

The Books of 1 and 2 Kings

Lesson 9: Kings of Judah and Israel; Ahab Rises -- 1 Kings 15:1–16:34

Imagine standing at the edge of a river and watching the current. For a moment it seems still. But toss a leaf onto the surface and you realize the water is always moving, always pulling in one direction. First Kings 15 and 16 feel something like that. One king appears, reigns briefly, and is swept away. Another takes his place. Then another. The names tumble past like items on a casualty list: Abijam, Asa, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, Ahab. Eight kings in two chapters. Some reign decades; some last a week. But underneath all of them, there is a current. And if you watch long enough, you realize it is pulling downward.

In Judah, the current slows for a moment. Asa sits on the throne for forty-one years, and the narrator pauses to breathe a full sentence of praise over him: 'And Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as David his father had done' (15:11). He clears out the male cult prostitutes his father tolerated. He tears down idols. He deposes his own grandmother, Maacah, because she has made an abominable image for Asherah. There is something almost electric about a man willing to do that. Loyalty to God that costs something is the only loyalty that means anything. Asa's heart was 'wholly true to the Lord all his days' (15:14), though even he stumbled late by trusting Syria's silver more than God's power.

In the north, meanwhile, the river runs faster and darker. Nadab is killed after two years by Baasha, who wipes out the entire house of Jeroboam exactly as God's word had said he would, and then Baasha himself builds a reign as wicked as the man he replaced. His son Elah lasts two years before Zimri, one of his military commanders, kills him during a drinking party and seizes the throne. Zimri lasts seven days. When the army hears what happened, they name their own general, Omri, king instead, besiege Tirzah, and Zimri burns the palace down around himself rather than surrender. Omri establishes a dynasty, builds a new capital at Samaria, and earns a single line of summary: he 'did more evil than all who were before him' (16:25). Then his son comes to the throne, and the line gets rewritten: 'Ahab the son of Omri did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him' (16:33). Each generation edges further down the slope.

These two chapters are not merely a political chronicle. They are a theological examination of what happens when a nation's leadership drifts from God generation by generation. The standards of comparison here are always spiritual: did this king follow the Lord or not? Did he walk in the sins of Jeroboam or not? The narrator has a single measuring rod, and it is not military power, economic prosperity, or diplomatic skill. It is faithfulness to God. That is the conviction at the heart of this passage, and it is exactly the conviction we need to carry into our own lives, our own families, and our own churches today.

Group Discussion: Looking across the rapid succession of kings in these two chapters, what pattern do you notice about how sin and faithfulness are passed from one generation to the next, and what does that suggest about the responsibility we carry toward those who come after us?

Personal Reflection: Asa's heart was described as 'wholly true to the Lord' for most of his reign, yet late in life he relied on Syria's military alliance instead of trusting God. Is there an area of your own life where you began well and have quietly begun to trust something other than God for security or help?

Read 1 Kings 15:1–16:34

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Kings 15:1–8. Abijam reigned in Judah for only three years, and the narrator's evaluation is brief and unflattering. Yet verse 4 gives a startling explanation for why God did not cut off his dynasty: 'for David's sake.' What does this passage teach about the relationship between God's covenant faithfulness and the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of individual leaders?
2. The narrator tells us that God kept a lamp burning in Jerusalem 'for David's sake,' honoring a covenant even when the current occupant of the throne had not earned it. Can you think of a time in your own life when you experienced God's faithfulness not because you had been faithful but because of someone else's faithfulness, a parent, a mentor, or a congregation, that had gone before you?
3. Read 1 Kings 15:9–15. Asa's forty-one-year reign stands as one of the brightest spots in Judah's history. Verse 14 says, 'But the high places were not taken away. Nevertheless, the heart of Asa was wholly true to the Lord all his days.' What does the difference between Asa's incomplete reforms and his wholly true heart tell us about how God evaluates leaders and people, and what does 'wholly true' mean in practice?

4. Asa removed his own grandmother from her position as queen mother because of her idolatry (15:13). That must have been an extraordinarily costly decision. When has your loyalty to God cost you something in a significant personal relationship, and how did you navigate that tension between love for people and faithfulness to God?
5. Read 1 Kings 15:16–22 and 2 Chronicles 16:7–10. Asa began his reign trusting God but later paid silver from the temple treasury to hire Syria's king as a military ally rather than crying out to the Lord. The prophet Hanani told him he had 'relied on the king of Syria and not relied on the Lord your God.' What does Asa's late-life failure reveal about the long-term danger of substituting human strategies and alliances for trust in God?
6. Asa's drift is subtle: he did not build an idol. He simply solved a military problem with money and political cleverness instead of prayer and trust. Where in your own life are you most tempted to reach for a human solution, a financial cushion, a relationship strategy, or an institutional protection, before you bring the need honestly to God?
7. Read 1 Kings 15:25–16:7. In the northern kingdom, Baasha killed Nadab and wiped out the house of Jeroboam, fulfilling the word of God spoken through the prophet Ahijah (14:10–11). Yet Baasha himself then walked in the sins of Jeroboam. What does this pattern, where God uses an instrument of judgment who then becomes as guilty as the one judged, teach us about human nature, moral responsibility, and the way God holds each person accountable for their own choices?
8. Baasha was used by God to accomplish a prophesied judgment, but that did not excuse him from the personal sin of his own reign. We sometimes comfort ourselves by pointing to circumstances, influences, or other people's failures as explanations for our own behavior.

What distinction does this passage press us to make between understanding the influences on our choices and taking full responsibility for those choices?

9. Read 1 Kings 16:29–34 alongside Deuteronomy 17:14–20 and Revelation 2:18–23. Ahab ‘did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him’ (16:33). He married Jezebel, served Baal, and witnessed the rebuilding of Jericho at the cost of two sons, exactly fulfilling Joshua’s curse (Josh 6:26). Across 1 Kings 15 and 16, the narrator uses a consistent pattern of evaluation, measuring each king by whether he walked in the ways of God or in the sins of Jeroboam, and the downward trajectory seems to accelerate. What does this passage teach about God’s patient justice across history, His consistent standard of evaluating leaders by covenant faithfulness rather than worldly success, and how the perfectly faithful King of the line of David finally answers what every failing king in this passage could not?
10. Looking back across the whole sweep of 1 Kings 15–16 from Asa’s reforms to Ahab’s depths, what is one truth about the difference that one person’s faithful heart makes, and what is one specific way you sense God calling you to greater wholehearted devotion to Him as a result of this study?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 2 Chronicles 14:1–15:19, the extended account of Asa’s reforms and his reliance on God in battle, providing the fuller picture of his early trust and eventual failure; Deuteronomy 17:14–20, God’s law for the king, the standard every king in Kings is implicitly measured against; Psalm 78:56–72, a psalm rehearsing Israel’s repeated rebellion and God’s choice of David, the covenant backdrop for God’s patience with the royal line; Romans 3:23–26, where the righteousness of God in judging and justifying is the New Testament answer to every failing king; Matthew 1:1–17, the genealogy that runs through Asa and all these kings to reach the one King whose heart was wholly true in the way no other was