

THE REIGN OF ASA

I Kings 15:9-24

At the beginning of the lesson emphasis should be on the fact of the divided kingdom and the difference between Israel and Judah. Review briefly the story of Elijah and Elisha. Be sure the children know that Judah was the part of the country which remained faithful to the descendants of David and Solomon and continued to worship in the temple at Jerusalem.

Doctrinal Points

The thing against which we must guard most constantly is putting anything above service to the Lord as our prime object in life.

Notes for Parents

We may wonder why in our assignment this week we go back from II Kings to I Kings, chapter 15. It is only because the two books of Kings, in following the history of the divided kingdom, necessarily shift back and forth between the story of Israel and that of Judah. The four lessons preceding this have been on the northern kingdom, Israel; now we shall have four lessons on the southern kingdom, Judah. The history of Judah comes out most clearly by taking up the stories of some of its good kings, and the first of these, Asa, appears in I Kings 15.

When Solomon's kingdom was divided, the southern part, Judah, remained faithful to Solomon's line and continued the worship in the temple at Jerusalem, while the northern part, Israel, rejected Solomon's son, chose another king, and set up two golden calves, one in Bethel and one in Dan, as the object of national worship. The result was that while the kings of Israel were uniformly idolatrous and became worse and worse, Judah from time to time had good kings who instituted reforms and tried to strengthen worship

of the Lord. In both kingdoms the people as a whole were easily led away into idolatry by the pagan nations who lived side by side with them.

We all know from experience what it is to have a “divided mind”—to want to do right and not be sure what is right, or to know what is right and not want to do it. It is this state which is pictured in the Bible by the divided kingdom, Judah in the south representing the heart and Israel in the north representing the mind. The kingdom united and at peace under Solomon is a picture of those times when we are at peace and happy because we both know what the Lord would have us do and want to do it.

After such a state it is our mind which rebels first. We ask ourselves in some new situation, “Is it really worthwhile to follow the Lord wholly?” Selfish considerations appeal strongly to our minds, although our “better nature” clings to the principles which we have been taught from the Word. The good kings in Judah represent such principles. In our story today Asa removes the idols which the people have set up. Once we have become established in the Christian life, we are frequently led to judge ourselves in this way, to see that some of the things which have appealed to us as more important than strict goodness are really unworthy of our effort, and to try to put them out of our calculations.

But often, like Asa, we do not do a thorough job. Verse 14 of our chapter says, “But the high places were not removed.” The high places were the elevations which had been built up to hold idols. We may make ourselves see that certain particular things we have been “worshiping” are worthless, but we are not quite willing to give up the self-satisfaction and pride in our own judgment which has supported these pursuits. It is this pride which is represented by high places. It was because Asa stopped short of complete reform that he was moved later to seek the help of the king of Syria instead of trusting in the Lord, and that he gave up the treasures of the temple to gain this help. And finally we read that “in the time of his old age he was diseased in his feet.” When we cling to our pride in our own wisdom, we eventually slip back into

the ways of the world instead of walking firmly in the paths of the Lord.

Primary

Remind the children of the wicked Ahab in an earlier lesson. Then tell them that Asa was a good king. Tell them about the worship of idols and repeat the commandment against worshipping idols (Exodus 20:2-6). Then tell them how Asa destroyed the idols and brought the people back to the worship of the Lord. The good side of Asa's story is the important one for the little children, but mention the fact that Asa made mistakes, too, as all of us do, and also mention the disease in his feet in his old age. This may seem a very small point, but it will interest the children and will help to fix Asa in their minds. Later its correspondence will be important.

Do you remember how the people in the northern part of the land rebelled against Solomon's son and set up a kingdom of their own? Their first king was afraid that if his people continued to go down to the temple at Jerusalem to worship, as they had been brought up to do, they would in time be drawn back into the other kingdom. So he set up two calves made of gold, one in Bethel just across the border from Jerusalem, and the other in Dan, the city farthest north in his own kingdom. And he appointed ceremonies and great feast days for the worship of these calves, so that the people would enjoy themselves in it. So the people of the northern kingdom never did return to the worship of the Lord. In spite of the warnings of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, whom the Lord sent to them, they became worse and worse until finally the Lord could not help them anymore and their enemies conquered them and carried them all away.

But the people of the southern kingdom had the temple and its worship to keep them reminded of the Lord. They were not very good either, and were often tempted to worship the idols which the other peoples of the land worshiped, and sometimes they even set up idols of their own. Many of their kings were bad, too, but every once in a while there would come a king who was good, who would try to bring his people back to the worship of their true God.

Our story today is about the third king of Judah.

What was his name?

Was he a good or a bad king?

What good things did he do?

What did he not do that he should have done?

How did the king of Israel try to injure him?

To whom did Asa send for help?

What did he use for presents to persuade Benhadad?

How did Benhadad help him?

What physical trouble did Asa have in his old age?



Junior

This class will be interested in a study of the situation with the help of a map and in discussing how Asa's leaving the high places untouched and turning to Syria for aid would be likely to invite trouble later. The lesson of the result of not doing a thorough job of "cleaning up" is good for this age group.

All the kings of Israel were evil. In spite of the Lord's warnings through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, Israel became worse and worse and finally was taken captive by Assyria and all its people carried away into captivity, never to return.

But the history of Judah was different. In the first place the kings of Judah were all descendants of David. Read verse 4 of our chapter to see why. They were not all good, and the people of Judah were often led away into the worship of the idols of the nations among whom they dwelt. But you remember that the capital of Judah was Jerusalem, where the temple was; so they always had that to remind them of the Lord. Sometimes they neglected the temple and let it fall into disrepair, and one bad king even set up idols in the temple itself. But every once in a while a good king would come to the throne, who would restore the worship of the Lord and bring about reforms. So Judah was able to stand longer than Israel and, although it, too, was eventually conquered and many of its people carried away to the conquering Babylonia, some of the people were left in the land and others were, after a time, allowed to return and rebuild the temple. So it

was the descendants of the people of Judah who were the Jews of the Lord's time.

The first of the good kings of Judah was the great-grandson of Solomon.

What was his name?

It is said in verse 14 that "Asa's heart was perfect with the Lord all his days." This means that he always wanted to do right. We shall see that he made mistakes, but his intention was good.

What was the first good thing he did?

Perhaps you remember that in Abraham's time the great cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by a rain of "fire and brimstone" from heaven because all the people in them had become so wicked. Afterward those who practiced similar evils were sometimes called sodomites.

What other good thing did Asa do?

What did he not do that he should have done?

This same thing is said of several of the other good kings. It means that though they destroyed the idols themselves, they did not break down the places where the idols had been set up, and so afterward it was easy to put new idols there. The idols were images of various kinds. Some people today still worship such images. We do not worship images, but really anything that we think of as more important to us than obeying the Lord is our idol. People may make an idol of money or social position or political power or sports and pleasures. Sometimes even you, for instance, come to see that you have been caring too much about fun or sports or even eating, and you make up your mind to put that particular enjoyment down in your life to the level where it belongs and not to let it come first in all your thinking and planning. This is like Asa destroying the idols. Grown people do this, too, with their idols. But if they do not go further and recognize that there is something which supports all these idols and leads us into the worship of them—the thought that we ourselves are of first concern in everything—then they are not destroying the high places, and

other idols will soon take the place of those they have removed. The “high places” are the feeling of our own importance and wisdom.

Who was king of Israel during most of Asa’s life?

He was not a descendant of Jeroboam. Nadab, Jeroboam’s son, reigned only two years and then the people, led by Baasha of the tribe of Issachar, rebelled against him. Baasha killed Nadab and became king himself. The royal line in Israel changed several times in this way.

What did Baasha do to trouble Asa?

To whom did Asa send for help?

What did Asa give the king of Syria in return for his help?

In II Chronicles three chapters, 14, 15, and 16, are devoted to Asa’s reign. The books of Chronicles are the temple records and do not have an inner sense. But we sometimes learn interesting details from them. So in regard to Asa we learn that he was rebuked through a prophet for trusting the king of Syria instead of the Lord, and that the last part of his reign was less happy than the first.

How long did Asa reign?

What physical ailment did he have in his old age?

Intermediate

The children of this age are able to understand the general meaning of the divided kingdom in us and how hard it is for us to stay good when we let ourselves begin to think in a worldly way about our everyday life. Stress our need of the courage to stand by our religious principles in the face of temptation from companions.

Our lesson today is chosen partly because it is typical of the history of the divided kingdom and partly because Asa has come down in history as a well-known figure in spite of the fact that his story is told in only a few verses.

The Lord kept His promise to David that he should always have a son to sit on the throne of Judah. Evil as many of the kings of Judah were, they were all of David’s line. This means that once the

heart has accepted the rule of the Lord's truth, it never can quite forget that sovereignty. However bad some of its states are, it is bound to stop now and then and examine itself and try to reform. So the kings of Judah were not all bad. Every little while there was a very good one. The sign of a bad king was the setting up of idols; the sign of a good king was the destruction of them. Idolatry is the setting up of anything as our supreme goal in life except service of the Lord. We should guard against this more than against anything else.

Spiritual idolatry may creep into our lives without our recognizing it. Up to the time of Asa's reign there is no mention of neglect of the temple worship. The idols were set up in the "high places" outside of Jerusalem. So at first we may continue to go to church and worship the Lord on Sunday but may forget Him during the week in our pursuit of knowledge or money or pleasure. It is recorded that Asa destroyed the idols, but "the high places were not removed." We come to our senses from time to time and dethrone certain false goals which we find to be in control of our thinking in regard to our daily life, but often we do not go quite far enough. We do not destroy the high places, the tendency to trust our own judgment, to assume that what we think is right just because we think it.

If we remember that "high places" used in a bad sense are the opposite of true humility before the Lord, we shall understand the result of this neglect of Asa's. Other good kings had this same weakness. Literally, when the high places were left untouched, people still continued to go to them for worship and it was easy to put new idols in them when the good king was gone. So it is with us: if we do not recognize and break down our tendency to self-esteem and pride in our own intelligence, we merely replace one worldly goal with another, and worship of the Lord gradually dies out of our lives. Later in the story of Judah we find that the temple fell into disrepair and finally that idols were set up in the very temple court.

In this chapter, too, we have the first appearance of the king of

Syria, who was to play an important role in the subsequent history of both Judah and Israel. Syria and Assyria picture the rational faculty—Syria especially that faculty in the natural plane of the mind. We all know that we may use our reason to support either truth or falsity—that we may argue in favor of either. It is not the possession of good reasoning power which makes a person good, but the desire of his heart to serve the Lord and the neighbor. In our story today Syria is brought in as an ally of the good king Asa, but Asa buys this help by giving up the gold and silver of the temple. Syria, which later would become an enemy, thus gained a type of control in Judah. Asa saved his country for the time being but at the cost of later disaster. Read here II Chronicles 16:7-10, which tells how the Lord sent a prophet to Asa to rebuke him for trusting in the king of Syria instead of in the Lord. The two books of Chronicles do not have an inner sense. We do not study them in Sunday school for this reason. But we may often find interesting historical details in them which are not mentioned in the Word itself. Chapters 14, 15, and 16 of II Chronicles are concerned with the reign of Asa. Asa's looking to Syria for help is a picture of trying to support our belief in the Lord and the Word by means of natural things, as people try to find traces of the flood in order to support the story of Noah. In doing this they are really giving up their inner certainty with regard to the Lord and the Word, the gold and silver of the temple.

Asa's weakness in this respect had an interesting result. Verse 23 tells us that "in the time of his old age he was diseased in his feet." The feet represent our outward conduct. When we begin to look to men and to nature for support of our faith instead of trusting wholeheartedly in the Lord, sooner or later we begin to do as other people do instead of governing our conduct by the Lord's laws. We become diseased in our spiritual feet.

Basic Correspondences

Syria = the rational faculty exercised on
the natural plane
the feet = the outward conduct

Senior

The best lesson for the Seniors is that of the subtle way in which the will to do right can be undermined by listening to worldly reasoning. They will be facing this temptation constantly from now on and need to be armed against it. Remind them of Elijah's words: "if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him." The story of Asa is a good illustration of the importance of this choice. The Lord says: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

We have seen that the divided kingdom pictures the state of our lives when our desires (Judah) and our thinking (Israel) do not work in harmony. When we have once known the peace and happiness of the state represented by Solomon's kingdom, our hearts cling to the religion which has meant so much to us. We have our selfish and rebellious times—there were evil kings in Judah as well as in Israel. But frequently we examine our lives and try to correct them because we really mean to be good.

The reign of Asa, the third king of Judah, represents one of these times of self-examination. Asa was the great-grandson of Solomon. All the kings of Judah were of David's line. At heart we recognize the Lord's truth as our ruler. Our capital is at Jerusalem and we continue to worship in the temple on Sunday—or at least at Easter and Christmas. The people of Judah continued to go up to Jerusalem for the great feasts. But outside of Jerusalem—that is, in our everyday life in the world—we fall into the habit of doing as "everybody else" does. We set up idols in our high places. The high places represent our self-esteem and self-confidence. The idols are the objectives which worldly people accept as the desirable things of life: money, power, position, pleasure, skills of various kinds. Asa destroyed these idols. It is not hard from time to time to recognize that we have been putting too much time and energy into our sports and recreations, or worrying too much about money, or injuring our health by unnecessary overwork. "But the high places were not removed." We do not give up our self-esteem. In fact, we are rather apt to be proud of ourselves for showing such good sense. And when the high places are left, it is easy to put new idols there. Asa's son was a good king, but his grandson

was evil and the land slipped back into idolatry.

During Asa's reign it is recorded that Israel threatened Judah by building a city near Jerusalem to keep people from going out or coming in. So the worldly part of our mind tries to build up arguments to "shut up" our good intentions. In this crisis Asa sought help of the king of Syria and paid him with treasures from the temple and from his own house. People do this when, feeling their beliefs threatened, they try to support them by finding "natural" explanations for the miracles, for example, and "common-sense" reasons for supporting the church and living the Christian life. The treasures they give up are the silver of belief in the Word because it is the Word of God coming to us from the Lord Himself, and the gold of serving the Lord and the neighbor from love. Syria represents the reasoning faculty as applied to external knowledges of good and truth. This faculty may be a friend or an enemy, depending on how it is used. At this point in the story Syria appears as a friend, but since the motive of the service is gain and not true friendship, Asa is really weakened by the alliance and Syria is strengthened and put in a position to become a more dangerous enemy. We all know how easily our own arguments can sometimes be turned against us.

In his old age Asa was "diseased in his feet." When we begin to compromise with worldly reasoning and to look to it for support, and give up our full trust in the Lord and the Word, our daily conduct eventually shows the effect of our weakness. We no longer walk easily and confidently in the Lord's way. We wobble. We yield here and there to worldly ways, not only in our thinking but in our acts. Throughout the Bible walking is a symbol of daily conduct, and we remember that the Lord tells us that the way to destruction is broad but the way to life is narrow and straight. We should remember this when people who are trying to get us to go back on our principles urge us to be "broad-minded."

Adult

The correspondence of the high places and the meaning of Asa's mistake in

looking to Syria for help instead of to the Lord are probably the most fruitful discussion topics for this class. Read aloud in class II Chronicles 16:7-10, and point out how the books of Chronicles round out the narrative of the books of Kings in spite of the fact that they do not have an inner sense. Suggest that the class study at home chapters 15, 16, and 17 of II Chronicles and compare them with our assignment from I Kings.

Judah pictures our will—our desires, affections, motives—in their relation to the Lord. When once we have experienced the state pictured by Solomon, the peaceful victorious state in which our wills and our reason unite in serving the Lord, it is not easy for our will to change and become evil. The mind goes astray more readily than the will, if once the will has become regenerate. This is pictured by the contrast between the history of Israel and the history of Judah. Israel degenerated rapidly after the separation, as we have seen; its sovereignty was not passed down in unbroken succession, and its kings were evil. Judah, on the other hand, remained loyal to the line of David throughout its history, and several of its kings were good, although some weakness and compromise was found in most of them. The people of the land were idolatrous and wicked, but the kings endeavored to serve Jehovah. This is a picture of the state of our affectional life when we still wish to be good but have allowed our minds to turn from reliance upon the Word to reliance upon worldly considerations and knowledges. Our ruling principle, the king, for a long time remains prevailingly faithful to the Lord, but our lesser desires and affections, the people of the land, are led to follow our wandering thoughts, and become more and more corrupt until the king can no longer bring them back to order.

A glance at a map of the divided kingdom will help us to see the situation. See how close Jerusalem actually was to the northern border of Judah. When Israel, which should have been a great protecting bulwark, had instead become an enemy, Jerusalem was very vulnerable. The Ramah which is mentioned in our chapter for today is not the Ramah of Samuel. Ramah merely means “a hill,” and there were several Ramahs. This Ramah was very close to Jerusalem on the border of Israel. Geba, which Asa built with the materials from Ramah, was just to the east of it, also on the border.

The little incident in regard to Baasha and Asa, considered in the light of this glance at the map, can readily be seen to picture the way in which our mind, once perverted, seeks control of the will by building up a stronghold of reasoning just on the border where our affections must express themselves in ideas. In the early stages of degeneration—Asa was only the third king of Judah—the good will in us is able to tear down this stronghold and to use the same materials, the same facts and arguments, to build another stronghold a little to the east of the former, a little closer to the Lord, which may serve as a defense to our religion instead of a threat. Geba also means “a hill.” Every detail in the story of the relations between Israel and Judah throughout this period teaches us something about the interplay of thought and desire in us.

Asa, the great-grandson of Solomon, was a good king. Verse 11 tells us that he “did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did David his father,” and verse 14 says that in spite of certain shortcomings “Asa’s heart was perfect with the Lord all his days.” He “took away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made.” He even removed Maachah, his mother—actually his grandmother—from being queen because she made an idol, and he destroyed her idol. Before Asa came to the throne Judah had had two bad kings, Rehoboam and Abijam. When the intellect abandons its allegiance to the Lord, when the mind ceases to accept the Word of the Lord as revelation, the immediate effect on the heart is bad. But there soon comes a time when the well-meaning heart recognizes at least the obvious evil results and seeks reform. This is Asa. The sodomites, according to Swedenborg, represent an extreme degree of the “love of exercising command for the sake of self and not for use” (SD 5939^e, 6096²⁹).

“But the high places were not removed.” AC 2722 tells us: “In the Ancient Church holy worship was performed on mountains and in groves; on mountains, because mountains signified the celestial things of worship; and in groves, because groves signified its spiritual things.” Later, as with many other representative forms, the significance was lost sight of and the mountains and groves wor-

shipped as holy in themselves. The Israelites even built themselves high places and made images of their groves, turning what was originally holy into idolatry. Read John 4:20-23. High places in a good sense represent exaltation of the Lord, but in a bad sense exaltation of self. Just as the high places in the time of the divided kingdom were set up throughout the land, so the sense of our own importance and intelligence may come to pervade our daily living. There is scarcely a field of our activity where we shall not find it if we examine ourselves honestly. These are our “high places,” and as long as we allow them to remain, we shall soon find new “idols” to replace those we may recognize and reject.

In the spiritual sense this failure to remove the high places leads directly to the rest of Asa’s story. For even though apparently he kept his good intentions to the end, Asa was led into the serious mistake of looking to men for aid instead of to the Lord. When Baasha, king of Israel, threatened to hem him in, he turned to Syria for help. In II Chronicles 16:7 ff. we learn that the prophet Hanani rebuked Asa for trusting in the Syrians instead of in the Lord and that Asa was angry at the rebuke. Asa had not purged himself of self-esteem. In a good sense Syria represents the right kind of reasoning from the knowledges of truth and good on the natural plane. That there were remains of the Ancient Church in Syria we learned in the story of Balaam and in the story of the Magi. But the character of Asa’s reliance on Syria pictures reliance on these knowledges as belonging to the human intelligence, not as coming from the Lord. In return for the aid of the king of Syria, Asa gave him “all the silver and gold that were left in the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king’s house.” This is a picture of sacrificing interior good and truth for the sake of external immunity and advancement. Without the bulwark of spiritual intelligence, which Israel should have been to Judah, our wills are prone to give up one treasure after another through fear of the strength of our enemies. Once our minds have become convinced that the only valid truth is what men discover for themselves, we begin to give up one by one the treasures which have come to

us by revelation.

When Asa was old it is recorded that “he was diseased in his feet.” Here again the story as given in II Chronicles adds interesting details. When we have allowed ourselves to turn from reliance on the Lord to trust in the fickle support of human intelligence, even our moral character declines. The feet, as we know, picture our daily conduct, the way in which we walk. We recall how many times the Lord was called upon to heal the halt and the lame. When we undertake to set up human intelligence as the test of truth, we soon become like those who “reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man.” The Lord knows better than we do what is right. It is the Lord who can say to us, “This is the way, walk ye in it,” and “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” The quotation from Isaiah just above is from chapter 40, which ends: “But they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 411¹²: “In that day they shall reject every man the idols of his silver and the idols of his gold which your hands make for you . . .’ This treats of judgment upon those who from self-intelligence believe themselves to be wise in Divine things. Such are those who are in the love of self and the world, and who seek after a reputation for learning for the sake of self; these, because they are unable to see truths, seize on falsities and proclaim them as truths. The falsities that favor their principles and their loves are signified by ‘the idols of silver and the idols of gold’; that these are from self-intelligence is signified by ‘which your hands have made for you.’”

Arcana Coelestia, n. 6435¹¹: “In very many passages of the prophetic Word mention is made of ‘mountains and hills,’ and by them in the internal sense are signified the goods of love . . . Because ‘mountains’ and ‘hills’ signified such things, in the Ancient Church their Divine worship also was upon mountains and upon hills; and afterward the Hebrew nation set altars upon mountains and hills, and there sacrificed and burnt incense; and where there were no hills, they constructed high places. But because this worship became idolatrous, through holding the mountains and hills themselves holy, and thinking

nothing at all about the holy things which they signified, this worship was therefore forbidden the Israelitish and Jewish people . . . In order however that this representative which had been in ancient times might be retained, the mountain of Zion was chosen, and by it in the supreme sense was represented the Divine good of the Lord's Divine love, and in the relative sense the Divine celestial and the Divine spiritual in His kingdom."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What king of Judah is our lesson about today? *Asa*
- P. Was he a good or a bad king? *good*
- P. What did he do that was good? *destroyed idols*
- J. What did he not do that he should have done? *remove high places*
- J. How did the king of Israel try to overcome Asa? *built Ramah*
- J. To whom did Asa send for help? *Ben-hadad, king of Syria*
- P. What did Asa use for presents for the king of Syria? *gold and silver of temple*
- P. What physical trouble did Asa have in his old age? *diseased feet*
- I. What does idolatry mean for us? *"worshiping" such things as money, power, etc.*
- S. What do the "high places" mean? *pride in one's own intelligence*