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Preacher: Dennis Hill

[0 : 0 0] Well, once again, thank you for your kind invitation to come and your hospitality, and I'll bring your greetings back to Kingston-upon-Hull.

And come and see us sometime when you're in the neighborhood. We'd love to have you come. We're going to be looking tonight at one of the great reforming kings of Israel.

Well, you know that Saul was the first king. God was not pleased with Saul. David, who followed him, of course, was a man after God's own heart.

The kingdom was established under his reign, and he was followed by his son Solomon, who built the temple and enjoyed all the fruits and blessings of his father's victories and faithfulness.

Few people in the history of the world could have been born into better circumstances than Solomon. And yet, sadly, we know that he did not remain faithful to the Lord.

[1 : 0 0] In the latter part of his reign, his heart was drawn away, and to the gods that were worshipped by his many wives. His spiritual decline, it seems to me, set a pattern which was repeated many times in Israel's history.

There were periods of great blessing, spiritual victory, followed then eventually by decline and unfaithfulness. Now, you might say, Dennis, why are we studying one of these old kings from the Old Testament?

Isn't there something a bit more relevant? I don't know, because it seems to me that things haven't changed. It seems to me that this is very much the history of 20 centuries of the Church in the New Testament.

The same pattern has continued to one degree or another, right up to the present. God sends blessing, revival, reformation. There's great victory, but it only lasts for a while.

Sooner or later, the people begin to forget God's goodness, don't they? They begin cooling off in their devotion, begin becoming too much like the world around them.

[2 : 1 3] So it's nothing really, but it seems to me that old pattern in the Old Testament. Why has God preserved all of these accounts for us? Why did he include these things?

It seems to me that he knew that we would need to study these in order to learn, well, how we might avoid the mistakes that they made. And when we don't, we might learn how we can get out of the troubles that we're in the way they did.

So because of that, we'll look at the life of one of these great kings, Asa, king of Judah, the southern kingdom. You know the kingdom's divided as a judgment because of Solomon's unfaithfulness.

The ten northern tribes rebelled and set up their own kingdom. And you know that in all the many years of that northern kingdom, they never once had a godly king, not one.

In the south, they had wicked kings as well, but they also had some very godly ones. And one of them is Asa that we want to look at tonight. Great reform and revival took place in his reign.

[3 : 18] And so we're going to look at what happened, how it happened, what we can learn, how does it apply to us. And all these kings, you know, all these godly kings, in some little way, point to and reflect the great king that was to come, the great reforming king.

And so we'll see perhaps a bit of that as well. First of all, Asa made a very good start in the beginning of chapter 14 that was read for us. We see Asa at the beginning. He was the fourth king after David, succeeded his father.

And we are told that Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He removed altars of foreign gods. He cut down wooden images. And he commanded the people to seek the Lord and to observe God's commandments.

Wouldn't you be thrilled to hear the queen come on television this week and say that to us all? Or the prime minister? I wouldn't suggest you wait for it too long, but it would be lovely, wouldn't it?

And of course, you know, speaking of the king, the great reforming king, this is what he does in a spiritual sense in each one of our lives when he comes in, doesn't he? He removes the altars of the foreign gods and cuts down the wooden images and commands us to obey.

[4 : 37] God's people are to be a commandment-keeping people, even today in the New Testament. You know, some people have the mistaken idea that grace means we throw the law out.

We're done with that. That's a misunderstanding. You know, Jesus said in the Great Commission that we're to make disciples, didn't he, of all nations, and we're to teach them to observe all things whatsoever he's commanded us.

And you know, the way the church is described in the book of Revelation in chapter 12, we're told there about the devil's persecution of the church, and the church is described as those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

No conflict there. They go together. Of course, there is the faith alone, in Christ alone, whereby we are saved, not by obeying commandments or by doing works of any kind, but then there are the works which will always follow real faith, the keeping of the commandments, not perfect obedience, but real obedience.

So the church of Jesus Christ is described as those who keep the commandments of God. Now, this is always a hallmark of reform and revival.

[5 : 54] And you know, what is reformation? Isn't reformation just simply trying to conform ourselves to the Word of God? Isn't that what reformation is? We look at ourselves, our lives, our church, everything we do, and we say, are we conforming to the Word of God?

And where we are, we thank God for his grace, and where we aren't, we seek to reform, so that we will be in line with the Word of God. That's just simply what it is. And obedience to the commandments is always a hallmark of reform and revival.

So when you hear about something which is reported to you as revival, or a work of the Spirit, or God really moving, always look for signs of renewed obedience to the Word of God.

Other things may or may not be there, but that will always be there where there's genuine revival, genuine reform. It must be, by definition. So during this good start here that Asa made, the Lord gave him and the land ten years of rest.

They had no war for all that time, and during that time of peace, Asa fortified the land against possible future trouble, and it's a good thing that he did, because we see here at the end of that ten years, he was attacked by the army from Ethiopia.

[7 : 09] And in addition to all the preparations that Asa made, and he made many, he realized still that victory was God's to give, and so he prayed this wonderful prayer in verse 11 here, asking the Lord for his help.

No one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army.

O Lord, you are our God. Do not let man prevail against you. That's a wonderful prayer, isn't it? That's a wonderful prayer to pray. And notice here, it's never a question of us taking wise and prudent steps, or depending on the Lord in prayer.

The two go together, don't they? It's not one or the other. It's not we sit up on the top of the hill and wait for the Lord to come and do something. We do what we should do, what is in front of us, what is practically responsible for us to do, and realize, of course, also, that it all depends on God, and we pray to him, and ask him, as Asa did here.

Well, God gave Asa this brilliant first ten years, and he topped it off with this great deliverance from an army which was about twice his size. And then after this great victory, he comes back, returning to Jerusalem, as we saw here in 15.

[8 : 33] He's met by Azariah the prophet, who has a message for Asa, and for all the people. There's about three or four points here we want to just look at in this message.

First of all, he says to him, the Lord is with you when you are with him. Puts a little qualification on there, doesn't he? The Lord is with you when you are with him. Now, what Azariah is saying here is not that our salvation, the forgiveness of our sins, depends on our faithfulness or our works.

He's not saying that. The whole Bible contradicts that. That's not what he's saying. What is he saying? Well, what he's saying is that they've won a great victory against an army twice their size.

God has delivered them in answer to their prayers. The Lord has brought about tremendous success for them and for the cause of God's kingdom. But he's saying that the Lord has brought about this great victory because Asa and the people were seeking him and were seeking to be obedient to his will.

Now, if they had been rebelling against him, in all likelihood, the opposite would have happened. Now, it could happen the other way as well. God sometimes gives victory when there is disobedience.

[9 : 43] He's a sovereign God of grace. It's not on the basis of our works or faithfulness. But generally speaking, if we are disobedient, we can expect failure of one kind or another.

While salvation and forgiveness are a question of sheer grace, there are other blessings and privileges that are only enjoyed when we are truly seeking to be obedient.

And it makes sense, too. God doesn't want to reinforce bad behavior, does he? He doesn't want to reinforce disobedience. God will only be with you to give you that kind of success when you are with him.

That's what he's saying to him. He's saying to the prophet, saying to Asa as he comes back here. And that doesn't mean, of course, that things will always go the way we would like if we're walking with the Lord.

God is sovereign. We don't just kind of push the right buttons and God responds accordingly. It doesn't work that way. What we want, what we think success is, may be different from what God wants to give us at any given time.

[10 : 53] But this is the principle. When we are with him in trust and obedience, then he is with us, giving us all the blessings and victories that he sees are best for us.

They may not be the ones that we think, but the ones that he sees are best for us. Now, question, why did God give Asa this exhortation at this time?

It seems like he's raining on his parade a little bit, isn't it? He's coming back in this great victory. We've won and it's wonderful. And now I say, well, the Lord's with you when you are with him.

It's almost like there's a little warning in here, isn't there? Like we were talking about this morning. A little warning in there. Why? Well, a lot of people have said this and discovered this and I believe completely that it's true that one of the most dangerous times for us spiritually is right after a big victory or a big success.

Our guard is down. Our head can be turned a little. We might have a tendency to have our eyes focused on ourselves and, ooh, look what happened here. Well, I guess we were doing all right.

[11 : 59] And so therefore, God comes in right away for Asa's good to give him this little exhortation. He wants him to stay focused.

And so he gets this exhortation. He goes on to tell him something else here. He says, Be strong and do not give up. Interesting. We wouldn't have thought Asa would have been even thinking about giving up here.

But this is what he says. Be strong and do not give up. The prophet reminds Asa of how bad things were in the verses we read there. When the people were not hearing the word of God as they should, things were terrible.

God is telling them here through the prophet. And they were not living as they should. And this is the warning. Be careful. Don't go back to that. Because that was what was happening when people were not living as they should.

And so he tells them two things here. First of all, be strong. He says, be strong. And by this, of course, he means strong spiritually. He's not necessarily talking about military strength here.

[12 : 59] Although he wouldn't completely ignore that, of course. But he's talking about spiritual strength. Asa is a man of God. Very clearly a man of God. But he's a man. He's a man.

And so he's a sinner. He's capable of faithfulness by God's grace. He's capable of unfaithfulness by his own natural sinful nature. Just like us in the same way.

So he's telling him to so live his life that he may be strong spiritually. Be strong in the Lord. Just as Paul urged the Ephesians were to put on that full armor of God.

The word in prayer has to have a central role in the life of any person who wants to be strong spiritually. Remember what Paul said. We won't read the whole section here. But verses 17 and 18 of chapter 6.

He says, Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God and pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

[13 : 58] With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. The vital part of us being strong spiritually.

Prayer, the word of God, the armor of God. There are things that will make us stronger spiritually and there are things which will make us weaker spiritually.

We read in Galatians, Paul says to them, So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature.

They are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. What he's telling him, and he's talking about, this is the normal Christian life he's describing here.

He's not talking about some unusual circumstance. He's saying, this is what it is. This is what the Christian life is. There remains in the life of the believer two inclinations, if I can put it that way.

[15 : 02] One to live for Christ and the other to return to self and to live for self in some way. And these remain right up to the end. They don't go away. Some very godly, experienced Christians tell us that it doesn't get easier as you get older.

It gets more difficult. And I tend to think that's the case. We cannot eradicate the inclination to sin. We cannot eradicate that temptation that will come.

But we can, by the Spirit of God, dominate it. We can't eradicate it. We can't make it go away completely. But we are to dominate it. That's what, wasn't that just what God said to Cain?

Sin is at the door and you must master it. You must dominate it. You must overpower it. How? Well, obviously, by the Holy Spirit.

But the more time we spend doing those things that will feed and promote our Christ-centered inclinations, the stronger we will be spiritually. It's just, it's just a very simple common sense.

[16 : 04] You know, if we spend a few minutes a day quickly reading over a little devotional in our Bibles and then spend hours of the day on recreational pursuits or whatever, we shouldn't be surprised if we're not as strong spiritually as we would like.

What did Jesus say to his disciples? The night on which he was betrayed, he came back to them, told them to pray that you will not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

He was telling them that prayer is one of the means by which we avoid entering into temptation. We won't avoid temptation, we can't, but we can avoid entering into it.

And he says, prayer is one of the means of grace. Of course, all sin weakens us spiritually. You know, we're supposed to run in the race that is set before us.

Well, sin, of course, makes us limp. And habitual sin will put us out of the race until that condition is changed by repentance. There are some things that are not sin in themselves, but they have a tendency to dull our spiritual senses.

[17 : 15] You know what I'm talking about? We all know this, don't we? There are some things, it's not really sinful to do X, Y, or Z, whatever it is. It's not sinful, but we know that after we have done it, the last thing we feel like doing is praying or reading our Bibles.

And that should be a real warning signal. Is that really something you want to spend a lot of time doing? You know, if we do, obviously we're going to be weaker spiritually. John Wesley's mother used to tell him, you know, that, I can't remember the quote, I wish I had it, but, you know, anything that has that effect on you, she said, is sin.

Anything that does the opposite of building you up spiritually has to be wrong. So we ask the question, after I've done something or been somewhere, does it leave me with more or less desire for spiritual things?

Any activity which leaves us with no appetite for prayer, I'd say, must be dangerous. Right? The growing Christian, the Christian who's spiritually strong is the one whose aim is to increase the activities which promote his Christ-centeredness and to decrease the activities that don't.

It's just common sense, isn't it? Be strong. Be strong in the Lord for others, for your family, for your loved ones, for the Lord, for the church.

[18 : 40] You know, the stronger we are spiritually, that's the best thing we can do for other people. You know, McShane said this over and over again, the most important thing I can give to you is my holiness.

In other words, a close walk with God. That's the most, that's the best thing you can do for anybody, anybody in the world, the people you love the most. You can buy them all kinds of things, you can spend quality time with them and do all kinds of things, but if you're not living close to God, you're not doing the thing that they really, really need and the thing that could bless them and help them.

And boy, I feel that as a parent, don't you? Or other loved ones that we have. How do we want to help them? We're concerned about them. The closer we walk with God, that's the best thing that we can do for them.

That's the most that will help them above anything else. And nothing else will take the place of that. Nothing. So he says, be strong. And then he says, do not give up.

Literally, the words are, do not let your hands be weak. It's an interesting little picture here. It's one of those Hebrew expressions that sort of paints a picture for us. You know, someone is here, he's doing some work which involves his hands and his hands begin to get weak and the word can also mean drop and so what we have here is the man's hands dropping to his sides.

[19 : 58] He's had it. He's all tired. He can't go on. He stopped doing what he was doing. He's lost the strength or maybe the courage to continue so he stops and maybe he gives up entirely deciding that oh, this is all too much for me.

This is what he's saying. Don't let this happen to you, Asa. Don't let your hands be weak. Asa and the people of Israel are being urged to continue the work of reform that they've begun.

Don't give up. Why? Didn't they finish it? No. You know what the reformers said? Their great phrase was *semper reformedum*. Always reforming. Reformation never ends.

It just goes on. The only time that reformation could possibly end is if you and I and our churches were perfect. So, don't count on reformation ever being over because there's always something, some way in which we can get closer to God, some way in which we can please God in some other way.

And so there's always that move ahead. So he says, don't give up because this is always the great temptation for God's people.

[21 : 05] I think it's especially great temptation for the leader. And of course, he's speaking to Asa here, isn't he? Because it's hard. The obstacles are great. The burdens are heavy. The consequences of anyone failing are far-reaching for a leader even more so.

The effects are felt among God's people. Their hands and hearts are weaker and so the work suffers. believers. So, what does the devil do?

He's no fool in this sense. He attacks believers and especially the leaders. Especially. That's what Paul was exhorting Timothy about in the last letter that he wrote to him, 2 Timothy there, chapter 4.

He's encouraging Timothy to do what? Well, 2 Timothy chapter 4 beginning in verse 5. He says what? But you, he's talking about all these who are turning aside with their itching ears and turning aside to myths.

He says, But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure.

[22 : 17] I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. You see how he saying, But you, for I. You do this, I'm doing this, you do this.

And what is he telling them here? Basically, he's saying, Don't quit. Discharge all the duties of your ministry. Keep going, keep going to the end. I'm going to the end, Timothy.

See, I'm about ready to go. I've finished the battle. I've fought a good fight. Now you do the same thing. This is what he's telling Timothy. Don't quit. Don't give up. Keep on. The work of reform is hard to start, but it's harder to continue.

Azariah is urging Asa and all the rest to keep on. Don't give up. Don't quit now. The temptation to think we can't keep on going when the things get difficult is very strong.

I don't know if any of you have seen those films that have been put out by a church in America. Have you ever seen those? They're on DVD. They're available in this country. They were reviewed recently in Evangelical Times.

[23 : 24] They're very American, of course, and so they have some cultural things with them, but there's one scene in one where it's an American football coaching practice, and this guy's being forced to do the death crawl.

That means he's crawling on his hands and feet with somebody on his back the whole length of the field, and this guy is there screaming at him, don't quit. Don't quit. See how far he can go. He wants to see how far this guy can go because he's a real leader on the team, but he's been slack.

He's been not really with it. He's kind of just putting in his time, and he wants to really get this guy to move, and so he's there crawling with this guy on his back thinking he's going to go 20 yards, and the guy keeps him more and more and more, and he winds up going the whole length of the field.

It's a wonderful scene if you ever get a chance to see one of those DVDs. Quite emotional. But he was saying what the prophet here is saying to Asa, don't quit.

Don't quit. It's going to get to the point where you feel like you can't go on. Don't quit. Keep going. Why? Well, one reason is, he goes on here to say, our next point, because your work will be rewarded.

[24 : 35] Now, Azariah could have mentioned a lot of reasons why Asa and the people should continue, but the only one that the Holy Spirit caused him to mention was this. Your work will be rewarded.

You're not doing this in vain, Asa. You see, that's one of the great temptations that Satan will bring to our minds and hearts when the going gets tough.

It's all for nothing. And he gives a variety of reasons why it's all for nothing, and he keeps trying different ones until he finds the one, the temptation, the fiery dart, which is just right for you, and he'll zoom in on that with you.

Here's one. It's all for nothing, because all that you're doing is just going to fall apart in a few years' time. Things never last. People in the future may come and just change everything you've done, so it'll all be for nothing.

Forget it. Give up. Or, you've misunderstood what God really wants. You've got it all wrong. This is a colossal waste of time. Stop now. Or, you're really going to offend people if you keep on like this.

[25 : 46] You're going to be terrible division. People will oppose you. Just give up. You won't be able to continue. It's all going to get too difficult for you. Look at you. You're weak. You're tired. You're old.

Stop it. You're going to have to quit halfway through. You won't make it. Quit now, or you'll be humiliated later. Or, you're probably not really a Christian anyway.

Look at you. Look at your life. God's not behind this. You're going to make him angry. You just better quit. There's a hundred, a thousand limitless fiery darts that the enemy comes at us with in order to get us to stop if we're seeking to do something for the Lord.

Of course, if we're just sitting on the couch watching TV, he'll leave us alone. You won't hear any fiery darts because you're of no threat to him. But if you want to do something for him, he will come at you with some kind of attack.

And so, Azariah's words, just like Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

[26 : 57] This is what Satan tries to convince us in one way or another. It will be for nothing. God says, it's not in vain.

It can't be in vain. There is a reward for the person who serves God. He who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him.

Jesus endured the cross, we're told, for the joy set before him. Moses, he had his eyes on what was coming.

This is the way it is. There is a reward waiting at the end. Now, we don't know everything about the reward of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We don't know everything about our own reward, but surely part of the reward that he was looking at was the joy, was the glory that was going to come to the Heavenly Father because of all the multitudes of hell-deserving sinners which are going to be redeemed and are going to be with him on that day.

[28 : 00] God delights to reward those who serve him. It is not pay for services rendered. That's not what rewards are in the Bible, in the New Testament.

We do not earn it. The only thing we've ever earned is hell. Everything else is God's gracious dealings with us. It's the reward of grace freely given to those who have served him in some way.

God delights to honor those who honor him. You know, God even rewards pagan rulers who have served his purposes in some way. Do you remember Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon?

He laid siege to Tyre. God was punishing Tyre for their sins and he had the Babylonian army there and Nebuchadnezzar and they went out as big siege of Tyre and they finally destroyed Tyre and Nebuchadnezzar and his troops got all exhausted and tired and got nothing out of it basically.

And God says in his word because they did this and God I will reward them by giving Egypt to them and that's what he did. And so they conquered Egypt.

[29 : 07] That was their word. Well, if God is concerned to reward a pagan ruler in that way under those circumstances how much more will he reward his people who love and trust him and desire to please him and want to do something that will make him happy if I can put it that way how much more will he reward those who serve him and who persevere in serving him when the going gets tough.

Parents, if you ever watch your children working hard and persevering in something and really having a difficult time how does it make you feel towards them?

Well, how does God feel when he sees us persevering in a difficult time in a hard thing to do but we want to keep doing it because we want to please him?

Oh, God will reward you. How will he reward you? I don't know but I'm sure you won't be disappointed. I'm absolutely certain you won't be disappointed.

He rewards in all kinds of ways. Of course, the great reward as God said to Abraham, I am your exceeding great reward. Of course, Christ is the reward but God has ways of doing things for us and to us and through us in which he rewards us.

[30 : 37] This is what he tells us in his word. He rewards us now, later, rewards here on earth, rewards in heaven, temporal, spiritual, rewards for us, for our loved ones, for our church, for our nation.

You know, one time, I'll just share this personal, I went through a very difficult time in a church over some ecumenical problems and we took a very difficult stand and we had to, we felt we had to.

And my brother, who had professed Christ back in the States, had wandered away. And after this whole thing was over, he came back to the Lord and it was, I can't go through all the details, but it was so clear to me that this was exactly what God had done, brought him back to himself as a way of encouraging me for the difficulty that we went through.

So, with Nebuchadnezzar, the Lord remembered my difficulties. Only eternity will reveal all that God has done and will do for his people as they serve him.

But God will bless, God will reward. His word tells us that. And no one whom God rewards, as I say, will ever be disappointed with what God has given to them.

[32 : 04] So, what the prophet said to Asa, the Spirit says to all of us today, to all of you here going through this period of interregnum, it's not easy, is it?

It's not easy. Well, God says to you just what was said to Asa here all these years ago, be strong, do not give up, for your work will be rewarded.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word again, these wonderful accounts in the Old Testament of what you did and how you worked with your people.

And Lord, we thank you for preserving them for us, to teach us, because we go through the same kind of things in one way or another. And Lord, we do need this encouragement.

We do need this challenge. We pray, O God, that you would help us. Help us to be with you, that you may be with us, to give us the success that you long to give us.

[33 : 08] Lord, help us, we pray, to be strong, to not give up, to continue, and to be confident that you do see, and that you will bless, and you will provide, and you will reward in your time, in your way.

And Lord, we will rejoice as you get all the glory. For Jesus' sake, Amen.