

Good Kings of Judah #1

When Henry Loos approached possible donors for a new literary magazine that he wanted to start, most just laughed at his idea. It wasn't that Henry didn't have the background or training for such a project. He was a graduate of Yale University, class of 1920. Henry had demonstrated some poetic skills. But this new idea of his seemed bizarre. Henry wanted to produce a magazine that would summarize the news events of the week. *Who is going to want to read old news?* Henry's friends asked. *Why wouldn't people just read the daily newspapers instead.* Still Henry persisted. In spite of rejection after rejection, he thought it was a good idea.

Finally Henry met a wealthy lady in Cleveland named Mrs. Harkness. She was impressed with Henry who appeared to be a clean cut young man with looked like he was trustworthy. Mrs. Harkness decided to invest \$20,000 in Henry's experiment. Only later did Henry learn that Mrs. Harkness hadn't understood any of his presentation at all. She was nearly deaf so she couldn't hear much of anything that he said to her. But her instincts told her to trust Henry – so she did. She had a lot of money – most of it invested in the stock market. So she had decided to back Henry's project.

It was fortunate for Mrs. Harkness that she invested in Henry Loos. For she would soon lose the rest of her fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, but her investment in Henry continued to give her a comfortable retirement. Henry's idea would take off and flourish despite the doubts of his friends. We still read the product of Henry Loos' brainstorm every time we read a *Time Magazine*.

We all rely on different people and institutions in life. Much of the quality of our lives is dependent on the character and dependability of what we trust in life. Financial institutions try to present an image of stability to attract investment capital. Pictures of a rock or a bull or helping hands are used in an attempt to give confidence to people – we are an institution you can rely on is the message that is proclaimed. But we have all experienced how fragile many of our financial institutions are during this past year. Those who find a good investment like Mrs. Harkness are rewarded, but those who rely on that which ultimately fails lose their money. So people are constantly looking for stable investments to trust.

As important as temporal security is to us, having a solid foundation to trust in the spiritual realm is much more important. Happily, God gives us such a rock upon which to plant our spiritual feet. The first good king of Judah that we are going to study this morning provides an example for us of the importance of relying upon God.

We are starting a study together looking at the 8 good kings of Judah. Following the division of the nation of Israel after the death of Solomon in 931 B.C., there were 40 kings that ruled over the Northern and

Southern Kingdoms. The Northern 10 tribes that were called Ephraim or Israel had 20 kings and the southern Kingdom called Judah had 20 kings. This in itself is quite remarkable because Israel's history was 136 years shorter than Judah's. Samaria the capital city of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Jerusalem didn't fall captive to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians until 586 BC. Judah lasted an entire world empire longer than Israel but they still both had 20 kings apiece. Not one of the kings of Ephraim, the northern tribes, is declared to be good in the Scriptures. Jeroboam, the first king of the northern tribes, put up golden calves in Dan and Bethel and encouraged his people to worship at these altars rather than going to Jerusalem to worship as God's law instructed. Jeroboam undoubtedly got the idea for these golden calves from Egypt where he had been exiled from King Solomon. He was jealous of his people going to Jerusalem to worship at the temple so he proposed this double calf solution, but his idolatry set a precedent that the other 19 kings followed resulting in none of them passing God's test of being a good king.

The Southern part called Judah had 20 kings – 8 out of the 20 (40%) were declared to be good in the Scriptures. The first king who is declared to be a good king in the divided kingdom was Asa. Asa was the great grandchild of Solomon. The dynasty went from Solomon to Rehoboam to Abijah to Asa. Rehoboam ruled for 17 years; Abijah ruled for just 3 years; so Asa came to the throne of Judah about 911 or so B.C.

What was it that made Asa a good king in the eyes of God? In one brief phrase it was Asa's reliance on God. Now Asa wasn't consistent throughout his life in every circumstance in his reliance on God – and this brought some trouble into his life. But unlike his father and grandfather, Asa did rely upon God in several key areas of his life. This allowed him to have a peaceful and stable 41 year reign as King of Judah.

The account of Asa's reign is found in 1 Kings 15 and 2 Chronicles 14-16. The Chronicles account gives some specific examples of Asa's reliance upon God both positively and negatively. We first will look at 2 areas in which Asa relied upon the Lord that brought great blessing into his life and then we will conclude by looking at 2 areas in which Asa chose not to rely upon the Lord that brought pain and heartache into his later life.

READ 2 Chronicles 14:1-15 to 15:4:

2CH 14:1 And Abijah rested with his fathers and was buried in the City of David. Asa his son succeeded him as king, and in his days the country was at peace for ten years.

2CH 14:2 Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the LORD his God. ³ He removed the foreign altars and the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. ⁴ He commanded Judah to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, and to obey his laws and commands. ⁵ He removed the high places and incense altars in every town in Judah, and the kingdom was at peace under him. ⁶ He built up the fortified

cities of Judah, since the land was at peace. No one was at war with him during those years, for the LORD gave him rest.

2CH 14:7 "Let us build up these towns," he said to Judah, "and put walls around them, with towers, gates and bars. The land is still ours, because we have sought the LORD our God; we sought him and he has given us rest on every side." So they built and prospered.

2CH 14:8 Asa had an army of three hundred thousand men from Judah, equipped with large shields and with spears, and two hundred and eighty thousand from Benjamin, armed with small shields and with bows. All these were brave fighting men.

2CH 14:9 Zerah the Cushite marched out against them with a vast army and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. ¹⁰ Asa went out to meet him, and they took up battle positions in the Valley of Zephathah near Mareshah.

2CH 14:11 Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, "LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. O LORD, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you."

2CH 14:12 The LORD struck down the Cushites before Asa and Judah. The Cushites fled, ¹³ and Asa and his army pursued them as far as Gerar. Such a great number of Cushites fell that they could not recover; they were crushed before the LORD and his forces. The men of Judah carried off a large amount of plunder. ¹⁴ They destroyed all the villages around Gerar, for the terror of the LORD had fallen upon them. They plundered all these villages, since there was much booty there. ¹⁵ They also attacked the camps of the herdsmen and carried off droves of sheep and goats and camels. Then they returned to Jerusalem.

2CH 15:1 The Spirit of God came upon Azariah son of Oded. ² 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. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. ³ For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach and without the law. ⁴ But in their distress they turned to the LORD, the God of Israel, and sought him, and he was found by them.

Now there are 2 areas of reliance on the Lord that I would like to direct your attention to in the life of Asa.

First, just after he assumed office, he removed the altars to foreign gods and the high places, smashed the sacred stones, and cut down the Asherah poles. Now these general statements demonstrate Asa's

commitment to rely upon the Lord. For these foreign gods that he removed each had a very practical application to the life of these citizens in an agricultural society.

Astoreth was the Canaanite goddess of fertility. She was the one who blessed the procreation both with children and with flocks and herds.

Baal, her husband, was the god of the storm. He was the one who brought the rain that was so desperately needed in this dry region to grow the crops.

Dagon was the Philistine god of grain. He was the one who made the crops grow and produced a bountiful harvest.

Chemosh was the Moabite god of war. He was the one who gave strength and protection to a country.

And, of course, there were many other gods and goddesses that we could discuss, but I think these help us begin to get the picture of how important these deities were to the daily lives of these people. Each god represented a very important function that was indispensable to the quality of their lives. By removing their altars and shrines, Asa was publicly saying that we are going to rely only on the God of our Fathers, Jehovah. This was a dramatic and courageous statement to make after a couple of decades of worshipping these false gods.

But then there was also a very specific event that tested Asa's commitment to rely upon the Lord. The Cushites came up from North Africa and marched against Asa with a vast army. An invading army is usually the ultimate threat against a king and his sovereignty over his country. And this army specifically would have caused great alarm. The Egyptians had used soldiers from Cush as mercenaries for some time now. Much like what happened in Rome when the Roman empire, steeped in luxury, relied upon Barbarian mercenaries to fight its battles near the end and those barbarians eventually turned on Rome itself, these Cushite forces had now taken over the land of Egypt in what is now remembered as the 25th dynasty. Now confident in its power and strength, the Cushites were looking to expand northward. Judah was the next plum to be plucked. Now Asa had prepared himself and his country. He had an army of 580,000 men, equipped with swords and armor. It would not have been unusual for the king to rely on his military preparedness and trust in his army for protection and even seek to make an alliance with another nation to fight the Cushites with him. But Asa did not do this. Asa prayed to the Lord and confessed his reliance upon God for protection.

2CH 14:11 Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, "LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. O LORD, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you."

God honored Asa's trust by striking down the Cushites before the Judaean Army. The Israeli soldiers not only had the thrill of tasting victory, but they also gained much wealth by plundering the North African army.

There is no question that Asa began his rule by a firm resolve to rely upon the Lord. And God blessed that commitment. He blessed it with military victory; He blessed it with prosperity; He blessed it with peace.

But sadly, Asa did not remain consistent in his reliance upon the Lord during the later years of his life. And there are 2 negative examples that are given in Chronicles to illustrate that fact. Read those with me from 2 Chronicles 16:1-14:

2CH 16:1 In the thirty-sixth year of Asa's reign Baasha king of Israel went up against Judah and fortified Ramah to prevent anyone from leaving or entering the territory of Asa king of Judah.

2CH 16:2 Asa then took the silver and gold out of the treasuries of the LORD's temple and of his own palace and sent it to Ben-Hadad king of Aram, who was ruling in Damascus. ³ "Let there be a treaty between me and you," he said, "as there was between my father and your father. See, I am sending you silver and gold. Now break your treaty with Baasha king of Israel so he will withdraw from me."

2CH 16:4 Ben-Hadad agreed with King Asa and sent the commanders of his forces against the towns of Israel. They conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel Maim and all the store cities of Naphtali. ⁵ When Baasha heard this, he stopped building Ramah and abandoned his work. ⁶ Then King Asa brought all the men of Judah, and they carried away from Ramah the stones and timber Baasha had been using. With them he built up Geba and Mizpah.

2CH 16:7 At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah and said to him: "Because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand. ⁸ Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? Yet when you relied on the LORD, he delivered them into your hand. ⁹ For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war."

2CH 16:10 Asa was angry with the seer because of this; he was so enraged that he put him in prison. At the same time Asa brutally oppressed some of the people.

2CH 16:11 The events of Asa's reign, from beginning to end, are written in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel. ¹² In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the LORD, but only from the physicians. ¹³

Then in the forty-first year of his reign Asa died and rested with his fathers.¹⁴ They buried him in the tomb that he had cut out for himself in the City of David. They laid him on a bier covered with spices and various blended perfumes, and they made a huge fire in his honor.

In the 36th year of his 41 year reign, Asa faced another military challenge. This time the challenge was from the north rather than the south. This wasn't near the challenge that Asa had faced earlier in his reign. The Cushites had conquered all of North Africa. This time Baash, the king of Israel, was just building some fortifications. He hadn't even mustered an army to attack, he was just doing something that would threaten Judah's borders. Asa probably figured he could handle this little problem – he didn't need the help of the Lord this time. So he made a deal with the Syrians or Arameans to the north. Asa knew that if they would threaten Baasha from the north, he would stop building the fortifications on his southern border figuring the Aramean threat was a greater crisis for him. And that is exactly what happened. Asa's plan worked. But God was not pleased because Asa had relied on his own ingenuity and the nation of Aram.

What Asa didn't realize was the plan of God. God had already relieved Judah from the threat to the south defeating the Cushites. Now God had planned to take care of the threat to the north taking care of the Arameans. But Asa had ruined this plan by joining in treaty with the Arameans. God wasn't pleased with this.

And Asa continued in his waywardness when confronted by a physical problem. Asa began to have problems with his feet. But instead of praying to the Lord for guidance and healing, Asa only consulted his doctors. Now there is nothing wrong with consulting physicians. God has given tremendous capabilities to us as a human race to develop medical technologies. But Asa did not seek help from the Lord but only from the Physicians. So God thwarted the help of the medicinal help that Asa was given. Asa, who started out so well, ended up his life crippled and in pain.

God wants his people to rely upon Him. When His people do trust in Him, God blesses them. And often, God blesses in similar ways as he blessed Asa – with protection and peace and prosperity and health. Sometimes these blessings of God bring an even greater temptation into our lives. For while it is easier to trust God when the enemy's army has surrounded us, it is sometimes harder to rely upon God in days of prosperity and peace and health. We are even tempted to rely upon our prosperity and own plans rather than relying upon God. But God desires that our faith grow with the years of time so that our reliance and trust in Him becomes greater as the years pass.

When workmen were preparing to build the first railway suspension bridge connecting the U.S. and Canada in 1847 near Niagara Falls, they were stymied at first as to how to get started. Once they were able to connect the 2 sides, they then would be able to do the work. But how could they get that first cable across

the great divide? The chief engineer of the project offered \$10 to anyone who could come up with a solution to their problem. The reward was finally claimed by a 13 year old young man named Homan Walsh. He took a kite and standing on the up-wind side of the channel, he flew the kite up into the air allowing it enough string to drift over to the other side. In time, the kite fluttered down to the earth. Then to that thin kite string, a little bit thicker line was attached and pulled across, and then a thicker one and then a thin cable, and then a thicker cable – and finally, strong, thick cables were connecting our country with Canada and the workers were able to complete the first suspension bridge.

Our reliance upon God is designed to work like that little boy's idea. At first, our trust is halting – but God honors it. This should give us confidence to greater trust, and greater trust, and finally we have a strong connection to God. But we must not then start trusting in the bridge and forget the one who made the bridge in the first place. We must continue to rely upon the Lord all the way through our lives.

Reliance on God is evidenced the most through our prayer life. During those early days when we had little chance of success against the mighty British troops, it was natural for our leaders and troops and citizens to pray to God for help. But now we are the world's super-power. Now we feel that there is no equal militarily to our army and navy and air force. We must resist the temptation to rely upon our own strength. We must continue to rely upon the Lord. And we show that by taking time out of our schedules to acknowledge God and ask for His help and blessing and guidance through prayer. I trust that each of us will acknowledge our reliance upon the Lord as we live our lives this week.