

1ST KINGS

Week 26, chapter 15 and 16

In our last lesson in 1st Kings we ended by focusing on the meaning of the word “whole-hearted” (*lebab shalem*) as used in chapter 15 verse 3. There the Scriptural complaint is that the newest king over Judah, **Aviyam**, was just like his predecessor and father **Rechav'am** (Rehoboam) in that he was NOT whole-hearted towards Yehoveh; and this was unlike King David who was whole-hearted.

We spent some time with this because it doesn't take much reading on the resume of King David's life before we see this damning list of some of the worst possible sins a human can commit against another human: sexual immorality and murder. So how is it that despite these grievous trespasses, and the consequential divine punishments promised to him, that David is seen by the Lord as “whole-hearted” towards Him? And the answer seems to be that God's definition of whole-hearted revolves around the lack of idolatry in one's heart and actions. That David did things that even in our day and age might earn him the death sentence, these were things that were violations of commandments that regarded human to human interaction. Idolatry is on the other hand a direct human to God interaction. And the implication is that idolatry is the Old Testament name for the so-called “unforgivable” sin that in the New Testament is called blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

We'll not review today all that we discussed in the last lesson in this regard; but suffice it to say that while Christianity has struggled mightily with defining “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit”, so did the ancient Hebrews struggle with defining idolatry otherwise they wouldn't have done it so much and then expressed shock when accused of it by God's prophets. It must be, however, that even if we can't fully define it we know that in some way this particular sin is so serious as to cause the Lord to doom the idolater (who has crossed over some divinely defined line) to eternal death; thus we're going to approach this matter of idolatry from another angle today.

In modern church-speak idolatry is usually said to mean anything that a Believer puts ahead of God in importance. And then countless sermons are spoken usually centered on our wallets

and our income with the suggestion that we have made our money or job that idolatrous god. And while I can see in some respects the good intent of such a suggestion and its application, it really is but hyperbole and allegory and it doesn't match with the biblical definition and examples of idolatry. Thus while sounding satisfying such a dubious definition leads us away from actual spiritual truth and reality.

Throughout the Bible idolatry was visibly and tangibly expressed as the overt worshipping of idols and images, and particularly those idols and images of named gods and goddesses who were obviously not Yehoveh. Idolatry was not accidental; such outward expressions must necessarily begin with a conscious decision of the human mind and soul to redefine just who God is, and thus to reject in part or in whole what the Torah and all the Holy Scriptures say that He is. In other words, if the Scriptures say that God is One (echad) and that there are no other gods, and that God is not human-like or animal-like then to worship an idol of another god, or to make an image of a golden calf or a bull or any other creature is to declare that God is either wrong or He is not telling the truth. Or perhaps another option is a belief that the Holy Scriptures are incorrect in their pronouncements of God's inherent attributes.

Generally speaking in modern Judeo-Christian societies, and even in modern Western secular societies, we don't see people making, buying and worshipping little idols of false gods. I've never witnessed a Christian or Jew or even an "enlightened" secular person have a shrine to a false god or have a shelf full of idols and images of false gods to whom they burn incense or pray to as superior beings. That seems to be a relic of the ancient past, or it belongs to some primitive voodoo culture or in some of the oriental religions of the Far East. So does that mean that idolatry is actually just a thing of the past within Judeo-Christianity and therefore likely none of us would ever be tempted to commit it anyway? In my opinion idolatry is alive and well among Jews and Christians; it's only that we outwardly express it differently in modern times than the way we usually see it in the cultures of the Bible.

Since the source of idolatry is formed by a determination in our minds and souls to redefine God, then whenever we pick and choose those characteristics and purposes of Yehoveh that are attractive to us and we reject others of His attributes and purposes, that is a form of idolatry as surely as if we set up an Asherah and prayed to it. And it happens today for the same reason it happened for the ancient Israelites; we do this to have a god who serves us better and often helps us fit in better with our local society. So we worship a god of our own making; we worship the one we want rather than the one that is.

When we worship whoever it is that we worship, what else is it that we worship in our minds and hearts other than the characteristics that we attribute to that being? The attributes of a god

define that god for us. Therefore I can't assign to the God of the Bible the attributes of Buddha or Allah and then expect the God of the Bible to see my worship as acceptable to Him or even as pertaining to Him. It is the Scripturally declared attributes of Yehoveh that makes Him who He is; intentionally dismiss some of His attributes or add some that aren't there, and you no longer have Yehoveh you have some other god; a false god. It doesn't matter what we might think to call him.

So (for instance) if we think in our worship that God's **greatest** purpose in His relationship with His people is to fulfill all of our human dreams and goals, that is idolatry because that is not what the Bible says about Him. If we think in our worship that God has become our buddy instead of our Creator, King and Redeemer, that is idolatry (for the same reason). If we make God merely a super-human instead of an entirely separate and unique being that is far above and unlike any other being, that is idolatry. If we make God to be **only** vengeful and wrathful, that is idolatry because we refuse to acknowledge His other attributes. If we make God to be **only** love and mercy, that is idolatry (for the same reason). If we make God to be **only** a God of war or **only** a God of peace, that is idolatry.

When taken as a body of work we see in King David's many Psalms his balanced and insightful understanding of Yehoveh that He is all of those attributes I just mentioned and far more. David tells us that God is severe and He is kind; God will destroy and He will save; God will forgive whom He will, and He will NOT forgive whom He will not; God will punish and He will reward; God will curse and He will bless; God is the Creator of all things, not the substance of all of things. And most importantly God is One, not many. And He is all of these attributes simultaneously. The ancients expressed their erroneous understanding of the way gods worked by picking and choosing characteristics and attributes, and then assigning a certain characteristic to one god and a different attribute to another (a god who creates, another who is a god of war, another who is a god of peace, a separate goddess of fertility, a specialized god of the harvest, etc). We do no differently when we embrace the characteristics of the Lord that suits us as individuals and thus we define Him in that way, and at the same time we deny or reject His other characteristics that are less desirable to us.

Therefore the Scriptural message is: be whole-hearted towards God and be seen by God as He saw David. Or be half-hearted towards God and be seen by God as He saw Jeroboam, Rehoboam, Aviyam, and the many others who followed them.

Let's re-read chapter 15 starting at verse 6.

RE-READ 1ST KINGS 15:6 – end

The war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam was eventually taken up by Rehoboam's son **Aviyam**. The Rabbis say that even during Rehoboam's lifetime as King it was his son **Aviyam** who at times led the war effort of Judah. Of course we are not to understand that there was one long continuous battle over these years but rather there was a state of hostility between the two kingdoms that on occasion broke out into open warfare. Then we're told that **Aviyam** died and was buried in the City of David. **Aviyam** reigned for only 3 years and must have died at a relatively young age.

Verse 9 begins with the story of **Asa**, **Aviyam's** son, who became King of Judah upon **Aviyam's** death. He would be regarded as one of the more righteous kings of the Davidic dynasty. Notice again how the reigns of the kings of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel are synchronized by the passages explaining that **Asa** became king of Judah at the time that Jeroboam had attained his 20th year of rulership over Israel. **Asa** ruled for a long time, about 41 years and did what was right in the Lord's eyes. In fact, what he did that was "right" is favorably compared to his forefather David and this is in reference to working to eliminate idolatry from God's Kingdom.

Verse 12 says that King **Asa** rid the land of Judah of **qadesh** and removed the **gillulim** (the idols) that his fathers (meaning Aviyam, Rehoboam and Solomon) had established. The **qadesh** are often translated into English as cult-prostitutes, male prostitutes or sodomites; but in reality the word **qadesh** literally means those who are set-apart for a holy purpose. It is from the same root word as **kadosh (qadosh)** that means holy. But in this context it is referring to some kind of immoral sexual behavior that was attached to the Jerusalem Temple and apparently was actually desired and sanctioned by the priesthood as a good thing. Exactly what it was can only be speculated upon; most scholars and historians think it was Temple sanctioned prostitution done for the sake of raising money for the Temple treasury and operation (that was a rather standard pagan temple practice in that era). As you sit cringing a bit about this don't think that this sort of mindset has passed away; today we see sanctioned gambling done at churches in order to raise money for ministry. We see Halloween pumpkin sales at churches complete with sales people in full witches costumes, done for the purpose of raising money for the church. The point is that so much of the time in the Bible that we see the Hebrews doing evil in God's eyes, they certainly didn't see it that way; they were doing good in their own eyes. The Hebrews frequently seemed to find a way to rationalize wrong behavior as long as they did it in Yehoveh's name or for what they deemed as a pious purpose. I'm

sorry to say that Christianity has not learned from this and instead has at times adopted the same attitude.

It has to be the irony of ironies that institutional Christianity long ago decided it simply must avoid all things Jewish or we would be committing a sin called judaizing; however at the same time it was deemed to be fine and dandy to adopt blatantly pagan worship practices and observances, attach Christian meaning to them, and then fight to the death to hang on to them and declare anyone who won't go along with it as a heretic. The Puritans who fled across the Atlantic to a New World did so primarily because they sought to escape religious persecution as they refused to observe those standard practices and observances, choosing instead to follow the teachings and observances ordained in the Bible.

King **Asa** was so zealous to do what was right before the Lord that he even deposed his own grandmother, **Ma'acah**, from her position as **gevirah** (Queen Mother). That had to have been a politically risky move and one that probably wasn't popular either inside or outside the royal court. The stated reason for her removal was that she was the patron of Ashtoreth and so had erected an Asherah in her honor. **Asa** had this disgusting thing cut down and burned in the Kidron Valley that ran along one side of the City of David. Grandma couldn't have been happy about this but **Asa's** goal was to please Yehoveh, not his family.

However **Asa** didn't do everything right; verse 14 explains that he wrongly left the **bamot** in place. These **bamot** (high places) are to be understood NOT as places of worship to pagan gods but rather as places of worship to Yehoveh. What was wrong in allowing them to remain? There was to be but ONE authorized place of worship and sacrifice, Solomon's Temple. There was but ONE place where God would put His holy name, Jerusalem. But people thought it the height of personal piety if they were to spend the money to build their own high place, complete with altar, where their family would worship and sacrifice privately. Again, these Hebrews never thought they were doing something wrong in God's eyes; but that is what happens when we either stop reading God's Word, or we stop taking it seriously and taking it for what it says, and kind of build our own personal religion that seems to validate whatever it is that we want to do. We think if we call our activity a ministry, or we say that the Lord gave us permission to do it, or that it may be sin for you but it's not for me, we can do what the Bible says not to do and somehow it's OK. In fact we tend to feel pretty good about it. That's often the case with Believers today just as it was with Biblical Hebrews in times past.

At the end of verse 14 we are reunited with the words that we all ought to strive to hear someday when we face the Lord as we enter eternity: "he was wholehearted with the Lord". In other words the hurdle to jump over into a state of God-declared righteousness was not

perfection of behavior. Rather it was the avoidance of idolatry as evidence of faithfulness to Yehoveh; and **Asa** showed himself faithful in that regard. As a further demonstration of his loyalty to the God of Israel **Asa** brought the spoils of war that his father **Aviyam** had won, as well as the treasures that **Asa** had accumulated, and dedicated them to the Temple.

But now we see another side of **Asa** emerge. The next several verses explain that **Asa**, King of Judah, warred with **Ba'sha** King of Israel. A little later we'll get a brief account of how **Ba'sha** replaced Jeroboam's dynasty as king of the northern tribes. But for the moment his kingship is just stated as historical fact. Let me take a moment to set up a bit of a historical timeline for you in this regard (most of this information is recorded in 2nd Chronicles 13, 14 and 15). After a tremendous victory over **Yerov'am** by **Aviyam**, the Kingdom of Judah had an extended period of relative peace that lasted about a decade. As it is for any national leader, war with a foreign enemy gets all of his attention because the primary issue for him is national survival. However in peacetime it is domestic issues that can be addressed.

Thus it was during this 10 year lull in hostilities with Israel that **Asa** set about uprooting pagan idols and **Asherah**, building up his fortresses and defenses, and upgrading his army. At the end of this peaceful period the Cushite ruler from northern Africa named **Zerah** invaded Judah with an overwhelming army. But **Asa** cried out to the Lord, and placed his faith in Yehoveh for deliverance and **Zerah** was defeated. After this battle **Asa** renewed his campaign to rid Judah of idol worship, re-consecrated the Altar outside the Temple, and held a great festival of thanksgiving to give the Lord credit and glory for all that had happened.

But in the 16th year of **Asa's** reign the latest King of Israel, **Ba'sha**, decided to invade Judah and quickly gained control over the strategic city of Ramah in the territory of Benjamin that was only a couple of hours from Jerusalem and **Asa's** palace. It is clear that **Ba'sha's** intent was to isolate Judah from any communication or traffic to the north at the same time he could control his own people from journeying south to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship and sacrifice under the supervision of the Levites.

With **Ba'sha** almost on his doorstep **Asa** panicked. So in verse 18 the King of Judah decided to purchase an ally to help him against **Ba'sha** and Israel. Only a few years earlier **Asa** had dedicated his father's and his own gold and silver to the Temple treasury; but now **Asa** uses the Temple like a bank and plunders it; he sends the precious metals to the pagan Ben-Hadad, King of Damascus, Syria as a bribe. It is indeed sad that the great God-given victory over the Cushite King **Zerah** failed to persuade **Asa** to once again follow the same pattern, under similar circumstances, by seeking the Lord for deliverance; but instead he would try the way of the flesh that most rulers of that day would have taken.

The idea was that **Asa** figured that the only way that **Ba'sha** could ultimately overrun Judah was with Ben-Hadad's help. And apparently there was a treaty in place between Israel and Damascus. So **Asa** didn't necessarily ask Ben-Hadad to attack his ally Israel but merely not to help **Ba'sha** in his exploit to capture Judah. Nonetheless Ben-Hadad did attack a handful of cities in the northern part of Israel and this had the effect of forcing **Ba'sha** to withdraw his troops from Ramah in order to reinforce his defenses against Ben-Hadad. He retreated to Tirtzah, his capital city, and never again tried to attack Judah.

Verse 22 explains that as quickly as **Ba'sha's** men left Ramah **Asa** required every able bodied man in Judah (without exception) to report to Ramah to help carry off all of the cut stones and usable building materials that **Ba'sha** had left behind. **Asa** used those materials to fortify his own strategic defensive positions at the cities of Geva and Mitzpah.

This is the end of Asa's story except to say that in his old age he was stricken with a debilitating disease in his feet (the Sages say it was Gout); 2nd Chronicles 16 says that he was stricken in the 39th year of his reign. Not long afterward he died and was buried with other members of David's household in the City of David. He was succeeded by his son **Yehoshaphat**.

Using the standard way of synchronizing reigns used by the editors of the Book of Kings, verse 25 now backtracks significantly to fill in some blanks and explains that **Asa** was in only his 2nd year as king over Judah when **Nadav** began to rule over Israel, taking over from his father Jeroboam. But he ruled only 2 years and was as sinful and full of idolatry as was his father. Remember that according to Biblical Regnal chronology saying that he ruled 2 years in no way means that he was on the throne for 730 days. It merely means that he was king for parts of 2 calendar years, and it could have amounted to as little as a few days (although it likely was for several months at the least).

Now we find out how **Ba'sha** came to be King of Israel. **Ba'sha** was not a member of Jeroboam's dynasty; rather he was from the insignificant northern tribe of Yissakhar. It happened that **Nadav** was leading his troops in battle against the Philistines at a place called **Gib'ton**. **Gib'ton** was a named Levitical city in Dan's territory, but Dan had long ago abandoned the territory and moved north to near the border of Lebanon so the Philistines occupied it. Fulfilling the prophecy as spoken by **Achiah** of Shiloh that the House of Jeroboam would be entirely terminated because of Jeroboam's idolatry, **Ba'sha** conspired to treacherously murder Jeroboam's son **Nadav** at **Gib'ton**, and once accomplished he set about

to kill every male family member that remained from Jeroboam's line so that the former royal line would have no one left to seek revenge.

It must be made clear that the final few words of this chapter want one and all to know that while **Ba'sha** was not innocent, he was essentially carrying out Yehoveh's will in killing all of Jeroboam's family. Over and over in the Bible we'll see this theme of the Lord using evil men to bring about punishment over His own people. What we don't see is the Lord turning good men into bad men and then using them for that purpose.

Let's move on to chapter 16.

READ 1ST KINGS CHAPTER 16 all

Ba'sha was a complete failure as a king and so the Lord set about to punish him for his wickedness. God sent the prophet **Yehu**, who was the son of another prophet named **Hanani**, to bring the bad news to **Ba'sha**. The very same curse that the Lord laid upon Jeroboam would now happen to **Ba'sha**. We will see that this same prophet **Yehu** who criticized **Ba'sha** would also criticize the new king of the southern kingdom, Jehoshaphat.

In verse 2 the Lord through **Yehu** tells **Ba'sha** that rather than realize that it was wholly impossible for a man who was not of aristocratic blood, and who came from such common stock of a small tribe (Issachar), to rise up and become a king over so formidable a people as the 10 northern tribes could not have happened unless the Lord God made it happen. And so rather than **Ba'sha** understanding that he was only an instrument to bring about God's wrathful prophecy on the House of Jeroboam, and instead of responding by drawing near to God and serving Him, **Ba'sha** became the most idolatrous and evil king over Israel to that point in history. Thus the Lord says that He will completely wipe out **Ba'sha's** line (just as **Ba'sha** completely wiped out Jeroboam's line) and there will be no dynasty of **Ba'sha**.

I think it might be a good time to remark about something that some of you may already be

puzzling about. It seems that there was something very strange in the nature and character of the kings of Israel in that they were consciously well aware of God overthrowing the previous Israelite kings due to their perverse worship of golden calves and of other gods and idols, because each successive new king had a direct hand in ending the reign of the previous regime. It was made clear to them by God's prophets, in advance, that the reason that the Lord was allowing them to even commit murder of the sitting king was in order to bring about prophetic fulfillment of God's judgment on that evil king for his idolatry. And yet, these new kings responded by worshipping the same false gods, golden calves, and Asherah that the kings they had just deposed were worshipping.

It is utterly irrational. But it has that same aura of determined self-destruction that the true master of these evil kings, Satan, seems to have. Satan knows that his ultimate destiny is destruction in the Lake of Fire. He knows that he is going to lose his ages-long battle with God. So why doesn't he repent, accept the forgiveness that Messiah offers, and end this suicidal war that he can't win? We could ask that question of each of these successive generations of Israel's kings; and we could ask it of some of our present world's worst homicidal despots and perhaps we could ask it of some of our closest family members and dearest friends. Why do they think they can defeat God? Why do they think that they will be the first ones to do evil in God's eyes and escape his punishment and wrath? It can only be a spiritual blindness that has deprived one and all of these of their senses.

Why do we as God's followers (of all people) think that we can disobey Him and suffer no consequences? Why do we think that (for us) our sins and trespasses will arouse little more than a grandfatherly wink and chuckle from God Almighty? Why do we think we can forsake Yehoveh's laws and commands, His festivals and His ordained observances, and replace them with observances and doctrines of our own creation and that He will bless it and even congratulate us for it? Why do we think we can disagree with or overturn His prophetic decree that Israel will once again be His chosen people and precious treasure, be restored and returned to their own land that He promised them, and that anyone who tries to harm His people will be themselves harmed? It is because of that same kind of irrational spiritual blindness that infected the long list of Israel's wicked kings, and the source of that irrational blindness is also the same as theirs was: the Evil One.