

# Asa, A Reign of Two Halves

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's turn briefly now to 2 Chronicles, and looking at something of the teaching, part of the teaching in chapters 14 to 16.

These three chapters, looking at some of the major points raised in them. We saw last week some of the details about Rehoboam.

We looked at this, tried to illustrate really this section of the Bible as a portrait gallery of kings, where you find certain features of the personalities and the life and the reign of these various kings, as if they were portraits hanging in a gallery.

And we've moved on to look at Asaph today, this king of Judah. And this is a fairly substantial portrait. You might say, in fact, that there are two portraits of him, because his reign can really be divided into two very distinct and very different parts.

You know the old football saying, it was a game of two halves. And what is meant by that, of course, is that the first half was very different to the second half.

[ 1 : 12 ] If the first half was not very well played, then the second half was much better. And managers usually speak about, or used to speak in that sort of way. It's a game of two halves, the two halves contrasting the one with the other.

Well, that's how it was with this man's life, with this man's reign. Because the first part of his reign was a very good time. There were good years.

There were years of blessing, years of personal godliness on his part, personal commitment to the Lord. Years when the land and the surrounding lands as well had peace and rest.

And we see the importance, spiritually, of that and its meaning. It's somewhat difficult to put together the account in 1 Kings. And this one here, in terms of the time scale, because the years don't fit in.

And there's always been a problem to interpret us just to how to do that, without actually allowing for mistakes in the Bible, which, of course, we don't allow for. But it's difficult to put the years together.

[ 2 : 17 ] I'm not going to go into that, but the chapter 16 there, in the 36th year of the reign of Asha, Basha, king of Israel, went up against Judah.

Well, from 1 Kings, it's difficult to fit that in to the years that's mentioned there. But what we can say is that for 10 years, the land had peace under Asha's reign. So the first 15 years or so of his 40-year reign, he remained for 40 years.

And let's just say the first half of it, near enough, were good years. The second half were very difficult years. They were bad years.

He himself, personally, strayed badly from the ways of God. And, of course, very often when kings strayed from the ways of God, the people followed them.

We saw that with Rehoboam as well. And these bad years were marked by his own personal decline, the decay of his spiritual life and vitality, and the people themselves, too, to an extent, went back from the ways of the Lord.

[ 3 : 30 ] The good years were years of rest and reformation. These are the two things mentioned in the first half of his reign. Years of rest and reformation. The second part of his reign, the bad years, years of regression, going backwards, and repression.

Because he took it out on certain people, especially people like Hanani the seer, or the prophet, who spoke the word of God to him. Now, it's interesting that the Chronicles writer, in putting this picture together, this picture that has these two halves of his reign in it, in contrast, that each of these halves, each of these, let's call it two portraits, really, each of these portraits has the word of God spoken to the king, and a different reaction in each case.

In the good years, his reaction was that he obeyed the word of God, and from that he was stimulated to carry out reforms. In the bad years, the word of God that came to him, he utterly rejected what Hanani said.

In fact, he put Hanani into prison. The other thing that you find mentioned, as well as the word of God coming to him, is a crisis. In the good years, there was a crisis, when Zerah the Ethiopian, verse 9, chapter 14, came against them, with an army of a million men and 300 chariots. Asa went out to meet him, and then he prayed to the Lord his God, as we'll see in a minute, and he obtained a great victory. And the testimony of it was, that the people enjoyed great peace through that victory, because the Lord was with them.

[ 5 : 15 ] And Asa came out to meet him. Sorry, Asa, as he came back from that, he was met by Azariah, the son of Oded, he was a prophet, who again said to him, the Lord is with you while you're with him.

If you will seek him, he'll be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. And on the basis of that word, Asa carried out the reforms mentioned in chapter 15.

Then in chapter 16, the second part, another crisis came, this time the crisis was with Basha, the king of Israel, the northern kingdom, which remember, had begun in the time of Rehoboam under Jeroboam.

And then Basha came to set up a means by which people would be prevented from going to reach Asa, and from Asa back the way.

So it was a kind of military strategy. And instead of looking to the Lord, Asa just went and made an alliance with the king of Syria.

[ 6 : 20 ] And that was a disastrous policy, as Hanani, this time the seer came, and said this to him. He was so annoyed that he turned on him, put him into prison.

And then he began to persecute certain people, probably those who were supporters of Hanani. That's briefly the outline of this man's career.

And it is singularly telling, isn't it, that for all of these years that he had been true to the Lord, it still didn't mean that in the latter years he didn't go away from him.

That's a lesson for us all. Just because we're mature in our following of the Lord is not itself a guarantee that we will not stray or depart from the ways of the Lord.

David was not young when he strayed from the ways of the Lord in his sin with Bathsheba. This man was not young. He had been the best part of 20 years, a king, obedient to the Lord, and yet, for the next part, he went away from the Lord.

[ 7 : 24 ] He strayed badly. Let's always put that to ourselves and let's always carry that with us. That we have to actually finish the race as much as beginning it.

Paul's testimony in 2 Timothy 4, verse 7, as he spoke about how his life was coming to an end. One of the things that he said there, and it's a very, very important point that he made, I have finished the course.

I have kept the faith. It's a great thing to begin. To begin the Christian life. To enter into the Christian race. And it's not just young people that need to bear this in mind.

Some people begin the Christian race when they're very much up in years. But whenever we begin, we have to also think about finishing. There's the whole issue of perseverance. And of coming to finish the race that we've begun.

So let's look at these two years. These two sections. The good years. Rest and reformation. And then there's the bad years. Regression and repression. There's the rest that's mentioned, first of all.

[ 8 : 37 ] Chapter 14. The bit that we read there mentions a number of times that the land had rest. Now, rest is important in the Old Testament as well as in the New.

Because one of the reasons God gave the promised land to his people was to give them rest. And it's significant that after the conquests of David, we find mentioned in the scriptures that the land had rest.

It was very significant and very much a part of God's program for his people that they enjoyed rest in the land, in the promised land.

And that has a spiritual significance as well. Because the land was designed in the spiritual terms to be a sanctuary for these people of God.

In it, they were to worship him, to serve him. They were to be themselves closed out against, if you like, all the idolatry and all the different kinds of worship and obscenities that went on around them

in the other pagan nations around them.

[ 9 : 46 ] But the promised land in which the people were settled was to be a land of rest. A land of being obedient to God and enjoying the blessings of the covenant.

That's built into the teaching that you find in a passage like this. When it says that the land had rest, that the people had rest, the Lord gave him peace. He built fortified cities for the land had rest.

Look at all the times there that you might go down and mentioned about rest. That is theologically and spiritually significant. And you can go from that into the New Testament because the whole idea of this rest, particularly in the Hebrew sense of it, the word shalom, you're very familiar with that word, it means much more than the absence of war or the absence of conflict or the doing away with the situation where you've got that sort of thing.

The Hebrew idea of rest means wholeness. It means that whole, that idea of every aspect of life coming under the matter of satisfaction in God.

There's a sense of being complete in God and in the salvation and the provision that God has made. And that rest, of course, in the New Testament is described as the peace of God.

[ 11 : 18 ] The peace of God which passes all understanding, Paul said to the Philippians, which keeps, which garrisons your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

And that's why, of course, you find Jesus himself saying in that famous passage in Matthew, Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, all you who are without rest, who don't have a satisfied life, who have things in your life that still are needing attended to in order to give you wholeness and completeness.

Come unto me and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon me. Put yourself under my teaching, under my discipline, he's saying, become a disciple of mine and you will find rest for your souls.

There's the human dilemma. Where does a human being find rest? Where does a human being find ultimate satisfaction? Where is our wholeness? Where is our well-being ultimately situated?

It is in Christ, isn't it? It is in the Lord. It is in God's provision of rest. And here is that emphasis on the land having rest and on the blessing of God through this obedience on the part of Asa.

[ 12 : 40 ] He did what was right and good in the eyes of the Lord. He took away the high places and the incense altars and the kingdom had rest under him.

You see, there's a very definite connection between his own obedience, his being true to God and the enjoyment of rest. And that's how it is with us personally as well.

That's why Isaiah so often says, There is no rest, says my God to the wicked. There's the contrast between those who live without being obedient to God and seek to find rest and satisfaction somewhere else.

There is, says Isaiah, no rest to them. They are like the troubled sea which can never rest. When you look at the sea agitated after a storm or at times when there isn't a calm.

Look at how different it is when there's a stillness and a calm. That's how it is. In the contrast the Bible gives us between those who are in Christ, those who know salvation in him, those who do not.

[ 13 : 53 ] And rest, of course, doesn't mean inactivity. We kind of, we think of rest in the ordinary way of thinking about it. We do our work every day. We come back home.

We put our feet up. We watch television. We do whatever. There's other work to be done, of course, as well. But the idea of rest, in the ordinary sense, in our way of thinking of it, has come to really mean putting your feet up and not doing your work.

Being resting from your work. Well, the rest that the Bible speaks about, this peace, this spiritual well-being, this peace, it's not idleness. It's not putting on your slippers and doing nothing.

It's actually being engaged in fellowship with God. It's in the enjoyment of God, which is not inactivity. It means prayer. It means worship. It means service.

It means taking delight in him as he takes delight in us. That's this state of rest, this rest that God gives to his people. And, of course, it does involve rest from war.

[ 14 : 56 ] That is something that, in these days particularly, we should have our mind focused upon. Rest from war is so important to people.

There are millions in the world today who don't know what it is to have rest from war, from conflict, in their own home situations. And you've only got to look at the devastation in places like Syria. Or go back to the horrid times also of previous world war, periods of world war and the horrible devastation that war causes.

We should always be praying against war, wherever it is. because there are few things in human experience as awful as war.

The misery, the loss of life, the loss of infrastructure. One of the, just in passing, one of the men I met at the ICRC was a man, Patrick Jock.

[16:04] I'm sure you've seen bits on the blog about it, but he comes from South Sudan. It's so difficult to get your head round to the conditions that they live in.

Because the infrastructure of the country during these times of war, when they were involved in war, before they became separate as a country themselves, but that has left his country not just poor, but absolutely devoid of infrastructure.

There is no electricity. There is very little transport. There are hardly any buses even. If you want to go from one place to another, you've either got to walk or find somewhere someone has got a bike or else go on the back of a cattle truck.

That's day by day conditions and that is itself a direct result of war. We have to remember that peace, even in a political sense, is so important in the world in which we live.

But of course, there's a more important peace than that even. That spiritual peace where people come to be right and at peace with God. So they had rest. And then there's reformation.

[17:17] Now you notice in chapter 15, we're moving to chapter 15, as we said, the word of God came to Asa by Azariah after his victory over Zerah, the Ethiopian, and those who were with him.

And this is a very timely word of God to King Asa because one of the dangerous times is when you are flushed with victory. When you really feel that you've overcome something that's been a challenge to you spiritually, or withstood a temptation, and you've come through it, and you're thankful to God, be on your guard.

Because that is when the enemy, that's when the devil, that's when the flesh will very often again surge in a new attempt to take over your life.

And this word was very important at this stage for Asa. Because the word said, 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. There are the connections. We actually mentioned the verse last week. But there are the connections in the context of Asa's life.

[18:33] Here is Asa and the people coming back from battle flushed with victory with a great sense of achievement. Very rightly so. And that's when pride, self-sufficiency, and self-dependence, and self-confidence could very easily have come into Asa's thinking.

And the word of God is given him to direct him against that. But notice what it says. 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. Now that's important for you and for me as well. Thankfully, God's grace is able to overcome and often overcomes our forsaking of him.

There is no absolute irreversible connection between our forsaking and God's forsaking.

Sometimes he will recover us even if we've forsaken him. That's something to be thankful for. But the connection still stands true in general terms.

[19:47] If we are with the Lord, if we're on his side, yes, we're not going to be perfect in that. We're going to have our own imperfections in following the Lord.

But if our heart is there, if our desire is there, if our inclination is there, if we're determined to go on following him, then we have this great promise. The Lord is with you.

And the Lord is not going to go back on his word. You follow him and he'll be with you. On the other hand, if you forsake him, he will forsake you.

If we go away from the Lord, if we turn out back on the Lord, we have no warrant to say, ah, but the Lord's still going to come back to me. And the Lord's going to be with me.

We have no right to say that. We have no warrant or confidence as to why that should be. Because what we're told is, if we forsake him, then he will forsake us.

[20:52] He will turn from us. We will not have his blessing. We will not have in our lives the things that are so precious to the Lord's people in covenant with.

So let's keep both sides of the connection that God himself has set out for us. Now, that word was then followed by a brief description of the days of the judges.

And you see, again, it's a contrast between these days of disturbance during the time of the judges. They didn't have peace, he says in verse 5, to the one who went in and the one who went out because they were afflicted.

They had disturbances. Yet, God, when in their distress, they turned to him. He was found by them. But he says, you, he says to Esau, you and the people take courage.

You have peace, make the most of it, he's saying. Take courage. Don't let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded. And then you go on to read about the reforms that Esau set in motion throughout the country.

[ 21 : 56 ] Now, that's always important looking at these pictures of the kings. The really good ones are always associated with reforms, with reformation, with sweeping away certain things that have come into the practice of the people and especially the things of idolatry, the idols of the Canaanites, the practices of the Canaanites.

Now, as I've said before on many occasions, we have to bear in mind that it isn't just simply a formal sort of worship that's involved in the worship of these idols.

There were many obscenities and debauched practices involved in the worship of the Canaanites. And these were the things that were being brought into Israel and Judah when they took the practice and the idolatry of the Canaanites and began themselves to follow that.

And so that's why it's so commendable in the eyes of the Lord for a king like Esau to sweep away these idolatries, these obscenities, even once so far as to depose his grandmother.

It says there in verse 16, even Maha, his mother, who was actually his grandmother, king Esau, removed from being queen mother because she had made a detestable image for Asherah, for one of these gods of the pagans.

[ 23 : 32 ] And the word detestable probably means more than detestable. The image would have been graphic enough to have been an obscenity. And he removed her.

You see, that is saying to us, here's a man who puts God even ahead of his own family. And if his grandmother needs to be removed because she's a bad influence on the people, on the nation, even though she is an honorable person in terms of her status as queen mother, you might say, out she goes.

It's too dangerous. It's too important an issue. And so she's removed. And we should never, ever be reluctant to say God first and everybody else second to that, even our nearest and dearest.

We have to love them, of course. We have to do everything the Bible tells us in regard to our families and our friends and our acquaintances. But it must always be God first.

Nobody spoke more vehemently about that than Jesus himself. In regard to our relationship with father or mother or brother or sister, he must be loved more than we love them.

[ 25 : 00 ] He must be loved first and foremost. Otherwise, you cannot, he says, be my disciple. We can't be half-hearted about our following of God.

Our being in discipleship under Jesus as our king. And here's a man who's an illustration of that. He went through with these reforms even though it involved members of his own family.

These were the good years. Years of rest, years of reformation. There's something to ask ourselves today. Is my satisfaction, is my rest really where it should be in Christ?

Have I come to know and to accept and to take this Jesus that God has provided as my resting place? Do I rest in him and am I conscious thereby that he is resting in me?

Is there a mutual delight between me and God? Is the relationship between me and God today one in which I can say, I'm resting in that.

[ 26 : 06 ] I have satisfaction in that. In the words of the psalmist, Psalm 73, who himself had very nearly slipped away as he testifies. But when he came back, having gone to the sanctuary and then come to see the place that the wicked had, though he was envious at them, though he saw the prosperity of the world and he was almost pulled aside to it.

Yet when he came to really think about it and understand things in the light of God's truth, whom do I have in heaven but you? And on earth there is none that I decide besides you or above you.

My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

That's his testimony. And that's where the Bible puts us. What about the bad years? Just briefly.

The bad years? Well, in chapter 16 you have an account of the bad years.

There's regression first of all. There are two crises actually in this picture. One is political, one is personal. Basha, the king of Israel, came and instead of looking to the Lord, Asa turned to the king

of Syria.

[ 27 : 25 ] Now the king of Syria was already in an alliance with Basha and what Asa did was effectively get him to switch sides. Instead of continuing an alliance with Basha, he then actually agreed with Asa and switched sides and became an ally of Judah.

And it worked. It worked brilliantly. It worked superbly because Basha broke off all his building work that he had begun and he withdrew and Asa was able to go into Ramah where Basha had been building and took all the stuff from there and then with it he built Geba and Mizpah.

What a brilliant strategy. What a successful policy and how brilliantly executed that he was able to get this man to switch sides in his support now and that's the end of Basha.

He's gone home. He's been defeated. Fantastic. No. It's a disaster. Why? Because as Hanani 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.

In other words he's saying if you had left things as they were and the Syrians and Basha had come against you would it not have been the same as it was in your previous crisis when the Ethiopians and the others that were helping them actually with that massive army you defeated them why didn't you look to the Lord this time?

[ 28 : 54 ] You would have had the same outcome Hanani is saying to him. What a disaster indeed because while he had gained victory over Basha he had lost the support of the Lord.

He had replaced the Lord with the king of Syria. He had replaced trust in the Lord with confidence in a human policy.

How familiar is that? How applicable is that to our own age? How applicable is that to our own governments? How applicable is that to our own situation?

How applicable is that to our own lives? because here is a warning to you and to me that even in the later stages of life we have to go on trusting in the Lord relying in the Lord's word as much as we did when we began the Christian way and if we don't then it's going to be disastrous for us too. We have to keep on trusting and relying in the Lord even when it's difficult even when you don't see how that reliance is really going to be to your advantage in any given situation that's not the point the point is the Lord's word is always reliable and the Lord himself is always a reliable foundation and a reliable king for us that's after all what Hanani is saying the eyes of the Lord run to and throw 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 you see the years of rest have gone the peace is gone instead of it he's got conflict and disorder and war he's lost the support of the Lord and nothing is more important to us than to have the Lord's support to be on the

[ 31 : 11 ] Lord's side and therefore to have the Lord on our side because he lost here his victory that he would have had over the Syrians too he lost his rest he lost also his spiritual sense look at verse 12 he became 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 there was nothing wrong in seeking help from physicians any more than there is for you and I to go to the doctor when you're unwell there's nothing wrong with that you mustn't listen to people who say that you just look to the Lord and you don't look to any medical help you don't look to any medication you don't go near any of those things you just look to the Lord alone this is not saying that to us what it's saying to us is you don't look to the physician alone that's what Asa did he ignored the Lord he didn't let his crisis bring him to the Lord or bring his crisis to the Lord that's the first thing he should have done he didn't do it at all instead he just relied on help from the physicians what a sad ending to an otherwise good life what a sad ending to a reign that had achieved so much what a sad thing to put on anybody's tombstone a reign of two halves it looks as if he was buried with honor the great fire that was made for him nothing to do there with pagan rituals at all it's not a cremation that's in view there they made a great fire in those days sometimes for a king that had died a fire was made just to be a sign of honor and how in their view he was held in great esteem and that was done for him yet the record of scripture gives us this note of sadness this bleak picture of his final year of his the second half of his reign so what is it for us then well it's two things I think today as Hebrews says

Hebrews 12 let us run the race that is set before us with perseverance looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith and secondly even if we are mature in years as believers let's not wear the garments of victory before the victory is done another wicked king Ahab gave us words that are very applicable actually to our Christian life there in 1st Kings chapter 20 verse 11 words that he sent back to king Hadad again of Syria when an army was gathered against Ahab Ahab sent a

message back to Hadad in these terms tell him he said to the messenger let not him who straps on his armor boast himself like the one who takes it off in other words it's all too easy to boast when you put on your armor and when you've engaged in part of the battle but that's not victory said Ahab it's the king who's able to take it off in victory that's able to boast and until the victory is won we have to keep wearing the armor and keep following the

Lord and be on the Lord's side and be true to him because we have the greatest promise of all from the greatest king of all in the most certain word of all the Lord will be with you let's pray oh Lord our God we thank you for your own sovereign provision for your people for the grace that provides for us day by day for the way in which you bring us your word in all our circumstances so as to speak into our conditions bless us we pray as we learn once more from your word the importance of persevering and trusting and reliance upon you hear us now we pray for Jesus sake Amen