

The River Runs Crooked

I Kings 15; II Chronicles 14-16

Introduction

In Max Lucado's book, *The Applause of Heaven*, he retells the story surrounding the burial of Charlemagne, which occurred near the end of the first century. Charlemagne, if you remember your notes from European History class, was an emperor who ruled most of western and central Europe. He is still considered, by many historians, to be the most influential king who ever reigned in Europe.

When Charlemagne was buried, he asked to be entombed sitting upright in his throne. He asked that his crown be placed on his head and his scepter in his hand. He requested that the royal cape be draped around his shoulders and an open Bible be placed in his lap. Supposedly, it was done.

Two hundred years later, the Emperor Othello, driven by curiosity, determined to see if the burial request had indeed been carried out. He sent a team of men to open the tomb and report back to him. They found the body just as Charlemagne had requested. However, as it was nearly two centuries later, the throne was littered with crumbling piles of bones. The royal cape was moth eaten and the crown was covered with dust. But, still open, underneath the old fragments of clothing and the royal drape, was the Bible.

The Bible was opened to Matthew, chapter 16. The verse that was apparently circled for attention, was the 26th verse. That verse was the message that Charlemagne, the great monarch of an ancient empire, wanted the world to remember whenever he was remembered. It says,

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? . . .

If there is a message to be heard from our study today in I Kings, chapters 15 and 16, it is that message. For the Spirit of God, inspiring the prophet Jeremiah, wanted all of us to be able to read in I Kings, something more than history. So, as each king passes across the stage under the divine spotlight, Jeremiah introduces them to us with the same cryptic formula. Notice several examples in I Kings, chapter 15:

- verses 1 through 3,

Now in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, Abijam became king over Judah. He reigned three years in Jerusalem . . . He walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God .

..

- verses 25 and 26,

Now Nadab the son of Jeroboam became king over Israel in the second year of Asa king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel two years. He did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father and in his sin which he made Israel sin.

- verses 33 and 34,

In the third year of Asa king of Judah, Baasha the son of Ahijah became king over all Israel at Tirzah, and reigned twenty-four years. He did evil in the

sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin which he made Israel sin.

The Lord, in these verses, is making me painfully aware that I need repetition in order to learn. We are all that way. When the Lord repeats Himself in the Word, it is not because He has lost His train of thought, it is because He wants to get a message across to us.

The Lord parades these kings across the pages. There are five dynasties in Israel alone, during the reign of one king, King Asa, in Judah. Their biographical entries in the books of I and II Kings are brief. The main point, in the sight of God, is that they were evil or they were righteous.

Imagine your epitaph reading,

. . . he walked in all the sins of his father . . . and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God . . .

“But, Lord, what about their kingdoms; their reign; their military exploits; their expansion projects; their pageantry?”

When their history is written for eternity, only one thing matters, and that same thing applies to you and me. It is, “Did you walk with God?”

Now, frankly, reading through this text and studying for this sermon, it seemed as if I was reading a novel or watching some sick soap opera. Imagine these events occurring, at times simultaneously in the northern and southern kingdoms: one king rules under the oppressive, domineering hand of his mother; another king is invited to his trusted friend’s house, where he drinks too much and cannot fight an assassin who appears, slits his throat, and assumes the throne; that empire’s army, which at that moment is out of the country, hears the news, proclaims their General to be King, and marches back to town; so the assassin and would-be king, knows it is “curtains” for him, and he rushes to the palace and commits suicide by burning it down around him; which then causes civil war to erupt, as the flames are finally extinguished. It is racy reading material, let me tell you!

All of these kings reminded me of a river that runs crooked along its path. And, why does a river run crooked? Because there is a path of least resistance and water will always take that path.

The current of popular belief was, “live life to the fullest, with self on the throne”. And these men had “arrived,” they were the king!

In the final analysis, however, God, who will always have the last word, says, “That which is eternally significant is not what you became known for, but who you walked with.”

Asa – The First Years

Now, in the middle of all this mess, that was primarily occurring in the northern kingdom of Israel, one king reigned in the southern kingdom of Judah for more than forty years. His biography, especially the early chapters, are a breath of clean air amidst the surrounding smog. He arrives in the capital of Jerusalem as a knight in shining armor! Notice I Kings, chapter 15, verse 11. These are words that you do not expect to read.

Asa did what was right in the sight of the Lord, like David his father [forefather].

This is almost too good to be true! Asa is surrounded by ungodliness, yet his reign signals a change. He goes down in Jeremiah’s account as someone who acted a lot like David!

Principles from Asa’s early years

Let me give you a couple of principles that arise from Asa’s early years.

It is possible to have godly character in an ungodly culture

1. It is possible to have godly character in an ungodly culture.

What is wonderful about Asa is that his character was not formed by his culture, nor was his integrity rewritten by his culture when he reached the top of the heap.

A lot of nice people have been ruined by a promotion. Do you know what I mean? It is the age old story of the small hometown boy or girl who makes it big and then, stiffs everyone from their past as insignificant. The best test of character is not how you act when you are a nobody, but how you act when you are somebody.

Asa is now somebody. Will he follow the practice of kings before him, who were proud, arrogant, unaccountable, immoral? *No!*

The second principle lies underneath the layers of Asa’s upbringing.

It is possible to have righteous standards in spite of unrighteous surroundings

2. It is possible to have righteous standards in spite of unrighteous surrounding.

In case you missed it, look at verse 8.

And Abijam slept with his fathers and they buried him in the city of David; and Asa his son became king in his place.

What kind of king was Asa's dad? What kind of example did Asa grow up with? What kind of heritage did Asa enjoy? Look at verse 3.

He [Abijam, Asa's father] walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God . . .

As I will bring out in a moment, not only was Asa surrounded by the effects of his father's ungodliness and immorality, but his grandmother, who played a significant role in the kingdom, was an ungodly, sexually deviant idolater as well. This was Asa's home, yet he grew up to follow the God of Israel!

Reminders from Asa's early years

Allow me to insert a couple of thoughts as reminders at this point. One negative and one positive thought arises from Asa's early years.

Do not excuse personal sin with your parent's poor example

1. Do not excuse personal sin with your parent's poor example.

No matter what you are overcoming by virtue of your past, when it comes to sin, there is no excuse. Adam tried that one, "Lord, it's that woman you've made me live with; it's her fault."

No matter how ungodly our parents, and we, as parents, are fallen human beings, and we all fall far short, that is no excuse for any son or daughter to embrace a lifestyle of secret or public sin.

Do not forget that God's blueprint for you is not erased by an undesirable heritage

2. Secondly, do not forget that God's blueprint for you is not erased by an undesirable heritage.

If you are struggling with the fact that your home life, when you were growing up, was not godly and, as a result, you feel that you are missing some ingredients that God would certainly require in order for you to be His special child and servant, remember that God is not handicapped by your parental heritage! Your parents were not a surprise to God; they did not overwrite His plans for you. God is more powerful than your past and He has a future for you.

Notice, in the last part of verse 1 of chapter 15, that Asa's father's name is written as Abijam. That literally translates to mean, "my father is Yam". Yam was a Canaanite sea god. It is interesting that in I and II Chronicles, his name is Abijah. That translates to mean, "my father is Yahweh". It is possible that his given name was Abijah, but later, in his immoral shift into idolatry, he changed his name to Abijam in honor of one of his many false gods!

Asa – The Formative Years

The Germans have a proverb that, translated, says, "Whatever the old sing, the young chirp."

Well, Asa reverses the proverb and, against all odds, begins some drastic actions.

The acts of Asa

Notice, beginning in verse 12 of I Kings, chapter 15, that Asa accomplishes several key things that form the strength of his kingdom.

Asa demolishes the system of religious promiscuity

1. Asa demolishes the system of religious promiscuity.

Notice verse 12a.

He also put away the male cult prostitutes from the land . . .

The Hebrew word for male prostitutes is "qedesim," which refers to both men and women who practiced sodomy and prostitution as a part of a religious ceremony.

Can you imagine the upheaval that would be caused by a leader assuming the throne, in an era when homosexuality was politically correct, and putting them away; that is, exiling them to another place outside of his kingdom? He did not kill them or abuse them; he did not explain them away as an alternative religious lifestyle; he did not command the

military to include them; he simply told them, “If you want to practice that, then pick another country.”

This is the first action he takes. He “kills the cash cow,” gets rid of the money makers within the pagan temples.

Asa destroys the legacy of idolatry

2. Asa also destroys the legacy of idolatry.

Look at verse 12b.

. . . and [Asa] removed all the idols which his fathers had made.

Now it is getting personal. Asa is getting rid of the family heirlooms. Some of these idols were expensive. They were overlaid with gold and were made with the finest craftsmanship. He “chucked” them all.

Do you think Asa is causing a ruckus in the kingdom? First he causes all the religious leaders to get upset because he has cut off their main supply of cold, hard cash, and secondly, he has offended all of his relatives because he took all of the family idols and threw them in the trash. And, he is not finished yet!

Asa deposes the queen mother from her role in the kingdom

3. The next action of this godly young king is to depose the queen mother from her role in the kingdom.

Notice verse 13a.

He also removed Maacah his mother from being queen mother, because she had made a horrid image as an Asherah . . .

Now, do not be misled by this verse. Although it says she was his mother, understand that this is a Hebrew euphemism. In fact, notice what is said about Asa’s father, Abijam, in verse 2,

He reigned three years in Jerusalem, and his mother’s name was Maacah, the daughter of Abishalom.

The same words appear in verse 9 concerning Asa. So, who is she?

She was the daughter of Tamar, who was the daughter of Absalom, who was the son of David, which made her the mother of Abijam and the grandmother of Asa. That might show up on the final exam, so do not forget it! I know it can get confusing,

but most of the men who sat on the throne were all interconnected in some way or another. It is similar to going to a small country church when they are having dinner on the grounds – most of the people at that picnic are related.

The important thing to remember is that the custom of this day was for the eldest matriarch to play a significant role in influencing court policy. She would often have a throne next to the king and was usually referred to as the king’s mother, or the queen mother. She wielded great authority by virtue of her maternal position and resulting influence in the family.

Some have suggested, for example, that Ahasuerus, or Artaxerxes as the Septuagint calls him, was sympathetic to the request of Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem because he was influenced by the queen mother of his court, Queen Esther.

So, what does Asa do to the queen mother? He fires her! He deposes her; puts her throne in the storage shed! Can you imagine?!

Why? Notice verse 13b.

. . . because she had made a horrid image as an Asherah . . .

The queen mother had an image made that was related to the fertility cult of Asherah. The Hebrew word “horrid,” could be rendered “obscene”. The Hebrew verb is translated “shudder”. Evidently this image was so graphically perverted that it is described as an evil, obscene creation that caused people to shudder with shock.

Now notice verse 13c.

. . . and Asa cut down her horrid image and burned it at the brook Kidron.

There were probably a lot of people crying, “Censorship,” and asking, “What about artistic license?”

The National Endowment for Hebrew Arts was very upset; the Jewish Civil Liberties Union probably filed suit. But, Asa did to that image what he should have done – he cut it down.

Asa’s act was done as a public act. With crowds of spectators around him, he burned that image. It was an act of righteous judgment; he was acting Mosaic, for Moses had taken the golden calves, burned them, and cast the ashes into the water.

As the smoke from Asa’s fire rose into the air, it was clear that he was burning more than an idol. Make no mistake about this, he was burning his ships

behind him; he was making it clear to the nation that a new king was on the throne and a new standard of righteousness was the politically correct language of the day.

For thirty six years, the people flourished under Asa's righteous hand, for, as Proverbs, chapter 14, verse 34a, says,

Righteousness exalts a nation . . .

I pray that for our nation as well.

It is interesting that Jeremiah makes no mention of any major sin or error in Asa's life.

In the book of II Chronicles, Ezra includes a wonderful story about Asa. Turn to chapter 14, verses 9 and 10.

Now Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and 300 chariots, and he came to Mareshah. So Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up in battle formation in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah.

Continue to verse 11 and notice this great prayer of Asa's. In fact, if you are facing some insurmountable challenges right now, memorize his prayer!

Then Asa called to the Lord his God, and said, "Lord, there is no one besides You to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; . . ."

I love that. Did you catch his words, "between the powerful"? There is no spiritual lingo in this prayer to soften the horrible reality of life; this is a crisis and the enemy is powerful. Then, he says, "and those who have no strength;" not "some strength," or "a little strength," but "no strength". Continue reading verse 11.

". . . so help us, O Lord our God, for we trust in You, and in Your name have come against this multitude. O Lord, You are our God; let not man prevail against You."

That a great prayer, is it not? "Lord, if I have anything to do with what comes next, I'll fall flat on my face. I have absolutely no strength for the crisis of today; I'm totally weak. It's me and my little army against a million. I just can't do it. Please, Lord, help!"

Notice verse 12.

So the Lord routed the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled.

It was quite a victory. It was quite a kingdom. Asa was quite a king.

Asa – The Final Years

On the heels of this victory, a prophet named Azariah appears on the scene and gives Asa good advise for his kingdom and his reign. Look at II Chronicles, chapter 15, verses 2 and 3.

and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, "Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: the Lord is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you. For many days Israel was without the true God and without a teaching priest and without law."

In other words, "Asa, you haven't gone far enough in your reforms. It isn't enough to get rid of wrong worship, you need to reinstate true worship. The people need to be taught the Law."

The rest of chapter 15 tells us of Asa repairing the great altar and bringing the people to sacrifice before the God of Israel.

Two events in Asa's final years to learn from

Now, had the biography of Asa ended here, the story would have been entirely wonderful. However, while he does go down in history as being one of the few good kings, Ezra inserts two events that occurred in Asa's final years that every New Testament Christian can learn much from.

An unfortunate decision

1. The first event we will simply refer to as, an unfortunate decision.

Look at II Chronicles, chapter 16, verse 1.

In the thirty-sixth year of Asa's reign Baasha king of Israel came up against Judah and fortified Ramah in order to prevent anyone from going out or coming in to Asa king of Judah.

Now, understand the picture that is portrayed in this verse. The northern king of this divided kingdom, marched to Ramah, just five miles outside of Jerusalem, and made it his military headquarters. He

not only stopped the northern Jews from defecting, so they could enjoy the revival that is occurring in the south under a godly king, he cut off a major route for trade and commerce for Asa.

You would expect Asa to consult with God. For over thirty years, Asa has walked with God. Notice what he does instead, according to verses 2 and 3.

Then Asa brought out silver and gold from the treasuries of the house of the Lord and the king's house, and sent them to Ben-hadad king of Aram, who lived in Damascus, saying, "Let there be a treaty between you and me, as between my father and your father. Behold, I have sent you silver and gold; go, break your treaty with Baasha king of Israel so that he will withdraw from me."

It is clear that Asa is in a tight spot and he panics. He needs an immediate solution. We all know that waiting on the Lord can be rather time-consuming, right? So, Asa does the unthinkable. He raids the temple treasury and bribes a pagan enemy of God and of the Jewish nation and has him do the dirty work.

Does Asa's compromise work? *Yes*, it did! Asa, in everyone's judgment, made a smart, shrewd political alliance. Baasha retreated to the north and there was peace again!

The greatest deception of compromise is, *it works!* For example:

- telling a lie might get that deal closed;
- lowering your standards may bring greater popularity among the student body;
- adding that product to your store shelves might bring higher sales;
- telling that joke may give you better camaraderie.

Compromise seems to work! Ladies and gentlemen, compromise works, that is why it so popular. In a time of military crisis, Asa compromised, and it worked.

Notice, however, the prophet who comes to rebuke Asa. Look at chapter 16, verse 7.

At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah and said to him, "Because you have relied on the king of Aram and have not relied on the Lord your God, therefore the army of the king of Aram has escaped out of your hand."

Now, stop for a moment and realize what he is saying. "Asa, if you had relied on God, not only would the Lord have taken care of Baasha, but that old King Ben-hadad would have been conquered as well. Instead of taking money out of the treasury, you could be putting a ton of plunder inside it right now."

Ouch! "Look what you forfeited, Asa! It looked like your compromise worked, but don't be deceived by immediate results!"

Compromise does work, but only temporarily!

Do you remember when Moses was told by God to speak to the rock, but instead, he hit it with his stick? If you remember, the water did flow, the thirsty people did drink, and they thought he was a hero, but God thought differently. The long-term result was not so wonderful.

Erwin Lutzer worded it this way, "Compromise wins games, but it loses tournaments!"

One of the men in our church, who used to pastor a church, told me an interesting story a few years ago. I may not remember all of the details, but let me tell you the main points of the story.

There was a younger man on the board of his church whose car broke down irreparably. He asked the board, at their meeting that night, to pray about his situation, as he really did not have the money for the purchase of a car at that time. They agreed to pray with him over the next week. At the board meeting the following week, the man announced that he had been able to arrange financing for a used car, so they did not need to pray anymore.

After the meeting, another board member told my pastor friend that he was somewhat surprised. He said, "You know, since my wife died, her Cadillac has been sitting in the garage. It has hardly been used, so I had decided to tell him tonight that he could just have it. I guess he does not need it now."

That young board member never knew what he had missed.

Now, I am not suggesting that God has Cadillacs for all the faithful. Sometimes the faithful ride the bus. However, I just cannot help but wonder what we forfeit when we arrange our own plans instead of seek the Lord and then, wait to see what He will do.

Ken Dodge, who pastors in the west, repeated a story that one of his church members had shared. The man's eight-year-old son, Franky, had looked forward, for weeks, to a particular Saturday because his father

had promised to take him fishing if the weather was suitable. There had not been any rain for weeks but, as Saturday dawned, wouldn't you know it, it was raining heavily and it appeared that it would continue all day.

Franky wandered around the house, peering out the windows, and grumbling more than a little. "Seems like the Lord would know that it would have been better to have the rain yesterday than today," he complained to his father and mother.

They tried to explain how badly the rain was needed, but Franky was still upset. "It just isn't right," he said over and over.

Then, about three o'clock, the rain stopped. There was still time for some fishing, so the gear was quickly loaded and they were off to the lake. Whether it was because of the rain or some other reason, the fish were biting hungrily and father and son returned with a full string of fine, big fish.

At supper, when some of the fish were ready, Franky's mom asked him to say grace. Franky did, and concluded his prayer by saying, "And, Lord, I know I was upset earlier today. It was because I couldn't see far enough ahead."

Asa's story is almost over. But first, there was a military crisis and an unfortunate decision. And, then, there is just one more sentence that speaks a volume.

An uncomfortable disease

Asa experienced a personal, physical crisis and an uncomfortable disease. Notice verse 12 of chapter 16.

In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa became diseased in his feet. His disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but the physicians.

Now, the implication throughout Scripture is not that it is wrong to seek doctors. Paul's reference to Luke as the beloved physician, validates the office.

It is also not always true that sickness is the result of sin and doctors cannot fix it. Sickness may be nothing more than the effects of time and age. I like the way one man wrote it, nearly two hundred years ago, "Sickness in old age, is a divine trial, to wean men from the world and ripen them for eternity."

While it is not wrong to seek physicians, it is wrong, when faced with a physical crisis of health, to seek everyone but God. I Corinthians, chapter 11,

verse 30, informs us that sickness may be a messenger to straying saints.

Asa was evading God! The truth was, he had imprisoned God's prophet; in his last years, he was doing harm to the nation. Perhaps God allowed Asa's feet to become diseased as a symbolic gesture that Asa was no longer walking with God.

Applications From Asa's Years

By way of application, I want to say, basically the same thing, three different ways; that is, repeat it. My wife has learned the art of repetition. She will say to me, "Honey, the trash is getting full . . ." and then, "Sweetheart, tomorrow's trash day . . ." followed by, "Stephen, Charity's diaper pail is sending up distress signals; smoke flares."

I usually get it the third time!

I want to repeat myself simply because the Scriptures that we have been studying today have repeated themselves. In one brief biography after another, the same words are read. We are not told anything about the splendor of one man's reign, or about his kingdom, his successes, his wealth; we are told, in simple language, what kind of character the man had. He either walked with God and did right or walked in the sins of his father and did evil.

That leads me to the first application.

The most important decisions in life happen in private, not in public

1. The most important decisions in life happen in private, not in public.

What marked these men for all time, was not their public reign, but their private relationship with God.

The most important preparation for a crisis in the public arena is intimacy with God in the private arena

2. The most important preparation for a crisis in the public arena is intimacy with God in the private arena.

My father told my brothers and I, when we were young men, this same truth in a different way. He said, "Boys, when you get out of bed in the morning, if you decide to follow the Lord, then you've made the only important decision you'll need to make all day."

The truth is, crisis is a fact of life. When it comes, your walk with God in private will help you reveal the grace and power of God in public.

For the third application, I will repeat myself with slightly different words.

The most important activity in life is your personal, private walk with God

3. The most important activity in life is your personal, private walk with God.

For some of you, you need this three-fold reminder, because lately, your walk has been crowded out by your work; your public activity has taken precedence over private intimacy with God. Some of you are setting yourself up for failure on the home stretch.

For others, perhaps you have been feeling rather insignificant to the community at large or to the church. Certainly, God cannot be too impressed with your accomplishments or achievements. What are they?!

Remember, no matter what your role, whether it is participant or leader, when the dust of history settles, the question from Kings and Chronicles remains, "Did you walk with God?"

I want you to hear that question which is emanating from the dusty remains of Charlemagne. He was the great emperor of the early European world, but his crown now lies on the floor of his tomb,

his royal drape, once magnificent and envied, is now moth eaten and drab. Learn the lesson from him that it is better to walk with God than win the world.

Learn the lesson from a litany of kings, good and bad, who had the greatest role in the land; who had achieved the most impressive position in their world! They were the CEO's in the land and they were the quoted; they were the wealthy, the adored, the obeyed. And yet, in the end, their brief biographies included God's simple epitaph.

Learn the lesson well that, "The epitaph God is writing is the only epitaph worth reading – and the only lifestyle worth living!"

Have an epitaph that says that you, His child, walked in His ways, with a heart that, although not perfect, and that in fact, failed and confessed and failed and confessed again, was devoted to Him, period.

John Bacon, an eighteenth century English sculptor, ordered a marker for his grave with the following inscription: "What I was as an artist seemed to me of some importance while I lived; what I really was as a believer in Christ Jesus is the only thing of importance to me now."

The truth is, if, by His grace, we will understand that truth now, then no matter what crisis we encounter, no matter what the terrain is like over which the water of our life will flow, our hearts are devoted to Him. Then, and only then(!), will the river of your life and mine, run straight.

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