

Asa was the son of Abijah.
Abijah was the son of Rehoboam.
Rehoboam was the son of Solomon, the son of David.

Asa comes to the throne only twenty years after the death of Solomon.

And, as the Chronicler summarizes the story, Asa reigned for 41 years.

The first decade of his reign saw peace.

Then the Ethiopians invaded with their million man army (the really big army)
around year ten of his reign.

In the fifteenth year of his reign (ca. 895 B.C.)

Asa led Judah and the remnant of Israel in making a covenant to seek the LORD.

Then there was no more war in his reign for 20 years
until the invasion of Baasha in the 35th year.

When Asa took the throne in Jerusalem,
Jeroboam was king of Israel –
and then Jeroboam’s son, Nadab,
then Nadab’s general, Baasha,
then Baasha’s son, Elah,
then Elah’s general, Zimri,
then Elah’s other general, Omri,
and finally Omri’s son, Ahab.

Seven kings ruled the northern kingdom of Israel
during the 41 year reign of Asa.

You can see a faint picture of the everlasting rule of the Son of David,
as the rulers of this world come and go.

1. Asa’s Wisdom – Seeking the LORD (chapter 15)

a. Azariah’s Call to Asa and Judah: Your Work Shall Be Rewarded (v1-7)

15 The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, ² and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, “Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The LORD is with you while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. ³ For a long time Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest and without law, ⁴ but when in their distress they turned to the LORD, the God of Israel, and sought him, he was found by them. ⁵ In those times there was no peace to him who went out or to him who came in, for great disturbances afflicted all the inhabitants of the lands. ⁶ They were broken in pieces. Nation was crushed by nation and city by city, for God troubled them with every sort of distress. ⁷ But you, take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded.”

Last time we heard of Asa’s faithfulness in worship,

his building program that imitated Solomon (on a smaller scale),
and the triumph of Asa over the million man army from Ethopia.

Asa had cried out to the LORD:

“O LORD, there is none like you to help, between the mighty and the weak.
Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you,
and in your name we have come against this multitude.
O LORD, you are our God; let not man prevail against you.” (14:11)

Solomon had prayed, asking God to hear the prayer of “your servant” (the king),
when he prayed towards the house of God.

And God had promised that he would hear.

Now, Asa has done precisely that.

He has called out to the LORD his God in faith.
And God has given him the victory.

Now, Azariah, the son of Oded, comes and preaches a victory sermon
in honor of the LORD’s great triumph.

The point of Azariah’s sermon is that those who seek the LORD will find him.

In illustration of this, he calls Asa and all Judah to remember Israel in days long past.

While Israel was in Egypt
they were without the true God,
without a teaching priest,
and without the torah (the law).
And during the time of the judges
they were essentially without these things.
Yes, they had priests –
but the priests did not teach the people (think of Eli’s sons).
And yes, they had the law –
if you mean, did they have the stone tablets in the ark;
and they had a copy of what Moses had written down –
but there is little evidence that anyone was reading it!

Certainly the priests weren’t teaching it!

So, if you want the true God, then you need a teaching priest –
and you need torah (God’s law – God’s instruction) for him to teach!

The message is clear:

if you want the true God, then you need the true community
bound up with the teaching priest and the LORD’s own law.

When you do not seek the LORD,

the result is chaos and distress –
nation rises against nation, and city crushes city.

Therefore, take courage and seek the LORD, “Do not let your hands be weak,
for your work shall be rewarded.”

Notice that verse 8 refers to these words as “the prophecy of Azariah the son of Oded.”
This is a good reminder that “prophecy” does not have to be “predictive.”
Azariah’s prediction is pretty generic: “If you seek, him, he will be found by you...
your work shall be rewarded.”

Those are just general theological truths:
God rewards those who seek him!
But prophecy does not to be predictive.
Prophecy is a declaration of the word of the Lord.

Indeed, Reformed folk used to refer to preaching as “prophesying”!
William Perkins wrote an excellent book entitled,
“The Art of Prophesying.”

We should not expect prophets like Elijah and Isaiah to walk the earth these days –
because prophets like Elijah and Isaiah only show up
when God has something new to reveal about salvation –
and God has revealed everything we need to know for life and godliness
in Christ Jesus his Son.

But we should expect prophets like Azariah the son of Oded.
(And I think this is what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14).
Because what happens to Azariah?
Azariah takes what he knows about the scripture
and applies it to the context of the king and people of his day.

We should expect the Spirit of the LORD to work by and with his word
to apply the scriptures to our context today!

b. Asa’s Courage: the LORD Was with Him (v8-9)

⁸ As soon as Asa heard these words, the prophecy of Azariah the son of Oded, he took courage and put away the detestable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities that he had taken in the hill country of Ephraim, and he repaired the altar of the LORD that was in front of the vestibule of the house of the LORD.^[a]⁹ And he gathered all Judah and Benjamin, and those from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon who were residing with them, for great numbers had deserted to him from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.

When Asa hears the words of Azariah the son of Oded,
he took courage and put away the detestable idols
that had accumulated over the previous 40 years (since the last years of Solomon).

Asa believes God’s promises.
The Chronicler wants you to see that when you believe God’s promises,

and act accordingly, then the Lord will be with you.

And as evidence of this, the Chronicler points to the “great numbers” of the faithful who had deserted Jeroboam and come to Asa.

The Chronicler repeatedly emphasizes the restoration of Israel within the boundaries of Judah during the reign of the Davidic kings.

Verse 9 highlights the fact that “great numbers” deserted to him from Israel “when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.”

As the subsequent narrative suggests,

the border was pretty flexible and regularly shifted.

A “conquest” might consist of the village elders shifting allegiance!

And others throughout Israel might go to Jerusalem to worship the LORD out of their opposition to the golden calves of Jeroboam.

c. Judah’s Oath: They Sought the LORD with Their Whole Desire (v10-15)

¹⁰ They were gathered at Jerusalem in the third month of the fifteenth year of the reign of Asa.

¹¹ They sacrificed to the LORD on that day from the spoil that they had brought 700 oxen and 7,000 sheep. ¹² And they entered into a covenant to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul, ¹³ but that whoever would not seek the LORD, the God of Israel, should be put to death, whether young or old, man or woman. ¹⁴ They swore an oath to the LORD with a loud voice and with shouting and with trumpets and with horns. ¹⁵ And all Judah rejoiced over the oath, for they had sworn with all their heart and had sought him with their whole desire, and he was found by them, and the LORD gave them rest all around.

And so in the third month of the fifteenth year of Asa,

the people of Judah and the faithful from Israel

gathered together in Jerusalem and made a covenant “to seek the LORD.”

The text makes it sound like they were already gathered –

and while they were gathered, they entered a covenant.

Why were they gathered?

Well, what happens in the third month?

Passover (the Feast of Unleavened Bread) was in the middle of the first month, and then you count 50 days from the day after the Sabbath during Passover week; that means that the first or second Sunday in the third month is Pentecost.

Every Israelite knew that Pentecost is in the third month,

so really, all you have to say is, “they were gathered at Jerusalem in the third month” and everyone will know that you are talking about Pentecost.

Pentecost was a fitting time for this covenant renewal.

After all, it was in the third month after setting out from Egypt that Israel came to Mt. Sinai.

Passover was celebrated in Egypt.

Pentecost was connected with the giving of the law
(and the establishment of the priesthood).

And Azariah, you may recall,
had just emphasized the importance of the teaching priest and the law.

And here you see the importance of the covenant community.
When the Son of David leads his people in seeking the LORD their God,
then the people of God prosper in their life together.

You might say that “in Asa, there is neither Judah nor Israel,”
but there is “one Lord, one faith, one church.”

Verse 13 is especially striking:

whoever would not seek the LORD, the God of Israel, should be put to death, whether young or old, man or woman.

As Dillard puts it (p128),

“Membership in the covenant community required submission to the LORD;
death was the alternative (15:13).

In the New Covenant, no less than the Old, those who will not give fealty to the LORD
have no place in his kingdom (1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph 5:5; Rev 21:8; 22:14-15).”

This is why the NT speaks of excommunicating those who will not repent.

Paul even uses the language of the OT death penalty -

“Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor. 5:13).

The advantage of excommunication, of course,
is that it permits more time for repentance!

And, when someone repents, it is as though they have been restored from death to life.

d. Asa’s Heart: The Purification of Worship (v16-19)

¹⁶ *Even Maacah, his mother, King Asa removed from being queen mother because she had made a detestable image for Asherah. Asa cut down her image, crushed it, and burned it at the brook Kidron.* ¹⁷ *But the high places were not taken out of Israel. Nevertheless, the heart of Asa was wholly true all his days.* ¹⁸ *And he brought into the house of God the sacred gifts of his father and his own sacred gifts, silver, and gold, and vessels.* ¹⁹ *And there was no more war until the thirty-fifth year of the reign of Asa.*

Verses 16-19 then return to focus on Asa’s liturgical reforms.

Maacah was the wife of Rehoboam –
which makes her Asa’s grandmother.

The Hebrew word translated “mother” can refer to any female ancestor.

She is referred to as the daughter of Abishalom in Kings

(probably a variant spelling of Absalom, son of David),
and as the daughter of Uriel of Gibeah in 2 Chronicles 13:2.
She is probably the granddaughter of Absalom,
the daughter of Tamar (Absalom's daughter) and Uriel of Gibeah.
(This may be the same Uriel the Levite named in 1 Chronicles 15).

She is named Maacah, after her great-grandmother, the mother of Absalom.
David had married a woman named Maacah – the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur
(2 Samuel 3:3).

Geshur was a small kingdom in the northern part of Israel.
We sometimes forget that there were non-Canaanite peoples living in Israel.
Geshur was a tiny kingdom in the middle of Israel
which appears to have submitted to Israelite over-lordship,
without losing its own identity.

But apparently Rehoboam's wife was as bad as her husband.
She made a detestable image for Asherah.
Asherah was the fertility goddess of the Canaanites and other Semitic peoples.

There are many ancient Hebrew inscriptions that speak of "Yahweh and his Asherah."
I find it humorous that scholars try to use this to debunk the biblical narrative.
The biblical narrative suggests that worship at the high places was common.
Chronicles and Kings both indicate that *every* king of Israel engaged in this –
and even the *good kings* of Judah struggled with this.
The fact that *the queen mother* is making images for Asherah
suggests that for over thirty years
Asherah has been included in Yahweh-worship in Judah.
And while Asa is said to have destroyed *her* image,
it is not clear that Asa purged Asherah worship from Judah.
After all, his son, Jehoshaphat, is said to have taken "the Asherim out of Judah." (17:6)

So Asa destroyed one image – and the best the Chronicler can say is that
"his heart was true" (even if he didn't remove all the high places).

In other words, from the text of scripture, we should *expect* the archeological record
to produce *lots of evidence* for syncretism, Asherah worship, and high places;
some evidence of Baal worship;
and *maybe* a little evidence for the pure worship of Yahweh.

Verse 17 points out that the high places were not taken out of Israel.
14:3 says that Asa removed the high places and foreign altars from Judah,
but apparently he did not remove the high places in Israel;
and (perhaps) over the course of 41 years, the high places crept back into Judah!

It's easy to be sincere when you are gathered with thousands of people in Jerusalem
(think of the big revival meetings of the last century, or a Promise Keepers rally).

But then you have to go home to your village.

And when you go home to your village, old habits die hard.

Sure, Jerusalem is only a day's journey away (or so).

But the high place is right there.

And our ancestors worshiped at the high places for generations.

Before Solomon's temple, even the prophet Samuel and David the king had worshiped at the high places.

And that pillar that Asa removed?

That was a sacred pillar where our ancestors had worshiped.

When I was a child I remember how I felt the nearness of Yahweh when we worshiped at the sacred pillar.

So why not?

Why do we need the priests in the temple?

Why do we need this centralized liturgy?

We can do just as well here!

You find a lot of people today who have the same mentality.

Why do we need to go to church?

We can worship God at home – or on the golf course!

And you see the same result over and over:

where public worship is ignored –

where people turn to their own devices, idolatry invariably follows!

Because God still has a centralized sanctuary – in Christ –

where we gather *together* as his people.

As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman,

the true worshiper will worship neither in Jerusalem, nor on this mountain, but in Spirit and in Truth.

There is only one place where you can worship God: in the Spirit and in Truth.

And that is why chapter 16 then deals with Asa's folly,

as he forgets the principle that he learned in chapter 15.

2. Asa's Folly – Seeking Anything Else (chapter 16)

a. Asa's Strategy: What Goes Around, Comes Around (v1-6)

16 In the thirty-sixth year of the reign of Asa, Baasha king of Israel went up against Judah and built Ramah, that he might permit no one to go out or come in to Asa king of Judah.

Now, before we get to the substance of chapter 16, we need to deal frankly with a problem.

The problem is that 1 Kings 15:33 says,

“In the third year of Asa king of Judah, Baasha the son of Ahijah

began to reign over all Israel at Tirzah, and he reigned twenty-four years.”

So, by the 36th year of Asa's reign, Baasha has been dead for 9 years.

In those nine years, his son Elah, reigned for two years,
then in the 27th year of Asa, Zimri overthrew Elah,
and seven days later, Omri killed Zimri.
In the 36th year of Asa's reign, Omri is king of Israel,
and two years later Ahab, his son, comes to the throne of Israel.

There are two basic solutions that have been proposed:
some suggest a copyist's error, and that originally it read 16th year
(in Hebrew the letters that stand for ten and thirty look a lot alike);
but since we've just heard about the covenant renewal in the 15th year,
it would be odd to say that there was no more war ...
until later that year! (15:19)

Others suggest that "35th year" (15:19) and "36th year" (16:1)
refer to the years since the division of the kingdom
(Rehoboam reigned for 17 years, and Abijah for three,
so that would put the events of chapter 16 in the 16th year of Asa's reign);
this is liable to the same objection (namely, that it makes the text say
that there was no war from the fifteenth year to the fifteenth year!)
but also faces the objection that nowhere else in all of Kings and Chronicles
does any biblical text provide dates in that way!

Indeed, after evaluating the various options,
Ray Dillard (from WTS) says that the question of how to harmonize the chronology
between Kings and Chronicles "has as yet no ready solution." (p125)

Kings is very clear that the events of this chapter happened during the reign of Baasha,
but the Chronicler appears to shift it to the end of Asa's life,
(perhaps out of a desire to show the close connection between Asa's rebellion
and Asa's disease).

But since it clear from Kings and Chronicles that the dispute was between Asa and Baasha,
the events of chapter 16 must have taken place no later than the 26th year of Asa
(since Baasha died the following year).

Many liberal scholars suggest that when ancient scribes came across conflicting material,
they simply included both without trying to harmonize them.
The idea is that, out of reverence for ancient texts, they didn't worry about conflicts.
The problem with this view is that the earliest rabbis on record
are very concerned about conflicts!
So we know that the ancient Jews were quite concerned about harmonization.

Further the texts that we are dealing with are not merely human productions,
but were divinely inspired!

Of course, there is another possibility.

The Chronicler plainly had access to the book of Kings,
and regularly borrowed material from Kings.
Anybody reading Kings could see that Baasha became king in the third year of Asa,
and reigned 24 years –
and therefore died long before Asa's 36th year.

Therefore the war *did* happen long before the 36th year of Asa's reign.

But the Chronicler wants you to think of Asa's fall from grace
as something that happened only at the end of a long and peaceful reign.
So he does something a little odd.

He uses his normal phraseology "in the Xth year of his reign,"
but he dates it according to the years since the division of the kingdom,
which, if you interpret it with respect to Asa's reign,
would be at the end of his life.

But the Chronicler *knows* that you know what Kings says,
and so he trusts you to interpret it *both ways*.

Yes, the event happened earlier (like Kings says),
but you are supposed to think of it in connection with the end of Asa's life.
The Chronicler is relying on his reader to *know* the history of the Kings
and so see what he is doing.

(Incidentally, we saw something like this in the book of Samuel,
where it says that Saul was one year old when he became king,
and he ruled for two years.

The author of Samuel is counting on your careful reading of the text to realize
that Saul had received the Holy Spirit within that year,
and that Saul would *lose* the Spirit only two years later.)

Likewise, in this case, when you read verse 1 of chapter 16:

16 In the thirty-sixth year of the reign of Asa, Baasha king of Israel went up against Judah and built Ramah, that he might permit no one to go out or come in to Asa king of Judah.

In other words, "thirty-six years after the division of the kingdom –
which I want you to connect with the end of Asa's reign,"
Baasha king of Israel went up against Judah and built Ramah.

The border between Israel and Judah is only seven miles from Jerusalem
(after all, David had selected Jerusalem because it was the city in Judah
that was closest to the rest of the tribes).

But Ramah is on Benjamin's side of the border.
And Ramah is on the north-south ridge that controls the traffic going north.
It is also within easy striking distance of the Beth Horon ridge
that controls the east-west traffic in the region.

In other words, if you control Ramah, you essentially control the central Benjamin plateau, and therefore, no one from Israel can get past Ramah to go to Jerusalem (the only way to bypass Ramah would be to go through Jericho, which involves a 3,500 foot ascent from the Dead Sea to Jerusalem – in only 15 miles, or else go around to the west through Philistine territory)

Now, if I'm right about how to harmonize Kings and Chronicles, then the 36th year of the kingdom is actually the 16th year of Asa – and these events happen the year *after* the great covenant renewal at Pentecost of Asa's 15th year.

The Chronicler knows this – and knows that an astute reader will know this – but he doesn't want to confuse the good outcome of the covenant renewal with the bad outcome of Asa's faithlessness, so he connects Asa's faithlessness with the end of Asa's life.

Because when Asa sees Baasha building up Ramah, he sends silver and gold to Ben-hadad king of Syria and asks Ben-hadad to honor the covenant that Abijah had made with his father.

² Then Asa took silver and gold from the treasures of the house of the LORD and the king's house and sent them to Ben-hadad king of Syria, who lived in Damascus, saying, ³ "There is a covenant^[b] between me and you, as there was between my father and your father. Behold, I am sending to you silver and gold. Go, break your covenant with Baasha king of Israel, that he may withdraw from me." ⁴ And Ben-hadad listened to King Asa and sent the commanders of his armies against the cities of Israel, and they conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel-maim, and all the store cities of Naphtali. ⁵ And when Baasha heard of it, he stopped building Ramah and let his work cease. ⁶ Then King Asa took all Judah, and they carried away the stones of Ramah and its timber, with which Baasha had been building, and with them he built Geba and Mizpah.

And so, when the Syrians attack from the north, Baasha is forced to withdraw from Judah in the south, and Asa takes the stones and timbers from Ramah and instead fortifies Geba and Mizpah (on the northern border of Benjamin).

But not surprisingly, the LORD was not pleased with Asa's reliance on Ben-hadad. (And purely on a political level, there is a problem! If you rely on human kings to break their covenants with others – what do you suppose they will do to you?)

But Asa is not just an ordinary king.
He is the LORD's anointed.
Solomon had prayed – and God had promised –
that if the LORD's anointed prayed,

God would hear, and save, and bless.

And so in verses 7-10:

b. Hanani's Rebuke: The Eyes of the LORD Support the Blameless (v7-10)

⁷ At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah and said to him, "Because you relied on the king of Syria, and did not rely on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Syria has escaped you. ⁸ Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied on the LORD, he gave them into your hand. ⁹ For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless^[c] toward him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars."

Again you see a familiar pattern in the sermon of the seer Hanani:

the main point is that you relied on the king of Syria, rather than the LORD your God;
the evidence/illustration, in this instance, came from earlier in Asa's reign:

when the Ethiopians attacked, you relied on the LORD,
and he gave them into your hand.

"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth,
to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him."

The Chronicler wants to show us how faithfulness is rewarded,
and faithlessness is punished.

So he does everything in his power to show you the connections.

As Dillard puts it, "reforms issue in victory, peace, prosperity,
and the loyalty of the populace (chaps. 14-15);
war and disease follow infidelity (chap. 16).

The reign is divided into two periods, and apostasy is confined to the last few years."
(p127)

Especially after working through the book of Job,

Chronicles can appear to be taking the side of Job's friends!
The doctrine of immediate retribution and immediate blessing
would seem to contradict the message of Job.

But then again, if you think about the big picture of Job,
Job's suffering lasted only for a few weeks or months.
And in the end, Job is vindicated and blessed.

So even the book of Job will say that when you see everything in the big picture,
it is still true that God rewards the just and destroys the wicked.

Sometimes you need a wider angle lens –
but in the end, God will make all things right!

Verse 10 reminds us, though, that sometimes the powers of this age don't like to hear this:

¹⁰ Then Asa was angry with the seer and put him in the stocks in prison, for he was in a rage with him because of this. And Asa inflicted cruelties upon some of the people at the same time.

Hanani is the first prophet in a long line of prophets to suffer death or imprisonment for proclaiming the word of God to political power.

If you want to speak truth to power,
be prepared!
Even good kings like Asa can forget –
and hearts that once were true can become false.

Beware, beloved people of God!
Do not forget the LORD your God –
do not forsake him!

And hear the warning in verses 12-14:

c. Asa's Disease and Death: Seeking Physicians (v11-14)

¹¹ The acts of Asa, from first to last, are written in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel.

¹² In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians. ¹³ And Asa slept with his fathers, dying in the forty-first year of his reign. ¹⁴ They buried him in the tomb that he had cut for himself in the city of David. They laid him on a bier that had been filled with various kinds of spices prepared by the perfumer's art, and they made a very great fire in his honor.

This is not cremation.

It is very clear that he was buried in verse 14,
and that the fire was an honorific fire (a celebratory bonfire) in honor of his life.

The theme of Asa's reign had been "seeking the LORD."

But at the end of his life he instead "sought help from physicians."

The Bible does not condemn going to the doctor!

The problem is found in the contrast:

"even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from the physicians."

If you think that the real solution will be found through the physicians,
then you have forsaken the LORD your God.