

Prayer and Courageous Action

Lessons from the Life of King Asa

Mark Heath, 29 Dec 2005

2 Chron 14-16

Have you ever wondered why we have so many accounts of the lives of kings of Judah and Israel taking up space in the Bible? Perhaps like me you have heard many sermons on the life of King David, and perhaps one or two on Solomon or Josiah, but the rest of the kings are largely unknown to many of us. The writer of Chronicles devotes three whole chapters to the life of king Asa (whose life is covered much more briefly in 1 Kings 5:9-24), which should alert us to the possibility that there are some lessons to be learned.

On the surface of things, we couldn't be in a more different situation from these kings. We live thousands of years later, in a completely different culture. We live in the New Covenant, the other side of the cross. And on top of that, most of us don't have responsibility anywhere near approaching that of the king of a nation.

However, the New Testament consistently teaches that the Old Testament Scriptures were written to for our instruction (e.g Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). King Asa is not presented as someone who is 100 percent good, or as 100 percent bad, but as a real person trying to live for God, getting some things right and making some mistakes. Though our situations are in one sense very different, the lessons from his life are as relevant today as ever.

A Heart for God (14:1-8)

The first thing we notice about king Asa is his desire to be a godly king. This might seem surprising as his father had not been devoted to the Lord (1 Kings 15:3). What's more, the influential Queen Mother was a worshipper of Asherah. But God is able to use people whatever their background.

In verse 2 we see that he wanted to do what was right "in the eyes of the Lord". In the days of the Judges, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Asa's grandfather Rehoboam (2 Chron 10:8) was torn between deciding which people to please – his friends or his advisers. But Asa was not a self-pleaser, nor a man-pleaser, but a God-pleaser.

This is something we need to watch for in our own attitudes. The temptation to be a selfish, doing only what seems good to us is one that we must continually fight. More subtle is the temptation to be a man-pleaser. This is manifest in constantly trying to gain approval of others, or avoiding disapproval. The trouble is, being a man-pleaser will inevitably lead us to compromise on doing the right thing.

Asa's desire to please God was seen in three ways. First he got rid of idols (v3). This was bound to make him unpopular with some people, but God's word is clear on the subject of idolatry. It must not be tolerated in the life of a believer. In our day, idolatry is still a temptation, even though we may not have wooden gods we bow down to. Anything that takes the devotion that God deserves must be considered an idol in our lives.

Second, he sought the Lord, and encouraged others to do the same (v4). He recognised the importance of prayer in his own life and the life of the nation. They needed God's help to do what was right, and his protection against danger.

Third, he promoted obedience to God's word (v4). If we want to live as God-pleasers, then we must take seriously the task of knowing what he requires. Eph 5:10 encourages us to find out what pleases the Lord.

We see in verses 6-8 that God blessed Asa with a period of prosperity and peace, during which time he was able to strengthen the defences of the country.

The First Crisis (14:9-15)

So things appeared to be going well for Asa, but suddenly there was a crisis. A massive Ethiopian army came against him. How was he going to respond? Impressively, Asa uses principles he has already learned, and responds with *prayer* and *courageous action*.

We see courageous action in verse 10, as Asa leads his much smaller army out against the enemy. He shows here his determination to do what was right, even though it was difficult. He might have been tempted to flee, or to surrender, but he takes bold initiative and meets the enemy head on.

But that is not all he does. In verse 11, we see that he prays. In his prayer he acknowledges his own weakness and reliance on God. He also discerns that this crisis could be an opportunity for God's glory, as his army was fighting in the name of the Lord.

This dual approach of prayer and courageous action is an example for us to follow when we face major life crises. We need to have a good knowledge of God's word to help us know what the right course of action is, and have the courage to take it. But also we must pray, recognising that we need God's strength to overcome. Taking action without prayer shows self-reliance, but praying without taking action is equally foolish – it shows lack of faith and obedience.

God honoured the approach Asa took to this crisis and a great victory was won by the Lord (v12). In fact, Asa ended up in a stronger position than before as they took plunder and the surrounding nations became afraid.

A Word from God (15:1-7)

Things were going really well for King Asa at this point, but then an interesting thing happens. A prophet came to see Asa with a message for him and the nation. According to the prophet Azariah, now was the time for seeking God (v2) and taking courageous action (v7). Now Asa may well have been tempted to respond rudely. Hadn't Azariah seen how he had handled the recent war? Surely this was a message that belonged to just before the war, not just after it.

But Asa thankfully had a humble spirit, and accepted this word from the prophet. He realised that the call to prayer and courageous action was not just one for times of crisis, but for peace-time as well. Asa was not to wait until another crisis came along to set about seeking God, but to take initiative himself.

A Fresh Commitment (15:8-19)

The first thing Asa did was set about getting rid of the idols (v8). We may be surprised at this, as the previous chapter says that he had already done this. But they had gained some territory during the intervening years, and perhaps some new idols had been made in existing territory. The war against idolatry in our lives is an ongoing one. There can be a subtle creeping back and compromise after we had thought we had decisively dealt with an area of sin. We need regular purges of idols from our lives.

Asa also took the opportunity to deal with the issue of the Queen Mother. He had not had the courage to depose her and destroy her idol the first time around, but now he knew he needed to be strong. Asherah worship could not be endorsed by a member of the royal family. Sometimes, pressure from our own family members can be a very powerful hindrance to us doing what we know is right. Though we must be gentle and polite, we need the resolve to do what is right even when a close relative opposes us.

As well as taking courageous action against idols, Asa wanted to call people to worship and seek the Lord. He repaired the altar (v8), and his godly example drew many from Israel (Asa was king of Judah) to join him (v9).

Asa led the people in a radical recommitment of themselves to seeking the Lord with all their hearts (v11-13). As I write this it is approaching new year, a time when people traditionally make

“new year resolutions”. We do this because we recognise the need to periodically focus ourselves on what is important in life. As Christians, it is good to take opportunities such as new year, or perhaps a holiday to make a fresh commitment to seeking God with all our hearts, and to ridding our lives of sin. Of course, we will still need to make a daily effort to spend time in God's presence, but regular times of renewal of commitment will help safeguard against drifting.

So crucial did Asa view seeking the Lord to the welfare of the nation that he made it a capital crime not to do so (v13)! Quite probably he was being overzealous here, and as Christians we must remember that our war is primarily against sin in our own lives, and is not fought with human weapons. In any case, it would appear that everyone responded to the call to seek the Lord, and wonderfully, in verse 15 we are told that “he was found by them”. The promise of Jeremiah 29:13 is open for all who respond to it – “when you seek me with all your heart I will be found by you”.

Another Crisis (16:1-6)

So far, the story of Asa's life has been one of faithfulness to God, and blessing from God. Asa had learned whether in crisis or peace-time, to seek the Lord in prayer, and to serve him wholeheartedly with courageous action. So in 16:1, when King Baasha of Israel sets up a siege against Asa's kingdom of Judah, we would expect that he would deal with this crisis in the same way as before.

Unfortunately he didn't. Instead, he used the silver and gold from the temple and his palace to buy the allegiance of the king of Syria, based on a treaty their fathers had made in the past. The plan worked, and Baasha withdrew. This crisis had been averted, at great financial cost, but also at even greater spiritual cost.

What tempted Asa to approach this problem in this way? There were three factors. First, it was *possible*. He had a lot of money. Perhaps he had begun to look to his riches as a source of security rather than God. This is a temptation that faces all of us who enjoy a measure of material prosperity. Second, there was *precedent*. He was only doing what his father before him and other kings had done. But here we see that his desire to do what was right in the eyes of the Lord was slipping away. Third, it was *pragmatic*. After all, it worked. He may well have felt very pleased with himself, at the 'wise' way he had handled the situation.

Another Prophecy (16:7-10)

But it wasn't long before God sent another prophet to king Asa, this time with a message of rebuke. Asa had been a fool (v9), and God would punish the nation for it. The prophet reminded him of how he had won a great victory with God's help against the Ethiopians (v8). In those days, Asa had relied on the Lord (see 14:11), but now he didn't rely on him any more.

This time Asa's response to the prophetic word was not one of humility but of vindictiveness. He took out his anger on the prophet and even some of his own people (v10).

How could Asa have got to this point? Somewhere along the line he had had lost the determination to seek God and do what was right. Maybe he simply hadn't learned the lesson of regular commitments to the Lord, and had let things drift over the years. The prosperity he had been blessed with for his righteousness had actually served to turn his heart away from God.

The Final Crisis (16:11-14)

Now we come to the final, and tragic episode of Asa's life. He gets a disease in his feet. Foot disease is not usually life-threatening, and Asa decides that it is not important enough for prayer. He is clearly not on speaking terms with God any more at this point in his life. Even as the disease gets more serious, he still is too proud to pray, preferring just to seek the doctor's help (v12). Of course, there is nothing wrong in itself with getting medical help, but his loss of reliance on God was evident by his refusal to pray. The foot disease eventually led to his death.

Conclusion

Though his life had a sad ending, Asa is described to us by both the writers of Kings (1 Kings 15:14) and Chronicles (2 Chron 15:17) as a good king who remained true to God. He was honoured by his people after his death. The early parts of his life should serve as an inspiration to us to meet whatever challenges we face with prayer and courageous action. We need a determination like Asa had to do what is right in the eyes of God.

The latter part of his life though should serve as a sobering reminder of the need for regular recommitment to seeking God and ridding our lives of idolatry. If we don't do this, we may allow our reliance on God to slowly diminish and be replaced with a reliance in other things. If it has been some time since you rededicated yourself to seeking God and obeying him, perhaps Azariah's prophetic word is also applicable to you - "If you seek him, you will find him, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you" (2 Chron 15:2). So "take courage. Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded" (2 Chron 15:7).