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Grace That Remains

I Kings 15:1-24

Intro: As a nation, Israel has always been referred to by a well known title that is unique to them: God's chosen people. We are familiar with the phrase but do we know what it means? Yes, God chose Abraham out from among all the other nations on earth to make of him a great nation that would be separated unto God specifically. But God's choosing of Israel means much more than that. Another way to ask the question would be – for what reason did God choose Israel. Clearly, it had nothing to do with Israel and everything to do with the purposes of God but what are those purposes? Well, we know that Israel was called to bear witness of the one true and living God before all the other nations of the earth. We also know that the Scriptures were given by God to Israel to be preserved and offered to the world. We also know that it would be through Israel that the Savior of the world would come.

These were the things God had called Israel to do and for the most part, through the reigns of David and Solomon, both the name and glory of the Lord was projected by Israel to nations near and far. But, at this point in her history, the reality of these things being accomplished looks pretty bleak. Now, instead of one united kingdom, there are two and they're constantly at war with each other. Also, the leaders and common people in both kingdoms have a bad habit of departing from the true worship of Yahweh to go and serve idols. The honeymoon is over; the glory is fading. If it had been left to the human agents of God's covenant, none of God's purposes would've been realized. But, the overruling hand of God's sovereignty and His grace is present to ensure that His purposes will come to pass.

Despite rampant idolatry in both kingdoms, the priests still carried on with the prescribed temple ministry in Judah. But, during the 340+ yrs from Rehoboam to Zedekiah (last king) only 8 of the 19 kings of Judah were classified as good. As for the 20 kings of the northern kingdom of Israel, for the most part they were self-serving men who were classified as evil. Some were better than others but none of them were comparable to David. Israel will have nine different dynasties over their 250 year history while the southern kingdom of Judah will faithfully maintain the Davidic dynasty for

350 yrs. It's from this very same dynasty the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David, would come.

Before we launch into our study today, I would like to remind us all that the Books of Kings and Chronicles do not record the history of Israel and Judah from the same perspective. The primary focus of the Books of Kings is on the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel, which we will begin to see in the last half of this very chapter. From the end of ch15 through to ch10 of II Kings, the focus is almost entirely on the kings of Israel. The emphasis of the Books of Chronicles is almost exclusively on the Davidic dynasty in Judah. In fact, the northern kingdom is only mentioned when they had dealings with Judah. Understanding this alternating perspective will shed light on our text today.

1-7 – Nothing good is said about Abijam in this passage. In fact, not much is said about him at all, apart from the usual literary formulas. However, if you were to look him up in **II Chronicles**, you would find that he is given an entire chapter (**13**). In that chapter, you would learn that Abijam knew quite a bit about the Lord and about Israel's religious heritage. You would also learn that he could preach too. He delivers quite the sermon to Jeroboam, when he brought his northern army out to do battle with Abijam. Abijam was able to make some solid theological and accurate historical points that showed Jeroboam he was on the losing side of this battle, even though his army was twice the size of Judah's. You will also learn that when Jeroboam attacked, Abijam cried out to the Lord and God brought a great victory to Judah over Israel that day. They whipped them so bad; Jeroboam never came out against Judah again.

Why the different presentations of the character of Abijam's reign in Judah? How can one section of the Bible barely mention him and in that brief blurb, can't find one positive thing to say about him; while another section gives him an entire chapter and makes him out to be the hero? Is this a discrepancy? No, it's just that the writers of Kings and Chronicles are making two different points. The author of Chronicles, whose focus is on David's dynasty, implies that Abijam was reasonably orthodox when compared to Jeroboam and his idol cult in Bethel. The writer of Kings, on the other hand, is telling us that, when it comes to following in David's footsteps, Abijam completely misses the mark. He was covenantally defective when compared to David. He knew something of the Lord but he

didn't uproot the idolatry and sexual immorality that was introduced into Judah by Rehoboam.

We see this most clearly in **v3**. As with his grandfather Solomon and his father Rehoboam, the heart of Abijam's problem was a problem of the heart. Actually, the second half of **v3** explains the first half. Abijam may have had David's blood flowing in his veins but he didn't have David's heart beating in his chest. Clearly, it's the condition of the heart (**3b**) that determines the path of the feet (**3a**). The condition of your heart will lay out the path that you will follow in life, whether you will live to serve the Lord or to serve yourself. This may still be surprising knowing all the theology and religious history Abijam was familiar with but it does provide us with a valuable spiritual principle. It is important for us to know the truth of God's Word but it is vastly more important for us to believe that Word, to trust it, to follow the truth that we know. Information doesn't change carnal hearts. Information is important but submission to and application of the Word is the key.

You could also say that Abijam had two fathers, since both Rehoboam (**3a**) and David (**3b**) are called his "father". Here we have in one verse the two normal Hebrew connotations: immediate progenitor and distant ancestor. But these respective fathers also constitute two different models. Sadly, Abijam choose Rehoboam as his pattern of life to follow rather than David. But, with all these wrong moves and blatant disregard for the covenant relationship with Yahweh, how is there still a kingdom Judah? Jeroboam kicked Yahweh to the curb and he was the last of his line. His sin not only doomed him and his entire family, it also doomed Israel. And yet, Judah continues on. How?

The answer is given in **v4** – for David's sake! What does that mean? It could mean on account of David's faithfulness or it could mean on account of Yahweh's promise to David. There may well be 2 answers to the question of why the kingdom persists in Judah: Yahweh's covenant commitment (**v4**) and David's covenant consistency (**v5**). David's faithfulness wasn't perfect but it was typical of him. Thus, if Jeroboam's infidelity was poison and slow death to Israel then David's fidelity was blessing and long life to Judah. Because David and Jerusalem held a special place in God's affections, the idolatry of Solomon and Rehoboam didn't bring upon Judah the immediate judgment of God that had been expected. It was no different with Abijam. This dynasty, unlike Jeroboam's, is secure.

So, why's there still a kingdom in Judah? Because of the faithfulness of David but also, more importantly, because of the faithfulness of God. He had made a promise and in that very promise He recognized that David's descendents may very well be a bunch of scoundrels (II Sam 7:4b). But the kingdom remains, not because man obeys but because God has decided. The reason the Jews haven't vanish into the mists of history is because God won't allow it. He has decided that His kingdom will come. Grace is not only greater than our sin; it's more stubborn than our sin.

8-15 – The next king of Judah is Asa and he is shown as both a reformer and a politician. Like a breath of fresh air, we read for the 1st time of a king who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did his father David. The character of Judah's kings was always measured against David, the founder of their dynasty. In contrast to his father Abijam, Asa followed Yahweh with the same heart as David. So, Asa's righteousness was distinctive.

It was also destructive! He got rid of the perverted persons his grandfather Rehoboam had allowed into the land; he ran them out on a rail. He also removed all the idols that his predecessors had made and worshipped. He even hacked down and burnt up some horrid object his grandmother made for the worship of the goddess Asherah. His purge extended even to the royal household. This shows how consistent Asa's reforms were. He was able to act righteously, even when his own family was wrong. There were no pampered exceptions. He then deposed Maacah from being Queen Mother (or first lady) in Judah.

There appears to have been some limitations to his reforms (14) but II Chron 14:3 tells us the Asa did remove the high places that were associated with the altars of foreign gods. So, he removed the high places that were dedicated to idols but not the ones that were dedicated to the Lord. He also brought into the temple treasures that both he and his father had dedicated to the Lord. These were most likely their portion of the spoils of war from the victories that Yahweh had granted to them. There is no doubt about the sincerity of Asa's heart condition – it was completely opposite of that of his father Abijam. But, let's set Asa's religious accomplishments aside and dive into his politics.

16-24 – So there is unending hostilities between Asa and Baasha, king of

Israel. We've not been formally introduced to him yet, the writer can't do everything at once. Take his word that Baasha is now king up north and he's stirring up a political thunderstorm. He came down and invaded Benjamite territory, taking Ramah and is now in the process of fortifying it against Asa's counterattack. Ramah was strategic: it was only 5+ miles north of Asa's Jerusalem and it sat across the main north-south road and controlled Judah's most convenient access to the coastal plain. Baasha's plan was no secret; it smells like an economic blockade (17b)!

What can Asa do? Well, the writer doesn't give us all the options; he simply tells us what Asa did. His first move was to empty the coffers of his own treasury and that of the temple. Notice the similarity to the dedicated things of v15. Apparently, he believed these treasures belonged to the Lord – as long as he didn't need them himself. He then takes all these treasures and sends a commission to Ben-Hadad up in Damascus and asks to enter into a treaty with him. Of course, the most important provision of this treaty was that Syria had to first break its treaty with Baasha and then turn around and attack him. For Ben-Hadad, this was an offer he couldn't refuse: get paid good money to take real estate from Israel. And this wasn't just dirt – it was prime locations. Controlling these sites gave Syria dominance over the main east-west caravan route to the Mediterranean. Economics has a secure place in every nation's plan.

With a major attacking force threatening his northern border, Baasha could no longer play "Flip this house." He had to break off his DIY project in Ramah to go deal with this invasion; which was Asa's plan from the start. Asa then instituted the draft for a patriotic public works project. He had his people go up and carry off all Baasha's construction materials, using the pilfered items to fortify 2 of his cities to serve as defensive outposts for the kingdom of Judah.

Obviously, this was a slick move on Asa's part. It was textbook diplomacy, even humorous the way Asa outsmarted and out flanked Baasha. The catch phrase of the old "A-team" TV show was, "I love it when a plan comes together." But, how often does that happen? How often does one enjoy such unqualified success? What does the writer think of Asa's political ploy? The writer of Chronicles literally rakes Asa over the coals for his actions here (through Hanani the prophet) but none of that is apparent here. The Kings account seems more objective, more non-committal of Asa's treaty with

Syria. Does this mean he approves of Asa's tactics? Not necessarily! The criticism is more muted than what we see in II Chron 16 but it is still present in the text.

Notice how the writer simply records Asa's own incriminating words in his message to Damascus, "See, I have sent you a present..." What do you call a "present" that is given in order to receive favorable treatment from the recipient?

It's a bribe! And that's what Asa actually calls it. To make matters worse, he tells Ben-Hadad to break his treaty with Baasha. This may not seem like a big deal because it was clearly necessary; until you realize that the Bible takes a dim view on broken covenants. Much later, the last king of Judah will be excoriated for breaking his covenant with the king of Babylon. Also, God would judge Egypt severely for not keeping its word to Israel, despite the fact that Israel was both wrong and stupid to look for help from pagan Egypt. Asa's actions here were not just politics!

So, what can we take from this Story? What principles can we infer from it? The first thing we can learn from this text concerns the unfaithfulness of success. As we have noted, the author of Kings doesn't outright denounce Asa's little foreign policy deal but he does allow Asa's own words to leak some negative connotations over the entire affair. Asa was a smooth politician – his strategy worked! To those who have learned the hard way about "the best laid plans of mice and men," we admire his success. This is why we often find the Bible to be so disturbing – because it tells us time and again that success is not proof of spiritual faithfulness. Circumstantial success and covenantal failure can exist in the same life at the same time.

We like to think that our success, our "blessings" stem from our great relationship with Jesus. Now it's very true that they just might but stop and think of all the successful people out in the world and tell me how many of them even have a relationship with Jesus, let alone a good one! Actually, Asa's actions here point to his deteriorating spiritual relationship with Yahweh. When he is confronted with his sin by the prophet Hanani in **II Chron**, he is infuriated and has the prophet imprisoned. He then proceeds to oppress others of God's people. David was also confronted about his sin with Bathsheba by a prophet and he repented. Instead of repenting, Asa hardens his heart against God more.

All in all, Asa was a good man who did not finish well. The last years of his life were marked by unbelief, hardness against God, oppression against God's people and disease in his feet. A perfect heart isn't a sinless heart but a heart that is wholly yielded to the Lord and fully trusting in Him. Age and time do not necessarily make us better, wiser or smarter. They only do so if we continue to follow the Lord in faith.

The 2nd principle seen in our text is a more positive point – the possibility of faithfulness. The picture of Asa in ch15 is not as bleak and critical as that in II Chron 16. Does the writer of Kings want us to take a more positive view of Asa's rule? Don't forget **v11**! Asa may have ended his career as a miserable creature but he began it as a good man. He is the first man after the division of the kingdoms to be identified as such! Clearly, it is possible to walk like David! Purity of worship can be protected and preserved! Times of hope and restoration can appear within a history that is plummeting to disaster!

This should be an encouraging thought for us today. We can look at the modern, Western church and rightly wonder if it has forever lost its power – so bleak are its prospects, so unclear and counterproductive is its witness, so alarming are its apostasies and so trivial are its concerns. And yet in the midst of all this, it's still possible for the Lord in His mercy to usher in something closely resembling Asa's reform movement. Yes, the days are dark, the enemy is encroaching on our territory; the forces of evil are gaining ground in every level of society and government and yet, God is still on the throne and we are still here! For what? To do what He has called all of His people to do – live for Him and share His love to a lost and dying world.

Asa's reign was clearly one of Yahweh's mercies. He raised up an individual who – despite his faults and failures – nevertheless, slowed the slide to infidelity. This is the argument against the fretting fatalism that despairs over the alarming and increasingly unfaithful condition of the church. Our text teaches us that there are times when our God graciously intervenes to reform, to renew, to restore. As long as we continue on this earth, this reality is a constant possibility. In fact, **II Chron 16:9a** provides us an encouraging thought to go with this principle. Yahweh had decreed to always keep a lamp in Jerusalem and Jesus has decreed that the gates of hell shall not prevail against His church.

Do you believe Him? Do you live like you believe Him? 😊