

George Philip Bible Readings

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The Second Book of Kings

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1:1-2

There is no break between the two books of Kings. In the four hundred years from David to the Captivity in Babylon there was within the divided nation, Israel and Judah, a steady and progressive declension spiritually and morally. The story tells of the repeated interventions of God by word and action as He brought His judgments to bear on the life of the nation. Keep in mind right through these studies that the declension was never really stopped, not even by such revivals as took place in the time of Josiah. The end of Second Kings sees Israel wiped off the map (722 B.C.) and Judah taken captive into Babylon while Jerusalem lay in ruins (586 B.C.). In today's verses we have an interesting exposure of the essential division within the kingdom of evil. Ahab, wicked in person and mighty in power, set against God, had held Moab in subjection. But the moment Moab saw its opportunity it rebelled against Ahaziah, refusing subjection. There is always this lust for power among evil men and nations, and it marks them out for what they are. But it also makes clear that power is held in a precarious grasp and consequently there is always restlessness and a sense of insecurity in evil. There is no peace to the wicked (Isa. 57: 20-21) for they will never live in harmony. But at the same time there is a rigorous and relentless holding on to evil, as Ahaziah showed when in his distress he sent his prayerful petitions to Baalzebub, the Lord of the Flies. The last thing he wanted was any association with the God of Israel. But God had something to say to the king.

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1:1-2

God overtook Ahaziah and challenged him as to whether he would be a man of faith and acceptance or a man of unbelief and rejection. The poor man, son of Ahab and Jezebel, had little chance by way of heredity, and with Israel in a state of moral and spiritual rotteness he had little help from environment. But circumstances and heredity together are not stronger than the grace of God available even to Ahaziah. The story makes it plain that the man deliberately chose to go the way of evil (1 Kings 22:52-53) but that he could have changed and chosen differently right to the moment of his judgment. Ahaziah kept himself away from the battle because he remembered clearly how his father had been killed, apparently by chance, in a similar situation (1 Kings 22:34). But no one is safe who is at odds with God, and the king leant on a window or parapet on the roof and fell to the ground. This must have been public knowledge and many in Israel may have seen this as the beginning of God's dealings with the king. Possibly the king himself was aware that God the Lord was drawing near to challenge him and this makes his action in v.2 one of clearly calculated defiance. Ahaziah had grown up during Elijah's mighty ministry in Israel and could not plead ignorance. This is the defiance of unbelief (Jas. 4:13-17; Heb. 3:12-15).

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1:3-8

The king's dramatic and radical action of unbelief called forth action from God and the fiery prophet was sent to intercept the messengers. But there is mercy here mingled with impending judgment, because in stopping the deputation from reaching the shrine of Baal a further opportunity of repentance was given to the king. God did not act in immediate judgment, and we need to be reminded again and again that God's judgments are never precipitate but are the fruit and culmination of long patience and waiting (2 Pet. 3:9,15). It is quite amazing to see here that God did not accept the king's refusal (2) as final. It is also amazing to see how aware the king was of the fact that there was an authentic prophet in the land speaking the word of God. He had heard many sermons from Elijah and had refused them and this time it was to be no different. Over against the king's arrogant unbelief it is glorious to see the spiritual stature of Elijah. He was in tune with God, up to date with the situation, available for God's use at a moment's notice, obedient in unquestioning response and accurate to the very letter of the message entrusted to him. Did he have hopes of the king's repentance? We cannot tell. Elijah returned to his base at Carmel to await developments and to be ready for the next move.

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1:9-18

Recognising that God was indeed speaking to him through the prophet, Ahaziah deliberately chose to refuse that word because it would mean a public change of life. Then, having made his position of unbelief clear, the king seemed compelled to go on and on in a frenzy of opposition that grew madder and madder in defiance. The issue was quite clear: either God had to give way and die or the king had to die. Three times over (9, 11, 13) the king sent platoons of soldiers with deliberate intention of silencing the prophet's voice, because it is extremely embarrassing even for a king to go on in godlessness when there is an Elijah preaching. It would seem that the first two captains were in sympathy with the king, but the third man recognised both the word and power of God and spoke words that signified penitence and faith (13-14). There was no such penitence on the part of the king. Every successive encounter with God served only to make him harden his heart and the word of judgment in v.3-4 was confirmed in v.16-17. Woe to him who strives with his maker (Isa. 45:9).

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1:9-18

Modern commentators are disturbed by this story of fire from heaven to destroy adversaries, and regard the whole business as an offence to the Christian message. One man goes so far as to say that Elijah made "a callous and dramatic fool of him self and misrepresented God." To support this statement the story of James and John in Luke 9:51-56 is adduced. But this is to misunderstand the whole incident, wresting it from its context, and forgetting that in an earlier story the fire of God came down in an evil generation and fell on the sacrifice, not the people (1 Kings 18:36-39ff). What is more, we need to remember that fire is in the hand of God not man, and Elijah was no more able to *command* fire from heaven than anyone else. The decision rests with God alone, and the God of righteousness and truth would not have acted in such a startling way if the prophet had only been concerned with his own vindication. Nor would God have been prepared to risk His own reputation within the nation simply to answer the mistaken prayer of an aging prophet who did not understand the divine nature. Contrast the imperious intolerance of unbelief in "come down," (9) and in "the king's order, come down," (11) with the words of penitence in v.13-14. These last men were saved by the fire that was the judgment of others. Be slow to pronounce verdicts on the works of God. He is God.

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2:1-8

The close of Elijah's ministry is full of significance and reveals the greatness of the prophet and his successor. For possibly twenty years this man had been God's instrument and spokesman in a situation of rampant godlessness, and mighty though his ministry had been, the spiritual and moral landslide had not been checked. Truly a prophet of fire, constantly available for God, Elijah was also a man of like passions as we are (Jas. 5: 17), not flawless, but usable. Humanly speaking, it seemed he was good for many years yet, but as he went on with the business of God's work he knew that the end had come (1,9). There is no sign of emotional excitement or depression, although Elijah's attempts to get Elisha to leave him might have been some sign of tension and desire to be alone as in the incident after Carmel (1 Kings 19:3-4). But it is more likely that the older man was testing the resolution of his successor. Elijah is to be pictured here striding on towards Bethel, a centre of idolatry (1 Kings 12:28-33), as if determined that he would bear witness against evil right to the end. What a test this was for Elisha who had vowed loyalty (1 Kings 19:20). But he did not fail. It may well have been that Elisha was aware of the significance of these last days of preparation, and answered the comment in v.5 with sharpness because of the distraction caused by the excitability of the young men. What is clear is that both the prophets were aware that they were dealing with God and that the issues were great.

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2:1-8

The journey from Gilgal to Bethel, Jericho and Jordan brought the men to places of significance in Israel's history and this may have been a powerful reminder to Elisha that in his work as a prophet he would be serving the faithful God of the covenant. Gilgal was Israel's base of operations after the crossing of Jordan when first they claimed God's promised land (Joshua 4:19-24), and it had long associations with the blessing of Israel

under Samuel's ministry (1 Sam. 7:16). Bethel was where God pledged Himself in grace and faithfulness to Jacob (Gen. 28:10-19). Jericho was the scene of one of God's great triumphs on behalf of His people, when He cast down the city that barred the way to the land of promise (Josh. 6:1-2ff,26-27). All these places would awaken memories of past glories and also a sad comparison with what had come to pass. But perhaps even more important, we are to realise that in these places within a godless land Elijah had schools of trainee prophets which he had established in his vision for the future. Is this not probably where the Isaiahs and the Micahs and others sprang from? There was to be a continuing prophetic witness in the nation and these young men had to be awakened to their impending responsibility for, as we shall see, they were not yet ready. They had not learned to bear the yoke in their youth (Lam. 3:27). Elijah's greatness is seen in this last tour of ministry, committing his work, God's work, to faithful men (2 Tim. 2:1-2; 4:1-8; 1 Pet. 5:1-11).

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2:9-15

Elisha was no novice, his call having come some ten years previously, but was he ready to take over from Elijah? Elisha himself was not too sure and he tended to hold on to his master as long as possible (as the disciples wanted to do with Jesus after the resurrection). It is not wrong to hold fast in love and loyalty to one's father-in-God, but this must not hinder the process of preparation for independent service. There is a suggestion in v.5 that the sons of the prophets also had doubts as to the capacity of Elisha to stand alone, and while this may partly explain the sharpness of Elisha's retort it is more likely that the young man felt his associates were simply weakening his resolve and adding to his burden in a time of crisis when he was set to do God's will (cf. Acts 21:13; Matt. 16:23). But Elisha showed a dogged determination to follow. At the river Jordan he saw the authority of God that rested on his master, an authority that was symbolised by the prophet's mantle (cloak) but did not rest in it. It was not the mantle but Elijah's God who had power and this prompted the request in v.9. Elisha, who no doubt compared his own sensitive nature unfavourably with the rugged dynamism of Elijah, saw what constituted a true prophet. It was not personality, nor even experience, but the fact that God was prepared to trust a man with power. He asked to be made Elijah's true spiritual successor (9).

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2:9-15

Elisha was learning that God does not send men to the work at their own charge, provided they are honest and humble enough to acknowledge their need. But the initiative rests with God alone. This seems part of the meaning of Elijah's answer (10). It could also mean that Elisha was asking something that would prove to be costly far beyond his present understanding. But the old prophet knew that God would not send His ordained man to the work without provision, and he knew that if Elisha could but see the glory and the power of God he would grasp his opportunities firmly by faith and prove God to be faithful. It is a wonderful thing to be persuaded that a young man is destined for holy service, and every minister and man of experience must do as Elijah did here: give the young man fellowship and instruction and a mutual opening of hearts as they journey and talk. It is a good sign when the young prophets want to do this, and sad that so many of them now seem to feel that they know it all already and have no need. When the time for parting came suddenly, Elisha saw, for he was single-eyed (Matt. 5:8). He saw the might of the unseen resources of the living God and he never forgot (6:16-17). He saw that Elijah had been to the nation nothing less than the mighty defence of God. He saw also the mantle of prophetic office waiting to be taken up and used, and in unhesitating faith he took it up and his ministry was begun with token confirmations from God right from the start. What a story. What a God!

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2:9-15

There is something glorious about Elijah's departure from the world, by-passing death, and being caught up into God's presence when his work was done. It reminds us of Paul's words in 1 Cor. 15: 50-57, where death is put in its place and shown to be an intruder (because of sin) into the plan and purpose of God. Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, death is defeated and no longer has the last word (2 Tim. 1:10). In the final outworking of Christ's victory it may well be (since we do not know the times or the seasons) that many of us will be alive at Christ's coming and will never know the sharpness of death (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Whichever way

it proves to be, by death or by translation as in the case of Elijah and Enoch (Gen. 5:24), the phrase used by the Salvation Army seems to sum it up, "Promoted to glory". What a way to describe the end of a life of service in the faith of the Gospel. Look back to v.1 and note that it was at God's time that Elijah was taken. When God's servants walk in His will nothing can touch them until their work is done (John 11:7-10), but when their work is done it is best that they should not stay (John 17:1, 4-5). It makes life very simple, indeed serene, as is suggested in v.11 as the two men went on and talked.

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2:9-15

Consider now reference to Elijah in other parts of Scripture. In 2 Chronicles 21:5-6,11-20 we have mention of a letter from Elijah. Now, the prophet was dead by this time. He died in the time of Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 3:11), father of the king Jehoram spoken of here. We must assume the letter was written before Elijah's translation, the prophet already reading the signs of the times and foreseeing what would happen. The daughter of Ahab was like her mother and father, and she inspired her husband in his anti-God policies. Perhaps they felt little danger from the gentler prophet Elisha and thought that with the "firebrand" out of the way they could sin with impunity. It is never so. God's voice is never silent. His Word stands for ever, and people cannot escape from it. Elijah was gone but his ministry continued. He may have been dead (as far as the world reckoned) but he was still speaking powerfully to the nation (Heb. 11:4). We cannot tell when the king received the letter, who delivered it, who held it in custody until the time of its delivery. But we know it arrived at the right time and spoke the truth. The king may have laughed it off. The queen may have reviled Elijah as her mother Jezebel had done. But the word God speaks cannot be silenced, and what it declared came to pass. God is not mocked.

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2:9-15

Elisha was alone and in a critical position. He had been prepared for this moment since 1 Kings 19:16 and we must not imagine that he had known nothing of the anointing of God in the subsequent years of his association with Elijah. The call and anointing do not necessarily mean preparedness, but Elisha was ready. His personal sorrow (12) was not allowed to deter him and, when he saw the prophet's mantle waiting to be taken up, he did not hesitate. He had seen with his own eyes the unseen resources of God's power; he saw the river Jordan and the sons of the prophets watching on the other side; he knew the assailing of doubts and fears, for if he failed now his credibility as a prophet would be destroyed. The possibilities of the situation were immense and he did not falter. Taking God at His word and accepting God's call by taking up the mantle (no new method), he called on the name of the God of Elijah, thereby testifying that the same God was his God. Elijah's God still lives but the prepared men are few. Mere training does not fit men for holy service, nor does biblical knowledge give warrant to a man to preach. There must be the call of God confirmed by the unction of the Spirit, which Spirit gave to Elisha a clearness of purpose, a decisiveness of action, and a quietness of spirit together with a holy boldness that was in no sense dependent on human personality. The sons of the prophets were quite clear about the facts. The Spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha (15).

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2:16-18

Like many a congregation, together with the divinity students in it, the sons of the prophets recognised Elisha's call to the ministry and his spiritual leadership and then proceeded to act in practical refusal of both. When you think of the daunting task facing Elisha: a nation of godlessness in which even the prophet of fire had failed to stem the tides of evil; and a wicked Jezebel still exercising power; you must recognise this incident as a direct attack of Satan seeking to knock Elisha off balance right at the start of his ministry. It must have been a terrible blow of sheer disappointment that these young men, from whom so much could have been expected, gave evidence of such total lack of spiritual understanding. They put pressure on Elisha and, however well-intentioned they were, the fact remains that they were totally misguided. They had grotesque and defective ideas about God's speaking (16) as if He indulged in "performances" of power for no real reason. *They* had not seen the translation of Elijah, although they knew his end was imminent (2:5). Had Elisha told them of the miraculous end? We cannot say, but we can certainly see the dogged, wilful, meddlesomeness of these novices.

No amount of warning is any use in this kind of situation and these men had to be allowed to have their own way in order to prove them wrong. It is a token of Elisha's stature that he refused to go off on a wild goose chase. We can but hope that the men were suitably humbled and corrected on their return. Too many, in similar situations, refuse to admit they were wrong, insisting that *at the time* they were in fact guided by the Spirit. Such dishonesty and "double-think" is its own judgment.

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2:19-22

Jericho was a fine city but the people were aggrieved because of the poisoned water, which some say was causing a great deal of miscarriage (RSV) and damage to the people's health, their cattle and their crops. They seem to have forgotten that the city was under the abiding judgment of God (Josh. 6:26), just as successive generations have forgotten that the whole world of man is not only fallen and adrift from God but under judgment, so that life is inevitably harsh (Gen. 3:17-19). Jericho was full of promise and the appearance of life, but there was no realisation of it, nothing worked out and the wells of life were deeply poisoned. In one sense it was to their credit that they turned to God's man for remedy (and not to the head of their own water department), but they still wanted God's blessing in order to escape from their predicament. There was no sign of repentance and no higher motive than their own welfare, and yet God's word and action to them was mercy. It is quite astonishing. It was not the salt, which was only a sign, that worked the miracle but the word of the Lord. There is no other means of getting to the root of society's sickness and healing its abortive life.

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2:23-25

Consider the sweep of this chapter and discern the activity of the Devil in fighting against this new ministry right from its initiation and before its practical beginning. The Devil is not specifically mentioned but then he does not usually advertise his presence or intentions. The Devil prefers to get on with the job undiscerned, so that God's servants will tend to blame themselves or other people for all that goes wrong. Satan's first assault was along the line of distraction, seeking to get Elisha away from Elijah so that he would not be in the place to see and receive the reassurances of God in respect of his ministry (1-14). When this failed and Elisha went forward, the Devil then tried to sidetrack the prophet by means of disheartening and demoralisation. If the sons of the prophets did not respond to his spiritual leadership, what hope was there of others responding? When Elisha stood his ground in glorious inactivity that stemmed from faith, the Devil then tried to make him precipitate in the case of Jericho with its godless self-centredness that had a mind only to make use of God. It would have been easy for Elisha to speak judgment but his word was grace. There may have been contempt in the request for the healing of the waters since, after all, even the great Elijah had done no miracle there. Was Jericho trying to demonstrate Elisha's weakness? Meekness and grace must never be confused with weakness, as Bethel discovered when that place tried to stop the prophet's ministry by brutal threatening. But Satan cannot succeed when God's man walks in obedience, and the same man who held back graciously at Jericho now went on to speak boldly in judgment.

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2:23-25

Many have branded this story as barbarous and have slandered the whole of the Old Testament as a result. It is a serious story and we must not eliminate the element of judgment from it. Yet at the same time we must understand it correctly, and in doing so we will learn the necessity of reading the Bible accurately. Always compare Scripture with Scripture before forming conclusions. In 2 Kings 4:9 and in 2 Kings 6:19-22 there is testimony to the fact that Elisha was not a vindictive man, and certainly not a man to call down judgment on little children who teased him. Why the translation "little children" in A.V. is followed in RSV and NEB as "small boys" is a mystery, since in the A.V. the same word is translated some 70 times as "young men". It is used in Gen. 22:12 with reference to Isaac (aged anything from 15-20) and in Gen. 37:2 with reference to Joseph who was 17. Such illustrations could be multiplied, and make us think of the "gang" as being young hooligans ranging in age from 7 to 17 or even more, just as we have seen in some riot-torn cities of our own day. It was a frightening crowd that milled round Elisha's back (24) hurling their deliberate contempt on him

because he was a man of God, and if the two bears injured forty-two of the scattering mob, you have some indication of how many were actually there. We who have learned to live with street mobs have some idea of how powerfully frightening they can be, and we can sense the dynamic of evil operating among them. God's man faced that alone, with the safekeeping of the nation's soul in his hand and the ongoing of the work of God as his charge. It was as God's man that Elisha spoke and not in personal defence.

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2:23-25

Learn to see things as they really are and be saved from superficial judgments. Bethel was the headquarters in Israel of the anti-God, anti-repentance, free-living movement, and its idolatrous golden calf was established a mere 12 miles from Jerusalem, as a deliberate affront to God and a barrier to the people's return to true faith and worship. The scathing mockery of the hooligan crowd reflected the apostasy and godlessness of their parents and made quite clear where Bethel stood in relation to God. Now, it was a time of crisis, for the fiery Elijah was gone and his restraint on the nation was loosened unless a successor with the same authority from God was made manifest. Elisha was that man, but he had made the long twenty mile ascent from Jericho to Bethel, and he was alone and burdened with his responsibility. When faced with this scornful, blasphemous deriding of the God whom he represented, and recognising full well what would happen if spiritual authority was demolished, Elisha turned and pronounced the judgment of God on them. God is not mocked! Whether it was the efficacy of the curse (and it would have had no power apart from God's action), or the noise of the rabble that roused the bears, we cannot say. But when men persist in their conscious rejection of God they place themselves outside all safety and become victims of all the powers that range the world. This was spiritual warfare. Elisha might have panicked, been terrorised into silence like many a man since, or he might have been martyred. But he stood firm in God (Eph. 6:10ff.).

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3:1-3

These verses emphasise the atmosphere of the nation at this stage of Elisha's ministry. There was superficial repentance together with basic spiritual refusal, and enough conformity to the patterns of spiritual behaviour to hide the fact that they lived in disobedience to God. But we can still sense the effect of Elijah's ministry and the awareness of the people that God was still speaking through Elisha in the fact that Jehoram removed the statue of Baal, even though Jezebel, his wicked mother was still alive (9:30). But the next verse qualifies the significance of the outward action for he still walked contrary to God. Here is the challenge of these verses. Is it not true that we are prepared to do without the outward expression of our defiance of God if public (and church) opinion so demands, provided we are still able to go our own chosen way? This is life lived in the sight of men (Matt. 6:1-6,16-18,21-24) and it is only a matter of time until such duplicity is found out (Luke 12:1-3). There is no peace in such a way of life but only an increasing tension, whereas in walking with God there *is* peace and joy (1 John 1: 3-9).

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3:4-14

This is the story of an unholy alliance which God never approved of but which He used in the sovereignty of His will to further His purposes of grace. The success of Israel, Judah and Edom does not mean the alliance was a good thing. That would be a superficial and premature assessment. Nor does the fact that God used Moab to chastise backsliding Israel mean that Israel was cast off (at least not yet). God's ways are past finding out, but His purposes are quite clear, though not necessarily apparent to the parties involved. God's promises to and purposes through His people stand sure even when the people rebel and backslide. Keep the long term view. God is making His sure way to Bethlehem and the coming of the promised Messiah. Because this is so we must learn to see in the complicated affairs of men and nations the intermingling of both the judgments and the mercies of God. It is God who orders His work and He is never under pressure from evil. He is bigger and surer than all our thoughts of Him (Isa. 55: 8-11) and He stands sovereignly over against all the mixture of motives seen in such an alliance as we have here. God had a purpose for one section, Judah, and because of this the rest

were blessed (14). That a work is blessed and advancing does not necessarily mean that all the individuals in it are right with God. Be careful:

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3:4-14

The lessons are practical and important. Jehoram reassured himself of his strength (6) and sought the help of Jehoshaphat, who consented without hesitation, thought or prayer (7). The king of Judah acted first, prayed much later, and in the interim allowed himself to be led totally by his colleague (8). Within a week their sin began to find them out (9), and it was Jehoram who first admitted that God was in the situation in terms of judgment. Like most people who act in spiritual presumption, he had nothing constructive to offer when the crisis came (10), for his spirituality was only skin-deep. Jehoshaphat, facing up to the fact that he should never have been in this situation in the first place (2 Cor. 6:14-18), reacted by expressing an earnest desire to seek the face of God. That this unholy alliance, a union that could never work because the parts were fundamentally different, came into being in spite of Jehoram's knowledge of God is clear from the fact that it was a man of Israel, not Judah, who mentioned Elisha's name. There was no excuse for this predicament and there was no easy spiritual talk as the solution was sought (12-14). Elisha's words in v.14 are very blunt and should have caused alarm to Jehoram. We must learn from this that we all must live with our choices. Some of them will prove very difficult to rectify.

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3:15-20

It was made plain to Jehoram that God was not turning a blind eye to his evil ways and that only the godly Jehoshaphat in the situation called for His intervention of mercy (14). Some commentators (including Spurgeon) suggest that Elisha was angry in the face of this situation, possibly distracted by the clamour of the circumstances, and consequently in need of the quietness and composure the music would bring, so that he could discern the mind of the Lord. This was no time for the prophet of God to be making snap judgments. It is not a case of inducing an emotional "condition", although there are instances of "ecstasy" among the prophets, an "ecstasy" which can be misunderstood (1 Sam. 10:9-12; 19:20-24), but it is a matter of being in the right attitude of mind and heart so that God can make His will known (Ps. 46). Be careful to note how Elisha was quite clear that he had neither the right nor the capacity to speak and act on his own initiative. It was only as God's spokesman that he was a useful factor in this situation. When he did speak it was to reveal with what glorious, effortless ease God would countermand the situation that had paralysed three great armies of men. Apart from God it was, and would have continued to be, total disaster. With God it was total transformation. But remember that it was not until the water ran out (9) and men were at an extremity of need that they sought God.

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3:15-20

Grasp clearly what is revealed here of the spiritual principles of a work of God. It is a sovereign work and the blessing is God's alone to give or to withhold. But it is man's business to prepare the way of the Lord, and in this case it was inglorious work involving sweat and toil, shifting rocks and mud, and doing it all in the dark with apparently little or no relevance to the pressing critical situation. But it was work done in faith and in obedience to what God had commanded. There must have been many temptations to stop or to settle for shallow troughs rather than deep ditches. It was all we mean by "spade-work", and it was all in terms of preparation. You can imagine people demanding to know when something was going to be "done". It did not even seem "spiritual". There were to be no signs or evidences; nothing to stir the emotions, thrill the senses or satisfy the lust for signs, wonders, proofs and tokens. But if the ditches were deep enough there would be no limit to the blessing of God. Man's part is the work of faith that digs the ditches. We would all like to control the "water-supply" rather than slog at the preparatory ditch-digging and we thereby limit the extent of the blessing. A spouting fountain is one thing, but the quiet relentlessness of the incoming of the tide is stronger. Dig deep. This is what ministry is all about.

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3:21-27

There is something devastatingly simple about the way in which God confounds evil men and brings to nothing the designs of the whole kingdom of evil in its militant opposition to the chosen people. We do not make light of the powers of evil nor of their persistence, which we have seen demonstrated throughout the books of Kings, but at the same time we do not regard our spiritual conflict as being in any sense warfare between equals. God alone is the mighty victor. Here, He made the sun shine on the water and confused Moab so that the enemy was led into disaster. Paul speaks of God sending strong delusion on evil men so that they believe a lie and bring themselves to judgment (2 Thess. 2:1-12). God Himself is our confidence, and we must trust Him and expect Him to work deliverance for His people, while we leave the exact methods to His wise will. Dare we try to imagine the thoughts and reactions of the kings of Israel and Judah in this situation? Was their thrill of victory tempered at all by the awareness that they had been trifling with God? Short memories are not good in spiritual life. Read Prov. 16:1-3, 7-9, 17-18, 32-33; Jer. 10:23-24.

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3:21-27

The last two verses may indicate the answer to yesterday's question about the attitude of the two kings. Right to the end of the day the king of Moab persisted in the fight with what seems to be an almost demonic fury that refused to countenance defeat. Perhaps this was inflamed by the obvious rejoicing on the part of Israel and Judah, and in a final act of defiance the king of Moab offered a human sacrifice to Chemosh, the god of the Moabites. He was true to his evil nature right to the end. But at this point the tide of the battle turned and so great was the pressure that Israel and Judah broke off the engagement and returned to their own land. God withdrew His restraint on evil and proved yet again to His people that they had absolutely no hope whatever in themselves. We need to be careful lest we become proud of victories which are ours only because the Lord has worked for us. Give God the glory. It is true; it is also safe. There is no suggestion that the pagan sacrifice was efficacious, although supersititious Israel may well have believed it to be so. When God's people backslide they will believe anything in preference to believing the truth of God.

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4:1-7

We begin to read of a sequence of miracles, and the first lesson is about miracles themselves. If we have a truly biblical doctrine of God in His sovereignty, miracles will never be an embarrassment. "God in His ordinary providence makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure." (Westminster Confession) God may stagger us with the miraculous element of His working but we must be none the less staggered if He chooses to work by slow natural processes. To be for ever longing for the astonishing is a sign of spiritual weakness and a failure to believe God, and a failure to understand His workings. In the previous chapter we saw God working on a broad national and political scale, while here He was concerned with the pressing need of a woman, widow of one of the sons of the prophets, a faithful servant of God. Note carefully that the Lord's faithful ones are not spared the rigours of life's experiences. We must not generalise and say that it is never God's will that His people should suffer. This woman suffered to the point that her creditors were claiming her sons to make them bondmen for seven years to pay off the debts. But the woman spread her need before the Lord through the prophet. She did not keep her burden to herself, but cast it on the Lord.

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4:1-7

Elisha, recognised and appealed to as God's man, challenged the woman with two questions. He made it clear that faith must be as specific as possible and that God starts His working on our behalf with what we have and not with what we have not. It was the pot of oil that the woman had which was multiplied to meet the contemporary need. In one sense she had nothing, yet she had everything and only her assessment of the possibilities limited the extent of the miraculous provision. The woman certainly had faith, possibly strengthened by the convinced speech of the prophet (Rom. 10:13-17). The woman was counselled not to be

parsimonious in her expectations (3) and also to refrain from demonstrativeness (4), for this work of God's mercy was not for the gaze of the curious and unbelieving (Mk. 5:36-43). Note also that the limit to God's working was set before the miracle began, and we need to recall Jesus' words in Mk. 6:1-6, especially v.5-6. The woman's need was certainly met in full, but think of the possibilities of blessing to others had the oil not stopped. Can God trust us with miracles?

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4:1-7

God begins with what we already have and multiplies it for satisfaction and service. If the oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, we have a deep spiritual lesson here. If we are believers, then we have the Holy Spirit, by whatever name we call Him (Rom. 8:9-11, the terms are interchangeable). If we have the Spirit, and He is an infinite and eternal Person, then the "supply" for us to use is quite without limit or measurement. It is not so much that we must seek for "more" of the Spirit, since He is indivisible, but that we should make more room for Him. It is in this sense that God multiplies what we already have, but it is done as the oil is poured out and expended, not as it is hoarded. It is as we walk *and* work in the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4, 12-15; Gal. 5:16,25) that we prove the Spirit's power and sufficiency. We must bring the "empty vessels", whatever that may signify in our lives (it does not mean emptying our minds and emotions, for that is dangerous auto-suggestion) and allow God to prove, by His indwelling Spirit, the all-sufficiency of His gracious power. But note that the woman had to do this in the privacy of her own home. It was not to be a public display, for people would want to copy the experience (Acts 19:11-16). Yet the widow's life would testify to the provision of God and she would not be afraid to say so.

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4:8-17

In spite of the rampant and increasing godlessness there was a spiritual work going on in the nation and people knew there was a God of power and grace. Many of the miracles were done for women and this may indicate that women are, for the most part, capable of more genuine faith, trust and response of heart than men. The woman of Shunem was married to a prosperous landowner who was so engrossed in his business life that he scarcely features in the story, even when his son died. The woman, possibly because of the heartache and disappointment of her childless state, was more aware of the real issues of life and, recognising Elisha to be a true man of God, she set part of her home at his disposal. What this human care meant to the lonely prophet can well be imagined. This was indeed spiritual service given by someone who had come to terms with her circumstances. Then, when the word of the Lord's blessing was spoken, pain awakened as she felt in a new way all the soreness of human disappointment hidden away in her heart. But God was not being harsh. He was drawing the woman out of an attitude of resignation into one of expectation in faith, cf. Luke 8:43-48; Matt. 15:21-28. God was not prepared to let her be less than He purposed and when the first element of blessing was disturbing, the woman would fain have evaded the issue. But the child was born in due time, as God said it would be.

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4:18-26

A whole new life of joy and fulfilment opened up for the woman of faith. Then, through sudden illness, the joy of years was shattered. What did it mean? The woman reacted with the decisiveness of faith and her carrying the dead child to Elisha's room is full of significance. Humanly speaking she was in an agony of sorrow, which was made infinitely harder to bear by the brutish callousness of her husband (19). The emptiness of his religion is seen in v.23, and the wife was not prepared to discuss a spiritual issue with a person who had no faith. She took the ground of faith and, believing that God had acted sovereignly in grace in giving her the son she had desired but had not asked for, believed that God would not leave His work half-done. She saw in her son's death a contradiction of God's promise and not merely a disappointing of her own hopes, and she refused to be deflected or to lose hope. Just as there is a time for submitting and accepting circumstances, so there is a time to rebel in faith and to claim the answer to the prayers of the heart. She went:right to God in the only way she knew, through the prophet. Read Job 1: 18-22; 2:9-10; 3:1-3; 23:1-14. Life, even for the believer, is not easy, nor is it easily explained, but faith goes to God.

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4:27-37

The heart of Elisha was instantly involved in the woman's grief and his tenderness is manifest. Note how the woman brushed aside Gehazi (26) almost as if she was aware of his spiritual insufficiency and how he responded with harshness (27), confirming that his heart was not in tune with God. The woman's strong competence, seen in the earlier verses, now gave way to a torrent of grief as she poured out her story. Elisha's bearing seemed to encourage and enable her to do so and this is indeed true ministry and compassion. The prophet acted at once, sending his servant (possibly his colleague and successor) with the staff, the symbol of prophetic authority, to the woman's home. But the woman insisted on Elisha's personal presence (cf. Matt. 8:5-13) and she was right. Gehazi did the right things in the right way, as he had been told, but there was no power attending the man's actions. There seems to be something sullen, almost accusing, perhaps cynical in the servant's report (31), and we cannot but feel that it was really quite irrelevant to Gehazi whether the child was healed and the mother's faith reassured or not. It was this lack of involvement, this failure to identify with the needy ones, that lay at the root of Gehazi's fruitless life and ministry. There is no easy, off-handed, casual way of ministering the life of God to needy situations.

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4:27-37

Note how totally Elisha entered into and identified himself with the situation of the stricken woman, and be quite sure that the prophet felt the sorrow and agony of that situation in his own heart. Compassion and sympathy are words that really mean suffering-together-with those who suffer, and from the place of sharing being able to minister hope. It was not Elisha's actions that worked the miracle, for only the power of God can do that. But his identification with the situation, body, mouth, eyes and hands (as Christ identified Himself with us); his breathing of his very life into the boy; his long agony of prayer in utter loneliness; these were the things that constituted the means by which the power of God unto life came into that home. No-one looking into that room would have recognised in the humbled, distraught, suffering man the person of the great prophet of Israel. Here was a man who was willing to die and be nothing in order that others might live. To change the figure, "All corn must go through the mill before it can become the bread of life to others." Such thoughts lead to Christ. Read Mark. 15:31; Matt. 17:14-21; Phil. 2:5-8; 2 Cor. 4:7-12. This is the way of the Cross.

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4:38-44

If the first miracle of the chapter (1-7) met human need, and the second (8-37) answered heart-hunger and triumphed over crisis, the third miracle (38-41) overcame mistakes of ignorance that had serious results. The final miracle (42-44) took up genuine willingness in all its inadequacy and made it minister to a hundred men. This last miracle casts the mind forward to stories of the significance of youngsters in the economy of God:- in 2 Kings 5 (a captive maid) and in John 6:9 (a young lad). Later on in 2 Kings 6:1-7 we have a miracle to answer the consequences of an accident in the context of the work of God. In each case God's intervention was immediate and total and we are given a picture of a God who is very near and vitally concerned with the well-being of His people. When we read such stories we should wonder why we ever doubt this God. There is never any justification for distrusting God.

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4:38-44

The servants of God were under pressure, sharing the common distress of the nation in time of famine, and each was doing his bit to help under the direction of Elisha. One man, with the best intentions but acting in ignorance (is this a valid excuse?) nearly poisoned the whole divinity college. That could sometimes be a good thing for the work of the Kingdom! It was a tragic mistake which could have decimated the spiritual ministry of the land, but God overruled. Some mistakes are not irretrievable, but some are. In the final miracle note the existence of a college of 100 prophets in an apostate nation. This was the fruit of Elijah's ministry and remember he thought that he had failed (1 Kings 19:4,10). Note also the magnificent act of sacrifice of the man who brought

the food when food was at a premium. Think of the man's demoralisation when he realised his sacrifice was really no use and think of the disappointment of the 100 prophets. But, like the widow's mite, this offering was taken up and made enough by the word of the El-Shaddai, the All-Sufficient God. How we need to learn to recognise the wonderful working of God's everlasting providence. We must learn to trust Him to safeguard and to provide. It is the Lord of Glory who personally shepherds His people to pasture and to rest (Psalm 23).

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5:1-7

The story of Naaman is first of all a story of fact, the miraculous healing of a leper; then it is a parable of spiritual healing in the case of a man whose life was blighted and frustrated by sin, of which leprosy is the symbol. There is in the story a great revelation of personality and character. The servant-maid is crucial to the whole miracle, for without her witness to the God who is able to heal, there would be no story. Her slavery had not destroyed her faith and it was because of her confidence in God (3) that she was able to speak. This is the essence of witness. She trusted and was not ashamed to say so, even though her circumstances did not seem to point to a good and mighty God. At the same time she knew she was in the kind of home where she could speak and this reveals the quality of Naaman's household. The servants in v.13 give the same testimony of love and respect to their master as does the king of Syria in v.5. Naaman was a big man in a big and rich country, an ardent nationalist and in a position to enjoy all possible fulfilment, *but* he was a leper. The disease may not have been very obvious, certainly not gross, for v.11 speaks of the place or spot, yet it *was* there, marking out the man as a leper, and it was a progressive disease. Leprosy is indeed a valid symbol of sin! This one fact of his life clouded the whole of Naaman's experience. He could not escape from it and this taint of leprosy seemed to contradict his humanity, his dignity, his peace of heart and all his future hope.

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5:1-7

Naaman, great in character and potential, was a man in need of cleansing, and he knew it. The fact of leprosy, like the fact of sinnerhood, together with its inescapable consequences, dominated his whole experience (Rom. 3:9-20). Something of the heavy burden of his heart is indicated by the alacrity with which he reacted to the testimony of the maid which was passed on by his wife. We never know where a simple word of testimony will reach. Would not the slave girl have prayed for Naaman, who by God's grace was "ready" for the word spoken? But Naaman's understanding was very limited and his first approach to God was through the diplomatic channels of king to king, and he set off loaded with riches, for after all a great man such as he was must not seem to appear as a beggar with nothing to offer. He must have been shattered by the king of Israel's reaction (7), because there was no help there and it revealed how totally lacking in understanding his own king had been (5-6). It is not easy to be exposed as being so very wrong, but it is necessary so that our own proud ideas of the way of salvation may be demolished and the way to God made clear. The maid's testimony had been quite specific. Naaman should have gone right to the prophet of God, but many besides kings and commanders seem to think there are special entrances for "superior" people. It was only when Naaman was baffled that he heard the command from Elisha, "Let him come now to me."(8)

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5:8-19

Like most of us, Naaman's problem lay in the fact that he was guided by his own thoughts and preconceptions (11) rather than by what had been spoken to him in the name of the Lord (3-4, 10-12). Although nothing in his world could answer the need of his heart, he regarded everything outside his own little world as being somewhat inferior. It is here we begin to see the hidden pride of the man for, laden with gifts, he was not going to be in debt to any man or God. It was going to be a "reasonable" man-to-man meeting rather than that of a needy supplicant with a generous donor. He was angry when Elisha did not even appear to accord him the common courtesies of his position (10). But the prophet was only a voice speaking the Lord's word and Naaman had to deal with God and not man. It was best that the prophet should be out of sight. Naaman was angry (11) at the simplicity of the proffered cure, far from all ostentation and dramatics. How we all like the flourish and seeming importance of signs and symbols! Naaman still felt that the rivers of his own land were as good as and

better than anything Israel could provide (12) and that outside help was not needed, especially since it demanded such a humbling of his person in public. Perhaps it was Elisha's words, "Wash ... and be clean," (10) that he really resented. No-one had ever before pointed out so devastatingly that he was in fact dirty and could do nothing to cure himself. This was the decisive moment for Naaman.

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5:8-19

There is wonderful grace in v.13 and a lesson in the art of leading people to Christ. Sometimes straight declaration and exhortation is needed but sometimes gentle persuasion. It was thus that Naaman yielded and took the place of the helpless sinner who needed cleansing. After all, the alternative was to turn away and to go back to a life marked by incurable blight. "Nothing in my hand I bring ... foul I to the fountain fly, Wash me Saviour or I die." (Toplady) That was Naaman's attitude when his rage subsided, and we must see here, as so often, the fierce attempts of Satan to keep a needy man from God. Try to imagine the man's feelings as he dipped himself these successive times in Jordan. But it is no vain thing to take the Lord at His word. Naaman was cleansed and he recognised that it was God's doing, to the extent that he returned publicly to confess this and to speak his gratitude to the prophet. The resolution with which Elisha refused all gifts concerned his testimony, for he would not be compromised nor would he allow the name of God to be brought under suspicion (cf. Gen. 14:1,17-24). But it also concerned the spiritual well-being of Gehazi, for whom worldly possessions were a real temptation, as we shall soon see.

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5:8-19

If we refer in this story to the "conversion" of Naaman (and certainly he makes a radical confession in v.15, 17), then we see in this clear-thinking man an immediate awareness of the problem of living out his new confession of faith in a totally alien territory where he, being the king's closest confidant (18), did not have complete freedom of action. He was quite clear that his new allegiance was to the God of Israel to whom he owed his salvation, but he was a Syrian with official as well as social obligations and he did not want his actions to be misunderstood. This is Paul's theme in Romans 14; 1 Cor. 8; 10: 19-33, and no easy answer is given, save that we are to hold back from passing judgment on a brother. Naaman was persuaded that a new life must authenticate a new faith and the load of earth was to establish a plot of land in Syria which would be to Naaman and to his associates an outpost of the kingdom of Israel or the kingdom of God in a foreign land.

It would remind him that although he was in Syria he was more basically in Israel, just as Paul reminds others that their being in Christ is more basic than their geographical location (1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1). It would be easy to say that Naaman should have been prepared from the start to take his stand for God, and he may well have undermined his resolution by this strange action by which he asks pardon in advance for actions that he knows will seem a contradiction of his testimony. But, if the Israelite maid had been so dogged when captured, she would not have lived to testify to Naaman. If we are persuaded about a course of action we must take it. If it is of God we will be kept, but if it is compromise there will be complications.

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5:20-27

The miracle, the conversation and the refusal of the gift were all watched closely by Gehazi, servant of Elisha, whose suspect spirituality has already been commented on in the note on 4:27-37. This man was being groomed for spiritual service, but would he make the grade? There was a considerable mixture of motive which was not immediately apparent to the general fellowship, nor to Gehazi himself, but which Elisha suspected. In spite of rich fellowship which he no doubt enjoyed, especially on the big public occasions dealing with such as Naaman, Gehazi was singularly inept in the work committed to him. One hesitates to denounce a man since we have all made real blunders at times, but certain texts are insistent, Rev. 3:1; 2 Tim. 3; Matt. 23:27-28. However long Gehazi had been drawing back in his heart, the crunch came when he saw the riches of Naaman and the pleasure and fulfilment they promised being sent away. He knew nothing must be allowed to cloud the fact that salvation was the free gift of God's grace, but he knew also where *his* treasure was. He set about manipulating the situation to get the best of both worlds, and he was neither the first nor the last to pursue such a policy In Heb.

12:16 Esau decided for momentary satisfaction instead of future spiritual service. In Josh. 7:19-21 Achan, for incidental profit, risked the whole of the work of God. In Acts 5: 1-4 Ananias and Sapphira lied to God to gain a spiritual reputation for consecration. In 2 Tim. 4:10 Demas, for love of the world, contracted out of a holy crusade. Watch and pray lestcf. 1 John 2:15-17.

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5:20-27

Gehazi's false heart and motive of worldly gain led to action which must have had a devastating effect on Naaman in his new found faith when the story became public, as it most certainly would. Note that Gehazi was not above making use of Elisha's name in his plot to deceive, nor did he hesitate to go back home to act as if nothing were wrong. It was his intention to take up his "spiritual service" in the place of privilege by the prophet's side and to go on with the work, ignoring the fact that by his sin and duplicity he had introduced a spirit of evil into the heart of the situation. But he discovered almost at once that a man's sins find him out. It is not nearly so easy as some people imagine to conceal duplicity in the context of a living work of God. God is light and we must walk in the light, refusing to be shadowy, twilight, ill-defined characters. If we have things to hide from each other, our attitudes become no more and no less than camouflage and there is no possibility of fruitful service, because God will not trust Himself to those who are acting a part. Gehazi was brought up with a jolt, discovered that Elisha had seen through him, and he came under the judgment of God. Do not recoil against God's judgment. Would it have been kinder for God to allow this man to go on for years in spiritual duplicity, and so to destroy himself? After all, Gehazi had just recently seen how a truly humbled and penitent leper had been cleansed. It could be so with him!

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6:1-7

A group of men, having little of this world's goods (the axe was borrowed) were busy in the Lord's work which was expanding. The young fellows were alive to the situation, took the initiative in the building project, asked for Elisha's company and co-operation and got it. In the process of work an "accident" happened, whether by carelessness or by excess enthusiasm we cannot tell. It was an accident. Why did it have to happen when the work was going on so well? We cannot tell, but it certainly left one man standing useless, for he had lost the means of working. Then came the miracle of grace in a situation beyond human remedy. Disaster gave way to hope and joy, and the man's usefulness was restored. What a comfort it is to have a God so immediately involved in our "ordinary" life and work, a God able and willing to over-rule the mistakes and set things to rights again. God judges wrong, as the story of Gehazi told us, but God is not a tyrant waiting to strike down His people when in all good faith they make mistakes. He is the God who picks us up when we fall and gives hope to the hopeless.

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6:8-12

The best-laid schemes of men and devils go astray gloriously when God takes a hand in them. We have often commented on the wiles, the well-laid stratagems of the powers of evil (Eph. 6: 10-12) and we must be alive to the reality of the warfare. But we must also be totally persuaded that if God is for us it is largely irrelevant who is against us, how many may be in collaboration, nor how powerful they may seem. Read in quick succession Rom. 8:31; Ps. 21:11 (AV); Isa. 54:17, and over against these assurances realise how weak the king of Syria was, in spite of all his military strength backed by a network of spies throughout Israel. It must have been unnerving for the king to be told that his secrets were being made plain, not by a spy or traitor in his camp, but by direct divine intervention. If the historical sequence of the chapters is accurate this king must have known through Naaman of the power of the Lord and of the Lord's mercy and grace. But there was no awareness of God in the man's thoughts at all, and he insisted that his quarrel was with the man called Elisha. Nor was there any sign of a change of mind or heart in the king, even though he had been successfully countered time and again. Some people simply refuse to hear the warning voice of God and insist on going on in their chosen way regardless of consequences. There is nothing so blatantly stupid as unbelief.

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6:13-17

Do you believe in angels and spirits, or do you think that God the Lord is an isolated sovereign with no one to carry out His commands? Do you believe the all-sufficient God, whose hosts are limitless, will ever send you on service without His provision? Are you prepared to believe that the hosts of God surround you even though you may not ever actually see them (Ps. 27)? Persuaded of these unseen realities, the prophet had a marvellous night's sleep while the enemy was urging himself on in restless determination (Ps. 3:1-8; 4:8). Elisha was well aware of the potential of evil and we must note that the king of Syria was strong enough to press his army as far as Dothan, a mere twelve miles from the capital city of Samaria. But over against this was the fact stated in v.16, and we must learn to stand on this truth. This is Christian warfare. There was no doubt about the issue, but unbelief can sometimes cause confusion by panic, and such panic might well have spread to the whole community around Elisha as a result of the servant's words uttered in the excitability of unbelief. But why were the man's eyes closed to such spiritual realities as he must have been taught of? In Gehazi's case it would have been the cataract of resentment and worldliness. Do we know what blinds us and makes us insensitive?

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6:13-17

The calm demeanour of the prophet is so admirable that we must consider it further, especially in the light of Jesus' words in John 14:1 (which is a command not a recommendation) and John 14: 27 (which is a promise that cannot be broken). We have to learn to let the peace of God rule in our hearts (Col. 3:15). This is not a case of trying to inculcate a sense of peace and well being: that is auto-suggestion not faith; it is a case of believing God and so living, as to the pattern and practice of life, that our minds are stayed on God (Isa. 26:3). Psalm 121 gives the same great affirmation of well placed trust as does Psalm 23, where the man of God sits at the table of rejoicing while the enemy is visibly prowling around. But what if the chariots of the Lord do not deliver, as is sometimes the case, and the trusting saints are allowed to suffer and die? In that case the chariots do even better, for they transport you into the presence of the Lord, the great King Himself. Jesus' words in John 11:9 signify that a man, walking in the will of God, is inviolable and invincible until his work is done. We must let God persuade us of His capacity to keep (Jude 24-25), and of His intentions of grace in fruitful service and blessing (Eph. 3:20-21).

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6:18-23

There is something amazingly sure about Elisha's words and actions which could be expressed either in terms of Elisha's faith in God or God's faith in Elisha. Certainly there was a harmony between the two which points to the close walk of a man with his God. It reminds us of our gentle but glorious Lord who testified, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). The prophet calling down blindness, where the king would have wielded the sword in vengeance, again points forwards to the Gospels (Luke 9:51-56). It seems that the operations of grace in gentleness and forbearance had the effect of resolving the enmity of Syria at least for a season (Rom. 12:17-21). But of course the superiority of the God of Israel and His people had been demonstrated so categorically that only a fool would have tried to interfere with Elisha's administration at this point. It is never wise to tamper with a man who is manifestly walking with God. But we shall soon see both the kings of Israel and Syria in their true impotence of heart. When God is at work everything comes out into the open.

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6:24-31

We cannot tell how much time elapsed between v.23 and v.24, but it is clear that the spirit of enmity towards God's people remained, no matter how stern or how gracious the lessons of providence were. The Devil never concedes defeat and in the moment of his departure, having been confounded, he resolves to return (Lk. 4:13). In spiritual warfare the once-for-all victory of Christ has to be won by faith, time and time again. But there was little faith in Israel and seemingly none in the king, and this apostasy lies at the heart of the terrible situation Samaria found herself in. Go back in the story to 1 Kings 8:33-34,44-52; 9:1-9 and see there both the cause of distress and the remedy prescribed. In today's passage the city profit racketeers were making their pile (25),

human nature degenerated (28-29) and the king tried to maintain some degree of nobility and even wore sackcloth, possibly more as a sign of sympathy with his people than of repentance towards God. His true heart will be seen in the next verse (v.32) when he vowed vengeance against God's spokesman whom he blamed for the entire predicament, possibly because of the clemency of v.21ff. Go back to 2 Kings 3:1-3 and recall the summary of this king's spiritual character.

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6:32-33

The last thought in the king's heart was of the possibility of repentance, and whereas in v.32 his venom was directed against the prophet, in v.33 it is specifically expressed in terms of rejection of God. In v.33 the meaning is either that the king blamed God for everything (a common reaction) and rejected Him out of hand, or else that Elisha had earlier urged the king to withstand the siege saying that the Lord would deliver, and now the king was tired of waiting. If the latter is the case, the sackcloth (30) is an outward symbol of the submission of faith which, in fact, had not touched the king's heart. Certainly the king intended murder, although the disposal of Elisha could not be considered a useful contribution to the desperate situation. But angry unbelief seldom considers and never looks to the future consequences of its actions. Remember that Elisha was going through the rigours of the siege along with the people. But far from indulging in rage, panic and desperate ideas of manipulating things without reference to God, he was sitting still because he knew God was in charge of the whole situation and could be trusted. Remember the words, "Open the young man's eyes," and Jesus' words, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," and imagine the prophet, aware of personal danger, saying, "I have learned from the past that God can be trusted and I am not going to begin doubting Him now."

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7:1-2

Elisha and the elders represented the remnant of faith within the beleaguered city and that group, resting in the word of the Lord, were at peace. It was a church gathered by God's word and kept by that word in bitterest difficulty. It was also the church that proclaimed the day of God's salvation. But it is only that church which sits still in the confidence of God and waits for God's time that can speak with clarity and authority. The king and his court, which had abandoned the ground of faith, had no better contribution to make than reviling prophets and slandering God. But God had revealed his purposes to Elisha (exactly when the timing of the day of salvation was revealed we cannot say; perhaps just as the king arrived), and the prophet declared the message in confidence, not knowing how it was to be carried out. He did not need to know the mechanics for that was God's department. The scornful reference to the windows (floodgates) of heaven seems to have been taken up by a later prophet and used to glorious purpose (Malachi 3:10). But it is no light thing to scoff at God's declaration of His coming mercy unto salvation, and the contemptuous cynic found he had brought judgment on himself, for he was to be excluded from seeing the mighty deliverance (Mk. 5:39-43). God does not like triflers.

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7:3-11

The impossible happened with no sign of human instrumentality, and it was given to the miserable lepers to make the discovery. The explanation is marvellous in its simplicity and reduces the powers of evil to true perspective (cf. Ps.2). Do you see how a "loud" miracle such as earthquake, hail from heaven, or the arrival of a counter army (all of which are recorded elsewhere in Scripture) would have been less effective in terms of rebuking the unbelief of the king and his people? In this way the city realised it had been continuing to tremble when the danger had in fact evaporated. It is intriguing how at times the Lord shuts the eyes of some; at other times he opens their ears to hear what is normally inaudible; while in this case eyes are opened to see the chariots and horsemen of the heavenly host. At times He creates confusion so that the enemies fall on each other, and at other times He works through normal channels of battle with the spiritual battle going on in secret (Ex. 17:8ff). Learn what God is like and learn to trust Him, believing that He knows the best way to do His own work.

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7:3-11

Part of the mighty deliverance was the provision of an abundance of supplies which, apart from the Lord's intervention, would have been devoured by the godless enemy. It was given to the despised lepers to be the first to discover the reality of God's salvation. After all they knew the desperation of hunger even more than most, and therein is a parable. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled (Matt. 5:6). May God

make us all hungry for salvation! But what will the process be? Having seen, tasted and rejoiced in what they had discovered, these lepers then gave expression to a principle of testimony and witness which so many believers never seem to feel. Read v.9 and consider what our attitude should be since we have discovered the unsearchable riches of Christ. But note also that the lepers were remarkably astute. Their bitter experience had made them aware that there was considerably more to life than immediate gratification when opportunity allowed. For that reason we read of them satisfying their hunger and also laying aside the means to provide for future contingency. Understand this in a spiritual sense. Granted we must live one day at a time, as Jesus taught, lest we become mere worldlings preoccupied with the business of existing. But in spiritual terms we are to store up present grace and blessing in the Word in preparation for the evil day which *will* come.

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7:12-16

There is something dark, twisted and evil about unbelief (Heb. 3:12-13; Jas. 4:17) and it constitutes a hideous slander upon the character of God. The king's sackcloth in 6:30 is seen now to have had little significance. He was a man surrounded by cynical men whose influence is never good (7:2). Such people are forever denigrating spiritual works and inculcating a spirit of unbelief, which exercises its baneful influence, often without our being aware of it. This, combined with the natural reaction to the pressures of his situation, caused the king to replace his trust in God with a spirit of suspicion. This is indeed a work of Satan, and by yielding to it we lose the blessing of God and even further we become incapable of expecting the blessing of God, even when it is declared by the prophet and confirmed by witnesses. There is only one thing to do: look and see (14), and again it was a servant rather than an "important" person who spoke the word of wisdom. After all, to stay where they were was miserable anticipation of death. "Nothing venture, nothing gain" can be a counsel of recklessness, but not when God has spoken. They investigated, tentatively risking two horses, not five (13-14) and found it all as God had said. How could it have been otherwise? God is to be trusted.

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7:17-20

This is a devastating story not least because the tragedy which befell the nobleman had all the appearance of an "accident". Things do happen which are quite beyond explanation and for which we do not have to seek for an immediate or apparent explanation in terms of moral and spiritual responsibility (John 9:1-3). In a world where the mystery of iniquity operates (2 Thess. 2:7), there will always be an element of bafflement and we must not be too quick to offer explanations. But this man had exposed the attitude of his heart in no uncertain terms and in the face of the clear declaration of God's intentions he had expressed himself in terms of blasphemous and contemptuous unbelief (7:2). He must have been aware of the authenticity of Elisha's ministry and of the miracles already attending that ministry and therefore his attitude was one of wilful unbelief. When this spirit of unbelief is found operating in places of public influence it constitutes a danger to the whole nation and the time comes when God the Lord is no longer prepared to tolerate it. No doubt many, perhaps even the king, interpreted the incident as one of these accidents caused by an overwrought crowd. But it was a judgment from God in the day of Israel's salvation. The doubting king was not judged, nor were the women who had degenerated to cannibalism under pressure of circumstances (6:27-31). But the man who laughed in the face of God when His word of mercy was spoken died without seeing God's salvation.

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8:1-6

God is persistent and efficient, and with the minimum of argument He gets on with His work which moves steadily onward throughout the years. This is why we must learn to have a historical perspective in our consideration of the affairs of men and nations and the activities of God among them. The "accidents" we spoke of in yesterday's note are not always on the limited scale of personal or local experience, for here we have a seven-year famine, called for by God but coming through "natural" climatic and agricultural processes. The national situation was not to be understood by men and women of faith in terms of a change in weather patterns or trade patterns but as an act of God. This is not a contradiction of His love, which is working constantly for the good of the loved ones even though pain may be a part of the process (Amos 4:6-13; Hos. 2:6-15). Love will not take the harder way if the easier way will serve, but if gentleness is presumed upon then sternness must come. But note carefully here that there was no famine among the Philistines, although that does not mean that God turned a blind eye to their sins. His dispositions are quite sovereign and He works His sovereign will in the long-term interests of His people and kingdom.

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8:1-6

Elisha must have been a supremely selfless man for he was the clear channel by which God's words and works could flow to the nation. His influence was very powerful and his ministry, like Elijah's before him, created an atmosphere in which faith and righteousness could flourish even though people like the king were not in fact brought to the obedience of faith. The Shunnamite woman, on the basis of past experience, took God at His word, departed for seven years' safety among the Philistines, returned, as she had always intended to do, only to find all her property confiscated. Her appeal for restitution was heard by the king. Elisha's ministry and activity were a salient factor in the case, and the woman received what was hers by right, together with compensation.

God is no man's debtor and it is no vain thing to put our trust in Him (Luke 22:35). Note from v.4 on, how interested the king was and how he was challenged to believe because of other people's experience. God was taking the word of His grace right to the king's door but even though there was a response of justice in his action, there seems to have been no real faith. Even when we face up to this "failure" of the Gospel we must still see the effective operation of the word of God in the restraint of evil, whereby it was possible to continue the preaching of the Gospel. Consider 1 Tim. 2:1-4 where "saved" may well mean "made safe" or "preserved" so that people might come to hear and to recognise the truth of the Gospel. This should make us pray much for the preaching of God's word, not least in its unmeasurable but incalculable influence on society.

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8:7-15

The old order was changing, yielding to the new, and the startling events associated with the ushering in of a new stage of God's work make grim reading. The anointing of Hazeal had been commissioned some years previously (15 or 20?) in the time of Elijah (1 Kings 19:15-18) but had not yet been done. Now, in the quiet assurance of faith, knowing clearly God's sovereign will, and being assured of His protection, Elisha journeyed right to the heart of the enemy's territory, fearing nothing. Elisha's clear preview of coming events came no doubt from divine intimation but also through a very clear and comprehensive grasp of the political situation and its intermingling with the spiritual good of God's people. The prophets were big men and made it their business to know what was going on in the nation. They certainly were not "so heavenly minded that they were no earthly use." But some "prophets" are so earthly minded, so conditioned to the material and temporal, that they are incapable of discerning spiritual issues. This man Elisha walked into the unknown, aware of the fact that the mighty purposes of God on a national level as well as an individual level are worked out through human instrumentality, whether in the willingness of faith or the defiance of unbelief. God's will shall be done and as we go ahead we must see to it that there is a fresh yielding to God's will so that we will be a living and glorious part of all that He plans to do and is already doing. This is the day to prove the sweetness of a new surrender.

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8:7-15

We live in a grim world and our newspapers tell of many instances of cruel power such as we read of here. If our faith is not valid in respect of a real world then we are nothing but escapists. We are reading of things that happen and will go on happening, but we do not fear them because our trust is in God, who alone makes princes to rule (Prov. 8:15-16; Dan. 4:17). In the design of God Hazael was to be king of Syria for the purpose of bringing retribution on Israel because of her sins. In all our thinking about world affairs we must learn to see the operative judgments of God which are never inactive, never late and never unrighteous (Gen. 18:23-25; Rom. 3:5-6). We cannot tell to what extent Hazael knew his destiny but it is certain that he had ambition for power. He was biding his time, and he had the ruthlessness necessary to carry out his intentions. Elisha's words in v.10 reveal his knowledge of Hazael's heart. In v.11 it is Elisha who "stood there with set face like a man stunned, until he could bear it no longer."(NEB) It seems that the mighty prophet, so close to God and so sure in his ways, became aware of the horrors that were to come through the influence of this godless man who was so coldly calculating, and Elisha wept. He did not weep for himself, but for the hurt that was to come upon his people (Jer. 9:1-3, 9-16). It is this dimension of spiritual perception and care that made the mighty prophets not only preachers but intercessors (Dan. 9:1-23). Of course while the public knew and felt the power of the preaching, they knew little if anything of the praying.

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8:16-29

This is a picture of the inevitable confusion of life when people are adrift from God. Having the wrong wives and the wrong friends, it is little wonder that their actions and attitudes were constantly at cross-purposes with God, leading to complications. In our day we have come to such an atomised and localised attitude to society and history that we fail to see that each generation is the womb of the next and after varying periods of gestation each reproduces itself with a deterioration or improvement according as it has dealt with God. But it is not merely the inevitable consequences of human choices that we must see, for in and through the whole development there are to be traced the active judgments of the righteous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 20:5). It is almost incredible that Jehoram of Judah, having seen the baneful influence of Jezebel, should take that woman's daughter to be his wife. How the association began we cannot tell, but the nature of the relationship outside the will of God is quite clear, for it had the effect of making the man called to rule God's work do evil in the sight of God (18). The whole situation would have been total hopelessness but for the glorious statement in v.19 concerning the forbearance of God and His determination concerning His own purposes of grace. It is God alone who preserves His people and His work against men and devils. What comfort!

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9:1-13

National and international upheavals are never sudden; they have a history; past iniquity recoils on the present generation. America's colour problem stems from the slave trade; Africa's turbulence from perverted colonialism; South America's revolutions from perverted religion which impoverished the people; Britain's labour unrest from inhuman industrial exploitation; and the church's predicament and rejection from its own preaching of a kind of God scarcely worth believing in. What is true on a national scale is also true on the individual level, and the tragedy is expressed in the words, "O, Israel, you have destroyed your self." (Hosea 13:9 AV; cf. Rom. 1:18ff.). At this point in the story, Jehu was anointed king to begin the destruction of the house of Ahab which had been foretold so long ago (1 Kings 19:15-18). To see the necessity for such stern judgment trace the story of the kings of Israel: Omri (1 Kings 16:25-26), Ahab (1 Kings 16:30-33), Ahaziah (1 Kings 22:51-53), and Joram (2 Kings 3: 1-3). In all the forty years since Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), Jezebel had maintained her baneful influence and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, God's great works of mercy, judgment, instruction and call to repentance, had been refused. Now the evil was spilling over into Judah (2 Kings 8:25-27) where Athaliah, a wicked woman (2 Chron. 24:7), was becoming a force to be reckoned with. The whole situation cried out for judgment, and it came.

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9:1-13

In a situation of impending judgment God had His remnant of faithful servants, who went about their business at the risk of their lives. This explains the secrecy and swiftness of the commission (1-3). But do not let this conceal the fact that evil is not supreme, nor does it ever have the last word, nor does it ever really have the initiative. Jehu had been left in charge of Israel's army when Jehoram had retired to Jezreel to recover from his wounds (8:28-29), and in that critical moment Elisha, aware that the moment had come (how sure these prophets were) set the drama of judgment in motion. The announcement of the divine commission and its terrible terms appealed to Jehu, although he was hesitant about the reaction of the army captains because it seems that all Israel was indeed tired of the tyranny of Jezebel. This is how revolution breaks out and it is astonishing how evil men and women seem quite insensitive to the reaction to their power until the day of disaster comes. Note in v.6 that it was made clear to Jehu that he was not in any sense an independent character. He was anointed by God to do God's work of judgment. This had been ordained for many years, since Jehu was a mere youngster, but it was only now revealed to him and to the people. This is an instance of the wisdom of God, for had wicked men known that this young lad was destined for the throne there would have been attempts on his life, just as the powers of evil tried to assault the infant Christ. Are you not glad that the reins are in God's hands?

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9:14-26

In yesterday's passage Jehu's uncertainties were swept away by the enthusiastic response of the captains who, recognising the validity of the prophetic anointing, were not disposed to risk being found on the wrong side. There was a public announcement of Jehu's coronation, and without hesitation the man began to act. The city was sealed to guarantee secrecy and Jehu set out for Jezreel. His meeting with the king's messengers reveals two things. First there was the affirmation that there is no peace and no possibility of peace where moral and spiritual evil hold sway in a nation (Isa. 57:20-21). All attempts at peace, especially those initiated by evil men, such as Jehu, are doomed to failure. God will see to that. People must recognise it and say farewell to their superficial hopes for peace. Secondly, the commanding assurance of a man who knew his purpose in life under the commission of God, together with the discontent of people under the yoke of a weak and wicked ruler, gathered men to the side of Jehu. The two kings, desperately deceived by their false confidence, rode out to their death. Like all weak and wicked men Joram saw righteous judgment in terms of personal treachery. The last thing he thought of was a confession of responsibility and without this there is no possibility of repentance. In was in that condition the king died.

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9:27-37

Jehu rode on furiously (20) but not rashly, for his mind was quite clear as to what he had to do and why it had to be done (25-26). The king of Judah as well as the king of Israel came under the judgment of God through this man. It was Ahaziah's own fault, for he had chosen to make his alliance with Israel ignoring the spiritual dangers that such an unequal yoke would bring. How blindly we go wandering into relationships that have no future in them save confusion. Panic when the crunch comes is singularly unhelpful, but so is the brash stubbornness shown by Jezebel who stood her ground in defiance of God right to the bitter end. This is the pride of evil and in measure it affects us all, making us reluctant to take action to remedy situations even when we know they will prove disastrous. It is no substitute for repentance just to be miserable in our sin. We must do something about it, and quickly, because spiritual situations as they deteriorate tend to harden beyond remedy (2 Cor. 7:1, 8-16).

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10:1-11

This makes grim reading but we must face up to it that the basic facts of good and evil, God and the Devil, are constantly operative in the world, continually active and developing and always coming to judgment (Matt. 13:24-30). At times it seems that only one of these two powers is active and here the voice of prophetic

righteousness seems totally silent. This is significant of the fact that God has given evil its head, *apparently* unchecked, to work out its fury in the context of sinful human society. This is New Testament doctrine, as Romans 1:24, 28 declares, and as the vivid teaching of Revelation makes plain. But evil is never totally free and indeed it is in the face of the tides of evil that you find individuals coming to the point of decision and taking their stand with God (11:2; cf. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea at the time of the Cross John 19:38-42). Of course this tide of judgment is not a precipitate thing. It had to come, as is evident if we pause to consider what a holocaust of evil *could* have been produced by the evil brood of Ahab's house. It scarcely bears thinking about, especially when you consider the danger to the royal line of David, from whom Messiah was to come. Could God stand back and allow human, demonic evil to fight against the redeeming purposes of His love?

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10:12-17

At this point in history the Cross is but a minute pinpoint of light on the far horizon of promise and yet its reality burned and flamed in the heart of God. To bring this great salvation to pass He was prepared to wield the surgeon's knife of judgment to cut the cancer of evil from the body of His chosen people who were the instruments of His revelation and redemption. God is never complicit with evil and yet He rules in righteousness, in and through its operations. What is more, it must have been clear to all that a day of God's judgment had come upon the nation, and this alone should have set a restraint of caution, if not repentance, on the relatives of Ahaziah. But the folly of evil is that it has no sense at all, and these men of Judah declared arrogantly that they were on their way to renew fellowship with the wicked royal house of Israel. They paid the price of their folly. "Thus God would have us deal finally with the chattering demons who so charmingly argue us out of the will of God. It is time we got tough with them, like Jehu." (W. Still) After all, we believe, in theory at least, that we are involved in spiritual warfare. It is difficult to interpret v.15-16 unless we say that Jehu was motivated by his divine commission, not mere blood lust, and that he recognised Jehonadab as a man who realised that God was working His purpose out. But v.16 casts a shadow forward to v.31. Do not idolise Jehu.

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10:18-28

A sense of confidence and a hope of making capital out of a grim situation is the very thing to beguile evil into showing its hand. Again it makes grim reading, but it shows that Jehu recognised that spiritual evil lay behind the moral and political confusion of his generation. The response to the plan also seems to indicate how little the people understood either Jehu or his work. But he was a man who got things done and at the same time he never lost sight of the issue, for in v.23 he guaranteed the safety of the remnant of faith within the nation. It seems that Jehu was aware of the fact that the true people of the Lord can get themselves into many strange, unwarranted and dangerous places in a day of confusion such as this. It is not for nothing that the Bible likens us to sheep with an amazing propensity for straying! But you will note that there is no suggestion at all that such men as Elisha, walking with God, were in any danger of being mixed up with a gaggle of Baal's prophets. They knew that certain things were best not tampered with, not even with the best of motives! Jehu saw to it that not merely the people of Baal but the institution of Baal was reduced to what seemed to be impotence. He must have made many enemies, as all reformers do, but he did the will of God.

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10:29-36

Here is the sad truth about Jehu. He exterminated Baal from Israel but Baal was not rooted out of the heart of Jehu. His zeal for the Lord was selective, especially in the sanctification of others, but enthusiasm for one aspect of the Lord's will does not compensate for disobedience in another. It is the constant temptation to make ourselves the exception to the rule of total obedience to God. When you think of the possibilities for Jehu in terms of personal life and in respect of the nation you begin to see the real tragedy of his failure. In a sense all his work was wasted, for he went on to build up another defective system in the nation that again called for the judgment of God. We could even go on to ask if all Jehu's work of slaughter and extermination might have been in fact a hindrance rather than a help, for it simply delayed the action of God in cutting off Israel (32) and setting Judah free from entanglement, so that she might have hope. "An unfinished work for God may be worse

than no work at all." (Wm. Still) For quarter of a century (36) there was a work in Israel that had a name that it was alive to God but it was dead (Rev. 3:1). It had the form of godliness but denied the power of holiness (2 Tim. 3:5). It is all rather disturbing in the light of the claim for recognition of those spoken of in Matt. 7:21-23.

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10:29-36

Here is a searching comment, contemporary in its application, from Rev. James Philip's notes on Kings: "We think again today of Jehu's failure to accomplish the moral and spiritual deliverance of Israel. We suggest his failure was all the more poignant and tragic because he did so much, and had such a pronounced effect on the life of the nation, while still falling short of God's intention. We may venture to use this to illustrate a principle in Christian service. It is sometimes maintained that a particular approach in evangelism or ministry is vindicated because "it works". But *is* this in itself a vindication of it, necessarily? Ought we not rather to go on and ask, 'What does it work, and *how deeply* does it work, and *how permanently* does it work?' Jehu's campaign "worked" in the sense that it produced results, and yet it failed in the sight of God; not only so, it failed so significantly that it is said in v.32 that in those days the Lord began to cut Israel short. Now there is a great lesson here, if we have ears to hear it. One's concern with the many forms and approaches to evangelism today is not that they do not work (have there not been good results, in many conversions?), but that they do not work deliverance in the land, when another kind of approach is likely to do so, and is known to have done so in the past. Look at v.31. There was a flaw in Jehu's consecration. The work was not deep enough in his own heart. The fact is, it is easier to slay idolaters than to slay the idolatry in our own hearts, just as it is easier to engage in various forms of evangelism than to allow God to make us channels of His grace to men. And the one has often been allowed to become a substitute for the other. It is possible to dissipate spiritual energy in much activity for the accomplishment of comparatively little, and in so doing effectively hinder the deeper purposes of God. For a deeper regeneration in Israel, work would have needed to be done more deeply in Jehu himself. That was where the real failure lay."

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11:1-3

Lust for power knows no bounds, and when you consider the actions of this woman, Athaliah, you begin to wonder if you are dealing with the Devil incarnate. Not only do we see a grandmother murdering all the royal family, but doing so to usurp a throne on which she had no right at all to sit. There was a hellish perversity and contradiction about this woman as there was in Jezebel. For six years she dominated Judah (we do not say she *ruled*, for that is a responsible word), but her end was never in doubt. Keep in mind that we are dealing here with Judah, not Israel, and it was through Judah that the royal line of God's promise ran. We must see the terrible denial of God's purposes expressed in this domineering woman who transgressed into realms she had no right in. She had tasted power as the "queen mother" during Ahaziah's reign and had no intention of relinquishing it nor of stepping down from the limelight. In such a time as this a godly woman, Jehosheba, daughter of Jehoram and sister or half-sister of Ahaziah, married to a high priest (2 Chron. 22:11) manifested the courage of faith, stole the child Joash and brought him to a place of safety. What courage she showed in the face of the fury of hell! Did anyone ever dream that one member of the remnant of faith who had not bowed to Baal would be found in the royal house? How many, if any, of the remnant of faith in the land realised that during Athaliah's time of power their deliverance was being prepared? How much we have to learn about God's ways!

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11:4-16

God is still on the throne. How tritely we say it, but how fundamental and practical is the fact. The evil Athaliah seems to have been quite unaware of the defect of her policy of total extermination of the royal family and no one told her. The godly Jehoiada was a great minister to have in such critical days and we cannot but wonder if there was any contact between him and Elisha or any other of the prophets. Perhaps any suggestion of Elisha's presence would have put the queen on her guard. The drama of the story, combined with the meticulous

preparation, the instant recognition by the people, and the frenzied screams of the frustrated she-devil is such that no comment is needed. This is the working of our God who does all things well.

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11:17-21

With the demise of Athaliah it was as if a mighty load had been lifted from the life of Judah, and the emotional relief was channelled into spiritual creativeness which set in motion a great movement of reformation. The spiritual leadership of the priest was magnificent in that it got right to the point of the nation's need and brought the people and their king to a clear commitment to the Lord their God (17). It was the kind of spiritual consecration that made a thorough end of all those things that could or would compete for the love and loyalty of their hearts. They were to be the Lord's people. Such a work is not set in motion nor maintained by spiritual novices, but by men and women, the priest and his wife, who had learned to deal with God in the loneliness of costly circumstances. It is such people who learn the necessity of singleness of heart, of balance of thought and action, and of the grace of patience born of faith, to wait for God's appointed time. Think of John the Baptist and his lonely desert preparation (Luke 1:76-80). Think also of Jesus, Moses and Paul. In each case there were years of preparation. Wait on the Lord, and be ready.

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12:1-3

These verses, summarising the long reign of Jehoash (Joash), reveal how closely intertwined were the fortunes of the priest and the king. The king did right and prospered because the priest instructed him, not in politics or economics, but in the word of God. This is how the church operates as the salt in and the light of society. But in spite of the driving force of Jehoiada's ministry and the king's submission to it, there was a significant lack of radical reformation, possibly due to the reluctance or laziness of the priests. And in due time the king himself took action (7), although the story goes on to suggest his motives were rather for the good of the state than the wellbeing of God's house and work (17-18). It appears from 2 Chron. 24:3-8 that Jehoiada had conformed to the pattern of his generation in collaborating in the business of duplicate wives for the king, a policy never sanctioned by God and a practice which always proved contrary to the best interests of the nation. This accommodation of God's truth to contemporary attitudes in matters of behaviour contributed to the declension of Jehoiada's influence over priests and king alike. This is probably the explanation why 12:3 records that thoroughgoing obedience to the word and will of God was not forthcoming. Without denying for a moment the real good these men worked we must still recognise a shadow on their work and consent to the fact that they were on a lower level spiritually at the end than at the beginning. Galatians 5:7 is searching question.

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12.4-16

On the face of it a great religious reformation was affecting the nation but when you look beneath the surface impressions things were not in a good or godly condition. The official position, as declared by the king, was that all the monies due to the Lord, the tithes *and* the freewill offerings of the people, should be ingathered and stewarded for the repair and restitution of the broken down House of God. This is how it should be, for spiritual renewal not accompanied by practical and financial faithfulness is suspect. But after twenty-three years it seems that nothing had been done with this steady inflow of money. Why? Was it being misappropriated by the priests or directed to irrelevant and illegal purposes? Was Jehoiada involved in this dishonest dealing or did he simply turn a blind eye to it? Did the whole priesthood think of the treasure of the Lord's house as being *their* property rather than as provision to enable the Lord's work to be done? Such a situation is dishonouring to God and it is for this reason that we must be meticulous in our dealings with the money that passes through our hands in relation to the work of the church. It is "holy" money belonging to God. It was the king who put an end to this scandalous practice and by his own authority by-passed the priests and saw to it that honest and faithful men were entrusted with the work of the building and its finance. What a rebuke, to have your share in God's work taken from you and to be laid aside yourself, disqualified (Matt. 21:43; 1 Cor. 9:27).

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12:17-21

The king, who so roundly rebuked the priests for their wrong dealing with the things of God, is now seen handing over the holy vessels and treasures to the king of Syria as a bribe to procure safety. But since we know that safety comes only from the Lord, there is never a case for abandoning God in the interest of safety. This is indeed idiotic thinking. It is not surprising to read that Jehoash's reign ended in murder and a complete denial of all that he had been earlier in his reign. 2 Chron. 24:17-25 tells the story in detail and it does not help to ease the darkness by pointing out that by this time Jehoiada the priest was dead (2 Chron. 24:15-17). Why did the king not turn to the Lord in the day of crisis as others had done before him? Why did he yield so easily to the policy of the princes and join them in their refusal of every word of God? Can this be the same king as before? What is the explanation? Was the king more devoted to the person of Jehoiada than to his ministry? Did Jehoiada draw back as we have already suggested, from carrying through a thorough ministry? Had there been a superficial agreement between king, priest and princes to "live and let live"? We cannot say, but we can resolve to expose our minds, hearts and wills to the searching word of God, which is salvation indeed. Remember that in the day of God's power, being restrained from evil is not the same as being saved. The latter lasts whereas the former leads to recoil and perhaps to a worse state than at the first (Lk. 11:23-28; 2 Pet. 2:20-21).

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13:1-9

The scene shifts to the northern kingdom of Israel and to the reign of Jehoahaz, son of Jehu, who had worked so mightily in the nation. This man was the eleventh evil king in succession after Jeroboam and this emphasis the perversity and stubbornness of unbelief. The whole life-direction of this nation was away from and contradictory to God, and they learned neither from the fate of their fathers nor from the ministry of the prophets. Remember that Elisha was still a force within the land and that there was with him a remnant of faith. But the evil influence of the king lasted for years and the people followed him in blind impenitence, so that God delivered them continually into the hand of their enemies. In this process of judgment something caused the king to cry to God for help. We cannot tell how this came about, save that it was the work of the Holy Spirit, possibly awakening some deeply forgotten convictions or feelings that he might have had in earlier days. What we do know is that God the Lord heard the wretched man's cry and delivered him and his people. This is indeed grace and mercy and presses home to our hearts the longsuffering of God. How He delays and stays His judgments, not willing that any should perish (2 Pet. 3:9-10). Then we read, "*nevertheless* (but) they did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam." We know the attitude and reaction only too well. But God has made it clear He will not always strive with man, or nations, (Gen. 6:3 AV) And when God stopped fighting, Israel was finished.

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13:10-19

Sixteen years of Jehoash's reign in Israel are passed over in a few verses, for he lived and died and had nothing to show for it except his evil influence. One incident is taken up for comment and part of its significance is that it makes very clear that this weak and wicked king knew all about Elisha, his significance, his message and the hope he held out to the nation. As in the case of the previous king, we have here the constraint of the Holy Spirit causing Jehoash to visit the dying prophet. We cannot really tell his motives but we must not be taken in too much by his tears, although we must never despise a weeping man nor too lightly brush him aside. Of course there are men who weep at a minister's funeral who have refused the man and his message all the years of his ministry. Such tears signify little. Yet at the same time the king paid tremendous testimony to the spiritual significance and worth of the old and dying prophet, recognising him as the defence and safety of Israel (14). Elisha was now about eighty years of age with at least fifty years of ministry behind him. Many of these years were spent in the context of a nation that could not be stopped in its downward career to judgment. But old though he was, he was by no means worn out and we see him here alive, dynamic and direct, fighting for the spiritual future of this king who had refused to listen all his life. This was the crisis moment for the king and that is why the prophet gave him so little time for the indulgence of tears. In human and spiritual stature, the prophet dwarfed the king.

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13:10-19

Elisha had no thought of dominating this weak and wicked king but was rather concerned that he should grasp the spiritual opportunity being presented to him. This was no time for the king to feel sorry for himself, nor to brood on his past failures nor on his future problems and difficulties. Such thoughts can paralyse a man and prevent any activity except a pathetic waiting for disaster. Elisha, in symbolic action full of promise and possibility, led the king as far as he could and then said, "Now, it is up to you. Strike." In some senses this was the laying on of hands in ordination unto hope and deliverance, and the king's heart should have thrilled to it. Instead, true to his weak nature, and with formal obedience totally lacking in fire or desire or expectation, he struck the ground three times and then stopped, possibly feeling rather stupid. He had the assurance of God's promise and power but unbelief had for so long run riot in his life that in the moment of crisis faith was strangled. All he might yet have been was frustrated in that moment. This is a solemn warning. Wrong living and dealing with God, especially under the ministry of a true man of God, are evil and dangerous things and their effect takes people by surprise (Heb. 12: 12-17). Forget the king. What is it that prevents us from launching out into wholehearted service and the realisation of all the glorious potential of life and personality by the grace of God?

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13:20-25

Look at the second half of the passage first and recognise in the midst of the grim struggle of experience the faithfulness and grace of the covenant-keeping God. In a very real sense the holding back of judgment in any one generation may well be attributable to the faith and obedience of the people of a previous generation who took God at His word and so carried forward His glorious purposes. But at the same time the righteous judgment of God cannot be averted and whether we read the last words of v.23, "as yet" (AV), or "until now" (RSV), or "to this day" (NIV), the solemn message remains. A further element of astonishment concerning the forbearance of God is emphasised in the N.E.B. which reads, "nor has He even yet banished them from His sight." We are nearing the point in the story when first Israel and then Judah as nations disappeared in the disaster of invasion and captivity, but even this did not invalidate the faithful promise and the sure purpose of God. Read Romans 11:1-12,15, 22-23, 25,28-36 and learn not only to marvel at the dimension of God's purposes but also to delay your own judgments in respect of any given situation. At the same time do not be desolated when a work that seemed spiritually stable and permanent collapses. They are not all of spiritual Israel who are of natural and organised Israel (Rom. 9:6-8), and saving faith is not always immediately apparent. It will be manifest in time, as will unbelief.

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13:20-25

Few commentaries deal with this astonishing miracle. Hebrews 11:4 refers to those who are still speaking and pointing the way of faith even though they have died, but this seems to be something more. Certainly the power of the prophet's person and his ministry has not come to an end with his earthly demise. Part of the message of the miracle is that though the servant is dead God is very much alive and active just as He was when the prophet was alive. Again the miracle here, as with the resurrection of our Lord, declares that death certainly has not the last word in the experience of the men and women of faith. You can imagine the awe that such a miracle would work in godless men, and what assurance and expectation it would kindle in the hearts of men of faith. Certainly there is an emphasis on the reality, the nearness and the power of the world to come, together with an unmistakable testimony with regard to the continuity of the one with the other. Elisha is still Elisha, he is with God, not in a limbo of forgottenness, and he is alive, not dead. The Shorter Catechism says, "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves until the resurrection." (Cf. Rom. 8:11). One thing is clear: the mighty God of Elijah, Elisha and all the mighty characters in the Bible, is our God and He lives to do His mighty works, no man or devil hindering.

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14:1-20

We begin a section dealing with a succession of kings, some good, some bad; some reigning forty years, some a mere few months; some coming to the throne by way of murder and intrigue and evacuating the throne by the same method. It would be a good exercise to read on quickly through the next few chapters and then to ask what is the significant spiritual message. It concerns what might be called "the acceleration of sin". A time comes for individuals, communities and nations when the evil situation of man's own making increases in momentum, so that it is out of control and careers on to disaster. Sometimes, as with an out-of-control vehicle, an upward gradient slows down the dangerous rush but its own momentum carries it over the top and the final rush to disaster begins. This is the story of Israel from chapter 14 onwards. Joash reigned sixteen years, Jeroboam the Second reigned forty years, both men doing evil in the sight of the Lord. Then six further kings occupied the throne in the space of twenty-one years, and at the end of that time Israel as a nation was no more. The lesson is simply that the course of events brings people and nations to the point of no return. But never think of evil as being finally in control. God rules and He "endures unchanging on" and His purposes cannot be thwarted (Job. 42:2).

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14:1-20

Keep in mind the fact that the remnant of faith within the nation was now left without the ministry and leadership of the great prophet Elisha. They would have to learn that God alone was their trusty refuge (Ps. 46) as they viewed the activities of king Amaziah in Judah. This man was religious and righteous up to a point but he stopped short of true and full obedience to God. He was a shrewd and calculating man and the retributive justice of v.5, although it may have had an element of vengeance in it, was not indiscriminate nor inhuman (6). His military exploits seemed to be ventures of faith and to have prospered but the record in 2 Chronicles 25 exposes the flaw of pride. Here in Kings it is very evident that the man became so confident in his success that his ideas became grandiose and he saw no reason why he should not take over the northern kingdom of Israel.

In v.8 the challenge to battle is given and replied to in terms of warning against presumption (9-10). But when men are consumed with "self" it is a waste of time trying to reason with them and they must be allowed to go their chosen way and to pay the price, which in this case was very high indeed and very humiliating. Even after the death of the conquering Jehoash, Amaziah had nothing but trouble and uncertainty and was finally removed by his own people. They had had enough! Tyrants are never loved, seldom respected, and are usually dealt with by tyrants.

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14:21-29

After a brief reference to the next king of Judah the story returns to Israel and wicked Jeroboam, the second king of that name (1 Kings 14:7-16). This man reigned forty-one years, doing evil in the sight of the Lord, and yet during that time the fortunes of Israel prospered and the nation entered a time of success and security. Keep the perspective. For the last fifteen years of Amaziah's reign Judah was afflicted and chastised, even though their spiritual condition was better than that in Israel where evil Jeroboam was free of affliction and enjoying prosperity. Why should this be so? Judah was nearer the heart of God's ongoing purposes and had still a future, while Israel was already beyond remedy. The Lord works hard with those who are yet to be of significance in His plans of redemption. That is a comfort and encouragement (Heb. 12:5-11). At the same time we must marvel that in spite of everything that was evil in Israel God had not yet spoken the final word of rejection. He is far slower to pronounce judgment than we are, possibly because He is not flustered by evil nor panicked by it as we tend to be. But that His judgment is finally necessary and fully justified is confirmed and demonstrated by the persistence of the people in evil in spite of some of the most glorious ministry in all history.

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14:21-29

Take up the final statement in yesterday's reading and recall that during the time of Jeroboam the nation had three mighty prophets, Jonah, Amos and Hosea. At times we can correlate the rising tide of evil with the

withdrawal of true ministry from the church within the nation but at other times, as in this case, we have spiritual and moral degeneration proceeding in the face of mighty spiritual ministry. Granted the true dimension of the situation was hidden by the prosperity of the nation under Jeroboam's rule, but the prophets were in no doubt about what was coming and their ministry was derided and refused. Jonah, whose personal story is in the book bearing his name, exercised a ministry of encouragement (25). Amos preached a radical word of realism which challenged the nation's complacency (Amos 4:1-12; 5:14-15; 6:1-6; 7:10-16; 8:11-12; 9:8-9,13-15). Hosea, more than any other, reveals both the heart and holiness of God and tells of love that passes knowledge (Hosea 2:13-15; 4:1-10, 17; 5:15; 6:4; 10:1-2, 12; 11:1-4, 7-9; 13:1-4, 9; 14:1-4). But even ministry like that was rejected. It is easy to understand both the urgency of the prophetic message and the burden of the prophetic heart. If man can feel it so, what must the heart of God feel as people and nations reach the point of no return? We see it in the sorrowing lament of Jesus for Jerusalem. "I would but you would not" (Matt. 23:37).

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15:1-7

When Jeroboam's illustrious, affluent, but dangerous reign had still some fourteen years to go, a young man called Azariah, better known to us as Uzziah (Isaiah 6), came to the throne of Judah and there began what was to be a glorious reign of fifty-two years. The record here emphasises only the disastrous end to the reign of this king who was so deeply mourned by Isaiah, but in 2 Chron. 26 we have the full story, the significant verses being 4-6, 7-8, 15, 16-21. Here is a man who served God fruitfully for many years, the type of man others look to for encouragement, seemingly so strong, sure and stable, yet he came crashing down in a way for which there was no remedy at all. This was no sudden collapse as v.4 indicates, but where a successful life in the work of God is built on a foundation that is suspect there is always danger. In 2 Chron. 26:16 we are told that it was at the height of his powers that he began to take liberties with God openly (as he may have been doing privately for a long time). And when he was challenged and rebuked for his unwarranted and unnecessary intrusion into the priesthood, he reacted with anger and resentment, and was in that moment smitten with leprosy. He had forgotten, in the blessing of God on his labours, that he was and must always be a man accountable to God. God looks on the heart and knows with devastating accuracy when it is no longer safe to use a man in holy service. For wilful Samson there was restoration in his death (Judges 16:28ff.), but for Uzziah there was none. He died a leper and everyone knew.

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15:8-12

"The importance of this brief excerpt of history for us lies in the last words in v.12(AV) 'and so it came to pass'. These verses have one simple lesson to teach, and it is that God is faithful to His promise. He had said to Jehu that his house would reign to the fourth generation in Israel (10:30), and reign it did, till the appointed and promised time. Here then, is a word for dark and troubled days. Disorder and increasing anarchy were taking hold of the land, and everywhere ominous clouds were gathering and in the midst, a faithful covenant keeping God was true to His word amid the untruth and lawlessness of His people. Here is a reality we can lay hold on in our own day. Be the international situation as black as it may, and the moral assets of the nation never so low, here is a sure anchorage for the soul in the midst of the gathering storm - the unchanging faithfulness of the living God. He is the one constant factor amid the changes and chances of life. Has He said and will He not do it? Has He promised and will He fail to perform? 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away'. Lean hard then on the promises of God!" (Rev. J. Philip).

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15:13-22

When reading these grim passages, remember that the Bible is not to be read as mere history but as the story of the outworking of the glorious purposes of God's salvation. Since we in our turn are now caught up into these very same purposes we must learn the spiritual lessons of the stories of old. This is a New Testament exhortation, spiritual and practical (1 Cor.10:1-15). Our passage makes sorry reading and it needs little imagination to sense something of the restlessness and demoralisation that must have marked the lives of the

people as a result of these repeated changes of government, to say nothing of the alarm created by the methods used to dethrone kings. But this is always the situation when a nation breaks loose from God. The powers and passions set free are quite beyond human control, and a dominion of fear results. Think how few thrones or governments, whether in democracies or republics, are safe in our own day, when coups and counter-coups add confusion to confusion. "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be" (Tennyson), *but* God's throne abides for ever. He makes the wrath of man to serve His purposes and when man tries to exceed His permission and become a law to himself then God simply says, "NO!" (Ps.76:10 AV). By murder (14), bribes (19) and extortion (20) men try with great effort to establish their name and their work, but it is no good. Fighting against God is a very exhausting and dangerous business. It never works out. But God's will is life, peace and rest (Matt. 11:28-30).

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15:23-31

The sobering thing in this depressing story is not the swift, murderous end to brief reigns but rather the length of time wicked men were permitted to occupy the throne and exercise evil influence contrary to God. But we have to learn that these dispositions of providence are never accidental, and in the context of them we must learn faith. We sometimes sing in a hymn that speaks of the coming of God's kingdom, "But the slow watches of the night not less to God belong" (Hosmer), and we have to learn that time belongs to God. He is not, and cannot be, provoked into precipitate action, which is more than can be said of us. But then, we are creatures who lapse so easily into unbelief that we think God is at work only when the extravaganza of success is granted to His people. It is not so. Wait for God's time! Unbelief also fails to see and to learn from the disciplines and warnings of disaster. In today's verses "all the land of Naphtali"(29) was carried away captive by Assyria and no one had power to stop it. This was "the writing on the wall" (Dan. 5:5ff.) for Israel but no one could understand it and no one ever thought that the worst would come. There is a disastrous optimism in unbelief that blinds people to the facts of experience. The evil power of Assyria could well have said to Israel, "I will be back in due time for the rest of you," but it would have made no difference. Of course, someone had to be blamed for this political reverse and a murder guaranteed a change of party politics but no change in the sin and decadence of the nation. Men might speculate as to whether a righteous God could possibly be on the side of a godless empire, as indeed Habakkuk did (Hab. 1:1-2:4), but God does not need "sides", for He sifts all men as He moves sovereignly on in His working.

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15:32-38

The close of today's passage indicates that while Israel was reeling like an incapable and insensitive drunkard towards the precipice of national judgment because of her sins, Judah was not really learning the lesson that righteousness alone exalts and establishes a nation (Prov. 14:34). Uzziah's good reign of fifty-two years was followed by his son's reign of sixteen good years (2 Chron. 27) and yet the spiritual health of Judah was in a bad way. The body politic was not purged of its idolatry, immorality, injustice and inhumanity, and such poisons, however well concealed, will go on doing their deadly work. If, as some commentators suggest, the first five chapters of Isaiah give the background of Jotham's reign we have indeed an ominous situation. Isaiah insisted that, while there was all the appearance of religious renewal and continuance in the old paths of good king Uzziah, there was in fact a deep sickness of soul throughout the whole nation. Perhaps Jotham did all he was capable of or all the situation allowed him to do and we must not be eager to criticise and condemn. After all, in our time, what have we accomplished in the business of rooting out evil and establishing righteousness and salvation in our land? Nor must we impugn the spiritual worth of Jotham because of the backsliding of his son. Many saints have had backsliding sons (Samuel, for example in 1 Sam. 8:5), and the explanations are not easy. But God is working. Having determined to amputate Israel from the body of the nation to give Judah the chance to survive and continue free from infection, God is also prepared to wield the surgeon's knife to cut from the life of Judah that idolatry which was a continuing barrier to their blessing and a permanent danger to the royal line of David, from whom Messiah was to come in the fulness of the time. God is in earnest. Are you not glad it is so?

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16:1-6

When we read these stories of God's dealings in righteous judgment with men, families and nations we need to remember that He still has not changed. We are foolish, as Ahaz was, if we fail to interpret our national and international circumstances in terms of the working of the living God. Ahaz of Judah must have known well the course of events in the neighbouring kingdom of Israel, the national declension and the preaching of the prophets in the face of such wickedness, but he chose to take no notice. The description of his evil ways is astonishing and portrays a man motivated by unbelief, pride and the sheer stupidity of bravado, "he even burned his son as an offering" (3) as if he was trying to demonstrate how utterly free he was from the restrictions of the Almighty. You can scarcely believe this was the son of Jotham, and grandson of great king Uzziah. The point the record seems to be making is that the man's way of life was deliberately chosen. In spite of indications that God was beginning to tire of the nation's sinning (15:37), this king had only one desire, to flaunt his independence in the face of the God of his fathers and strike out on a line of his own. But the man who challenges God finds that the challenge is accepted. Sometimes the answer comes swiftly in sudden catastrophe, sometimes in slow, relentless outworking, but it comes. Note well that even in the coming of judgment there is still grace and opportunity for repentance for it is recorded that Rezin could not overcome Ahaz (5). The king of Judah is faced with another choice.

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16:7-20

God was speaking loudly to the king but he chose not to hear and determined to place a totally human interpretation on his circumstances. When you dismiss God from your reckoning you go floundering from one complication to another even more disastrous. The picture is clear. Israel and Syria (Aram) come against Judah from the north (5) and are held off. Then Edom attacks from the south (6), taking advantage of Judah's predicament. In this situation Ahaz turns, not to God, but to Assyria, the up-and-coming power for help. He is helped at a cost and temporarily. Then when Ahaz goes to Damascus he sees an Assyrian altar and assumes that this idol is the explanation of Assyria's success and his own deliverance, and he commands that a similar one be built in Jerusalem. Possibly he never meant to end up such a total and public rebel against God, but the trouble with sinning is that it leads you on into further complications until it is virtually impossible to extricate yourself. At the end of the passage the king is seen demolishing the furnishings of the House of God to satisfy his pagan master in terms of paying tribute. It would be almost too much to believe were it not so clearly recorded in Scripture. Ahaz stepped back from God in the face of a spiritual ministry of great reassurance (Isa. 7). The assessment of the whole situation in 2 Chron. 28: 16-27 is awesome. This man wanted the kind of gods who would give him his way no matter what life he led. He got these gods, and they ruined him.

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17:1-23

This is history and its explanation is spiritual apostacy. Keep in mind that at this time Judah, the southern and still hopeful kingdom, had become a vassal state of Assyria because of Ahaz and his blind, backslidden policy. Israel was even more of a subject state, yet Hoshea tried to scheme with Egypt, with the disastrous result that Assyria laid siege to Samaria and after three years captured the city and exiled all the people. That the city withstood for three years is a testimony to the determination of evil even in the face of the final judgment of God. But in 722 B.C. Samaria fell and we understand that in the first year 27,290 people were transported away and settled in small groups in alien territory where they would be most likely to lose their identity. This was meant to be a solemn warning to Judah, but it was ignored. Israel also had been warned, very clearly, to no avail as Hosea 8:1-14 records. In today's verses there is given the post mortem on the death of a nation, on the collapse of the people of God. Link together verses 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 16, 18, 20, 23. With a blind stubbornness that not even the many prophets could check, Israel went on and on in the road that was bound to end in destruction. They disappeared from sight and from memory, but the work of God went on, and its sure progress simply highlighted the wrongness of those who had had to be removed because they were a danger to God's holy cause.

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17:1-23

Two specific elements of Israel's sin are emphasised here in this summing up by the judge of the case against a people who had been called, chosen and blessed and whose story could have been so different. It was not the difficulties nor the cost of true discipleship that frustrated the possibilities of this people. In v.7-9 there is highlighted their ingratitude. They forgot that God alone had made them free, and had brought them where they were in goodness, grace and blessing. Apart from God they were nothing, had nothing and could never be anything. When people begin to feel they can take liberties with God and with themselves, then disaster is not far off. In the passage beginning with v.9 we are told that Israel apostatised *secretly* long before there was any evidence of a departure from God. Behind the facade of apparent spirituality there were hearts seduced away, lives not right, vows compromised and altars neglected and broken down. God was angry, and His anger was manifested in mercy, for He sent the prophets to plead with the people to turn (13 cf. Ezek. 18:31-32; 33:11). Where sin abounded, grace much more abounded. But once God has spoken things can never be the same again, and in v.15, when their lives were claimed by God, their answer was clearly in the negative. There is no excuse and the word of God's grace becomes the word which seals a people unto judgment (Matt. 11:20-24; John 15:22). Israel and her kings were happy with God so long as He gave them victory over their enemies, but when He called them to be a holy and obedient people they rebelled. It was so in the time of Jesus. So long as He told parables, did miracles, fed the hungry, healed the sick and rebuked the establishment, people were enthusiastic, but when He spoke about taking up the cross and following Him they went away. The idolatry of self is the curse of the human race.

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17:24-41

If the previous readings have spoken of the dread acceleration of sin, these verses speak of the thoroughness of God when it comes to matters of judgment. The population of Israel was virtually removed and a new race of people were settled in the land of promise by the directive of the king of Assyria. This was a dreadful humiliation, never forgotten by the Jews, so that in the time of Jesus it was still true that the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans because it was reckoned that, because of this introduction of new stock, the Samaritans were not really Jews at all. Of course, as Paul pointed out, the Jews themselves were not truly Abraham's children since they were people of unbelief, not faith (Rom. 9:6-8). But note that although the land was under judgment, its title and government had not passed from the hand of God, and when these immigrants introduced (naturally enough) their pagan gods (which Israel had courted to her disaster) God sent a plague of lions among them. There can be no trifling with God and those who presume to do so can expect trouble, as Pharaoh had learned (Ex. 7:14-18 ff), and the Philistines (1 Sam. 5). The king of Assyria recognised that there was a religious or spiritual explanation of the plague of lions and produced the solution of sending back a priest of Israel to pacify what he considered to be the "local deity" of the land. You cannot blame the king for having such a poor and narrow concept of Israel's God. He had' formed it from the way Israel had dealt with God.

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17:24-41

There would have been real missionary hope in this situation if it had been a prophet rather than a priest who was sent into Samaria. The truth preached by one of God's faithful spokesmen would have challenged the iniquity of the people and brought spiritual light into the darkness. A priest of Israel, being part of the decadent religious establishment, would only institute the kind of religious observance that would neither challenge nor offend. When the passage speaks of teaching the people to "fear" the Lord it is clear from the context that ceremonial worship, not heart worship, is meant. This is made very clear by the fact that the resultant situation was one in which a whole colony of gods or a composite god was worshipped. They feared the Lord *and* served other gods (33). It was a token acknowledgment of God, to try to keep the peace and to ensure that no one could call them "godless". This is the kind of syncretism found in such organisations as freemasonry, where hymns are sung (they are religious) but the name of Christ is excluded, so that no offence will be given to those who do not believe in Him. They believe in God (Jehovah), so are they not "Christian"? But with Jehovah are joined Baal and Osiris etc, giving a composite god which is no god at all. Such a religious situation, so similar to that in our passage, declares that a good member of the association "will at the last be accepted into the everlasting hall of

the grand architect of the universe." This is the religion of salvation by works, and explains in some degree the absence of men from churches. They have an alternative, just as Samaria had. But there is only one name by which sinners can be saved (Acts. 4:12).

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18:1-8

Dark tragedy and judgment covered the land that had been Israel. And in Judah, through the reign of Ahaz, ominous signs were already abounding. It was in this dark situation that Hezekiah came to the throne and the issue was revival! Three whole chapters are given to tell of this good king, and four chapters of Chronicles (2 Chron. 29-32) and four in Isaiah (Isa. 36-39). The complete story gives a series of lessons. 1. You cannot have revival without the Devil emerging to fight against the quickened work of God. 2. Revival is the sovereign work of God and cannot be manufactured by people, although prophetic ministry (Isaiah) is a vital factor. 3. Revival can be hindered, qualified and quenched by people, and it can in fact come too late, so that its influence is limited to a delay of the final national disaster. 4. Abortive revival leads to a situation that is worse than at the start. 5. Revival cannot come apart from a thoroughgoing reformation in the House of God, a reaffirmation of spiritual priorities, and a re-consecration of God's own people. 6. As in the case of Hezekiah, the men used of God in mighty work are human, fallible, and prone to error and fear. Take the long term view. For sixteen years evil Ahaz ruled Judah (2 Chron. 28:22) and was followed by good Hezekiah for twenty-nine years. His son, Manasseh, who reigned fifty-five years, overturned the good that had been done (2 Kings 21:1-3), but two years later Josiah came to the throne for thirty-one years and a more thoroughgoing revival ensued. Why summarise all this? It is to persuade us that we are engaged in spiritual warfare on a *long term* basis (Eph. 6:10ff).

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18:1-8

What a testimonial to a godly king and what a pattern for a life of fruitful service! Hezekiah, twenty-five years old, as soon as he had the opportunity made a public rejection of things that were wrong, even long standing things that had become accepted (4). He trusted in the Lord, and held fast to Him, refusing to depart from His commandments (5-6). Little wonder the story goes on to say that the Lord was with him. But it was not merely personal blessing that resulted, for Hezekiah began to break the power of the enemies of God's people (7-8). This is what can happen when a man takes God seriously and sets himself to cleanse the House of God by the dynamic of personal example (2 Chron. 29:3-11). The king, like many a spiritual leader, met with refusal and scorn (2 Chron. 30:6-12), but there was a remnant of faithful response and that is sufficient for God to work with. Hezekiah would not be stopped (2 Chron. 31:20-21). He was in earnest and recognised that God was likeminded and that nothing casual or half-hearted was of any use in the present situation.. Remember that by now Isaiah's ministry had been maintained for twenty years, and that although the powers of government had not been swayed yet there were groups of the faithful throughout the nation. These constituted the spiritual life-line of the future. They were often disheartened and suffering, grieved because of the little response to prayer and preaching alike. But, they held on through Hezekiah's reign, through Manasseh's half century of evil, down to Josiah's time, on through the captivity in Babylon, the return with Ezra and Nehemiah, on to the Incarnation and right down to our own day. God does not leave Himself without a witness to His working (Acts 14: 15-17) and periodically there bursts in upon. the public awareness a demonstration of what God is doing all the time, namely working His glorious purposes. This we call revival, whether it is the right term or not.

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18:9-16

When Hezekiah's work was still in its initial stages Samaria fell and the news must have solemnised all Judah, even though there is a suggestion that Judah might have felt somewhat superior, considering that such things could *never* happen to their kingdom. But the enemy of God's people and work is rapacious and insatiable and in due time Assyria came against Judah. Hezekiah's mistake was in trying a policy of appeasement, for that simply signified to the enemy that the king was essentially afraid and unsure of himself, his position and his God. Without question this is an attack by the powers of evil against a newly revived work of God and it must be seen in that light. Hezekiah was very aware of the successes of the enemy who seemed to be carrying all

before him. But unless God Himself has been defeated the issue is not so dark as it *seems*. This is where we need to learn to stand our ground in faith and allow the situation to develop until we see the way through. Panic measures simply complicate things and we, like the king, need to be reminded from Scripture of the dependability of God (Ex. 14:13; 2 Chron. 20:17; Isa. 28:16; 26:3-4; Deut. 33:27). But if we do not ground ourselves in these truths when life is quiet, we will not be able to avail ourselves of their power when the battle really starts. Be ready! Watch and pray.

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18:17-37

Here is psychological warfare on a spiritual level. Having given ground in the first skirmish, Hezekiah has allowed fear to gain a foothold, and it is this the enemy plays on seeking total demoralisation of the whole of Jerusalem. It was an impressive display of strength and the verbal propaganda was calculated to undermine confidence even further. It was lies, because it suggested that the Devil was stronger than God. But if people's minds are bombarded with lies that are big enough, they may begin to believe them. The loud threats here are typical of Satan's roaring-lion technique (1 Pet. 5:8). But Rabshakeh went too far and his preposterous claims (19-25) began to be seen for what they were by a people who had begun to prove the power of the living God. In v. 22, 25 the aim is to create uncertainty and make the people wonder if they are wise in staking all on God. In v.29 the crafty spirit of hell seeks to undermine spiritual leadership. In v.31-32 the bribe is the offer of an easier life in which satisfaction will take the place of battle. In v. 33-35 we have the basic assault on the new-found faith of the Israelites but it is recognised as spiritual arrogance, and the attacks of the Devil begin to have the effect of strengthening faith, not destroying it. The impact of Israel's total silence must have been tremendous (36). It was the silence of faith that refused to come down to bandy words with the emissaries of evil. This is something we must learn. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal and we refuse to engage in battle on that level. We go to God.

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19:1-7

There is a glorious realism when you acknowledge that there is absolutely nothing you can do on your own behalf and you are cast back utterly on God. If the grim battles of experience do this for us then they are blessings in disguise. Think of the many instances in the apostolic church when the sheer pressure of experience drove the Christians to prayer. Here in the story of Jerusalem, the king, priests, people and prophet are all drawn together in a spiritual unity of purpose and determination in which there is no presumption at all. Gone is the old attitude which seemed to think that God was obliged to help whenever an anguished request came from a backslidden people. In v.2-4 the king recognises that the prophet is the real spiritual leader of the nation and with deep humility he asks for prayer. It is wonderful to see the swiftness and sureness of Isaiah's response. He is already engaged in the presence of God on behalf of the people, and the content of the message to the king makes it quite clear that God Himself is fully aware of the situation; that the challenge is addressed to God; and that action is already planned for deliverance. It is this sure word of promise that holds the king firm in faith when the confrontation is renewed. Do not fail to remember that this Hezekiah, now placing himself under divine protection, is the same man who, at the beginning of the engagement, allowed himself to be shaken into foolish and hopeless compromise. What a word for those who feel they have got off to a bad start. Get back to God the mighty rock and put yourself into his all-powerful and gracious hand. He will not fail you or forsake you. Whatever the issue, it will be for your eternal good and for His eternal glory. What more could anyone ask?

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19:8-19

Threats from the persons and powers of evil will continue to be a menace and a source of demoralisation, even although we know full well that their downfall has been pronounced. At such a time we must assert faith over against fear and refuse to allow the Devil to undermine our confidence in God, which he seeks to do even when we go to God in prayer. It is amazing how often in the presence of God our prayers are concerned with the terribleness of the situation and our own manifest weakness. Both these facts are no doubt true but our help is

not found in concentrating on them. That would be to fall into a trap of the Devil. We must learn to do what Hezekiah did, what the apostolic church did in Acts 4:23-31, and what Isaiah did (Isa. 40:1-18, 25-31). We must get the thoughts of our hearts centred on God Himself, for He is Lord of all, and the screaming, threatening, calculated fury of men and nations does not cause Him one moment of concern (Ps. 2). There would be a transformation of our prayer life if we allowed our costly experiences to teach us to pray as this king did here. He is not afraid to look at the complications and confusion of the outworking of international history, but at the same time, twice over, he insists on reminding himself that his God is the Lord of all the kingdoms of the earth. Our times are in His hands (Ps. 31:15) and all the issues belong to Him, and to Him alone (Ps. 68:20 AV). It was the awareness of this that kept the prophet Isaiah so sure in all his ministry. He had seen the Lord high and lifted up, whose throne can never be overthrown, and in this fact he sheltered (Isa.6). This was his peace.

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19:20-37

In answer to his prayer that was so diffused with worship, Hezekiah was persuaded that the real issue was between Sennacherib and God Himself (22, 23, 27). The Lord declares how He will humble this proud emperor (28) who has spoken blasphemy and taken issue with the Almighty. It will not be hard for the Lord to do this and the wording of v.27-28 signifies His complete and utter control over the situation. Compared with the sovereign power of the living God, Assyria and all it stands for is but a puny, insignificant weakling. At the same time we must recognise that Assyria had been allowed by God to extend its sway over the nations in order to be the rod of His rebuke and the fire of His purifying and judicial purpose. If Hezekiah had held his earlier position in impenitence of heart and impurity of life (13-16), as other evil kings in Judah and Israel had done, there would have been no deliverance. But this man had taken shelter under the shadow of the Almighty and he was safe. Never think for a moment that God approves the actions of evil men and powers even though He *uses* them to do His will. In the fulness of the time their proud wickedness will be brought to judgment, and if that day is delayed we must wait in the patience of faith, undecieved by the interim situation. Read Psalm 73 and be at peace.

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19:20-37

Concentrate on the second half of the passage from v.29ff. and see both the thoroughness and confidence of God, to say nothing of His competence! It would take time for normal conditions of life to be restored (29), and this is something we must accept in the outworking of spiritual battles. There are inevitable human consequences which are redressed only by natural processes, and the restrictions of enjoyment we inevitably experience must not be resented. It takes time to work out of our systems the entail of sin. But at the same time, by the grace of God, there is a renewing and developing process at work whereby the spiritual roots of individuals and fellowships are driven down into the good soil of God's love and grace, with a subsequent harvest of fruit to God's glory and the blessing of His people. For too long in Judah the desire had been for fruit without root, deliverance without discipline, rich fellowship without growing maturity and obedience, and for God's goodness without God. In such a situation the amazing grace and absolute faithfulness of God towards His people are quite staggering. The powers of evil will not be allowed to touch this people and this work. God Himself will be their defence, for they are His and have been His from ages past. In one night the angel of the Lord dealt with the danger, silently but devastatingly. Think back to the earlier situation in the nation when it seemed that the tides of apostacy would never be turned and marvel at the swift willingness of God to intervene in answer to the prayers of a repentant people. What hope this should give us in our own generation. Are there not signs that the sheer pressure of life is causing the people of God to begin to pray as they have not done for a long time? It is a day of hope.

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20:1-11

Hezekiah's story reveals him to be a man whose spiritual life ebbed and flowed and showed little real constancy. This is not to deny the good that God did for him and through him, but it does reveal the unrealised possibilities of the man. The time came when he was sick and it was made plain to him that it was not God's will that he

should be healed. The subsequent story, and other sections of scripture, make it plain that God can and does heal, by means of immediate miraculous intervention as well as by slower natural and medical processes. But it is not *always* God's will to heal (2 Cor. 12:8-9; 2 Tim. 4:20), and even here, when earnest supplication was heard and answered, there is a solemn undertone of warning, for the fifteen years granted to Hezekiah proved disastrous. We may not say that God was wrong in granting the man's request. Rather we must see the longsuffering (patience) of God (2 Pet. 3:15) seeking to lead this man to true salvation. If the last fifteen years of Hezekiah's reign were an extension of grace, and the whole of his reign was twenty-nine years, then we see a man who was in danger of being cut off with only half of his life of service fulfilled. The message in v.1-3 is that his day of opportunity was past and the day of assessment and reckoning was coming upon him. This solemn word brought tears and an impassioned appeal for another chance, based on a claim to have walked in faithfulness to God in the past. It is not for us to evaluate that claim, for God heard the prayer and answered it. The man had had moments of spiritual greatness, such as in 2 Chron. 32:7-8, 20, but Satan had desired to have him, to blight his usefulness, and Hezekiah had given him ground. He knew he had lost out spiritually and was distressed about it. But that is not repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-11) and subsequent events were to prove this.

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20-1-11

The king's anxiety for a sign of confirmation reveals some of the weakness and unbelief of his wavering heart. When the sign was given it seems to have produced carelessness rather than earnestness, almost as if the man felt he was quite safe, since God would not go back on His word given and sealed. We are not concerned to explain the miraculous sign, for such attempts often end up in explaining away the miraculous element. Since God is absolute and sovereign the miraculous is not a difficulty. Some say we have to think of a roof-top pillar casting its shadow on a series of steps, so marking the passage of time. The king, lying in bed could see the creeping shadow and grasp the message that time was running out for him. Then, by a physical miracle of gigantic proportions (to us, who are small, but not to God) the whole earth being thrown back on its axis, time was reversed and the king felt free from the past and in possession of the future. On the other hand we could think of the sun's rays being refracted in some way, at exactly the right moment (still totally miraculous) so that it was the shadow that retreated rather than time itself. The important thing is that God was dealing with a man, doing battle in grace for the good of his soul in the remainder of his years and in preparation for eternity. To discover the king's reaction read Isaiah 38:9-20 with his spiritual interpretation of experience, seeing himself like an unfinished piece of material cut from the loom; seeing God's loving forgiveness; and making vows for the rest of his days. But in 2 Chron. 32:25 we have the realistic assessment. The man learned nothing. His extra fifteen years were to do no good to him or to Judah.

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20:12-21

Pride is a terrible thing especially in the life of a man who has received wonderful goodness from the hand of the Lord. The pressure being removed, and feeling healthy again, the king began to think of himself as the conqueror of Assyria, and when messengers from the king of Babylon arrived, weak, vain Hezekiah felt he was back among the big names again. This seems to have boosted his self-confidence and, all his recent vows forgotten, he opened his heart to the men from Babylon in terms of commitment in friendship and allegiance to them. Then, when he was challenged and rebuked by Isaiah his reaction was first arrogance (15) and then contemptuous carelessness (19). Little wonder Hezekiah's story ends two verses later. There was nothing more to say. In the fifteen years of "second chance" granted to him he wasted the spiritual gain of the first half of his life, and into the bargain he had a son, Manasseh. It would have been better for the people of God and their work if that son had never been born. Read 2 Chron. 32:22-31. The Devil knew the man's weak point and, playing on it, drew him out from the shelter and safety of God. To see spiritual opportunity wasted is a solemn business. Look to the future! What you are going to be is probably the best test of what you have been in relation to God.

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20:12-21

In these historical narratives it is good to note how the prophets of God had a wider and fuller perspective of the situation than the kings. It is amazing just how true a grasp the prophets had of the national and international situation and Isaiah certainly discerned something of the course of events, and was aware of certain signal flags already flying. During Hezekiah's twenty-nine years of reign Israel had collapsed and ceased to be as a nation. But there were other strong tides of power. Assyria was dominant but already beginning to decline, and the ambassadors from Babylon were far more concerned to assess the political situation than to enquire about an irrelevant king's health. At least *they* considered Hezekiah irrelevant, although it might have proved different if the man had done right by God. Babylon was the up-and-coming power and was to be God's instrument of judgment against Judah. But already on the far perimeter of the international scene there was the insignificant empire of Persia which, within half a century, was to be the dominant power under the mighty hand of God. Read God's words about Cyrus of Persia in Isaiah 44:28-45:15. There is often the hiding of God's power (Habakkuk 3:4 AV), but that is no ground for failing to recognise it by faith. It is only when we see the vast perspective of God's power and purpose that we begin to see people, including ourselves, in true proportion. The thrill of the prophets was their awareness that they were involved, under the direction of God, in this mighty cavalcade of redeeming purpose. What a tragedy to lose or mortgage it.

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21:1-9

Manasseh reigned longer than any other king, worse than any other, and left a scar on the nation from which it never recovered (24:3-4). In one sense there was peace in his long reign but the only prophetic ministry was that which foretold judgment. It is alarming to see just how far down, humanly speaking, the work of God is allowed to go, and it presents a mighty challenge to faith to stand sure in God at such a time. Manasseh's story is one of half a century of disintegration, and the terms of the narrative make you think of Jesus' words, "This is your hour and the power of darkness" (Lk. 22:53). Paul speaks of the mystery of iniquity at work (2 Thess. 2:7). But although evil may be subdued, strident, dormant, defiant or rampant as here with Manasseh, evil is never unchecked and never in control however much circumstances seem to suggest it is so. This passage is alarming if linked with Rom. 1:18ff. and Eph. 5:6. Manasseh, having grown up in a compromised spiritual situation, was held in check only until his father died and then he was free to be himself. The word of God was pushed out, the good heritage of the past was ditched, the whole idea of the holy and the sacred was scorned (3-5) and life became a thing of sensual appeal (6). Like many a blasphemous rebel he destroyed the past, made the present a spiritual vacuum, and having invited hell, found his invitation accepted. The fruit of this man's life was the demonising of society (2) and inevitable judgment.

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21:10-18

During this king's reign the nation went beyond the point of no return and judgment became inevitable. Granted there was delay in that final national judgment, as we shall see, but the die was cast. Now, in this situation there was God's remnant of faith, for He never leaves Himself without a witness. These godly people must have suffered in the way described in Hebrews 11:33-40 and, far from selling out under pressure, there is ground for believing they exercised a ministry of intercession under the guidance of Isaiah in terms such as are expressed in 1 Tim. 2:1-3. After all, had not Isaiah at the outset of his ministry seen the unshakable throne of the living God and the whole earth full of His glory (Isa. 6:1-13)? But the prophet's strong encouragement would also be tender as we read in Isa. 63:8-9; 43:1-7. At the same time the deep earnestness of God is not to be missed in today's verses. It is going to be a final end for Judah, as v.13 described so vividly. It had to be so. Yet the children of the men and women of the remnant of faith were destined to be the instruments of God in days to come when God would do mightier things than any of the generations had yet imagined. We are indeed saved in hope.

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21:19-26

The next king followed the way of his father, which was the way of the nation, now corrupted and away from God. We may consider this virtually inevitable and scarcely worthy of comment but, if we turn to 2 Chron. 33:10-20, we find the astonishing story of the repentance of Manasseh. This is indeed a miracle of grace and should give heart to those who feel they have sinned too much and too long and have forfeited the right to hope. There is indeed mercy with the Lord. Was this not an answer to the prayers of the remnant of faith on behalf of this wastrel son of a backslidden father? It was the strong discipline of God that brought the man to humble himself before Him and it may well be that the story of his father's recovery from illness, told to him as a boy, was quickened in his memory by the Holy Spirit to become a contributory factor in a remarkable conversion. Why do we so limit God and assume so soon that a situation is beyond remedy? Could it be that Manasseh's prayers in his last days were the influence that turned the heart of his grandson Josiah to God? It was too late for the king to influence his son Amon, or to put the brake on the nation's headlong dash to destruction, but at least he could pray for his grandson. Why do we leave things so late? Bring up the children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord so that their ways are ordered in God before the wilful heart is captivated by the spirit of the world (Prov. 22:6). But this can be done only by prayer, precept and example. Don't take chances with God, if only for the sake of the children and their children.

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22:1-2

In spite of Manasseh's repentance recorded in 2 Chron. 33:10-20, his son Amon, already a teenager, had completely accepted the godless pattern of his father's way of life and never departed from it. But during Manasseh's last years a grandson by the name of Josiah was born, and it may well have been that the child's early years were influenced by the grandfather rather than by Amon the father, and when this child was a mere eight years old he ascended the throne of Judah and in his reign a mighty spiritual awakening took place. We must allow the facts of the story to thrill our hearts, encourage our faith and make us see that the long years of darkness in the nation were not negative but positive in terms of preparing the situation for the sovereign working of God in revival. For half a century darkness seemed to hold sway, faith was almost unknown, and the spiritual and moral life of the nation declined to desperate depths. In that situation God was working, not merely in the repentance of Manasseh, but in the birth of two children destined to be of great significance. Josiah, whose story we begin to study, was born in the palace; and Jeremiah was born, possibly in the same year, in the home of one of the priests (Jer. 1:1-10). The lessons are solemn and glorious. God sometimes bypasses a generation (Amon), because of its intractable wickedness, but He presses on into the future, bringing to birth and raising up His chosen servants. We must learn to look for God's working and to be ready for such a time as this.

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22:1-2

In the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18) there was revival, but it was so superficial and temporary that it served only to conceal the real depth of the sickness of the nation. In Josiah's reign there was a much more basic spiritual awakening, undergirded by the reinstatement of the Word of God in the House of God and then in the nation, but even this was not sufficient to stop the downward course of the nation. Yet we must not undervalue the significance of Josiah's reign, the first seventeen years of which are passed over in these two verses. It was a time when there was a stirring of prophetic activity through the ministries of Zephaniah, Nahum and then Jeremiah and we do well to trace the process of development. In today's verses Josiah is king at the age of eight. In 2 Chron. 34:3-7 he is sixteen, seeking after God but possibly not clearly or fully instructed. In the same passage he is twenty and taking active steps to deal with the established idolatry of the nation. In the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, when he was twenty-one, Jeremiah was called to be the prophet of God (Jer. 1:2) and his ministry lasted some fifty years, right beyond the time when Judah was carried captive to Babylon. Try to imagine how Jeremiah's ministry would instruct, inspire, cohere and direct the king's work. Then, in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, after five years of Jeremiah's ministry, there came the rediscovery of the Word of God (2 Kings 22:8). Until then it had been a revival with a minimum of the Word of God. But it was a preparation for what was to come.

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22:3-7

There is no mention of Jeremiah in Kings and little reference to Josiah in the Book of Jeremiah and we can offer no explanation for this. But it seems clear that five years of Jeremiah's ministry prepared the way and created the atmosphere for the radical rediscovery of the Word of God *in the House of God* and in its preaching to the nation. Josiah saw clearly that the hope for the nation was the repair of the House of God, not merely in material renovation, but in the spiritual restoration of fellowship with and obedience to God that was symbolised in the material. The depth of the work being done is signified in v.7 where a new sense of responsibility and integrity is being manifested in people's dealings with the things of God. When this begins to happen, and it is an unostentatious development, it is not long before the same influence begins to be felt in people's social and business life, and the destructive tyranny of sin begins to be challenged at all levels of society. Quite apart from the spiritual influence of Jeremiah's ministry and the religious leadership of the king, there is no doubt that Josiah's own example of honesty and integrity had a powerful effect on the people. This is one of the crying needs of our day on all sides of industry and politics. The so-called "credibility gap" is an offence and hindrance, and leaders must learn to say what they mean, mean what they say, and stand by it if they want the people to follow. If this is true in secular realms, how much more must the speech and life of the church of Jesus Christ bear the hallmark of integrity and consistency.

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22:8-14

The discovery of the lost book of the law had a devastating effect on the king, who seems to have been far more aware of the significance of both its loss and its discovery than the priests. Note that the word of God's truth had been lost *in the House of God*, even although the ritual of worship, sacrifices, feasts of remembrance, had been more or less maintained. The same can be true today in places where there is rigorous insistence every Sunday on reading Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel. Where the Word is not *spoken and heard in faith*, it is of no effect (Heb. 4:2; 1 Thess. 2:13). But it seems that the departure of the Word of God had gone unnoticed and it was certainly not missed until it was reintroduced, and then it caused commotion and trouble. Have you noticed in our day that in many instances of new forms of worship the reading and teaching of the Bible plays less and less part? It is this process, together with public and private reservations with regard to the Word of God, that results in that Word being lost. The seriousness of this situation is that dynamic and direction in spiritual life are also lost. We need to take seriously Hebrews 2:1-3. It was the recovery of the Word of God that galvanised the king into action of a more basic spiritual dimension, producing a spirit of anxious enquiry concerning his relationship with God and a spirit of intercession for himself and his people.

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22:15-20

The spirit of revival stirring in the nation set in motion a work of disturbance, rebuke, challenge, judgment and comfort. There was no place to hide from the searching Word of God and no escape from shattering realism. Why the messengers went to the prophetess (14) and not to Jeremiah or one of the other prophets is beyond explanation, save that it is often the case when men are adrift from God in times of spiritual declension that a godly woman of prayer is found whose intercession and spiritual insight is of the highest importance. That there was other prophetic ministry at this time is seen from Jer. 25:1-11, and their ministry emphasised the same solemn truth as Huldah the prophetess. The set purpose of God for the judgment of the nation because of its sins could not and would not be countermanded, yet there would be a stay of execution because of the repentance of that particular generation. There may well be a glorious ingathering of souls even while the clouds of judgment are darkening and yet the nation as a whole may be left unrepentant to face final disaster. It is never wise for any nation or people to assume carelessly that the purposes of God are inextricably bound up with *their* welfare. Jesus spoke to the Pharisees of the kingdom being taken from them and given to a people who would bring forth the fruit of righteousness (Matt. 21:43). It seems that Josiah grasped the urgency of the situation. Time was short and the nation was on the edge of the precipice. Oh for a tender heart that makes us pray (19) and enables

us to recognise that the God to whom we pray is a God of love (Jer. 31:3). He loves us from vanishing point to vanishing point (everlasting love). It is love that passes knowledge.

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23:1-3

The Word of God in power had broken in on the life of the nation and this great assembly of solemn vow and consecration was the result. It was indeed a high moment, the consecration meeting of a great national convention, and was inevitably charged with deep emotion. The example of the king, together with his transparent sincerity, must have had a profound effect on the people and the Spirit was so at work in that situation that the whole people stood to the covenant (3). We cannot but long to see such a day in our own nation and church. Recognise then that it came through the rediscovery of the law of the Lord and a realistic acceptance of its message without reservation. Recognise also the danger of such high moments. In a crowd there is an infectious emotion that can compel almost any reaction in response to the lead given. But this is not necessarily the same as spiritual consecration. Remember how the Pharisees were drawn out in the tide of enthusiasm at the time of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1-10). The rest of our chapter in Kings certainly seems to indicate that the people followed the king in his practical consecration in the purge of idolatry, and we do not wish to denigrate their actions or motives. The whole nation was quickened. But at the same time Jeremiah seems to have had some reservation about the movement (Jer. 7: 1-11; 8:8-11). How important it is, when the presence of the Lord is known in His word and a holy hush awes, subdues and stirs the people, to make sure that we personally are responding to the Word and doing business with God.

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23:4-20

Having taken the lead in spiritual consecration, the king also leads and directs the practical outworking of that new consecration in a most rigorous searching out and destruction of all the evil that spoiled the land and threatened to rob the people of their spiritual destiny. We could compare this with the similar moral cleansing recorded in Acts 19: 18-20. Josiah began by cleansing the House of God, then proceeded to purge the ministry of the House of God, removing those who had no right to be there, and then went on to root out entrenched evil throughout the whole body politic. What moral and spiritual courage this man had! This national purging, even though it was by the king's command, would not be accomplished without resentment. Think of the reaction in our own day to the slightest suggestion of restriction or censorship, and how the licensed trade, the gambling trade and the pornography trade bay like packs of hounds and slaver for the blood of these nasty Christians who want to spoil life and deny people their pleasure. If we pray for revival we must be ready for riots because the Acts of the Apostles make it clear that the two usually go together. Today's passage reveals graphically how totally the nation's life had been impregnated by evil of the grossest and also most spiritual kind. Such evil has to be cast out in the name of the Lord. It will not give ground easily and v.9 may well give a hint concerning those who conformed to the "revival" in their own best interest but who at heart had no part in it. Remember that this regime of evil asserted itself in the time when the Word of the Lord was lost in the house of the Lord, and nothing but the recovery of that Word had power to overturn the evil.

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23:21-27

The climax of the reformation led by the king was the celebration of the Passover, the appointed feast which always brought back to remembrance the great days when God delivered them from their bondage in Egypt and led them out to a new beginning and a new life. This is the symbolic significance of the occasion here. The people, who had backslidden so terribly, were being called back to begin again with the assurances of God's grace. But do not fail to see that this new hope went hand in hand with a rooting out of all in the nation's life that was an offence to God and a hindrance to His work. We cannot doubt the earnestness of the king nor the willingness of the people, *and yet* we have the solemn announcement of v.26-27. Whether we say the revival did not go deep enough (although it seems radical enough) or that it came too late the fact is that nothing, not even revival of any kind, could remedy the national situation. The active wrath of God was already bringing about the downfall of Judah and there was no going back. God takes sin and evil seriously, especially when they

are found rampant among His own chosen people through whom His holy purposes are to be worked out. Trace in the whole chapter the elements of the situation: the House of God broken down, its religion corrupted by mingling with pagan elements, a terrible moral declension (7), and a trafficking with spirits (24). When you remember that Baal worship had much to do with fertility cults, an obsession with "sex as a thing in itself", you realise how contemporary this is. Now read Rom. 1: 18-32 - God gave them over to judgment. Read Psalm 85:1-7 and Habakkuk 3:2.

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23:28-30

A fuller account of the end of Josiah is in 2 Chron. 35:20-27. It is a very sad story and it need never have happened. We do not need to know the details of the quarrel between Egypt and Assyria although this is part of the rising of the empire that is to carry Judah captive to Babylon. Egypt made it clear she had no quarrel with Judah even though her armies may have had to cross Judah's territories. It may have been offended nationalism that impelled Josiah to take issue with Egypt but we must look for a deeper reason. Judah had known a movement of the Spirit of God such as had not been experienced for generations, and Josiah had been the significant human instrument in that work. Inevitably he was the target for the attacks of the Devil and, impelled by what seems a sudden and certainly inexplicable decision, he commits himself to war and is killed. Could it have been that Josiah, like many a man since, became over-confident spiritually because of his manifest success and consequently became careless? There is no word of the king consulting with any of his spiritual colleagues, let alone consulting with God as great David had done (2 Sam. 5:17-25). Success is very dangerous. We must guard our souls, not least by keeping a clear head and a cool heart, and we must test the spirits which prompt our actions, especially if there are present the elements of suddenness and compulsion. There is far too much at stake to do otherwise.

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23:31-37

Josiah's foolish actions brought interference from Egypt, and Judah was no longer free to pursue her own course. In many ways Josiah escaped by death from the terrible consequences of his own folly, but his sons and his people did not escape. Both Josiah's sons, born and nurtured in a time of revival, turned to evil as soon as their father was dead. Of course, the peak point of the revival was in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign (23:23) and we are told little of the remaining thirteen years. Something must have gone wrong. But on the other hand the swift reversion to idolatry after Josiah may signify that the "revival" was largely external in its influence, causing an obvious change in the pattern of the nation's life but no real change of heart. We cannot say more than this and we can only speculate as to the reaction of Jeremiah the prophet who may well have seen Josiah's death as the removal of the last restraint on the swift, strong tides of evil. The humiliation of Judah makes painful reading. The king of Egypt, displeased with Jehoahaz, removed him from the throne after a mere three months. There is no permanence in a sinful life! Another son of Josiah is renamed Jehoiakim, set on the throne, and left in no doubt that he is a mere puppet allowed to live only that he might do the will of his master. There is no dignity in a life of sin. Adrift from God, king and nation alike are helpless and hopeless.

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24:1-7

Things are happening all the time and in a situation so fraught with significance in the outworking of the judgments of God, people, adrift from God, have no idea what to do and simply flail around in all directions adding to their own confusion and hurt. "We are moving quickly now into the final act of the tragedy of Judah, and the threat of Necho of Egypt gives way before the still greater terror of Babylon. One is able to see the inexorable logic of events unfolding here. Babylon (and the others mentioned in v.2) was drawn towards Judah because of the threat of Egypt from the south, and we can now see the fateful consequences of Josiah's rashness in going out against Necho. If only he had let the Egyptians pass unmolested, Judah would never have attracted the attention of Nebuchadnezzar! We see here something of the terrible entail of sin, and something of its tragic complications and ramifications in the inevitable involvements it brings in its train. But the historian goes further. He traces it all back to Manasseh's sins, 'which the Lord would not pardon' (4), and we are again

brought face to face with this grim and terrifying reality of a point of no-return which was reached in the enormities of that evil king's reign. And so, the troubling and oppression all around them were not only permitted but commanded by the Lord (3) as an expression of His righteous indignation against the sin of His people. God is not mocked; He means what He says. His warnings are not idle tales:" (Rev, J. Philip)

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24:8-16

As we begin the story of the swift run-down of the nation to captivity in Babylon let us pause to consider two things. This final demise of the nation was something the Jews never thought possible. It might happen to others but not to them, for after all they were the chosen and called people of God bearing His name and existing to be the carriers of His purpose. But it happened, and it was to happen again in the time of Jesus when Jerusalem was again destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. Read Matt. 21: 33-43; 23:34-39; Lk. 19:41-44. Then consider Paul's spiritual application of the rejection of the Jews in Rom. 11:11-27, especially v.19-21. The end of the story in the final chapter of Kings seems incomplete, as if there was something more to be said, and if we turn to 2 Chron. 36:15-16 we see the inevitability of the judgment. But the story goes on to v.20-23 where we see the beginning of the gleam of hope which tells us that the sure purposes of God do not fall to the ground.

Remember that in the last years of Judah's national life there was glorious prophetic ministry through Jeremiah who preached right through until he was taken to Egypt. Just before the final collapse of Jerusalem, Jeremiah, in a great act of faith, bought some land in Anathoth (Jer. 32:1-15) as a sure declaration that the future belonged to God and to His people and not to the military tyrant of Babylon. Think of Jeremiah's great story of the potter (Jer. 18:1-10). What hope it brings! Then when the Jews were in disgrace and rejection in Babylon for seventy years, they were not without prophetic ministry, because Daniel and Ezekiel were also carried away captive and in due time were called to be God's spokesmen. It is a glorious story.

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24:8-16

It is tragic to see a work of God crumbling and disintegrating before your eyes with apparently no desire on the part of anyone to do any thing to stop it. It seems that a total demoralisation had taken the place of national pride and destiny and the king, together with his court and all the people of capacity and significance, took the line of least resistance and sold out to Babylon. The siege of the city lasted possibly three months, according to Babylonian records. But it seems to have been a token resistance, for in v.12-13 the exodus from Jerusalem to Babylon (what a reversal of the glorious Exodus from Egypt to the land of promise) has the feeling of something pre-arranged. There was little concern shown by any party for the people whose lot it was to remain in the land. The closing verses of this chapter tell how, in the long run, Jehoiakin fared rather well in his latter years in Babylon, and it may be that he had calculated on this when he made the decision to capitulate so easily. Motives of self-interest in terms of worldly advantage are a constant danger to all who are engaged in the work of the Lord. The collapse of Judah and Jerusalem could not be evaded because God had pronounced it so, but the acceptance of the inevitable can be carried out in the dignity of sorrowing faith or in the pitiful weakness of unbelief in which God is forgotten, as are His purposes of grace. A comment on Jehoiakin (otherwise known as Jeconiah or Coniah) is found in Jer. 22: 24-30. The comment by Jeremiah the prophet which sets the situation in perspective is in Jer. 29:1-14 where the context (too comprehensive to expound here) suggests that the captives were already lapsing into false confidence. God's plan would take time and called for patience not precipitate action. This patience is not the inertia of despair but the sure hope of God's tomorrow.

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24:17-20

These four verses summarise the significance of Zedekiah's reign and the details are given in the following chapter. The previous king had sold out to Babylon with scarcely a thought of God. This king takes it on himself to resist the inevitable development of world empires. Neither of them seem to have had any thought of the possibility of repentance, and the courageous action of Zedekiah, stemming as it did from an evil life of unbelief, simply drew on Jerusalem the full destructive might of Babylon. There is a lesson here for our own day for political enthusiasts of every colour. All effort and manipulation that does not have as its motivation and

objective the holy will of God is bound to prove disastrous. What is more, no one can claim to be doing the will of God in their actions if their hearts do not centre on the Person and work of Jesus Christ (John 6:45). We all need to scrutinise the true nature and long term effects of our attitudes and actions. No doubt Zedekiah and many of his colleagues felt they were putting up a good fight in the national interest, but in fact they were hastening on the judgment of God. What Zedekiah was totally forgetful of was the simple but obvious fact that what little power or kingship he had, he held by courtesy of the King of Babylon. He was a vassal and his attempt to rebel was carried out in his own carnal and totally ineffective strength.. This is always disastrous.

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25:1-21

We give many references in this reading and suggest two days for its study. These passages make terrible reading. After nine years of petty rebellion against Babylon in which king and people no doubt felt they were being rather clever and successful, the crunch came. Nebuchadnezzar got tired of his puppet's rebellion and finished off the whole nation. Why the siege took nearly two years is not explained, unless Jeremiah 37:1-5 tells of a temporary withdrawal of the enemy. The whole passage in Jer. 37:6-38:6 gives an insight into the situation in Jerusalem and the attitude of the king and his people. The remainder of Jer. 38 from v.14 is a vivid exposure of the weakness of the king as well as his stubbornness. The destruction of Jerusalem and the depopulation of Judah were savage and total and the whole story tells us that the wages of sin is death. Righteousness exalts a nation but sin brings it down (Prov. 14:34). This is a lesson to be learned by every generation while there is still time for remedy. God is a God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). We must be ready to meet Him in the business of life (Amos 4:12).

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25:1-21

Take time to ponder the material given yesterday. Remember that the tenderly strong prophet Jeremiah ministered in this kind of situation. If you would see his reactions and feel his sorrows and be reminded of the Man of Sorrows, read the first two chapters of the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Faith that suffers and stands like this is faith indeed.

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25:22-26

The divine historian seems eager to draw the curtain and bring to an end the sorry and tragic story of a people who had failed so comprehensively. The shattering thing is that even after the main deportation of the Jews, those who remained in the land were not one whit better. They were neither humbled nor subdued as the story in Jeremiah 40-42 tells so vividly. Gedaliah, a Jew, was appointed by Babylon to be governor of the territory of Judah, and Jeremiah was associated with him. Their advice was clear but such counsel (25:24) was refused either because hotheads thought it signified a selling-out to Babylon or because they were jealous of Gedaliah's position and influence. It is terrible pride when people can be so proud of the few miserable remnants of a work that has been cast off by God! The chapters in Jeremiah tell of the assassination plot through Ishmael and of how Gedaliah, though warned, refused to believe that his colleagues could be so blind or evil (Jer. 40:13-16). The evil deed was done as Ishmael pretended friendship with Gedaliah (Jer. 41:1-3), a truly Judas act. By this means the possibility of peaceful existence was destroyed, and fear became the main impetus of the people who were ready for flight to Egypt. Their request for prayer (Jer. 42:1-6) was suspicious because their minds were made up. Read Jer. 42:7-22 and then see at the end of 2 Kings that they did in fact flee to Egypt. Their unbelieving folly left the land of Judah even more desolate than it needed to have been, and another generation in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah had to start from rock bottom. Unbelief is a tragedy. It resists when it should submit and it yields in weakness when it should stand. Lord, have mercy upon us!

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25:27-30

What do we make of these verses, which seem to form such an unsatisfactory end to the story? Of course, it is not the end of the story. 2 Chron. 36:22-23 makes this plain, looking beyond the captivity, which was not final

judgment but purifying judgment, so that this people could, in the future, carry forward the holy purposes of God for which cause they had been raised up at the beginning. Think of the marvellous story of Esther and of the over-ruling of God whereby the Jews were preserved when evil powers would have slaughtered them. New kings do rise up and with them changes come and this act of kindness, after thirty-seven years of captivity, seems to be a tiny gleam of hope. God is amazingly kind, and even in captivity He makes it plain through His prophets that His eyes are still upon His people. The captivity must run its course so that the fires of trial might purge this people and turn their hearts back to their faithful God. The story does not stop, it simply pauses, and God waits for His people to be ready and willing in the day of His power. The story is still being written. See to it that our chapter is worth writing and that our contribution is worth passing on to those who come after us.

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