

Starting (and Finishing) 2017 Well: a case study
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Brian R. Wipf

We've developed the habit of reminding you of some important spiritual practices and disciplines at the start of New Years. The goal, of course, is to help you see the necessity of them in your own walk of faith with God. Last week, Tim highlighted prayer in our Sunday sermon. I encouraged us married men in the January Body Lifeline. I'm going to be doing the same this Sunday and the next. Today, I don't have a particular topic to address, though I'm going to focus on the Word of God. Keeping our lives saturated with the Word of God is critical; so is keeping our hearts eager and ready to receive God's Word. Along with shining a spotlight on the word, I have a few other little nuggets to share with you this morning.

I want to do all of this by telling you the story of one of the first kings of Judah, King Asa. There are some very important lessons to learn from Asa's life. I've been greatly challenged by his life and I'm hoping God's word impacts you as well.

First, let me give you some context (PIC). First, here is a brief and partial line of the kings of Israel and Judah. At the top is David. David ruled a united kingdom; so did Solomon his son. But due to Solomon's sin, there was a civil war in Israel that divided the nation. The northern tribes under the rule of Jeroboam the son of Nebat revolted from Solomon's son, Rehoboam. And when that happened, there were two nations and not one. Israel was to the north comprising most of the 12 tribes of Israel and Judah to the South comprising of mostly Judah and some of Benjamin and Simeon. And here's Asa, King of Judah (he was the 3rd of 20 kings of Judah before the fall of Judah to Babylon). Let's read the opening words about Asa's reign and as we read, pay attention to what Asa is like as a king and what he did (READ 2 Chron 14:1-8).

The first thing that should jump out at you is how the author describes Asa's spiritual path; we find that in vs. 2, "And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God." When you read 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles the author always describes the kind of king that ruled Judah or Israel. And Asa was a godly king; a good man. He did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord. What a great description. I'd love to be remembered like this; Brian did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord. He wasn't perfect, he made some mistakes. But he was a godly man. He cared about God and followed him.

And this godliness, friends, was put to action. That's something you always need to remember; your faith, your godliness is made visible by your actions. Jesus said it best; "a good tree produces good fruit and bad tree produces bad fruit." What's the good fruit of Asa's life? He destroyed the altars and pillars of worship in the land and led wholehearted worship to the God of Abraham. One of the problems in Israel and Judah at the time was that many people had divided hearts; that means their loyalties and worship were divided. They gave praise to God, but they'd also honor and worship the gods of the nations and the gods of Egypt. Asa rightly knew

that true faithfulness wasn't divided, but instead had a singular passion - wholehearted worship of God alone. So, he tore down the altars of these foreign gods and commanded the people to seek the Lord and obey God's commands. Oh, Asa was a good king.

We're also told that he built up the armies of Judah leading an army of 580,000 soldiers and fortified the cities of Judah. That's an important detail because of what we read next (READ 2 Chron 14:9-15).

Grave danger jumps off the page in vs. 9, right? Zerah is believed to be the commanding general of the Ethiopian army and look at the size... 1 million strong. Do you remember the size of Judah's army? 580,000 is considerably smaller than 1 million; this spells trouble for Asa. And vs. 9 also says this massive army came as far as Mareshah. Mareshah is a fortified city in Judah! It's probably only 20-30 miles from Jerusalem; this battle is in their backyard, it could not be closer. It's as if we're the rebellion and Darth Vader and the Empire are coming to strike back and they're in Marshfield on their way to Medford... it's near.

What's King Asa to do? I'll tell you what: he prayed. Look at vs. 11 (READ). I just want to draw your attention to something really important about prayer piggy-backing on Tim's message last week. Notice how Asa prays, "Help us, O Lord, *for we rely on you.*" That's what you do when you rely on the Lord; you pray to him. You call on his name for help. You see that without God the city can't be defended; you see that without God's intervention there will be no growth. So, you pray. You lift up your voice and say, "God, come and help!"

This is a sign for me; this is one of the ways I evaluate my hope and trust in God. When prayers are infrequent it's a sign to me that I'm not relying on the Lord. Instead, I'm relying on myself, I'm relying on my resources, my ingenuity. And it needs to be corrected. How do you correct that? Well, first by repentance. I confess that this self-reliance is wrong and sinful. I confess that I'm too impressed with my ability. I confess that I'm turning away from God as my ever-present help in trouble. And then I look to cultivate a recognition of my need for God and a recognition that God is completely *able* and *willing* to help; he's both. He *can* help and he *wants* to help. Friends, not relying on the Lord can have dire consequences (as I'll show you in a minute).

Asa continues this life of faith in God. We're not going to read chapter 15, but it records the spiritual leadership and decisions of Asa, *and it's good leadership*. The prophet Azariah tells Asa that if he will seek the Lord, he will find God. And that's exactly what Asa does; look at vs. 8, "As soon as Asa heard these words, the prophecy of Azariah the son of Oded, he took courage and put away the detestable idols from the land of Judah and Benjamin...." Listen to the beginning of that again: "*As soon as Asa heard these words....*" Friends, that's taking God's word seriously. That's trusting and believing in God. I want to be like that; I want you to be like that. I want to be a man that as soon as I hear the words of God I act on them. God says, "Give!" and I just start giving. I don't wait around for others to give; I don't question if this is the best time to give. As soon as I hear, I give. God says, "Work for me!" and I just start working as

unto the Lord. I don't protest telling God these are my retirement years; I don't hold back. As soon as I hear that my life is to be filled until the day I die with works of righteousness, I get to work. That's what Asa was like. In fact, Asa even gave his own mom the boot because he believed in God's word. Look at vs. 16 (READ).

Didn't Asa ever hear "if mama ain't happy, nobody's happy?" My mother-in-law lightheartedly likes to call herself the queen. But's a little reminder to me, to Korby that this is mom; we do things mom's way. Cross mom at your own peril. But look at Asa! He gives his own mom the boot! But do you know why? It's because this is God's word; this is God's law. And not even your own mama is more important than the word of the Lord. Friends, prize and honor God's word so highly that you would even remove your mother as queen mother (if you absolutely had to) *as soon as you hear*.

There's a lot to like about Asa, am I right? He relies on the Lord and prays. He seeks God when he hears God's word. He's faithful; he's got a singular passion to honor God. But, that was the first half of his life; how does he finish? What will the 2nd half of his life look like? Let's keep reading (READ 2 Chron. 16:1-6).

Let me just summarize what's happening here (PIC). When Baasha became king in Israel, as the text states, he came against Judah by building Ramah to prevent the coming and going inside of Judah. This was a problem. So, Asa reached out to Ben-Hadad in Syria, Israel neighbor to the North to come against Israel and by doing so, Baasha would be distracted from Ramah and Asa could gain victory. And that's exactly what happened. It worked.

I admire Asa's resourcefulness and quick-thinking; Asa is a problem solver. He took action when action was needed. I try to be like this, too. I know some of you are like this. Something happens to your car and *boom* you do something about it. A new work opportunity presents itself and you're quick to act. You and your husband are now outnumbered by your kids so you devise the most effective zone defense. Sometimes our ideas work; sometimes they don't. But we did something about it the best of our ability. I get Asa; but what does God think about this (READ vs. 7-10).

The two qualities that we saw earlier in Asa's life - qualities that we should admire and emulate - are remarkably and sadly no longer a part of his life. First of all (and briefly), he has stopped relying on the Lord. That's exactly what Hanani says; "You relied on the King of Syria and not on the Lord. Didn't the Lord come through for you against the Egyptians and Libyans; that was a huge army and the Lord destroyed them all. Why will you no longer rely on the Lord?" Ok, but what did Asa *fail to do*? He failed to pray. He didn't ask God and the failure to ask God was rooted in self-reliance rather than trusting the Lord; that's why I said earlier lack of prayer is a sign for me that I am relying on myself and not on the Lord.

But notice what else he did: when he heard the Word of God from Hanani he got angry. He was so angry that he locked up the prophet of God. That's so different than before. As soon as Asa heard the words of God he did them; now, he hears them and hates them.

Friends, what do you do when the word of God stings? Well, maybe I should ask: does it sting? Do you ever hear the Word of God in a sermon, do you ever read God's word on your own, do you participate in a Bible study and get a little offended at the Word of God? It should. Remember what the Word of God is for (2 Tim. 3:16): All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

I've done a lot of coaching the last 10 years of my life. I've done a lot of reproof, correcting and training and one thing I've learned is that kids don't like those three things. I don't like them! I didn't like them when my coach did them for me! So I don't blame them. They all sting. The word *reproof* means to correct a wrong, but the wrong is a moral wrong. If one of my players punches the competition I'd reprove or rebuke them. They did something morally wrong. When you correct a moral wrong there's shame; you're correcting character and it hurts to be corrected like that. The word *correction* is also correcting a wrong, but there's not a moral quality about it. I've got a kid and he's working really hard, but he made an innocent mistake; in fact, he keeps making them. I need to correct him. But it stings; it stings his pride. He wonders, "What are the others thinking?" A coach *trains* his team. Before the end of practice you all need to run 10 laps. That's discipline and training. It will make them a better team; but it hurts. That's the what the word of God does; it stings. If you don't feel the sting of God's word every now and then, something's wrong in your reading and hearing.

So, what do you do when it stings? Do you get angry like Asa? Do you lock it up by not refusing to come to church anymore? Do you become a critic and nitpick all the details of the sermon on the way home? Do you stop reading the Word of God at home?

How can we be like the young Asa, who believes and responds as soon as we hear? There's a number of things that go into this, but let me suggest at least this: cultivate a need and desire to be stung by the word. Tell yourself, every time you read at home or every time you hear a sermon preached, "I need a corrective word the Lord." We need more; we need encouraging words from the Lord; we need gracious words from the Lord. But we also need corrective words and corrective words sting.

I remember as a boy my mother giving me vitamins; I'm guessing she heard that kids need vitamins so, trying to be a good mom, she gave them to us. I remember liking these vitamin C tablets. They were big, bigger than a quarter. When you chewed them, they'd be all chalky, but they'd also give this kind of citrus kick that made your teeth tingle. I liked those vitamins. But then she gave some others (I don't know what those were for), but they'd taste as good. If mom forgot to give me those, I counted that as a gift. Some of God's word doesn't quite taste as good as others. But we need both.

Cultivating your heart simply means you prepare to receive it. So, include some preparatory steps so you're ready to hear God's word. Let me suggest a few. First, humble yourself. Tell yourself, "I need help; I haven't arrived. I'm currently making mistakes and sin is deceiving me." When you humble yourself like this you start looking for God's corrective word. Secondly, prepare for the blow. A FBC brothers who's at home with Jesus used to tell me, "Pastor, you throw stone when you preach. I like it. Thank you." It's probably my favorite compliment on my preaching. It tells me he was looking to get hit; to be corrected. When you're not looking for it, when you're stung by the word it's not so welcomed, is it? So, get ready for the blow. Finally, pray. Pray for God's help. Rely on him.

I have one last thing before we close; why did Asa finish so poorly? What happened? Look at vs. 11-12 (READ). Look how things ended; he's stopped relying on the Lord; he hates the sting of God's word where he actually throws God's prophet in jail. Vs. 10 said he inflicted cruelties on some of the people at that same time. And in his darkest personal moments, he still refused to turn to the Lord for help. When the Bible says says, "*Even in his disease* he did not seek the Lord" that's code for, "if there was any time that he would have or should have sought the Lord he didn't."

So, I have mixed feelings about Asa. On the one hand, he lived so honorably so long. God's word says it itself; Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. In 1 Kings 15 it says (vs. 14) it says, "Nevertheless, the heart of Asa was wholly true to the Lord all his days." That's what God's word says; Asa is lifted up as a good example by and large.

But what about this terrible finish? I think we can at least say this: for all the good Asa did, he didn't end well. He didn't finish the race the way Paul modeled for us in 2 Timothy. And here's what you and I need to know: we'll finish just like Asa unless we make a point to finish well. That's the last word I want to offer as we start 2017; you can't coast to the finish line, friends. If you are in your retirement years or will soon be, let Asa's example frighten you; let it's sting motivate you towards humility, faithfulness and service. Don't live the last third of your life for you, live it for Christ. Maintain humility; don't live in pride. Don't stop learning. You've been a good example to your younger brothers and sisters in so many ways; don't become a bad example with the last portion of your life. And if you're like me, in your mid-aged years, maybe your early years, prepare now. Tell yourself right now, "I want to finish well." And then get yourself ready. If you're married, talk to you spouse and agree, "Let's not be like Asa." Ask a friend to hold you accountable. Tell your friend, "In 30 years, promise me you won't let me coast." Learn, my good brothers and sisters, from God's word today and from Asa's example.

Key verse ~ 2 Chronicles 14:2

Questions for the week

- Share with someone something you were convicted by from Asa's example.
- Are you concerned about how you might finish? Should you be?
- What's one routine you'd like to change or add in your life in 2017?

