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THE DANGER OF FORSAKING THE LORD

2 Chronicles 14-16

By

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Kings of Judah Lesson 2

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We're all prone to seek easy answers for life's difficult problems. We'd all like some spiritual panacea that would deliver us once and for all from sin and temptation.

A pastor's wife reported that she was on a search for such easy answers one morning as she sat with thousands of others to listen to a retired missionary, a spiritual veteran near 80. But what she heard was not an easy answer. Rather, it was a profound principle stated as a metaphor which influenced her inner life with God from that moment on. She heard the old man quietly say, "Untended fires soon die and become just a pile of ashes" (Gail MacDonald, *High Call, High Privilege*, pp. 17-18, quoted in *Partnership*, Jan./Feb., 1984, p. 51.) Maintaining the fire within--reality with the living God--requires constant attention. Though it was blazing yesterday, neglect it today and it will die.

We need to discard the myth that there is some spiritual experience we can have that will carry us for the rest of our lives. The minute we stop feeding our inner fire with God it begins to die out and we face the danger of forsaking God.

The story of King Asa makes this point clearly. He was a man who started well. His spiritual reforms brought revival to the southern kingdom. God's blessing was manifest. But later he forsook the Lord and incurred His discipline. The fire died out. The central lesson of Asa's life is summed up by the otherwise unknown prophet Azariah (2 Chron. 15:2): "If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you" (the same theme is repeated in 14:7; 15:7, 15; 16:9). We can paraphrase and apply it by saying,

If we seek the Lord He will strongly support us,
but if we forsake Him we come under His discipline.

Chapters 14 & 15 demonstrate the first half of that statement; chapter 16 develops the second half.

1. If we seek the Lord He will strongly support us.

“Seeking the Lord” is a major theme in these chapters (and in all of 1 & 2 Chron.; see 14:4, 7; 15:2, 4, 12, 13, 15; 16:12). The Hebrew word literally means to trample under foot; the picture is that of frequenting a place so often that you “beat a path” there. The verb has the nuance of seeking with care and of inquiring after knowledge, insight, or advice on a problem. So the idea is carefully to pursue the Lord as the source of all wisdom and holiness. From chapters 14 and 15 we can see five strands of what it means to seek the Lord:

A. Seeking the Lord means . . .

(1) *Obedience to God’s word.* “[Asa] commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers and to observe the law and commandment” (2 Chron. 14:4; see 15:3, 4). There is no such thing as revival among God’s people without a return to His Word as the basis for life and conduct. In fact it’s safe to say that your spiritual health today is in direct proportion to how well you understand and obey the Word of God. Please note that I did not say just “how well you understand the Word,” but rather, “how well you understand and obey,” because knowledge without obedience leads to delusion (James 1:22).

I’ve known people who emphasize Bible knowledge, but they don’t allow the Word to confront their sin. Invariably, they’re arrogant and not growing in godliness. On the other hand, I’ve known Christians whose lives had all sorts of problems because they didn’t even know what the Bible says about how we are to live as God’s people. They were disobedient out of ignorance.

If you want God’s blessing, you must begin a habit of regularly “beating a path” to God in His Word with the aim of applying it to your daily life. If you need a place to begin, read a chapter of Proverbs each day of the month, and look for one verse to memorize and apply each day. Don’t get hung up on the verses you don’t understand. Rather, seek to obey the ones you do understand.

Seeking the Lord means . . .

(2) *Separation from known evil* (14:5; 15:8, 16-17). I understand 14:5, which says that Asa removed the high places when compared with 15:17, which says the high places were not removed, to mean

that Asa tried to remove all the high places, but that he wasn't totally successful. But his heart was right.

The high places were hills where the Canaanites set up altars and shrines to worship Baal. The Hebrews did not at first set up these shrines as blatant idolatry. Rather, they looked at the way the pagans worshiped and said, "Hey, that's a good idea--let's bring that into our worship of Yahweh." And so true worship was subtly polluted with worldly religion. You can readily see how this is a danger in our day.

But Asa sought the Lord by trying to get rid of these elements of pagan worship. He even had to depose his grandmother Maacah (who had been the favorite wife of Rehoboam) from her powerful position as queen mother (15:16). Apparently she had made a sensuous idol and presided over some sort of immoral religious rites. Asa didn't do this quietly! He cut down her idol and publicly crushed and burned it to let everyone know where he stood! This took a lot of courage. Asa had to be more committed to the Word of God than he was to the risk of offending his own family.

You can talk about living a separated life all you want and people won't get upset. But when you start cutting down their idols and confronting people in positions of influence who are leading God's people into pagan thinking, people get very upset! In my ministry in California, I enjoyed 14 years of relative calm. But then I had an associate who got into 12 Step groups and wanted to bring them into the church. At first I was open to this, since it seemed to be helping people and I didn't know what was being taught.

But as I learned what they were teaching, with the focus on self and feelings rather than biblical faith and love, I grew increasingly alarmed. Finally, I said, "We're not going that direction as a church." People who had been my friends for years were enraged. They wrote angry letters to the elders calling for my resignation. Many of them left the church, all because I said, "This teaching is from the world, not from the Lord, and we're not going to follow it."

But seeking the Lord means separation, not just from blatant evil, but also from the subtle evil of the "high places" of modern Christianity, where we've brought the world into the church. We

need to be gracious and gentle, but no matter how graciously and gently you chop down someone's sacred shrine, you aren't going to be popular with everyone!

Seeking the Lord means . . .

(3) *Fortifying our lives against spiritual danger* (14:6-8). We read in 14:1 & 5 that the land was undisturbed during the early part of Asa's reign. But as Asa didn't kick back and say, "Ah, the good life!" Rather, he used the time of peace to fortify the land and build his army, because he knew that war inevitably would come.

Proverbs 24:10 states, "If you are slack in the day of distress, your strength is limited." In other words, a time of distress is the true measure of your strength, so you'd better get your act together during a time of relative calm so that you'll be ready when the trial hits. A lot of Christians kick back when the pressure is off and figure that they'll knuckle down when they really have to. But then the trial hits and they fall apart. The time to strengthen your walk with the Lord is now (Prov. 1:24-33)!

Seeking the Lord means . . .

(4) *Trusting in the Lord, not methods*. Asa fortified the land and built a strong army, (14:6-8) but when the enemy struck, he did not rely on his army, but on God (14:11). Asa knew, as everyone who grows strong in the Lord knows, that a powerful army is useless if the Lord is not his strength. The stronger you grow in the Lord, the more you become painfully aware of your own weakness, which drives you to trust in God alone. Methods and good management principles are fine, but we must be careful never to trust in them.

In my opinion, the American church has gone crazy with methods, but we're anemic when it comes to trusting in the living God. I have to be careful preparing a sermon every week. It's easy to use a method rather than to seek the Lord and call upon Him to anoint His Word. It's possible to have a good method for a quiet time or for witnessing or church growth, and subtly to fall prey to trusting the method rather than in God Himself. Learn from Asa: Build your army, but don't trust it; acknowledge your own weakness and trust in the Lord.

Finally, seeking the Lord means . . .

(5) *Committing ourselves to worship the Lord* (15:8b-15, 18). They restored the altar and began to offer the appointed sacrifices. They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord (15:12). Asa brought the dedicated things of silver and gold into the house of God (15:18). All of this was both time-consuming and expensive. It took time to slaughter all those animals and offer them in accordance with the Mosaic Law. It was costly to take perfectly good animals and sacrifice them. Gold and silver utensils were much more costly than copper or bronze.

True worship always costs our time and our money. If you're a convenience Christian--you worship when you don't have something else to do and you give when you have a little extra so it doesn't pinch you--then you're not seeking the Lord. As David said, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24).

Thus seeking the Lord means obeying His Word; separating ourselves from known evil; fortifying our lives against spiritual danger; trusting in the Lord, not methods; and, committing ourselves to worship God. If we seek the Lord,

B. He will strongly support us.

Note 14:1, 5, 6, 7, 12-15; 15:4, 7, 15; 16:9. Four themes reoccur: Rest; routing of the enemy; the reward of finding the Lord; and, rejoicing.

(1) *God's strong support means rest.* When we seek the Lord, we enjoy His peace. This does not mean a trouble-free life. The prophet who confronted Asa enjoyed God's strong support, but he got thrown in prison (16:10)! But in Christ we have inner peace in the midst of the storms. When I have been most severely attacked in my ministry, I've enjoyed God's peace, because I knew I was pleasing Him. It's a tremendous thing to know God's rest.

(2) *God's strong support means routing of the enemy.* Asa faced and defeated a tremendously large army because he sought the Lord. As believers, we will experience consistent victory over temptation and sin as we learn to seek the Lord.

(3) *God's strong support means the reward of finding the Lord* (15:2, 7, 15). If the concept of "finding" God sounds strange to you, it's because American Christianity has brought God down to the hu-

man plane and taught that anyone can know God at any time they choose. But the Bible reveals that God is exalted, that He dwells in unapproachable light. He does not cheapen Himself by revealing Himself to just anyone who flippantly decides it might be nice to know Him. He reveals Himself to those who obey Him (John 14:21). Like a rare treasure, we must diligently seek Him and we will find Him.

(4) *God's strong support means rejoicing* (15:15). This doesn't mean going around with a phony smile all the time. The Bible recognizes that at times we will be sorrowful. But beneath our sorrow and pain, there will be the strong undercurrent of joy that comes from knowing that nothing can separate God's elect from His love (Rom. 8:39).

But--and this is the scary part of Asa's story--it's possible for those who have sought the Lord and enjoyed His support to let the fire die out and to forsake the Lord. That's the warning of chapter 16.

2. If we forsake the Lord, we come under His discipline.

There is a harmonistic problem with the chronology of 15:19 and 16:1 which says that the war with Baasha was during the 36th year of Asa's reign, but in 1 Kings 16:8 we read that Baasha died and his son became king in the 26th year of Asa. Some commentators say that 2 Chronicles 16:1 means 36 years after the division of the kingdom, which was Asa's 16th year. But that seems to be bending the text. The only other solution is to assume that a copyist should have written the 16th year but wrote 36th by mistake.

At any rate, Asa got attacked by Baasha who fortified Ramah, a town north of Jerusalem. Asa panicked, stripped the Temple and his own house of all the gold and silver, and bribed Benhadad of Syria to attack Baasha's northern cities. The plan worked and Asa was able to dismantle Baasha's fortification at Ramah. But in all this Asa had forsaken the Lord, and he incurred God's discipline.

A. Forsaking the Lord means ...

(1) *Trusting in our schemes rather than in the Lord.* Asa devised this scheme of bribing Benhadad. Apparently his father had set the precedent (16:3). Asa made the same mistake later when he trusted the physicians, not the Lord (16:12). There's nothing wrong with

going to doctors, but our trust needs to be in the Lord, not in the doctors.

You have to wonder why Asa trusted the Lord against the huge army of Zerah (14:9-11), but failed when it came to this lesser army of Baasha. The text doesn't say, but often it is the smaller crises that trip us up more than the major ones. Jeremiah 17:5 is clear: "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord."

Forsaking the Lord also means ...

(2) *Using what works without regard to whether it is biblical.* Asa's unholy alliance with Benhadad worked like a charm. The only problem was, it was not a biblical plan. We Americans are a pragmatic people. I've often been asked, "If psychology helps a person with his problems, what's wrong with that?" My answer is, "If following Satan helped you with your problems, would you do it?" I hope not! The question we need to ask is not, "Does it work?" but rather, "Is it biblical?"

Forsaking the Lord means . . .

(3) *Rejecting God's means of correction* (16:7-10). Asa got angry at God's man who spoke the truth, and also at some of the people (probably those who supported the prophet). A person who is forsaking the Lord will get angry at someone who speaks God's truth and calls upon him to repent.

B. When we forsake the Lord we come under His discipline.

God's discipline flows from His love and holiness, not out of meanness. He will take whatever measures are necessary to correct us and, if that doesn't work, to show by His chastisement that He is totally apart from our sin.

(1) *God's discipline involves verbal correction* (16:7-9). You will recall that God also brought verbal warning after Asa's victory (15:1-7). Not all of God's discipline is for sin. Sometimes He graciously gives us a warning when we haven't done wrong, but we're in danger. If we heed His verbal correction, He doesn't have to get any tougher.

(2) *God's discipline sometimes involves problems to cause us to turn to Him* (16:9b, "wars"). Sometimes God has to whack us with a 2 x 4 to get our attention. Again, this doesn't mean that every problem we face can be traced back to direct disobedience. Often God sends problems to make us more like Jesus. But He also uses problems to turn us from sin.

(3) *God's discipline sometimes involves illness* (16:12). Asa probably had a bad case of gout. Again, not all sickness is due to sin. Charles Spurgeon was a godly preacher greatly used of God, but he suffered and eventually died from gout at age 57. In a sermon on Asa he attests to the painfulness of the ailment. But sometimes God uses illness to humble us and bring us to repentance. Whenever I get sick, I examine my heart to make sure that I have not sinned or forsaken the Lord in some way.

(4) *God's discipline sometimes involves death* (16:13). We don't know whether or not Asa's life would have been extended if he had repented, but it may have been. When a believer (and Asa, without question, was a believer) continues in sin and refuses God's means of correction, God will often take him in death. He is saved and goes to heaven, but his life on earth is cut short. Sometimes God is severe in order to vindicate His holiness and to impress on us how serious sin is.

Conclusion

The godly George Muller used to pray as he grew older, "Lord, don't let me become a wicked old man." When I first heard his prayer, I thought, "Come on, George. There's not a chance of that happening!" Muller walked with God for many years in a humble, prayerful manner as few others ever have. But Muller knew that even after all those years, his fire with God would soon die out and become just a pile of ashes if left untended.

The question I want to leave with you today is, Are you tending your inner fire? "Untended fires soon die out and become just a pile of ashes." Even if you've been a Christian for many years, are you still actively, persistently seeking the Lord? The lesson of Asa is, If we seek the Lord He will strongly support us, but if we forsake Him, we will come under His discipline.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some ways American Christianity mixes worldly ideas with God's ways?
2. How do we find the proper balance between trusting the Lord and using proper methods?
3. Why is pragmatism (using what works) not valid? What if the end result is good (helping people, etc.)?
4. Some say that "trust God" is simplistic, impractical advice. Agree/disagree?

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