

Judah During the Divided Kingdom (2 Chronicles 10:1 – 28:7)

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<p>The Reign of Asa, part 2: Asa Under Divine Blessing, part 2: Asa's Victory, Prophetic Approval and Obedience, part 2: Asa's Prophetic Approval and Obedience (2 Chronicles 15:1-19)</p>

Asa's Prophetic Approval and Obedience (15:1-19)

Having described Asa's victorious battle against Zerah, the Chronicler added another series of positive events to Asa's reign. He focused on the approving words of the prophet Azariah and Asa's reforms that followed. These events balance with contrasting events in the second half of Asa's reign (16:7-11; see figure 33).

Structure of 15:1-19

This portion of the Chronicler's addition to Kings divides into two main parts (see figure 33). These two elements form a closely connected passage. The first portion deals with the prophet speaking to Asa (15:1-7); the second portion records what Asa did in response to the prophetic word (15:8-19). In these passages, the Chronicler continued his depiction of Asa's early years as a time under God's blessing.

Prophetic Approval (15:1-7)

After Asa returned from battle, he encountered the prophet Azariah. The Chronicler conveyed his own understanding of these events through the prophetic speech.

Structure of 15:1-7

Azariah's speech is introduced with a description of the setting (15:1-2a). The speech itself divides into three main points (see figure 33). A basic doctrinal position is expressed (15:2b); historical illustration of the principle follows (15:3-6); an application is made to the contemporary circumstances (15:7). This basic pattern has been dubbed a "Levitical Speech" and appears in a number of passages. For instance, David's instructions to the leaders of Israel

in 1 Chr 22:17-19 included a principle (1 Chr 22:17), historical illustration (1 Chr 22:18), and an application (1 Chr 22:19). A similar pattern appears in 1 Chr 28:2-10. 28:2-3 is the basic principle; the historical illustration follows (1 Chr 28:4-7); an application closes the speech (1 Chr 28:8-10).

Introductory Setting (15:1-2a)

To avoid any misunderstanding regarding the reliability of Azariah, the Chronicler introduced his speech by noting that **the Spirit of God came upon** him (15:1). This unusual introduction to Azariah's speech may have been necessary because he spoke so approvingly of Asa. In the Old Testament positive words toward a king are often associated with false prophets (see 2 Chr 18:4-7; Jer 4:10; 5:12-13; 6:14; 14:13; 23:17; Ezek 13:10; Mic 3:5-12; cf. 1 Kgs 22:5-8). Moreover, Azariah insisted on certain forms of social and religious reforms that would have challenged the post-exilic readers of Chronicles. Therefore, the prophet's divine inspiration would have legitimized efforts to apply the prophet's instructions after the exile. For a summary of the Chronicler's outlook on the Spirit see comments on 1 Chr 12:18.

Doctrinal Principle (15:2b)

In the case of this speech, the prophetic doctrinal principle appears in language familiar to readers of Chronicles (15:2b). First, Azariah affirmed that God is **with you when you are with him** (15:2b). When the Lord was "with" his people, he led them into battle and secured their victory (see *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*). Nevertheless, God's joining his people in battle depended on a condition. It occurred **when [they] are with him** (15:2b). God allied himself with Israel only when Israel allied itself with him.

Second, Azariah stated, **"if you seek him, he will be found by you"** (15:2b). During the period of the divided monarchy the Chronicler frequently referred to "seeking" God as an allusion to the programmatic promise given to Solomon (see 7:14). God promised that seeking him through humble prayer and devotion would result in blessing. Asa's prayer in the preceding passage (see 14:11), illustrated this principle in action. Here Azariah stated this principle in a forthright doctrinal affirmation (see *Introduction: 19) Seeking*).

Third, the prophet warned against forsaking God because **he will forsake** (15:2b) those who do so. Once again the prophet uses terminology appearing frequently in Chronicles. "Forsaking" God was to violate flagrantly Israel's covenant requirements; to be forsaken by God was to come under the covenant curses (see *Introduction: 22) Abandoning/Forsaking*).

The Chronicler believed Asa was meeting the requirements of these covenant principles at this stage of his reign. He had fought his enemies and gained victory because he

sought and relied on God (see 14:11). The prophet's words explicitly explained why Asa experienced God's blessings at this point in this life.

Historical Illustrations (15:3-6)

After his doctrinal focus, the prophet's speech turned to historical illustrations of the principle (15:3-6). The prophet reminded Asa of conditions during the period of the judges. During that time Israel **was without the true God, without a priest to teach and without the law** (15:3). Widespread apostasy characterized this period. Priests and Levites who were supposed to teach the Law (see Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10; Jer 18:18; Hos 4:6-7; Mal 2:7) had themselves become corrupt (see Judg 17:1-21:25). The Law was forsaken and "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 21:25).

Despite the extreme conditions of that time, the doctrinal principle of 15:2 still applied to Asa's reign. To draw the connection plainly, Azariah used terminology he had employed before. When trouble came in the days of the judges, the people **returned to the Lord ...** (see *Introduction: 22) Repentance*), **sought him and he was found by them** (15:5 see 15:2; see also *Introduction: 19) Seeking*). The terrible conditions were overcome (however temporarily) by the nation's humility and dependence on God (see Judg 3:9,15; 4:3; 6:6,7; 10:10,12; 15:18; 21:3).

In order to strengthen his argument, the prophet described the distress of the period of the Judges (15:5b-6). It was a time of **great turmoil ... for the lands** (15:5b; i.e. the various districts of the promised land or nearby nations). Nations surrounding Israel were in constant war (15:6a). Nevertheless, God heard and answered the prayers of his people (see *Introduction: 17) Prayer*).

The final clause of the prophet's historical illustrations provided an interesting clue to his intentions. Why was the period of Judges such a terrible time? The book of Judges emphasized the sins of Israel as the cause of trouble. Azariah would not have disagreed with this assessment. Yet, the emphasis here was on divine involvement once again (see *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*). The troubles came **because God was troubling them with every kind of distress** (15:6). The active role that God played in the period of the Judges brought those events into contact with the experience of the Chronicler's readers. They had seen times of distress due to apostasy and had felt the effects of God **troubling ... with every kind of distress** (15:6). Of course, the implication for the Chronicler's post-exilic readers was evident. The principle affirmed by Azariah applied to them. Their exilic circumstances had been reversed and their current situation could be improved only as they sought the Lord and were found by him.

Contemporary Application (15:7)

The prophet's immediate concern in this passage becomes clear in his application to Asa (15:7). With the doctrinal principle and historical illustration established, he called on Asa to **be strong** and not to **give up** (15:7). Similar exhortations occur elsewhere in Chronicles (see 32:7; 1 Chr 19:13; 22:13; 28:10,20;). Azariah did not rebuke Asa, but encouraged him to continue with the full assurance that his **work will be rewarded** (15:7). At this stage in Asa's reign, he was a faithful king. Yet, more needed to be done. As the verses that follow explain, idolatry had spread through the land and the temple had been neglected (see 15:8). Azariah encouraged Asa to go further. If he did, even more blessings would come his way.

The prophet's positive words to Asa were easily applied to the Chronicler's readers. Like Asa, they had received deliverance from their enemies. Yet, much remained to be done. The prophetic word to Asa encouraged post-exilic readers to move forward in their restoration efforts. Initial successes were not sufficient. They had to continue in the way of fidelity as they hoped for more blessings from God.

Asa's Response (15:8-19)

The Chronicler's record of Asa's early years continues with a series of reports on Asa's response to the prophet. He explicitly connected these materials with the prophet's announcement by repeating terminology found there. **When Asa heard ... Azariah ... he took courage** (15:8 see 15:7). All of Judah vowed **to seek the Lord** (15:12; compare 15:2). Moreover, **they sought God eagerly and he was found by them** (15:15 see 15:2). The emphasis on the theme of "seeking" is apparent. The Chronicler saw this characteristic of Asa's early years as the reason for his great blessing (see *Introduction: 19) Seeking*). Asa's actions were direct responses to the instructions of the prophet. They illustrate how the king took his words to heart.

Structure of 15:8-19

Asa's response to the prophet divides into a series of three reports (see figure 33). The text describes Asa's worship reforms (15:8), Asa's assembly for reform (15:9-15), and Asa's other reforms (15:16-19). As noted above (see figure 32), the first two sections of this material comes from the Chronicler's hand. They were his additions to King's account of Asa's reign. The final section, however, stems for the most part from 1 Kgs 15:13-15; only 2 Chr 15:19 is additional.

Asa's Worship Reforms (15:8)

When Asa put the prophet's instructions into action he first reformed Judah's worship practices. Similar reforms took place in other portions of the history (see: *Introduction: 6) Royal Observance of Worship*). He destroyed **detestable idols from the whole land of Judah and Benjamin** (15:8). While the Chronicler presented Rehoboam and Abijah positively, these actions make it clear that neither of them stopped all idolatry. At this time, however, Asa rid **the whole land** of idols, including areas of **Ephraim** which he had taken from Baasha, king of Israel (15:8).

Asa's efforts were not only destructive, but constructive as well. He **repaired the altar**, the bronze altar Solomon had erected **in front of the portico of the Lord's temple** (15:8). Apparently, during the very first years of Asa's reign temple maintenance had been neglected.

The presence of idols and the disrepair of the bronze altar explain why Azariah exhorted the king to go further in righteousness (see 15:1-7). Many changes had to be accomplished and the work began with correcting the worship of Judah. Once again, Asa's actions were exemplary for the Chronicler's post-exilic readers. As a number of kings' actions illustrated, worship was the place for them to begin their reforms as well.

Asa's Assembly for Reform (15:9-15)

The report of Asa's response to the prophetic encouragement continues with an account of a national assembly. This assembly extended Asa's reform efforts.

Structure of 15:9-15

These materials divide into a five step balanced narrative (see figure 33). Asa's assembly begins with a detailed description of those who came to Jerusalem (15:9-10) and closes with the benefits the assembly brought to the nation (15:15). Opening sacrificial ceremonies (15:11) balance with the ceremonies closing the assembly (15:14). In the center of the story is a report of the oath sworn at the assembly (15:12-13).

Assembly Called (15:9-10)

This passage begins with the notice that Asa **assembled all Judah** (15:9). This terminology (see also 15:10) sets this event alongside a number of religious assemblies in the Chronicler's history (see *Introduction: 5) Religious Assemblies*). As in other such assemblies,

the actions taken here are paradigmatic for the post-exilic community. Asa led Judah in covenant renewal; the Chronicler's readers should learn to do the same in their day (see *Introduction: 13) Covenant*).

These verses emphasize the extent of the tribes represented in the assembly. **All Judah and Benjamin** came to the Jerusalem, but along with them were representatives of **Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon** (15:9). The Chronicler added the notice that the northerners were from among those **who had settled among them** (15:9). As in the days of Rehoboam (see 11:5-17), **large numbers had come ... from Israel** (15:9). The inclusion of Simeon among the northern tribes is problematic because the territory of Simeon is actually located south of Judah. It is feasible that some historical event not known from biblical records led to migrations from Simeon's traditional territory to a more northern location. Perhaps, Edomite incursions in the southern regions after the reign of Solomon explain their movements. Whatever the case, the Chronicler mentioned migrations from the North on several occasions (see *Introduction: 3) Northern Israel*).

This defection from the North took place when **they saw that the Lord his God was with him** (15:9). The fact that **God was with him** recalls the previous section of Asa's victory over Zerah (see 14:11-15). There victory resulted from God fighting on Judah's side (see 13:12; see also see *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*).

This and other migrations from the North were very important to the Chronicler. They were foretastes of the Chronicler's ideal of reunification of all Israel under the reign of the Davidic family (see *Introduction: 2) Northern Israel*).

Assembly Opening Ceremonies (15:11)

In recognition of the solemnity of this occasion, the Chronicler described the sacrifices offered at the beginning of the assembly. Asa and those who had joined him sacrificed **seven hundred head of cattle and seven thousand sheep and goats** (15:11). These numbers compare favorably with other similar events (see 1 Chr 15:26; 2 Chr 5:6; 7:5; 29:27-33). This assembly was attended by representatives of many tribes and included grand sacrificial ceremonies.

Assembly Oaths (15:12-13)

The Chronicler's chief interest in Asa's assembly also formed the turning point of the narrative. On this occasion the people **entered into a covenant to seek the Lord** (15:12). This ceremony of covenant renewal was probably concurrent with the annual Feast of Weeks or Pentecost (see Ex 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:15-21; Num 28:26-31; Deut 16:9-10). The

Chronicler mentioned several events of covenant renewal to inspire his post-exilic readers to reaffirm their covenant commitments before God as well (see *Introduction: 13) Covenant*).

From other portions of Scripture, we may surmise that a covenant renewal ceremony of this sort would include a number of elements. For instance, four movements emerge within the proceedings of Josh 24:1-25. The ceremonies began with the recollection of God's acts in Israel's history (24:1-13). The restating of the covenant privileges and responsibilities followed (24:14-15). The covenant people respond with repentance and commitment (24:16-18). Laws, promises, and terms of agreement are recorded (24:25). Like Joshua before him, Asa led the nation in renewal of commitments to the Lord (see Dt 29:1; Jos 8:30-35; 1 Sam 11:14).

The Chronicler explicitly tied Asa's covenant renewal to the preceding context. First, he described the assembly's oath as "seeking" (15:12; see 15:2; see also *Introduction: 19) Seeking*). Similarly, he described the sacrifices offered in conjunction with this covenant renewal as **plunder they had brought back** from victory over Zerah (15:11; see 14:9-15). These two elements in this story demonstrate that the Chronicler saw Asa's assembly as the climax of Asa's response to the prophet.

A remarkable note appears at the end of this covenant renewal. **All who would not seek the Lord ... were to be put to death** (15:13). The practice of executing flagrant covenant violators was established by Mosaic Law (see Ex 22:20; Deut 17:2-7; 13:6-10). As with all Mosaic instructions on capital punishment, the motivation behind this Law was to rid Israel of evildoers who would lead others from fidelity to the covenant. In the Old Testament period, religious and national policies were nearly inseparable. The judgments of the state of Israel in compliance with the Law of God were the judgments of God himself. As a result, one dimension of national covenant renewal was the purification of the nation. These executions are comparable to the New Testament practice of excommunication which is itself a purification of the believing community (see Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 1 Tim 1:18-20; 2 Thess 3:14).

Assembly Closing Ceremonies (15:14)

In balance with the opening ceremonies of sacrifice (see 15:11), the Chronicler turned to the ceremonies following covenant renewal. The people delighted in the event with **shouting and with trumpets and horns** (15:14). Once again, the Chronicler's interest in connecting music and joy is apparent (see *Introduction: 8) Music*). As in similar passages throughout his book, the Chronicler emphasized the joy and splendor of this event to motivate his readers toward imitation (see *Introduction: 27) Disappointment and Celebration*). Instead of threats of judgment, this scene of celebration offered positive incentive for covenant renewal. The wonder of Asa's joyous celebration could be theirs, if they would follow the example of Asa's covenant fidelity.

Assembly Results (15:15)

The description of the results of Asa's assembly closes with a continuing focus on the emotions of the event: **All Judah rejoiced** (15:15). Representatives of the entire population were excited about the renewal of the covenant. Moreover, they swore **wholeheartedly** (15:15). Wholehearted devotion was one of the Chronicler's most repeated themes (see *Introduction: 16) Motivations*). At this time Judah went far beyond external religious requirements and offered their souls to God. Moreover, the Chronicler added that because Asa and the assembly **sought the Lord eagerly ... he was found by them** (15:15). Wholehearted, eager pursuit of covenant renewal is once again expressed in terms of "seeking" (see 14:4; 15:2,12,13; 16:12; also see *Introduction: 19) Seeking*). Finally, the result of the assembly's joyous and sincere devotion was that **the Lord gave them rest on every side** (15:15). In language that recalls the ideal reign of David (see 1 Chr 22:18; 23:25) as well as Asa (see 14:6,7) and anticipates Jehoshaphat (see 20:30), the Chronicler pointed out that Asa's covenant loyalty led to protection from enemies (see *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*).

The encouragement to the Chronicler's readers is evident. The delightful experiences of this assembly should have motivated them to eager pursuit of covenant renewal in their day. They had to go far beyond mere external conformity to wholehearted devotion. Only then would the joy exhibited in this passage be theirs.

Asa's Other Reforms (15:16-19)

The Chronicler rounded off his record of Asa's reforms by returning to the book of Kings (15:16-19 // 1 Kgs 15:13-15). This material forms an inclusion with 15:8 that frames the story of Asa's assembly (see figure 33).

Several items come into the picture at this point. First, Asa **deposed ... Maacha ... as queen mother** (15:16). The **queen mother** was nearly an official status afforded to the mother or grandmother of a king (see 1 Kgs 2:19; 15:13; 2 Kgs 10:13; 24:12,15). These royal matriarchs often had much influence over the affairs of state. Asa's **grandmother Maacha** (see 13:2) had erected an **Asherah pole** (15:16). Apparently she was not fully committed to Asa's reforms. Not only did Asa destroy her idol, but deposed her as well. Even the king's own family was not exempt from his reform efforts. (For an explanation of the Asherah pole see 14:3-5.)

Second, the Chronicler repeated from 1 Kgs 15:14 that Asa **did not remove the high places from Israel** (15:17). This admission is not contradictory of 14:5. There the Chronicler asserted only that Asa removed high places **from Judah** (14:5). Here it would

appear that the Chronicler understood the book of Kings as referring to those lands of Ephraim which Asa possessed (see 15:8; 17:2). Despite this failure on Asa's part, the Chronicler also included from Kings that **Asa's heart was fully committed ... all his life** (15:17). Although the Chronicler turned next to Asa's years of infidelity, he noted that deep within this king was a heart devoted to the Lord. Once again, the Chronicler stressed wholehearted devotion but acknowledged that it did not imply perfect behavior (see *Introduction: 16) Motivations*).

Third, the text refers to Asa's dedication of **silver and gold ... and other articles to the temple of God** (15:18). This exemplary action recalls to the similar actions of David and Solomon (see 1 Chr 29:3; 2 Chr 5:1). Once again, this part of Asa's reign was subtly compared to these ideal monarchs.

Fourth, the Chronicler added a final note to this portion of his record (15:19). He had already mentioned the nation's **rest on every side** (15:15; see *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*). At this point, he emphasized that **there was no more war** (15:19). Asa was free of major conflicts **until the thirty-fifth year** of his reign (15:19). The allusion to the ideal reign of Solomon is evident (see 2 Chr 9:30).

With these closing reports the Chronicler presented the depth of Asa's reforms and the longlasting blessing of peace he received. For the post-exilic readers these features of the king's reign were enviable. They could experience the same peace, if they would imitate Asa's reforms in their day.