

Dr. August Konkell, Chronicles, Session 17, Compromised Faithfulness

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This is Dr. August Konkell in his teaching on the books of Chronicles. This is session 17, Compromised Faithfulness.

The Chronicler has presented Abijah as the king who averted direct warfare between the north and the south, and the king who really understood the ideal that God wanted for his people and for the nation of Israel, all Israel, as he likes to refer to it.

This avoidance of war between the north and the south was not something that could be avoided perpetually. There was war between the kings of the north and kings of the south, and we're going to see that in the successor of Abijah, and this is King Asa. King Asa, in the book of Kings, is actually a very good king who preserves much of what God desires for his people and pursues all of the right things.

But the Chronicler presents him as a king who was compromised. And no doubt, both of these are true, and certainly what we know is that Asa was at war with Baasha, the king of Israel, virtually during his whole time. The city of Bethel, which Abijah had restored, was one that was in perpetual conflict over this border between the north and the south.

But we begin with the good part about Asa and the positive part of his rule, where he begins to focus on the fact that the people need to understand the worship of God at the temple and that any kind of syncretism, any kind of compromise of alternate symbols, any kind of compromise of what God desired in the representation of his holiness, was a disaster. One of the things that constantly comes up in Kings is worship at the high places. Now, for the most part, even under Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who has established the two shrines at Bethel and at Dan, the worship at these shrines is not explicitly Baal worship.

Rather, Jeroboam wanted to present these as alternate places of worship of Yahweh. He just didn't want the people from the north going down to Jerusalem to use the temple there as a place of worship, as that would compromise his political ambitions.

So instead, he set up the shrines at Bethel and at Dan, and in setting up those shrines for the worship at Bethel and Dan, he introduced Baal symbols, especially the calf, and also something called the Asherah. The Asherah is a little bit ambiguous in biblical terminology, but there is one clear reference to Asherah, and I think this is the one that is meant most of the time, virtually all of the time, as it was so understood by the Greek translators of the Old Testament. The Asherah was a grove of trees, a grove of live trees, and these trees, or a tree, represented life.

It was very prominent in the Baal cult. Now, in the Baal cult, Asherah was also a goddess, but it was the tree that represented her as the giver of life. And so, we see in the story of Gideon, for example, when Gideon went to remove the altar of his father, he cut down all of the trees.

That was the Asherah. I think that that is essentially what is meant, but in any case, these Baal symbols were being used. And not only in the north.

There's always the danger of cultural infiltration, that we tend to adopt and do the things that the people around us do. And we try to say that when we do them, they are different, or they don't mean the same thing. But the problem is that you can't remove their significance and their symbolic implications just because a different person is using them, or they're being used in a different place.

Those associations all remain. And, of course, for the chronicler, there was really only one legitimate place of worship anyway because there could only be one place where the holiness of God was represented. So, this was something Asa understood, and he removed these foreign places of worship, referring, of course, to Judah.

The other thing that Asa did at the start of his reign is fortify all of the Judean cities and had a massive army. There's a curious thing here about the chronicler and his attitude towards warfare. Outside of David, where David has wars of aggression to establish his empire, the wars that the chronicler reports on are defensive wars.

He always regards a king with a powerful army as a sign that God is honoring the rule of this king and blessing this king. But what is always interesting is that in the chronicler's view of things, these large armies never help you win a war. As a matter of fact, the largest armies always lose the war, and the war is always won, depending on whose side God is on.

And God is not necessarily on the side of the Judean king. Sometimes God is judging the Judean king. But in any case, the chronicler approves of a large army.

You just don't depend on it in order to win your wars. So, we have Asa here, and he has victory over Zerah. This is a Nubian army.

Nubia is the very southern part of Egypt. This army was probably under the command of Egypt and likely was a portion of their army that the Egyptians were using in the area of the Philistines. But as the chronicler reports on this victory over Asa, it follows true to form.

He makes no mention of Asa's large army, whatever, and of their expertise and of their skills. No, it becomes very, very clear that these wars are God's wars. And Asa has gained God's favor, and God wins the battle, and Asa gets the spoils.

But the reign of Asa then continues with another prophet. This prophet is Azariah, who in chapter 15 brings a call to revival. The time frame of these distresses which the prophet talks about in this little speech is not given, but he talks about the many distresses that Israel has experienced, and quite probably he's referring back to maybe even the times of the judges.

But it's really a sermon. And Azariah is trying to say to Asa that just because you've got all of these distresses and all these difficulties doesn't mean that God is not in your favor, and God will deliver. You must not be discouraged, even in challenging times.

This leads Asa to a covenant renewal and a great celebration. Of course, what is significant here, and this is predominant, especially only in Chronicles, is the participation of the tribes of the north in this revival. This is the ceremony that takes place in the third month.

So that would be the Feast of Weeks in the calendar of the Jews. There were three main feasts in the Jewish calendar. The year always began with the Passover as the start of the year, and then in seven weeks was the celebration of the beginning of the harvest, and also the celebration of the giving of the law at Sinai.

Then, of course, in the seventh month there was the Fall Festival, which we've already referred to, which we often call Tabernacles. So, this is the feast that's not referred to as often, the feast at the beginning of the harvest. It's also the seven-day feast, and it is the Feast of Weeks.

So, Asa has this great ceremony in which he purifies things. And one of the notations that is given here is the removal of the Queen Mother. Now, the Queen Mother was one who had connections with the north and who had a negative influence in terms of the worship of Judah.

Women were of considerable influence during the reigns of these kings, and so this was something that was very significant. All of that is very, very positive. But the end of Asa's reign comes back to something that was actually characteristic of his whole reign.

Here is where we have one of the conundrums in the book of Chronicles, and we need to admit that the way the chronicler tells his story does leave us with some conundrums. There are various ways in which we can work out these chronologies, but they don't quite seem to explain the chronicler's methods. So, what the

chronicler reports on here is a war with Baasha, which he says takes place in the 35th year.

Now, that's very near to the end of Asa's long reign. If we go back to the chronology and the dates that are given to us in Kings, Baasha ceased to be king of Israel in about the 25th year of Asa's reign. So long, 10 years at least before this.

The events that are referred to here would have been more likely in the 15th or 16th year of his reign. So, it has sometimes been said that the 35th year was referring not to the beginning of the reign of Asa but to the time of the division of the kingdom, which goes back to before Rehoboam. And that certainly works out in terms of the chronology.

It's more of a problem in terms of the Chronicler's theology because the chronicler tends to have a correlation in his theology. And the judgment of God comes along with a failure or with a sin. And with this war with Baasha, what we have is clearly a judgment, which seems to be reflective of the way in which Asa died.

Kings tells us that Asa died because of a disease in his feet. The chronicler seems to regard this notation in Kings as a judgment that came from God. In any case, what we have here is Asa's failure, his failure to rely on God.

So, as an earlier point in time against Zerah, he had exemplified his reliance on God. Now he did not. And we have another prophet that shows up.

These have sometimes been called Levitical sermons, and they may well have been given by a Levite. But essentially, they are a reiteration of the way in which we have to rely on God and have to rely on his covenant. And where Hanani reminds Asa of the danger of alliances and relying on the military and other powers in order to win wars.

This is what Asa was doing. And this is absolutely wrong. And Asa's response is to exile Hanani.

So, Asa's end is not well. And Asa has this continuing unending war with Baasha. Now, that part, of course, is exactly the way we have it in Kings.

Asa and Baasha were at war throughout the time of Asa. So, this was a real issue in which North was fighting against South. So, the ideal of Abijah, in which these kinds of wars could be avoided, simply could not always be realized.

And in the case of Asa, it was not. In the end, Asa dies of his illness. And he's buried with what we sometimes call a spice fire.

A whole lot of spices with aroma were used in his burial. And he seems to have a reasonably honorable burial, even though he has a very unhappy ending. So, Asa is an example of a chronicler of one of those kings who does much that is well and does much that is good, especially in terms of avoiding syncretism and the purification of Judah.

But from the chronicler's point of view, he loses that humbling of himself before God. And because his heart becomes proud, and he relies on himself, and he relies on alliances, he ends up in disastrous wars with Baasha, and he ends up dying in judgment. So, it is one of the chronicler's ways in which you see the negative side.

If we do not know how to humble ourselves, the result for us is not.

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