

Lessons from King Asa Starting Strong....Finishing Weak

Intro: Almost all governments have records of the proceedings of its rulers; and ancient Israel was no exception. Frequently we can see in our Bible reading the references to the Annals of the King, which might have been something like an official record of the activities of Israel's and Judah's kings. However, our Biblical books of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles are not intended to be exhaustive political records of the kings of Israel and Judah, but instead they are spiritual commentaries, written by God's prophets, intended to enlighten us through the experiences of Israel's leaders. With that in mind I want to consider what we might learn from one of Judah's leaders, King Asa.

Asa lived during the period of the divided kingdom. He was the son of Abijah who was in turn the son of Rehoboam. Upon Rehoboam's death, Abijah took his father's throne; and though he showed commendable faith in his war with Jeroboam, the record is clear that "his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been" (1 Kg. 15:3-5). And it is clear that the Queen Mother Maacah had a very unhealthy influence upon the affairs of the kingdom. She wielded her influence to erect what the prophet calls "a horrid image as an Asherah" (1 Kg. 15:13). Yet in spite of these evil influences, Asa managed to overcome the ungodly influences of the Queen Mother as well as his father Abijah. We can see him...

Starting Strong

Called upon the nation to purify its faith and eliminate the remnants of idolatry

And Asa did good and right in the sight of the Lord his God, for he removed the foreign altars and high places, tore down the sacred pillars, cut down the Asherim, and commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers and to observe the law and the commandment. He also removed the high places and the incense altars from all the cities of Judah. And the kingdom was undisturbed under him. (2 Chronicles 14:2-5)

The prophet helps us see that Asa was a devoted follower of the covenant of God. He really knew God meant it when he said, "You shall not make any graven image". Though Israel had characteristically fallen into the worship of the gods of the Canaanites, this king had taken a stand against this great evil in the land. It was an act of strong faith to resist the popular views of the people and bring them back to the worship of God.

God's reward was to give Asa rest from enemies and he acknowledged God's providence as he used this time of peace to fortify the cities of his kingdom (2 Chron. 14:6-8).

Showed amazing faith in the defeat of Zerah the Ethiopian

God presented to Asa a test that would challenge his faith and help him grow stronger in it. A vast army led by Zerah the Ethiopian came to attack Asa's kingdom. Asa was to show amazing faith and reliance upon the Lord.

Then Asa called to the Lord his God, and said, "Lord, there is no one besides Thee to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O Lord our God, for we trust in Thee, and in Thy name have come against this multitude. O Lord, Thou art our God; let not man prevail against Thee." (2 Chronicles 14:11)

Asa strength is seen in his great faith in prayer which accompanied his loyalty to the Lord. The Lord's reward was a wonderful victory over a formidable opponent.

It was apparently a strategic time in Asa's life and God graciously provided a message for him to help him through the next years of his life. Azariah came with a new word from the Lord:

Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: the Lord is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you. (2 Chronicles 15:2)

The prophet rehearsed in Asa's hearing what had happened in the past and urged Asa not to let that happen this time, instead encouraging him with additional exhortation:

"But you, be strong and do not lose courage, for there is reward for your work." (2 Chronicles 15:7)

Continued the work of restoration of the true worship of Jehovah

In the period of peace that followed, Asa followed up on the words of God's prophet. 2 Chronicles 15 records one of the great reformations in ancient Israel

- Removed the abominable idols from the land

- Rebuilt the altar of the Lord

- Re-instituted the covenant with the Lord with great sacrifices

The prophet describes its wonderful culmination:

And they entered into the covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their heart and soul; and whoever would not seek the Lord God of Israel should be put to death, whether small or great, man or woman. Moreover, they made an oath to the Lord with a loud voice, with shouting, with trumpets, and with horns. And all Judah rejoiced concerning the oath, for they had sworn with their whole heart and had sought Him earnestly, and He let them find Him. So the Lord gave them rest on every side. (2 Chronicles 15:12-15)

And we could wish that the story ended there since it conveys so wonderfully the godly leadership of a man with a heart singularly devoted to the Lord and no other. However the man who we see starting strong is also now found...

Finishing Weak

Sought a political solution to the threat of Baasha, king of Israel

Here's the short version: Baasha was building a fortification at Ramah to prevent people from going in and out of Judah. However Asa, after showing the greatest reliance upon God in the defeat of Zerah, sought in this case a political solution to the threat of Baasha. Essentially he used the wealth of his kingdom and the temple to buy the help of Ben-Hadad, king of Syria.

It was successful in the sense that it ended Baasha's ploy to interfere; but it reflected a different attitude than Asa had earlier shown in relying upon the Lord for victory. God made known his displeasure through the prophet Hanani:

Because you have relied on the king of Aram and have not relied on the Lord your God, therefore the army of the king of Aram has escaped out of your hand. Were not the Ethiopians and the Lubim an immense army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet, because you relied on the Lord, He delivered them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. You have acted foolishly in this. Indeed, from now on you will surely have wars." (2 Chronicles 16:7-9)

Hanani prophecy indicates that through this act of compromise and self-reliance Asa would surrender the opportunity to conquer not only the king of Israel but also Syria. Now both would be a thorn in his side for life! But to this Asa added another sin:

Refused to hear God's rebuke through the prophet Hanani

Suddenly the man who had provided such great leadership to others would not be led by the prophet of God himself.

Then Asa was angry with the seer and put him in prison, for he was enraged at him for this. And Asa oppressed some of the people at the same time. (2 Chronicles 16:10)

He let his pride get the best of him and in a rage threw the prophet in prison and oppressed his own people! It appears that Asa had allowed his pride to get in the way of his own repentance. And it appears that for all his devotion to the Lord earlier in life, he..

Would not seek the help of God in his old age

The prophet adds this final footnote:

And in the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa became diseased in his feet. His disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but the physicians. (2 Chronicles 16:12)

Perhaps God in a final act of discipline allowed Asa to be afflicted with a disease of the feet. Such a disease might have been the occasion to turn to the Lord; but instead Asa proudly and stubbornly refused to ask help of the Lord, turning instead to his "physicians". And thus, we might describe this man who started so strong... finishing a commendable life of faith with spiritual weakness.

How did it happen? And what can we learn?

I've often thought about how it is that a person of outstanding faith and action can somehow surrender it all in the middle of life and abandon all that had been achieved and spoil it all through unbelief and sin. What made Asa go from the man of strength to the man of weakness? I submit there are three important lessons we can learn from his experience:

The dangers of self-reliance in times of success

When Asa knew that that he was helpless, he relied upon the Lord and tapped into a power that brought great victory; but somehow he apparently began to confuse the Lord's blessing with the power of his own wisdom and effort. Or, maybe he was just tired of fighting! But whatever the motivation, Asa let self-reliance mar a great life of faith.

The danger of pride in the face of rebuke

Asa no doubt did what he thought was a wise thing. He did not appreciate the rebuke of the Lord for what may have been in his mind a sincere effort to avoid war. But God could see in his heart an attitude that needed correcting. That attitude became manifest in Asa's anger toward God's messenger and toward the people who might have opposed his proud policies.

The danger of despising the Lord in times of discipline

It is hard to imagine a man who began so well to have been quickly abandoned by the Lord. I see in the disease of Asa's later life a final opportunity to Asa to return to that reliance upon God that had characterized his earlier life; but regrettably, he appears to have despised the discipline rather than be shaped by it.

Conclusion: We can all learn important lessons from this ancient king. Our time would have been well spent if we take note not only of the strength he demonstrated early in life, but pondered also the reasons for the weaknesses late in life.

Isaac Erret's prayer: "O that our hearts may be perfect towards thee, blessed Father! When we read of the errors and sins of good men, may we fear and tremble lest we too be thus guilty. May we never cease to trust in thee. Keep us from a vain trust in man. Preserve us from all intolerance. When our sins are rebuked, may we humbly accept reproof and turn from our evil ways. And while we earnestly contend for thy truth, and rebuke the errors of others, may we also consider ourselves, lest we also be tempted into wrong."