

Sermon 19, God's Mercy in the Midst of Faithlessness, 1 Kings 14:21-15:24

Closing hymn: Lo He Comes with Clouds Descending

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[Bavinck Quote]

I once made the mistake of reading a history of the intertestamental period. Well, maybe not exactly a mistake. But certainly, that was the most boring history reading I've ever done. How you make the campaigns of Alexander tedious I don't know, but this guy did it.

What is it that keeps the book of Kings from becoming a tedious chronicle of events—"one damn thing after another"? It is the theological account that the narrative is telling us. Yes, one goal of these books is to relate the history of the people of God of old. But the bigger goal is to demonstrate the unchanging character and work of God in the changing circumstances of history. The reason this history, or any history, is worth reading is because it bears witness to the outworking of God's eternal decree and thus to God's character. We are supposed to learn something about God from these books of Kings--and don't you ever forget it.

What the Holy Spirit is saying to us through this particular section is that God is faithful. In the midst of spiritual dearth, in spite of human leaders who do not live up to their promise, He is continuing to keep His word. Though there is chastisement for unfaithfulness, there is mercy for sinners. Yes, there will be challenges for those who endeavor to live a faithful life in an unfaithful world, but the mercy of God is always at hand.

I. Rehoboam's Reign: The Coming Judgment (14:21-31)

Though this is not the first time we have read about Rehoboam, this is sort of the official version of the important events of his reign. Effectively, there are three such events: the growth of

idolatry in Judah; the Egyptian invasion; and the continuing war with Northern Israel. Meanwhile, Rehoboam's reign proceeds under a cloud of negativity and suspicion from his mother, but also under a powerful blessing because of who he is and where he lives. Let's look more closely at all of this.

A. The King's Pagan Background (14:21, 31)

Rehoboam was the son of Solomon, but his mother was an Ammonitess. Back in Deuteronomy 23, Ammonites were forbidden from entering the assembly of Yahweh until the tenth generation. Plus, of all the kings of Judah, Rehoboam is the only one whose mother's name is mentioned twice. Coincidence? I think not. There is a shadow on this guy's reign from the beginning. He is not exactly all Davidic. In fact, he has more Ammonite than David in him.

Now, is the Bible racially bigoted? No. It's just realistic. The problem with the Ammonites was not their genetics, but their religion. Naamah was from a nation of idol-worshippers. The hint here is that those idol-worshipping ways were influential in Rehoboam's life, somewhere, somehow. Now, at the same time, he lived in the uniquely blessed city of Jerusalem.

Now, if one or both of your parents are unbelievers, is that a death sentence? Of course not. But it is nonetheless a challenge. Serving God is harder when you have not been drilled in it from early childhood.

B. The Nation's Pagan Ways (14:22-24)

Far more significant than Rehoboam's parentage, however, was the outright apostasy of Judah as a whole. This was especially wicked because God is a jealous God, whom they provoked to jealousy by their unfaithful ways.

Of all the attributes of God today, jealousy is one of the least popular. We are all about love, and we like social justice and fair trade coffee. But a jealous God--one who is very protective of His rights and prerogatives over us, and will not stand it when we sin and depart from him--that is not what people want to hear. Our God is not open and affirming. He doesn't understand if you want to keep a liaison with Baal. Family of God, hear me: if you depart from God, you will make Him jealous. You will make Him stand up for His rights in you. If you are a Christian, you are espoused to Christ. He will not let you just walk away. That's part of what this text tells us about our jealous God.

Notice the list of sins mentioned here. Here's how Israel made Him jealous.

1. They sinned more than Israel under the Judges. Now, if you've read Judges and Numbers recently, you are aware of how wicked the people of Israel were from the day they came out of Egypt. Well, under the early monarchy they were worse.
2. They indulged in false worship. This took the form of additional, un-authorized worship sites; it took the form of Asherah poles; and it took the form of good old-fashioned graven images. Nature worship, going up hills and camping under trees, was the name of the game for them.

3. They had male prostitutes in the land. Thus, the old KJV has “sodomites” here, and newer translations have “male cult prostitutes” or “male shrine prostitutes.” The Hebrew is the masculine plural word for “holy one,” so-called from the point of view of the Canaanite religions, who regarded these shrine functionaries as set apart for the service of their fertility gods. As far as we can tell, the way they served their gods was by offering their sexual services for free to any and all worshippers. Is it any wonder that Baal was so popular throughout Israel’s history?

Further, as a side note, we can learn here that homosexual activity is nothing new. This is not something that should surprise us. The church has confronted every form of sexual perversion many times, and survived. The true worshippers of Jehovah in every age have been attacked and seduced by the worshippers of Baal, who preach and practice “free love” and sexual promiscuity of any and every description. Thus, don’t believe it when you’re told that your views are retrogressive and that you simply need to get with the modern world! The saints under Rehoboam were told to get with the modern world in their day, too--and it was just as wrong then as it is now. Only a widespread ignorance of history allows the homosexual lobby to argue that opposition to their sin is new and unprecedented.

4. Finally, it is important to recognize the veiled threat in the end of verse 24. They were doing everything that got the Canaanites kicked out of the land! What’s the implication? That Judah was working overtime to get itself kicked out of the land too! In other words, by the time of Rehoboam the kingdom was already cruising toward judgment.

C. The Judgment Foreshadowed (14:25-28)

The little incident with Shishak only underlines this. This particular Pharaoh was quite an imposing dude; according to the reliefs he had carved at Karnak after this campaign, he had plundered over 150 cities. He certainly plundered Jerusalem. Those gold shields of Solomon’s time were just too tempting a target. Now, the rest of this picture is both inspiring and pathetic. Rehoboam had all his special guards line his path from his palace to the temple when he went up to worship on Saturday morning. At first, they stood there with polished gold shields. Then, post-Pharaoh, they had bronze shields. Rehoboam refused to be beaten, and you have to admire his spunk--but at the same time, his approach is less than inspiring. It’s as though the situation were tailor-made to symbolize the declining fortunes of Judah. The age of gold is over. The age of bronze has begun.

D. The Kingdom Divided Against Itself (14:30)

Meanwhile, Rehoboam further exhausted his treasury and slaughtered his subjects in endless wars against Jeroboam. Though we saw in Chapter 12 a clear declaration that the division of the kingdom was from God, Rehoboam continues to try his best to get those stubborn subjects back. Rather than saving his strength for resisting acquisitive Egyptians, Rehoboam wore himself out toiling against Jeroboam. Now, can a kingdom divided against itself stand very long? In short, every bit of this summary of Rehoboam’s reign emphasizes the inevitability of judgment. It’s

coming. A man with a pagan mother, pagan subjects, and a kingdom that's just entered the bronze age on its way downhill, and is engaged in continual warfare against the only state in the region even remotely suited to be its ally, is probably not going to last too long.

So meet Rehoboam son of Solomon, dead at 58. He got Judah firmly on the downhill slope, but at least he didn't live to see his country's total destruction.

II. Abijam's Reign: The Continuing Mercy (15:1-8)

Is God at work in history? When you're ruled by fools like Rehoboam, it can be hard to see. But the narrator explicitly reminds us of the goodness of God when times are hard.

A. The Wickedness of Abijam (15:1-3)

We don't read much about Abijam, other than his name and the basic information. He was a wicked man. His heart was not right with God.

Now, we've noticed before and we will notice again that the Biblical writers are more interested in a man's dedication to God than they are in anything else. Is that also what you're most interested in? Is your walk with Christ the most important part of your life? Is it central, or peripheral?

B. The Mercy of God for David's Sake (15:4-5)

Now, it was for David's sake that God showed mercy. This is because David was sincere in his obedience (though the text acknowledges his sin), and because of the sake of his greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. God showed mercy to Abijam by continuing his line. In other words, He showed mercy to him by continuing the process of bringing forth the Messiah in history. The fact that Christ was born is a mercy to you. The fact that He was coming is why God showed mercy to someone who didn't deserve it, like Abijam, like me, and like you. Remember, this is theological history. It is showing us not only that God is a jealous God who chastises the disobedient, but that He is a merciful God who keeps His promises for the sake of David and David's Son. If you have been wicked, come to Christ. Seek forgiveness from the God who showed mercy to Abijam not for his own sake, but for the sake of his eventual descendant.

C. The Kingdom Divided: Continuing Warfare (15:6-8)

Now, these two verses are a little strange. Basically, it tells us that there was war between him and Jeroboam like there had been between his father and Jeroboam. The idea, again, is that the kingdom of Judah is being weakened from the inside. They're fighting each other. God is merciful, but He very rarely frees us from all the consequences of our sin.

III. Asa's Reign: The Challenges of Faithfulness (15:9-24)

Asa is encouraging, in that he shows us that faithfulness is possible in this world of demon-worshipping kings and common people. But he is also disheartening, in that he too adopted the world's approach and methods.

A. Asa's Successful Reform (15:9-15)

First of all, we look at the good points. He drove out the male prostitutes. He destroyed his mother's ghastly image, and the other false gods she had. He was loyal in heart toward the Lord all his days, though he did not succeed in rooting out the high places.

In other words, Asa was a lot like many or most of us: sincere, but far from perfect. He was able to make headway against twenty years' worth of rampant idolatry. But he didn't totally eliminate it.

B. Asa's Successful Bribe (15:16-22)

But faithfulness was a little more challenging in politics than in religion. Isn't this so true? It is relatively easy to find a good church, to settle in there, and to be fairly conservative and faithful in religion. But when you're hurting and worldly solutions offer near-certain relief, with only a little bit of sin--well, suddenly faithfulness gets a lot harder. Asa was being attacked by Baasha, king of Israel. The war, in other words, continued unabated. Baasha was a go-getter; we'll hear about him in a couple of weeks. Naturally, he made life difficult for Asa. He was fortifying Ramah, only a few miles from Jerusalem. Imagine Canada blocking both Everett Turnpike and DW highway. Most of us would find it somewhat awkward to get out of Merrimack. That's the idea here--not that it was impossible to leave Judah, but that it had suddenly gotten a lot more annoying.

But Asa found a great idea: bribe Ben-Hadad to attack Baasha. The word translated "gift" in verse 19 is literally "bribe." In fact, it pretty much always means "bribe." The OT warns that it is wrong to take a bribe, and indeed the prophet Hanani rebukes Asa for this move in 2 Chronicles. In effect, though it was politically successful, it was the symptom of a heart that trusted in pragmatic strategies more than it trusted in God.

Now, for you Americans out there, and the one standing here in the pulpit, there is a lesson in this story. *Success and faithfulness are not synonymous.* My mother occasionally has arguments about popular music styles with various young people that she knows. Her question is always, "Does this kind of music and these kind of lyrics assist you to glorify and enjoy God? How?" Usually the response is along the lines of, "I know a person who got saved at a concert of this kind of music." If that response makes sense to you, then you think like a pragmatist. You think like Asa. "If it works, then it's legitimate! If it yields good results, then it must be a good technique!" The fact of the matter is that success and faithfulness are not synonymous. Sometimes they go together. But in this life they are often disconnected. To think that because it attracts people to church it's okay is a symptom of this disease of pragmatic thinking. To think that because people are saved it must be good music, or that because you didn't get caught then it wasn't a valid law, is pragmatism. And it's the enemy of godliness. Asa should have trusted in the Lord, who was faithful to His word to every leader of Israel and Judah. When pragmatism tempts us, we need to trust in the Lord, who is still faithful to His word!

C. Asa's Difficult End (15:23-24)

Godliness is challenging, even for those with sincere hearts like Asa's. In old age, his feet hurt. One commentator took this as a reference to prostate cancer; in any event, he did not die pain-free. The Chronicler tells us that he went to his doctors rather than putting his faith in God.

So--how about it, family of God? Is faithfulness worth it to you? It doesn't guarantee either success or ease. Far from it. Faithfulness is almost always a lot more challenging than the alternative.

Application: The church in the United States of America today is in a condition very similar to the condition it was in under these three kings. Much false worship is allowed and tolerated. Much moral libertinism masquerading as enlightened tolerance is abroad in the land. Many people are allergic to the exclusive claims of Christ and the nature of our God as a jealous God.

From the perspective of today, it's easy to see what a faithful Israelite in that day and age should have done. He should have prayed for revival. He should have trusted in God rather than the doctors, and resisted the temptations to make alliances with the worldly powers. While Asa's temptation was to ally with the ungodly Syrians, our temptation in the contemporary church may be to ally with Madison Avenue and Hollywood. Same temptation! Our call is not to adopt the world's methods in order to have the world's success.

If you were a faithful Israelite in the era of Asa, Abijah, and Rehoboam, how would you respond? You would hold fast to the true worship of the true God. You would train your children in the truth, and you would explain to them that though their rulers were wicked men, or at best compromised men, that someday God was going to set up a faithful ruler over His people in His land. That ruler would be a true son to David, and a worthy successor of that legendary faithful king.

Sometimes it's good for us to think in these terms a little more. Imagine if we were looking for a direct lineal descendant of George Washington to run for president, reunite this country, and throw off all the unconstitutional accretions that have been added to our form of government over time. When I was in college, there was a huge buzz on campus one spring. A new student had been admitted for that fall. His name was David Justice Reagan. He was the grandson of Ronald Reagan, a high school debate national champion, and a decorated Marine Corps. veteran with two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. He had a perfect SAT score, had been homeschooled, and was a godly Christian who had personally led dozens of people to faith in Christ. The school, against previous policy, had already agreed to make him student body president as a freshman because of his leadership experience in the Marines.

We were all pretty excited. This guy was someone special. Then it came out that the entire thing was an April Fool's day hoax perpetrated by our journalism department. Still, it was a pretty fantastic thought while it lasted. David Justice Reagan was, for a few hours, the hope of Patrick Henry College.

Well, if the grandson of Ronald Reagan could inspire that kind of hope, how much more do you think that a worthy Son of David would have moved the hearts of the people of God in 900 B.C.? Brothers and sisters, our call today is the same. Though we see what terrible shape the church is in, we have hope because the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back. God is at work in and through history, as the vignettes in these chapters show. These kings were under Christ's control.

Listen to the comforting words of the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, printed there in your sermon notes: “History, like nature, is a work of God; it does not take shape apart from his providence. Christ, by his resurrection and ascension, became king at the right hand of God and will remain king until he has put all his enemies under his feet [1 Cor. 15:25]. He reigns also over the divisions and schisms of his church on earth. **And his prayer for unity was not born of unfamiliarity with its history nor from his inability to govern it.** In and through the discord and dissension, that prayer is daily heard and is led to its complete fulfillment. . . . in due time.” (Bavinck, vol. 4, pg. 317) In due time, the Lord Jesus will take the power and glory. Until then, people of God, continue to cling to, long for, and teach your children to love His glorious appearing! Amen.