is important. Jehoshaphat has a son, and not only does his son maintain a friendship with the king of the north, he *marries a daughter of Ahab*. And Ahab was married to Jezebel. Be careful here. The Bible doesn't tell us that the son of Jehoshaphat married a daughter of Jezebel. Perhaps Ahab had other wives. Nevertheless, this is a marriage designed for disaster. This is bad from the start.

The woman Jehoram – the son of Jehoshaphat – married was named Athaliah. She was a granddaughter of Omri, king of Israel, and a daughter of Ahab. She had been around wickedness all of her life. Nothing of God's design was sacred to her.

And when her husband died after only eight years of rule, his 22-year-old son became king. He lasted only one year, leaving his mother, the daughter of Ahab, running the political scene in Jerusalem. In effect, Jezebel II is in charge of God's city! This is one of the lowest points in the history of Judah.

How wicked was Athaliah? When she took control of Jerusalem, she had all of her grandchildren murdered so none of them would claim the power she knew. That's the news of 2 Kings 11, which begins with the statement that Athaliah set out to destroy the whole royal family.

Thankfully, one of the grandchildren, a baby boy named Joash, was stolen away to safety, and seven years later, he would be named king. At that point Athaliah was killed, and a terrible chapter of Judah's history was finally closed.

That's a lot of history. And it's all very sad history. As Judah's history went, it stands to be one of the three worst times in the nation's existence. Know why it happened?

Because Jehoshaphat kept bad company. He made friends with people who should have been enemies. He got mixed up in things that didn't mix with God's people. And the repercussions lasted three generations after he died.

Bad company is a bad idea? Look what it did to Jehoshaphat and his family.

It compromised the morals Jehoshaphat knew to be true and wise.

The friendships the father knew led directly to a marriage his son knew.

And when it was time to suffer the consequences of his choices, the consequences proved to be much more difficult than he had ever imagined.

Can I tell you that this is still true? You make choices to mix with the wrong crowd, the wrong crowd will put you in a blender and watch everything you knew to be true and good turned to pulp.

When Jehoshaphat returned home, he was met by a prophet. His message?

“Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Because of this, the wrath of God is upon you!” (2 Chronicles 19:2)

I’d apply this to every area of life.

In marriage, you want to be careful to select a mate who has the same core values that God honors. The Bible says we’re not to be yoked to unbelievers. There are some here today who did exactly that, and after a few years, could stand up and bear witness: “This is the truth. Be sure you’re on the same page spiritually with the person you marry. Do not be yoked to unbelievers.”

There are those here who could also say: “Don’t be yoked with unbelievers in business.” There are young adults in prison, right now, who would say to our students: “Don’t be yoked with unbelievers at school, either. You hang around the people who are doing illegal things? Let them get arrested, and it won’t matter if you weren’t doing anything wrong. Everyone in the car gets hauled off to jail, and some of them become guilty accomplices.

To be yoked is to be bound together. If you’re the kind of person desperate for close relationships, Jehoshaphat would beg you to listen: “Bad company is a bad idea.

But if this king were talking, he’d surely tell you the happy ending to his story. For even in his worst days, he found out that where he had begun in life was where the answers to all his problems still lay. For he came back to God. He remembered his faith. And he would soon see the greatest miracle of his life.

Crisis will unveil the world’s best relationships.

In other words, you’ll learn what kind of relationship you really have in the midst of a crisis. You’ll find out what kind of relationship you’ve got with other people, and with God. The classroom of suffering, the science lab of crisis, will bring it to light almost instantly. You and other people and God Himself will soon find out what you’ve really meant about your relationship with Him.

Consider Jehoshaphat.

Israel, the northern kingdom, was beaten badly. Jehoshaphat barely escaped with his life. He lost most of his troops. His power base was slashed. Not surprisingly, when he was in this weakened condition, two fresh armies from the south came up against Jerusalem and Jehoshaphat.

This time, there was no one to help.

And that proved to be the very best thing that ever happened to Jehoshaphat. He was about to find that the only relationship he had ever needed was the one where he'd made his first investment.

Short end of the story. Intelligence reports came flying into Jerusalem that a vast army had crossed the Dead Sea, was gathered at En Gedi, and was, at that moment, only 15 miles away.

Understand ... it was a rough 15 miles. If you hike through the Judean Wilderness today, pack enough food and water for a three-day hike. The Judean Wilderness is filled with twisting, winding canyons, and the entire land is simply not conducive to having homes there.

But the wilderness can be hiked. And a great army storing up fresh water and food at En Gedi wouldn't have any trouble coming against Jerusalem. With a weakened army, with only the walls of the city to protect him, Jehoshaphat fell to his knees and prayed to the God who had just become his only source of help.

He called the nation together. He commanded a fast, and in a state of panic, the nation fasted. They prayed. They begged God for help. They asked for forgiveness.

And God helped.

A prophet stood up in the midst of the people – all of them praying, crying out to God – and he announced that he had an answer.

2 Chronicles 20:15-17

15 He said: "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. 16 Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. 17 You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.' "

The people believed the prophet, and they began celebrating. They sang and they sang and they sang. In fact, they liked the music so much, that they decided – now check this out, this is true – to send the choir in front of their army!

We like to send the planes out first. Shock and awe, bomb them into submission ... that kind of thing.

They sent the choir.

I've always suspected they made the tenors go first. Just a suspicion. Smallest group, you know. But I cannot imagine what that felt like, hearing this battle plan.

Can you imagine it? "Hey Scott," says the commander in chief. "We're going against the terror camp strongholds in the mountains of Afghanistan tomorrow, and we want you ... *to go first*. ... With your guitar."

They went, and when they came to where the enemy armies were, they found nothing but dead bodies. The Bible says it took three days to recover all the loot.

And not a string on the first guitar was harmed. They renamed the valley the "Valley of Beracah," which means, "the Valley of Praise."

And Jehoshaphat found out what he should have known all along. The God who wanted to be first in his life had everything he needed. He didn't need to make an alliance with Ahab in order to enlarge his territory. He had a God who could defeat mighty armies with musicians, for crying out loud.

You get a crisis in your life, you're going to find out where you've made your investments in faith.

I am so sick of what I call a "country-music level" of Christianity, this kind of feel-good, desperation hope that so many people have when they hit crisis. They say things that are completely unbiblical. They remember how sweet a person was. They remember all the good that a person had in them. And most of the time, the memories are accurate.

But the only question: Did you ever have that life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ?

Not some kind of watered-down, formulaic prayer that served as a way to let you sleep without worrying about hell. I mean ... have you ever come to the Lord the way Jehoshaphat came? Have you ever laid down in fasting and prayer and sleeplessness and begged God to help, told God that He was the only hope you had?

Right there, on that day, crisis will peel back all the layers of pretending and tell you, tell the people around you, and tell God what he already knows. For crisis will tell you what kind of faith you've really got.

And when he tells you to go into battle with songs of praise, knowing that somehow – despite the crisis – God is very much in control, then you shall finally know the victory.

Conclusion

It's Valentine's Day, so I'll end with a story of romance.

Tedd Kidd was five years older than Janet, finished college before her, and started to work in a city hundreds of miles from her. They always seemed to be at different places in their lives. But they had been dating for seven years.

Every Valentine's Day, Tedd proposed to her. Every Valentine's Day, Janet would say, "No, not yet."

Finally, when they were both living in Dallas, Texas, Tedd reached the end of his patience. He bought a ring, took Janet to a romantic restaurant, and was prepared to reinforce his proposal with the diamond. Another "No" would mean he had to get on with his life without her.

After salad, entree, and dessert, it was time. Both of them knew, after all those years of Valentine's Day proposals and rejections, that it was time for a life-defining question and answer. Tedd summoned up his courage.

Janet, however, spoke first. "I've got a gift for you," she said. She handed him a box the size of a book. He opened the package and slowly peeled away the tissue paper. It was a cross-stitch Janet had made that simply said, "Yes."

(Source: Rubel Shelly, Nashville, Tennessee; story told at Janet's funeral after 17 years of marriage to Tedd.)

This is God's message to us. He's already said, "Yes." He loves you. He wants to be in a life-changing, life-enriching relationship with each one of us. And here we are on Valentine's Day, as God waits on your answer. Will you say yes to Him?