

A TALE OF TWO ASAS
2 CHRONICLES 14-16

INTRO

The classic novel *A Tale of Two Cities* begins with these words: **“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”** Charles Dickens was describing the condition of western Europe in the late eighteenth century. The two cities in view were London and Paris.

He could just as well have been describing our society in the twenty-first century. We live in the best of times and the age of wisdom. We live in a time of wonderful technological advances. This week Captain Kirk and several others became space tourists. The communicators imagined in “Space Trek” have become a reality. We can talk with people on the other side of the globe with little or no cost. We can see family and friends in other parts of the country and the world via Facetime or Skype. With a few clicks of a mouse we have access to stores of information and knowledge on our computer screen.

Yet it is also the worst of times and the age of foolishness. The teen suicide rate in our country is up 60% in the last decade. The Army just reported that suicides among their soldiers were up 46% in the last quarter. The US murder rate is up 30% in the last year. Cultural elites are telling our children that they can change their gender. This week it came out that as a result of the school board decision in Loudoun County, Virginia, that males identifying as transgender can use girls’ bathrooms, a sexual assault took place. A high school boy wearing a skirt entered a girls’ bathroom and assaulted a freshman girl. Several weeks later the same young man was apparently involved in another assault at school.

Meanwhile public school districts dumb down their standards. This summer the Clark County School District decided that the lowest grade that any student can get is fifty percent. Behaviors, such as attendance, participation and late or missing assignments, will not influence a grade. (8NewsNow, 8/4/2021) The best of times and the age of wisdom. The worst of times and the age of foolishness.

Dickens’ description could also be applied to us as individuals. If we are honest with ourselves, we have all experienced good things and shown moments of wisdom. We have also done bad things and had our moments of foolishness. This is true of the central character in our passage this morning. He is a man who displays great faith and wisdom. He is a man who commits a great screw-up. In his life we will hopefully find lessons for us.

We are looking at the period of history known as the Divided Kingdom. (PROJECTOR ON--- DIVIDED KINGDOM MAP) We are in the tenth century BC. As a result of Solomon's sin of marrying many wives and adopting worship of some of their false gods, there was a split in the kingdom between north and south. Solomon's son Rehoboam, who followed him, bore some responsibility for that split. We looked at the life of his son Abijah last week. Today we will look at his son Asa. The Book of 2 Chronicles focuses on these kings of the southern kingdom of Judah.

I. A.

(I. THE TALE OF ASA THE MAN OF FAITH) In Chapters 14 & 15 of 2 Chronicles (p. 367) we learn about THE TALE OF ASA THE MAN OF FAITH. In the first eight verses of #14 we are told about THE BLESSINGS OF THE BEHAVIOR OF FAITH. (I. A. THE BLESSINGS OF THE...) According to vv. 1 & 2, **“Abijah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David. And Asa his son reigned in his place. In his days the land had rest for ten years. And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God.”** The time setting is 911-901 BC. The blessing of peace in the land of Judah is associated with the good and right behavior of King Asa.

The story continues in vv. 3-5: **“He took away the foreign altars and the high places and broke down the pillars and cut down the Asherim 4 and commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to keep the law and the commandment. 5 He also took out of all the cities of Judah the high places and the incense altars. And the kingdom had rest under him.”**

King Asa is taking a lead in seeing that his country gets its spiritual act together. He is getting rid of idols and false worship sites. He is encouraging people to “seek the Lord.” Nine times in these three chapters this term appears. Obedience to God's law seems to be central to this seeking the Lord.

The term “Asherim” refers to Canaanite religion. Some experts say that Asherah was the mother of Baal, the famous Canaanite god. Others say that she was the female partner of Baal. It appears that there was a carved wooden pole that represented Asherah. The pole was placed next to a stone pillar representing Baal. Perhaps these objects also served as incense altars. The important thing is that Asa's spiritual reforms lead to peace.

Verses 6 & 7: **“He built fortified cities in Judah, for the land had rest. He had no war in those years, for the Lord gave him peace. And he said to Judah, ‘Let us build these cities and surround them with walls and towers, gates and bars. The land is still ours, because we have sought the Lord our God. We have sought him, and he has given us peace on every side.’ So they built and prospered.”** The author seems to regard fortifications built during times of peace as a good thing. The problem comes when the nation turns to physical defenses rather than God in times of conflict.

The author adds in v. 8, **“And Asa had an army of 300,000 from Judah, armed with large shields and spears, and 280,000 men from Benjamin that carried shields and drew bows. All these were mighty men of valor.”** There is debate among the scholars about these large numbers in the armies and people of Judah and Israel. Some of the linguists say that the original word for “thousands” can also be translated as “officers.” The idea would be that there were 300 officers and their military units from Judah and 280 officers and their military units from the tribe of Benjamin, which was allied with Judah. These commanding officers were the mighty men of valor.

The basic point is that King Asa is seeking the Lord and doing right in God’s eyes. The result is peace and prosperity. Living rightly has physical benefits. Methodist leader John Wesley noted this. He once wrote, **“...religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches.”** (The Works of Rev. John Wesley, A.M., vol. 13 [London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872] Thoughts on Methodism 9.) The additional blessing from God here is the absence of conflict.

B.

In vv. 9-15 of #14 we encounter THE VICTORY OF FAITH. (I. A. B. THE VICTORY OF FAITH) Verses 9 & 10 tell us, **“Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and 300 chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. And Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up their lines of battle in the Valley of Zephathah at Mareshah.”**

After ten years of peace there comes a conflict. Ethiopia, or Cush (CUSH MAP), was to the south of Egypt. From our knowledge of Egyptian history the suspicion is that the pharaoh employed these Ethiopian troops as a mercenary army. These thousand thousand troops, or thousand military commanders and their units, are twice the size of King Asa’s army. Thus the king of Judah is presented with a challenge to his faith.

The armies meet at Mareshah in the Valley of Zephathah (VALLEY OF ZEPHATHAH), which is southwest of Jerusalem, in the direction of Egypt. Asa’s grandfather Rehoboam was attacked and defeated by an Egyptian army. He was forced to give up treasures from the temple. According to #12 v. 9 Pharaoh Shishak took everything. Asa is now faced with a similar challenge. How will he respond?

Verse 11: **“And Asa cried to the Lord his God, ‘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.’”** The exact translation of this verse is uncertain, but the general point is clear. For God the humanly impossible is as nothing. Asa is committing himself and this crisis situation to YHWH, the God of Israel. He is entrusting the situation to God’s care.

According to v. 12 the Lord responds positively: **“So the Lord defeated the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled.”** We are not told how this happens, but the Lord is credited with the victory.

Verses 13-15: **“Asa and the people who were with him pursued them as far as Gerar, and the Ethiopians fell until none remained alive, for they were broken before the Lord and his army. The men of Judah carried away very much spoil. 14 And they attacked all the cities around Gerar, for the fear of the Lord was upon them. They plundered all the cities, for there was much plunder in them. 15 And they struck down the tents of those who had livestock and carried away sheep in abundance and camels. Then they returned to Jerusalem.”**

This is a total victory for Judah. The Jews beat up on the Ethiopians and chase them all the way to Gerar. (GERAR MAP) Gerar was on the southwest border of Judah. It was probably the northernmost outpost of Egypt. This was such a significant victory for Judah that it would be 160 years before Egypt would again pose a threat to Judah. The Jews collected a whole lot of stuff as a result of the victory.

The lesson which the Chronicler finds here is that trust in God produces victory in a crisis situation. The original author was writing for the benefit of the exiles in the sixth century who had returned from captivity in Babylon. He was encouraging them to trust in God as they rebuilt their temple and their country. The lesson also applies to us. In a national crisis and in a personal crisis the best object of faith is the God who is really there. The challenge is to trust Him and His promises.

C.

In #15 the subject is THE PURSUIT OF WORSHIP RESULTING FROM FAITH. (I. A. B. C. THE PURSUIT OF WORSHIP...) In the first two verses we read, **“The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, 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.’”** This prophet Azariah is not otherwise known from the Old Testament. The time of his address to the king in Asa’s reign is also unknown. His message is a reinforcement of the lesson from the Ethiopian victory. It is a lesson that God’s people need to remember.

This was a lesson which Asa’s great grandfather Solomon was taught. In 1 Chronicles #28 v. 9 (1 CHRONICLES 28:9) David told his son Solomon, **“And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever.”** This is an assurance to us as well that if we seek the true God, He will let us find Him.

In vv. 3-7 back in our text the prophet Azariah continues his message (PROJECTOR OFF): **“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.”

The prophet is not specific about the time which he is describing. It sounds like the period of the judges. Prior to the appointment of King Saul as the first king of Israel there were several hundred years after the Hebrew occupation of Canaan when the people experienced a repeated cycle in which they fell away from worship of the true God, were then plagued with enemies who persecuted them, then cried out to God for help, and then were provided by God with a deliverer, or judge. Now they have the opportunity to break out of that cycle.

The prophet in v. 3 lists three essential ingredients for the recipe by which Judah can maintain a right relationship with God. They need to focus on the true God, They need to support a teaching priest. And they must follow God’s law. Here in the Book of 2 Chronicles the author is reminding Israel about the law of retribution. Obedience to God’s law produces blessing. Disobedience to God’s law results in judgment.

According to v. 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.”**

King Asa undertakes a renewed effort to root out idolatry. According to #14 this effort was begun earlier in his regime. Now he extends this effort to the territory of Benjamin and Ephraim. He also undertakes a renovation of the altar in the temple in Jerusalem.

Verse 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.”** Further blessings come to Judah as parts of the northern kingdom are drawn to the south. (PROJECTOR ON--- TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL) Ephraim and Manasseh were just to the north of Judah. Simeon was originally located within the territory assigned to Judah. It seems to have been absorbed by the larger tribe of Judah. But here there is an indication that some of the Simeonites had resettled somewhere in the northern kingdom. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verses 10-15 give a further description of the spiritual renewal in Judah: **“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.”

The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, happened in the third month of the Jewish religious calendar. It was perhaps then when there was a big assembly of the people in Jerusalem. This was apparently soon after the victory over the Ethiopians. For some of the collected animals were presented as sacrifices. The people now renew their commitment to the Mosaic Covenant, the law of God presented to them at Mt. Sinai. Verse 15 notes again that peace results from seeking the Lord with a devoted heart.

Verse 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.”** Chapter 13 v. 2 indicates that Maacah was actually his grandmother. But the term “mother” is used like the term “father” in the Old Testament. It can refer to any female ancestor. Queen mothers in the history of Israel often had great power and influence. Asa steps out again in faith by limiting her power and destroying her Asherah idol.

Verses 17-19: **“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.”** Things are really good with this Jewish king. He has established a positive legacy of faith in the true God. The Lord has, in turn, blessed him and his kingdom.

II. A.

But then in #16 we discover a different story. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE TALE OF ASA THE MAN...) We encounter THE TALE OF ASA THE MAN OF MISPLACED FAITH. In the first six verses of the chapter we learn about THE FAILURE OF MISPLACED FAITH. (II. THE TALE... A. THE FAILURE OF...) Verse 1 reads, **“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.”** Toward the end of King Asa’s reign another challenge is presented to Asa and his faith. King Baasha is perhaps bugged by the departure of some of his people from the north who have moved to the south. So he tries to put a stop to it by fortifying a town on the northern approach to Jerusalem.

(RAMAH MAP 2) Ramah is about six miles north of Jerusalem. This incursion by Baasha represents a threat to trade from northern areas, and it is an intervention into the territory of Benjamin, whose people have been siding with Judah. So King Asa needs to react to this foreign policy challenge. The challenge seems to be much less grave than what the attack by the Ethiopians meant earlier in his regime.

So how does Asa respond? According to vv. 2 & 3, **“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, ‘There is a covenant 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.’”**

Syria (ARAM MAP), also known as Aram, lay to the northeast of Israel. In this period of history Syria was often in conflict with the northern kingdom of Israel. So now Asa pulls off a clever foreign policy move. He pays off Syria to renew its conflict against Israel, thereby relieving the pressure from Israel on Judah’s northern border. He funds this project with treasures from the temple in Jerusalem.

Verse 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.”** The stratagem appears to work. Naphtali (NAPHTALI) is on Israel’s northern border. The king of Syria attacks and conquers some of these northern towns. Dan, you might remember, is one of the places where Jereboam had established a false center of worship for the northerners.

According to vv. 5 & 6, **“And when Baasha heard of it, he stopped building Ramah and let his work cease. 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.”** So King Asa tears down the fortifications at Ramah (GEBA MIZPAH), and he uses the material to build up his own fortified places on Judah’s northern boundary. On the surface everything has appeared to work out well. But King Asa has funded this with resources dedicated to worship of God in Jerusalem. He also has put his faith in his own efforts rather than in the God of Judah.

B.

Thus it is that in vv. 7-14 of #16 we find THE CONSEQUENCES OF MISPLACED FAITH. (II. A. B. THE CONSEQUENCES OF MISPLACED FAITH) Verse 7 tells us: **“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.’”** It seems that King Asa could have had not only victory over Israel but also victory over Syria. But he has relied on Ben-hadad rather than the Lord.

The prophet Hanani continues in vv. 8 & 9: **“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. 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. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars.”** Here are the consequences of Asa’s misplaced faith. The peace is gone. We deal with an omniscient God who knows and sees all. He understands the thoughts and the motives of each one of us.

He is looking for people who have a blameless heart. He is not looking for sinless people. For they are not to be found. The word which the author uses is *shalem*, which we saw last week is related to the familiar word *shalom*. *Shalem* means “to be complete, totally devoted, sincere.” Asa demonstrated that *shalem* earlier in his reign, but now he has messed up. Hopefully he is going to get back on track.

But we read in v. 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.”** Asa’s spiritual life is out of whack. Pride is a danger for anyone in power, especially a king. Here he has clearly hardened his heart. He has not only had misplaced faith, he has also turned against the spokesman of the Lord. This is indicated not only by his mistreatment of God’s prophet but also by mistreatment of other people who seem to have supported the prophet and have recognized King Asa’s misplaced faith.

According to vv. 11 & 12, **“The acts of Asa, from first to last, are written in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel. 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.”** The Lord is trying to get Asa’s attention. But he is still resistant. There is nothing wrong with getting medical help. But the implication is clearly that Asa needs to get right with God. It may also be that these physicians have a connection with false gods.

The story concludes in vv. 13 & 14: **“And Asa slept with his fathers, dying in the forty-first year of his reign. 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.”** The overall evaluation of King Asa from #14 v. 2 is that he did good and right. But he screwed up toward the end of his life. He had misplaced faith. That had negative consequences for not only himself but also his whole country.

There is an important lesson here for our congregation. We have a lot of people who have been Christians for a significant amount of time. We have a lot of people who are in the latter part of their earthly lives. Most of us may have done well in life by most standards of measurement. We may have exhibited a fairly consistent Christian faith. But there is a danger for us. There is a danger of pride. There is a danger of hardness. There is a danger that we can become casual about our spiritual life. When the next crisis comes, we can screw things up.

Bill Hybels (BILL HYBELS) has made a significant mark upon evangelical Christianity in our country. He was a major contributor to the development of Willow Creek Church in Illinois, which grew to have a congregation of 24,000 people. He became associated with the term “seeker sensitive.” Thousands of people became Christians through his ministry. He was instrumental in developing the Willow Creek Association and the

Global Leadership Summit, which sought to encourage and train Christian leaders throughout the country and the world.

Then shortly before he was scheduled to retire, he resigned. Reports surfaced that he had been involved in sexually inappropriate relationships with several women. In March 2019, *The Washington Post* reported that a six-month independent review by four evangelical leaders found the misconduct allegations against Hybels to be credible. The reviewers asserted that were Hybels still pastor at Willow Creek, disciplinary action would be required. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If a Christian leader like Bill Hybels can screw up like that, we can, too. We need to make sure that we are all cultivating our spiritual relationship with the Lord. We need to maintain a faith relationship in Him until we get to heaven.