

"Finishing Well"

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's great to see you all this morning. I want to extend a special welcome not only to graduates, but some family who I see in the audience who are visiting. We are glad to have you here! Worshiping with us this morning. It's a good day to be together. And God has blessed us with beautiful weather. Amen. Spring is finally here. Yeah, it's good. Our lives are often called a race.

And it raises a question of how we run that race to the end. Many who begin don't finish well. Sometimes we fail because of the slow, wearing effect of living in a fallen world, of our own sin and failure, of our neglect of our spiritual lives. Some of us don't finish the race well because we have faced some great trial or disappointment. And it's been a breaking point for us.

Some of you are runners and probably know this better than I do, but in the Boston Marathon, there is a place. This is mile marker 20 to 21 in the Boston Marathon. And it is called Heartbreak Hill.

It's only 88 feet tall. It's not actually very high. But if you've been running for 20 miles, your body is starting to break down. Your muscles are starting to tense up.

And this is the last of four hills through the town of Newton in a suburb of Boston that the Boston Marathon route goes. And when you get to the end, for many, it has become the breaking point.

[1 : 5 7] They lose their pace. They lose their stride. They end up walking. Sometimes they don't even finish the race. We face that in our spiritual lives as well. And how we respond to these breaking points makes all the difference. Will we be broken by them or will we run the race to the finish?

This is a fitting topic because it is send-off Sunday, as Alex described earlier. This is our day in the life of our church where we celebrate those who have graduated. Obviously, Yale is graduating this weekend, but there are other universities that others are graduating from. And we have high school graduates among us as well. And we're so glad to celebrate with you. And because of the kind of church we have and the kind of town New Haven is, we also see people come and go. Sometimes they move here for a while and then God sends them off. And this is why we talk about being a sending church. A church that believes that the gospel that gathers us and the gospel that transforms us is also the gospel that goes with us as we send out to the end of the world. So, wherever we are in the race, whether our race is launching into something new or continuing in the place that God has already had us, how do we run that race and what does God's Word say to us?

Fittingly, we're in a series in 2 Chronicles. Well, you might not think this is fitting, but hopefully by the end you'll be convinced of this. We're in 2 Chronicles chapters 14 through 16.

If you want to turn there in the Pew Bibles, it's page 343. You might want to keep your finger there because it's obviously a long passage and so we'll be looking at it in little chunks, not all at once.

But we're going to be looking at the story of King Asa and how King Asa started well, but didn't finish well, and what it is that God has to say to us as we look at his life and story together. So, with that, I'm going to pray and ask for God's help as we look at God's Word, and then we'll dive in.

[4:17] Please pray with me. Oh Lord, we do come to you this morning, and we ask for your help. Lord, by your Spirit, will you open our minds to understand your Word, and our hearts to delight in your Word, and our wills to submit to your Word, and our hands to do your Word. Lord, help us this morning as we look at this passage, Lord, to know you better. And Lord, we pray you would help us and equip us to run the race that you set out before us. Lord, be my help this morning. Help me to speak as I ought to say the words that you would have me to say, that your Word would be faithfully proclaimed.

Lord, may all that I do and say be pleasing in your sight. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. So, what do we have to learn from Asa, the king of Judah? We're going to look at three movements of this of the sermon. We're going to look at what it looks like to start well. We're going to look at how he faced later challenges, and then we're going to look, step back a little bit from his life, and look at God's plan for us in following Jesus. So, that's your outline if you're an outline kind of person.

So, we're going to start in how Asa started, and the fact is he started well. We could read chapters 14 15. That will take too long, so I'm going to dip in and give you a couple of snapshots. So, the first place is chapter 14, verse 2. This is what it said, as Asa began his reign. And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He took away the foreign altars and the high places, and broke down the pillars and cut down the ashram, and commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to keep the law and the commandments. Asa began pursuing God. The first thing he did was to remove idols, right? The high places referred to the places on literally higher up in the mountains in Israel where the Canaanite peoples that had lived there before would go up to worship their gods. The ashram and the poles refer to poles devoted to the worship of Asherah, a fertility goddess in the Canaanite religion. And Asa said, this is not the people that we are, and this is not the God that we serve. So, he went up and he removed them all. And even more than that, it said he taught the people, he led the people to seek the Lord to hear his law and his commandments and to obey them. And it's interesting to note that the Lord here, the word that's used in that passage is, you know, there are multiple names for God, the God of the Bible. He talks about himself in different ways to show all of the diversity of his attributes. And here it is the Lord, and you see there are little smaller caps in the ESV.

What that means is this is the Lord who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. This is the God who revealed himself as the deliverer of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This is the God who also revealed himself to Abraham and to David, who was a covenant-making God with this people. Say, I will be your God, and you will be my people, and I will bless you, and I will look out for you.

And so this was the God that he said, this is the one we are to seek above all others. A heart orientation that included growing in knowledge of the God of their fathers, growing in trust when they needed something to trust that God would provide, growing in obedience as they understood and knew his word, and growing in a love and desire to please God in all things.

[8 : 29] This is what we see in Asa. And he attributed God's graciousness to God. He saw that in verse 7b, if you want to look at it, said, the land is ours because we've sought the Lord our God. We've sought him, and he has given us peace on every side. He said, as we have sought the Lord, the Lord has blessed us abundantly. Now, his life didn't continue with all ease. Suddenly, to the south, 15 years into his reign, a massive army shows up on his southern border. It probably came from Egypt, might have been from Ethiopia. The different translations are sort of guess at where this army came from. But if you look at the numbers, and in case you're wondering, Pastor Nick mentioned this last week, but it's unlikely that there are actually a million soldiers on the battlefield. The way that the chronicler talks about numbers, it's more about units. But however you read those, and so a unit might not be a thousand, it might be a smaller group of people. But however you read those, what you see is that he was outnumbered two to one by this massive army with chariots, and suddenly his kingdom is deeply threatened. And what did he do? Well, look with me at verse 11 of chapter 14.

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. And that's exactly what happened. Faced with this great challenge, he turned to the Lord and pleaded for God's help, and God blessed him, and God delivered him, and rescued him, and routed this overwhelming enemy that was in his face. Asa continued to serve and worship the Lord. When we look at chapter 15, it's a long chapter, there's lots of really good rich things in there, but we don't have time. We'd be here all day if we looked at it all. But what we see in chapter 15 is that chapter continued to seek God after this victory by returning to the worship in the temple and renewing an oath with God.

Right? And so that's what we see in chapter 15. They come together. He calls an assembly. The people gather and say, yes, this is our God. We will follow him. We will seek him. And we see in verse 14 of chapter 15. This is how the people responded to Asa's leadership. They swore an oath to the Lord with a loud voice and with shouting and with trumpets and with horns. 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 first 15, maybe even 30, we can talk about timelines later. The timelines in this chapter are a little challenging. But he began so well. He led the people to seek the Lord with all of their heart and with their whole desire. Some of you are graduating from high school and college. You've made it. Congratulations. That's awesome. Way to go. As you launch into this new season of your life, will you seek the Lord with all of your heart? What does that look like? Well, it means a lot of things. But let me pick out two that I think relate to the passage. The first is it means that we trust God for our everyday lives. That's what Asa did. Faced with this huge challenge, he said, God, this is too big for me. I can't do this. So he turned to the Lord, and the Lord helped him because he trusted in him. Think of the words from Proverbs chapter 3 verses 5 through 7, where the writer of Proverbs encourages us to think about our lives in this way.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will make straight your path. Be not wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and turn away from evil. I know it's easy when you've succeeded and gotten to the point of graduation.

[13 : 33] You're thinking, all right, I can do this. Maybe some of you are more anxious than that. But sometimes we have this senioritis that's... there's a lot of bravado and courage about what's happening next.

But we must be sure that we do so humbly, not trusting that we can do anything because we're invincible, but we can do anything because God is our God, and he will carry us through.

Trust the Lord with where to live and who to live with. Trust the Lord with where to attend church, how to find a Christian community. Trust the Lord as you think about how you spend your time and your money and your talents. Trust the Lord and acknowledge him. Lean not on your own understanding, but humbly seek him and ask him to help you in all of these things.

So that's the first application for this. The second one is to think about how you set your hearts. This is the amazing thing about the God of the Bible is that at one level, we often fall into thinking Christianity is a set of rules that we need to follow, and it's just an instruction manual.

If we can just do the... do the right things and check off the right boxes, then we're going to be fine. But instead, God continually says it's your heart orientation that is the foundation. It's the fountain from which your actions will flow. So where do you set your heart?

[15 : 14] And I'll tell you, one of the things I want to encourage you to do as you want to run this race to the end is take time regularly to evaluate your life in terms of what you think your heart really values. What do I mean by that? Where do you invest your lives, your time, your money, attention, your love? When we look at these things, we see where our hearts really are. Do we make time for God's Word? Do we daily open it and read it? Do we invest in being a part of a small group where we come together to talk about God's Word together? Do we make attendance to church on an every week basis a goal and a priority for us? How do we spend our time otherwise? Do we give church and God just the minimum, the leftovers? Or do we think about how we use our time abundantly to serve and to be a part of His mission? That doesn't mean you have to be at church all the time. You can be serving God in the world, but what you're doing when you're out there is not simply going along the way and doing what all your peers are doing, but you're thinking, God, how do I spend each day, each hour to glorify You?

Look at your delights. What gets you up in the morning? Is it, this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. This is the day that God has set out good works for me to beforehand, for me to walk in. Let me find those and walk in those. Or do we get really excited about the NCAA lacrosse tournament? Okay, that's probably only me in this room, but...or our sports teams, or our family, or our career aspirations, or whatever it is. What delights our hearts? And if we find that other things delight our heart more than knowing and serving the Lord, Lord, then maybe we need to return to seek Him and let the marvel of our salvation bring awe again to our hearts and let the gospel become a treasure again to our souls.

Now, all of this could be said of Asa in his early years, could it not? But as he continued, he faced his own, what seems to be heartbreak hill. And this is what we see when we turn to chapter 16.

So, this is point two, how he faced later challenges. In chapter 16, verses 1 through 6, he has another military threat. This is actually half the size of the military threat from before, and it's from not the south and Egypt, but from the north, the immediate north. And if you remember, in Chronicles, we're looking at the story of the kingdom of Israel that God has put together.

But we saw earlier on in verses...in chapters 10 through 12 that the kingdom of Israel was divided into two. And the northern part was called Israel, and the southern part was called Judah. And Asa is the king of Judah, where Jerusalem is. And Israel and the king there, named Baasha, was threatening him. In fact, it was like invading. Think about the civil war. This is like the south creeping up to Richmond and starting to cut off the trade routes into Washington, D.C.

[19 : 01] That's basically what they were doing from...but flipped over from the north. They were coming down and trying to build this place called Ramah to choke off the trade and the military routes in and out of Jerusalem. And so, it was a significant threat. And how did Asa respond? You know, it's interesting.

The text doesn't really talk about his heart or motivate...what was going on in his thought process very much here. But what he does is, rather than crying out to the Lord and saying, Lord, this is too big for me. I can't do this. Help me. He says, I've been king for a while.

I think I've been successful. I know how to do this. And so, he goes to...okay, a little bit complicated. So, north of Israel is Syria. So, he goes to the king of Syria and he says, hey, if I give you a lot of money out of my treasury, will you attack my common enemy from the north?

And then that'll distract him from doing what he's trying to do here in the south against us. That's the idea. He basically comes up with his own plan, pays for it with great riches out of the storehouse of the temple as well as the king. And it works.

He gets peace. It seems like, man, he's a wise ruler. But...verse 7, God comes and speaks to him.

[20 : 37] Let's read it together. Verse 8, Verse 8, 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. 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 hands.

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to give strong support to those whose hearts are blameless towards him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars. In this new opportunity later in his life, later in his kingdom, to trust God, he didn't. He instead trusted in himself and trusted in his human treaties.

This is a U-turn, right? Remember, chapter 15 is all about seeking the Lord with all of your heart, with all of your desire, renewing a covenant with him. And then in chapter 16, he turns around and makes a covenant with the king of Syria.

And even though it's successful in the short term, it seems God comes and says, don't you see? I actually had something better for you. Because now you're going to continue to have wars, not only with Israel, but with Syria. Your partner will never, will not be a faithful partner.

And in the end, he will be another enemy for you to have to contend with. I would have delivered him into your hands, but instead, because of your foolishness, because of your lack of trust, they have slipped away. And as you continue, you see that this was not just one mistake.

[22 : 52] And Asa goes, oh, I blew it. You're right. And turns back to the Lord. Instead, if you look, verse 10 of chapter 16, do you see what he does? He gets angry at the prophet for telling him truth.

And he puts him in chains, right? And then you look two verses later in verse 12, it says, and later in his life, he became sick, but he did not seek the Lord in it, but instead sought the physicians for healing. Right? His heart had turned away from the Lord, and he made these series of decisions to show how far he had turned away. Now, I need to say this. Physicians are not all bad.

You should seek physicians if you're sick, but you should always trust in the Lord, not in your physicians for your life and your death, for your healing or sickness.

And when you're in negotiations for your job, it's okay to pull along a supervisor who's going to help you get that promotion that you want. It's okay to do that as long as you are trusting the Lord and not your mechanisms to try to get the things that you think you want or deserve.

The heart is the point. What do you rely on? What do you trust in? Asa began trusting in the Lord and relying on Him. And in prosperity, he worshiped God. And in adversity, he cried out to God.

[24 : 36] But then he turned away. And I will say, brothers and sisters, that as I've gotten older, and some of you have walked many more years than I have and know this even more, it is so hard to keep on seeking the Lord. The dangers are constant and all around. Because when things are hard, it's easy to turn away from the Lord. We blame God because He doesn't make our life easy. When we face deep pain or loss, we think He's abandoned us. When we experience rejection, infidelity, or betrayal, we think God has not protected us. When we have disappointments or broken dreams, we despair that God has good things for us. And even though we might persevere for a long time in pursuing God, there's a danger at each turning point, each breaking point for us to say, you know what? I'm done. I don't want to do it anymore. I give up.

I don't want to trust the Lord. One of the things that I've seen is that often when we've persevered for a while through hard things, is we can develop in our own hearts a sense of entitlement. God, I've been faithful and now you owe me. And we come to that breaking point where we think, but God, I thought you owed me this and you didn't give it to me. We've been faithful so long, we develop a sense of entitlement, demandingness towards the Lord or his selfishness. And when he doesn't give it to us, we often turn away. And that's the danger of trials. But there's also a danger, my friends, in prosperity.

This is what it seems like happened to Rehoboam in chapter 12. You can look at that later. But it seems like it happened... Asa had a great career as a king. He did everything right. It seemed like everything was going well. And yet his heart was vulnerable.

It reminds me of the words that Moses speaks to the people on the brink of entering into the promised land in Deuteronomy 8. If you remember this, God had delivered people out of Egypt.

He had delivered them through the wilderness where they didn't have water and they didn't have food. And God provided miraculously in all of these ways. And now as they're on the brink of entering into this promised land where God's going to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, that where he's going to give them peace from their neighbors and a land that they can call their own.

[27 : 22] He goes on and says, do you remember all the ways that God has been faithful? Do you remember all the ways that God's going to do all of these good things for you? And then in verse 17, he says this, beware lest you say in your heart, my power and the might of my hand have given me this wealth.

You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers as it is in this day.

Maybe some of you have felt this as well. The trials are when we know we need God so much that we turn to him all the time. And then when life is good, it's easy for us to forget. And it's easy for us to start to think, this is the way life should be. As a matter of fact, this is the way, this is the life that I have built. Look at what I have done and look at how great I'm doing.

And God gets pushed from the margins to the exclusion of our lives in our prosperity. When we have career success, when our kids are thriving, when our marriage seems happy, when our friendships are rich, and when our homes are places of joy and happiness and peace, how easy it is for us to say, my hand has gotten me this wealth.

How easy it is for us to think we rely on ourselves in these things. Both trials and prosperity are tests along the way in this race.

[29 : 07] So, what do we do? How do we run this race? Well, God has a plan. But I want to, as we dive into God's plan for us in terms of how do we pursue God, I want to expose something that has been in the background of our teaching on Chronicles. Because Chronicles sometimes feels like there are two messages going on at the same time. And one of the messages is there are spiritual consequences. So, for instance, in chapter 15, verse 2 of this passage, what we see is the Lord speaking, and 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. Or, as we just read in chapter 16, verse 7, 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. And then at the very end, you have done foolishly in this. Therefore, from now on, you will have wars. So, it seems like God brings blessing when we're doing well and then cursing when we're not, right? Prosperity when we're doing well and trials and hardship when we're not.

And look, we need to acknowledge this. This is a spiritual principle. There is a truth in it. It's actually throughout the whole of Scripture. So, even Galatians chapter 6, verse 7 through 10 says this, don't be deceived. God is not mocked for whatever one sows that he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption. But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not grow weary of doing good. For in due season, we will reap if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of the household of faith. So, we see, even in the New Testament, there is... there are... there is this truth about spiritual consequences, right? There is a sense in which God does bless those who follow him and obey him and... and... and... and bring judgment or condemnation or trial on those who don't. But it's not the only pattern in this story, is it?

We kind of like that one because it's attractive to our hearts. We know, okay, if I can do this, it... it puts... it feels like it puts us in control. But in fact, there is a different... and I would even say a deeper dynamic, even in the story of Asa, where we see God giving not what we deserve, but... he acts for our grace. He gives grace to us. He gives blessing and trials without a particular cause. So, for instance, in the very first chapter... first verse, chapter 14, it says that rest came to Asa. This was before he's described as seeking the Lord. It said God gave him this graciously, right? With no cause, right? And then we see in chapter 9 of verse 14 that when Asa is doing everything right, what happens? This massive army shows up on his doorstep. That doesn't seem like God blessing him, right? In verse... in chapter 16, verse 1, we have the same thing. Chapter 15 is all about Asa's worshiping the Lord and how good it is. And then suddenly, chapter 16, verse 1,

Israel shows up and starts to attack them. This isn't... this doesn't seem like good consequences. What is this? And then we see, interestingly, that in verses 13 and 14 of chapter 16, though Asa did not finish well, he was buried in the city of David and he was celebrated as a good king.

It's really interesting to see that at the end of the day, the imprint, the impression that the writer of Chronicles wants us to see is that Asa was a pretty good king. He was in the line of David and the kingdom did pretty well. It's fascinating to see this. And we think, this isn't fair. This isn't... this isn't the way it would work. How does this, recognizing these dynamics, help us run the race?

[33 : 47] Well, there's a warning and an encouragement in these dynamics. And the warning is that spiritual consequences are real. And that means that we need to be diligent. We need to exercise our wills.

We need to engage in community so that we will continue to press in to seek the Lord. Because when we don't, it will have negative consequences. That is true.

But the encouragement is that you are undergirded by a grace deeper than that. And that helps us run that race too, doesn't it? I think chapter 16, verse 9 is a key verse in this whole section to understand what we're supposed to see about God in the life of Asa.

The very character of Asa's God is a God who wants us to seek Him, yes, but He is actually seeking us.

He is coming to us and He is looking to be our help. He is looking to be our deliverer. He is looking for us to trust in Him so that He can provide for us.

[35 : 25] And it's fascinating when you think about this, because the verse says, whose heart is blameless towards Him. And we all go, oh no. Because none of us are blameless, right?

We probably haven't even made it to church this morning without doing something and we're like, yep, that's not blameless. But I don't think that's actually the best sense of this word here.

When you look at this, it actually says, whose heart is whole towards God. It's actually picking up on the same theme that we've seen in a number of places, seeking God with all of our heart, our whole desire.

And the word also has some similar connections to the word shalom, so that the heart who is at peace or who is at rest with God, that is God is the center of them, and they find their peace under Him.

So how do we navigate these dynamics? Well, we have a God who seeks us. And is this not, my friends, the very heart of the gospel?

[36 : 34] Right? Jesus came to seek and save us when we were lost in our sin. He is the good shepherd who leaves the 99 to come out into the woolly, wild world of fears and dangers.

To rescue the one and bring Him back in. This is the heart of God. In this, God's love is demonstrated for us.

That while we were still sinners, He died for us. See, this is the amazing thing. In the economy of cursing and blessing, of spiritual consequences, Jesus, the perfect man who never sinned, stepped in and took the consequences of our sin upon Himself by dying on the cross for our sins.

That's ultimately the breaking point of this economy. Through grace, in love, He came and took the consequences for us so that we could be delivered from the consequences of our wrongdoing, of our sin.

And so that we could receive from Him a new spiritual life and a heart that is finally alive and capable of seeking Him. And now that He's given us this heart, He says, keep going.

[37 : 53] Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. Press on to follow Him. And so we end with Hebrews 12, 1 and 2 that Lara read earlier.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Friends, this is how we run the race. We fix our eyes on Jesus, the one who has come to rescue us. Let's pray.

Lord, thank You for Your Word. Lord, thank You for the ways that it challenges us and encourages us. We pray, Lord, that You would help us.

Be our help. Lord, to run the race towards You that You've called us to. Lord, maybe for some, this message would cause us to repent of other things that we have done, of ways that we have begun to rely on ourselves, or things we have not trusted You for.

[39 : 22] Lord, help us to turn back to You because of the grace You've shown us in Jesus. Thank You that He has run the race for us, and Lord, that when we are His, He will bring us home.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.