

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Kings 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

First Kings 15 presents two contrasting royal portraits: Abijam of Judah (vv. 1–8) and Asa of Judah (vv. 9–24), followed by a compressed account of Nadab of Israel (vv. 25–31) and Baasha of Israel (vv. 32–34). The chapter operates under the explicit theological criterion established in the Deuteronomistic evaluation formula — each king is measured against David (for Judah) or Jeroboam (for Israel). Abijam walked in the sins of his father Rehoboam: his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, and he did not maintain loyalty to the covenant. He is granted a limited reign only because of the LORD’s commitment to David (vv. 4–5). Asa stands as a dramatic contrast: his heart was fully committed to the LORD throughout his life (v. 14), and he enacted sweeping reforms — removing the male shrine prostitutes, tearing down idols his fathers had set up, and deposing the queen mother Maacah for her idolatry (vv. 11–13). His one noted failure is that he did not remove the high places, yet the narrator is careful to emphasize this partial failure does not undermine the overall verdict on his heart. In Israel, Nadab reigns briefly, walking in Jeroboam’s sins, before being assassinated by Baasha, who then exterminates Jeroboam’s entire household in fulfillment of the word of the LORD through Ahijah (vv. 29–30) — and who himself immediately takes up the identical sin of Jeroboam (vv. 33–34).

This Text — Intent

God is using this chapter to demonstrate that the covenant and His purposes are not held hostage to human faithlessness — but that human response to the covenant has real, visible, historical consequences. The reader is meant to feel both the weight of accountability and the steadiness of grace. The contrast between Abijam and Asa is not primarily an ethical comparison but a theological one: what does a heart devoted to God look like in the seat of power, and what does that heart produce? The LORD’s faithfulness to David persists even through Abijam’s failure; Asa’s wholehearted devotion produces reform; Baasha’s cynical use of divine judgment (exterminating Jeroboam’s house) while immediately replicating Jeroboam’s sin exposes the difference between serving as an instrument of divine judgment and possessing a heart that actually fears the LORD. The chapter calls the reader to examine their own devotion — not merely external religious practice but the orientation of the heart itself.

Subject Sentence: Hearts wholly devoted to the LORD produce reform; divided hearts produce ruin regardless of dynasty.

Primary Claim: God measures His kings — and His people — not by religious activity or dynastic privilege but by the wholehearted devotion of the heart; and He remains faithful to His covenant promises even when His instruments fail, calling every reader to that same heart-level reckoning.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Deuteronomistic framework and its purpose

Some critical scholars read the evaluative formula (“he did/did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD”) as the imposition of a late ideological grid onto older source material, reducing the historical kings to theological caricature. Within evangelical scholarship, dispensationalists sometimes read the Davidic standard as applying specifically to the typological David-Christ lineage, making the moral evaluations less directly applicable to the church. The Reformed reading insists the Deuteronomistic framework is not an imposition but the text’s own governing lens — rooted in Deuteronomy 17:14–20 (the law of the king) and the Mosaic covenant itself. The evaluation formula is not ideology — it is theology. The standard of David is the text’s own, and it applies directly to every reader who stands before the same covenant LORD.

Asa’s high places and the nature of incomplete reform

A significant homiletical and interpretive question concerns Asa: how can his heart be “fully devoted” (v. 14) when he failed to remove the high places? Wesleyan/Arminian readings occasionally import this question in the direction of sinless perfectionism — suggesting the text reveals the impossibility of full devotion while affirming the call to pursue it. Roman Catholic readings have sometimes used the high places as a framework for distinguishing between mortal and venial failures. The Reformed reading is more precise and more pastoral: the narrator himself supplies the answer — “although the high places were not removed, the heart of Asa was wholly true to the LORD all his days” (v. 14 ESV). The text does not evaluate Asa’s performance as perfect; it evaluates the settled disposition of his heart. This is consistent with the Reformed understanding of progressive sanctification: wholehearted devotion is not sinless perfection but the governing orientation of the soul, which coexists with areas of incomplete obedience. Asa’s failure at the high places is real and noted — but it does not displace the primary verdict on his heart. Expositors must hold both without collapsing into either perfectionism or minimalism.

Baasha as instrument of judgment

The account of Baasha eliminating Jeroboam’s household (vv. 29–30) presents a pattern common in the Former Prophets: a wicked man used as an instrument of divine judgment who himself receives no credit and receives the same judgment he administered. Lutheran readings sometimes read this as Law operating in the civil sphere — God’s alien work

through pagan or wicked instruments — without making the instrument responsible for the broader pattern of sin. The Reformed reading affirms God’s sovereign use of Baasha as His instrument (the word through Ahijah is fulfilled precisely) while insisting that Baasha’s own heart is simultaneously fully culpable — he did not fear the LORD; he simply replaced one dynasty’s sin with another. The sovereign use of a wicked instrument does not sanctify the instrument. Both truths stand without collision.

Reformed verdict: The chapter is best read as a unified theological demonstration: the LORD evaluates by the heart’s orientation; His covenant faithfulness persists through and despite human failure; and there is no neutrality before the covenant standard — every king, and every reader, is measured.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 17:14–20** — The law of the king: the king must not multiply horses, wives, or wealth, and must read the Torah all his days that his heart may not be lifted up. This is the explicit framework against which every royal evaluation in 1 Kings is rendered. The evaluations in 1 Kings 15 are not novel — they are the covenant’s own verdict.
 - **1 Samuel 16:7** — “The LORD looks on the heart.” The criterion applied to Asa (“his heart was wholly true”) is the same criterion God declared when choosing David. The heart-evaluation of 1 Kings 15 is not a Deuteronomistic invention; it reflects a consistent divine priority across the whole canon.
 - **2 Chronicles 14–16** — The parallel Asa account in Chronicles amplifies the heart theme and adds crucial detail (Asa’s late-reign failure, his reliance on Aram rather than the LORD, and the word of the seer Hanani). Chronicles confirms the Reformed reading: Asa’s early wholehearted devotion was genuine and produced real reform; his later lapse reveals that sustained devotion requires sustained dependence.
 - **Psalms 86:11** — “Unite my heart to fear your name.” This Davidic prayer captures precisely what the text holds up as the standard — a unified, undivided heart. Abijam’s failure was a divided heart; Asa’s commendation was a whole one. The Psalm names this as something to be sought, not assumed.
 - **Romans 11:29** — “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” The grace shown to Abijam “for David’s sake” (v. 4) anticipates this principle: God does not rescind His covenant promises because of a generation’s failure. The lamp is kept burning not because Abijam earned it but because the LORD is faithful to His word.
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Aim

To confront the reader with the LORD's heart-level standard, expose the insufficiency of religious activity and dynastic privilege as substitutes for whole-hearted devotion, and call the reader to the kind of settled orientation of soul that produces real reformation in their sphere of influence.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Abijam begins to reign over Judah in the 18th year of Jeroboam; reigns three years	Synchronistic dating formula
3	Evaluation: walked in all the sins of his father; his heart not wholly true to the LORD	The heart verdict — negative
4–5	Yet for David's sake the LORD gives him a lamp in Jerusalem; David kept the commandments except in the matter of Uriah	Grace despite failure; Davidic covenant persists; David's own failure acknowledged
6	War between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all the days of Abijam	Historical note — ongoing conflict
7–8	Source citation; Abijam dies and Asa his son reigns in his place	Standard regnal closing
9–10	Asa begins to reign in the 20th year of Jeroboam; reigns 41 years; mother's name Maacah	Synchronistic dating; unusually long reign signals divine favor
11	Evaluation: Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as David his father did	The heart verdict — positive; David standard invoked
12–13	Asa removes male shrine prostitutes, removes all idols his fathers had made; deposes queen mother Maacah for her Asherah idol	Concrete reform actions; family loyalty subordinated to covenant loyalty

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
14	High places not removed; but Asa's heart wholly true to the LORD all his days	The qualification and the overriding verdict — held in tension
15	Asa brings dedicated things into the house of the LORD	Positive covenant act
16–22	War with Baasha; Asa makes league with Ben-hadad of Syria; fortifies Geba and Mizpah	Political and military account; note Asa's reliance on a foreign alliance
23–24	Source citation; note of Asa's disease in old age; Jehoshaphat his son reigns	Chronicles amplifies the disease as connected to late-reign unfaithfulness
25–26	Nadab of Israel begins to reign; reigns two years; walked in the way of his father Jeroboam	Standard formula; brief reign
27–28	Baasha conspires and kills Nadab at Gibbethon; Baasha reigns in Nadab's place	Regicide fulfills prophecy
29–30	Baasha destroys all the house of Jeroboam according to the word of Ahijah the prophet	Divine judgment executed; prophetic word fulfilled precisely
31	Source citation for Nadab	Standard close
32	War between Asa and Baasha all their days	Historical connection; Asa's reform does not produce peace from external pressure
33–34	Baasha reigns 24 years; walked in the way of Jeroboam	Baasha immediately replicates what he destroyed; instrument of judgment becomes perpetuator of the sin

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	Abijam: The Divided Heart Preserved by Grace

Division	Verses	Label
2	9–24	Asa: The Whole Heart and Its Reforms
3	25–31	Nadab: The Inherited Sin and Its Swift End
4	32–34	Baasha: The Instrument Who Became the Problem

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Hearts wholly devoted to the LORD produce reform; divided hearts produce ruin regardless of dynasty.

Primary Claim: God measures His kings — and His people — not by religious activity or dynastic privilege but by the wholehearted devotion of the heart; and He remains faithful to His covenant promises even when His instruments fail, calling every reader to that same heart-level reckoning.

Applications (Five)

1. The LORD’s standard is the heart, not the record — examine what governs you at the root. (*Mind/belief*) Abijam had the right dynasty, the right city, and the right temple — and the verdict was still negative because his heart was divided. Asa had imperfect results (the high places remained) and the verdict was still positive because his heart was wholly given. The chapter will not allow you to substitute religious positioning, church attendance, or doctrinal correctness for the settled orientation of your soul. The question the text presses on every reader is not “What is your religious profile?” but “What does your heart actually love, trust, and serve at the deepest level?” That is God’s question. Answer it honestly before answering anything else.

2. Covenant faithfulness is not forfeited by one generation’s failure — rest in what God has sworn, not in what you have earned. (*Affections/worship*) The lamp was kept burning in Jerusalem not because Abijam deserved it but because God had sworn to David, and God does not unsay what He has said. This is not a footnote — it is the theological spine of the entire Abijam account. If you are discouraged by your own failures, or by the failures of those who came before you in your family or your church, this text calls you to worship the God who is faithful to His word when His instruments are not faithful to Him. You did not earn the covenant. You cannot lose what you did not earn. Rest in what He has sworn.

3. Wholehearted devotion produces concrete reformation — identify what in your sphere needs to come down. (*Will/behavior*) Asa’s whole heart produced specific, costly action: he removed the shrine prostitutes, tore down the idols, and deposed his own mother. These were not minor adjustments — they were structural, relational, and politically costly reforms. A whole heart eventually produces visible fruit in the structures of your life. The question is not only “Is your heart devoted?” but “What has that devotion

produced concretely in the past year?” Are there idols in your household — digital, relational, financial — that a truly whole heart would remove? Name them. Begin removing them. Devotion that produces no reformation is not yet whole.

4. Partial obedience is real failure, even when the heart’s verdict is positive — do not make peace with your high places. (*Will/behavior*) The high places were not removed. The narrator records this plainly, without softening it. Asa’s wholehearted heart did not make the failure disappear. The Reformed reading holds both: the heart verdict and the obedience failure, neither erasing the other. This guards against two errors simultaneously — the perfectionist error (“if Asa had real faith he would have removed them”) and the minimalist error (“the heart is what matters, so the high places don’t”). Both are wrong. Your high places — the tolerated pattern, the accommodated compromise, the reform you have not yet made — are real failures, even if your overall orientation is genuine. Do not make peace with them. Press on.

5. Being an instrument of God’s judgment does not make you right with God — examine whether you fear the LORD or merely resent His enemies. (*Affections/worship*) Baasha fulfilled a genuine word of the LORD. Jeroboam’s house was destroyed precisely as Ahijah had prophesied. And then Baasha immediately walked in all the sins of the house he had destroyed. He used the language of divine judgment without the reality of divine fear. This is a searching diagnostic: it is entirely possible to be rhetorically and even historically aligned with God’s judgments while being personally undevoted to God. Political, cultural, or theological opponents of idolatry who are themselves idolaters of a different kind are Baasha. The question is not whether you oppose the right enemies. The question is whether you fear the LORD. These are not the same question.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Kings 15 establishes that God governs history with covenant fidelity and moral seriousness simultaneously — these are not in tension but are the two faces of the same divine character. He is faithful to His sworn word (the lamp burns for David’s sake even through Abijam’s failure), and He evaluates each generation by the real standard of the heart (Asa’s wholehearted devotion is commended; Baasha’s replicated sin is indicted). The chapter teaches that God sees through externals — dynasty, religious title, position in the covenant community — to the governing disposition of the heart. It also teaches that divine sovereignty in using human instruments (Baasha as executor of judgment against Jeroboam) does not transfer divine approval to those instruments. God’s purposes move forward; human accountability remains fully intact.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter displays the covenant structure that is foundational to Reformed theology: God’s faithfulness runs through the Davidic promise as a matter of sovereign grace, not human merit, anticipating the final Davidic king in whom all the promises land (2 Sam 7; Rev 22:16). The evaluation of each king by the heart standard (not ceremonial performance or political success) reflects the Reformed insistence that salvation and true religion are matters of the inner man — regeneration, not reformation alone, produces the kind of whole-hearted devotion the text commends. Asa’s partial obedience within genuine devotion illustrates the Reformed doctrine of progressive sanctification: the believer is genuinely and wholly given to God while remaining imperfectly obedient in particular areas. This guards against both perfectionism and antinomianism. Finally, the Baasha passage illustrates the Reformed doctrine of common grace and providential use of secondary causes: God governs even wicked men as instruments, without those instruments being righteous or receiving the imprimatur of divine approval for their own character.

Main Takeaway

God is not impressed by your lineage, your position, or your religious record. He is looking at your heart — the thing that actually governs what you love, what you trust, and what you will not give up. Asa’s heart was whole, and it produced costly, concrete reform. Abijam’s heart was divided, and all his Davidic inheritance could not compensate. Baasha destroyed the right enemies for the wrong reasons and immediately became what he destroyed. The question this chapter will not let you escape is simple: Is your heart whole before the LORD? Not perfect — whole. Give it to Him entirely, let that devotion produce what whole-heartedness always produces, and stop making peace with your high places.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the chapter to a morality gallery — “be like Asa, don’t be like Abijam.”** The chapter is not primarily an ethical comparison between better and worse kings. It is a theological demonstration of how God evaluates, how His covenant faithfulness works, and what whole-hearted devotion looks like in concrete historical reality. A sermon that produces only “try harder to be like Asa” has missed the chapter’s own frame. Asa’s devotion is itself a gift — the question is where it comes from and what sustains it, not merely that it should be imitated.
- **Flattening Asa into a failure because of the high places.** The text will not allow this. The narrator is explicit: Asa’s heart was wholly true to the LORD all his days (v. 14). Preachers who lead with the high places and use them to qualify or undermine Asa’s commendation are preaching against the text’s own verdict. The high places

are a real and noted failure; they are not the controlling verdict on Asa's life. Hold both — which is exactly what the narrator does.

- **Using “for David’s sake” (v. 4) as a license for covenant presumption.** The grace extended to Abijam “for David’s sake” is real grace — but it does not signal that divided-heart kings are acceptable to God or that the Davidic covenant makes evaluation irrelevant. Abijam still receives a negative verdict; the lamp is kept burning despite him, not because of him. Preachers must not allow this text to be used as comfort for people who want to claim covenant privilege without covenant devotion.
- **Treating Baasha as a hero because he fulfilled prophecy.** The fulfillment of Ahijah’s word through Baasha is a demonstration of prophetic reliability, not a commendation of Baasha. The very next verse reports that Baasha walked in all the sins of Jeroboam. Baasha is the text’s sharpest warning: it is possible to execute divine judgment and be personally under divine condemnation. Preaching that celebrates Baasha as a reformer — or that uses his story to baptize any “enemy of my enemy” logic — has missed the chapter’s point entirely.
- **Skipping the Israel material (vv. 25–34) as merely transitional.** The Nadab and Baasha section is not filler — it provides the essential negative counterpoint to Asa that completes the chapter’s theological argument. The contrast is structural: Asa reforms; Baasha replicates. Asa’s whole heart produces change; Baasha’s divided instrument produces more of the same. Preachers who treat these verses as mere historical notation deprive the congregation of the chapter’s own conclusion.
- **Neglecting the Davidic typology in favor of bare application.** The repeated invocation of David as the standard (vv. 3, 5, 11) and the “lamp in Jerusalem” language (v. 4) point forward to the greater Son of David who will fulfill what every earthly Davidic king fell short of. A sermon on 1 Kings 15 that does not at least gesture toward the one whose heart was wholly true to the Father in a way no king in this chapter managed — and through whose faithfulness the lamp burns for all who are His — has stopped short of the canonical trajectory the text itself is tracing.