

THE FIRST BOOK OF KINGS

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1:1a

These words introduce us to the historical setting of the Books of Kings which cover the history of Israel from the end of David's reign right through to the captivity of the Jews in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. It is in this section of Jewish history that we find the ministries of Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah. It was the age of the kings and the prophets and as such has tremendous significance in our understanding of the advance of the purposes of God. This is not ordinary history that we read, although it is most certainly factual history, nor is it a complete history of all the nations. It is redemption history, for it is the story of God's dealings with the people He had called and chosen to be His instrument of revelation and redemption. Everything that happens to this people we must view in the light of their identity and purpose. We begin to understand that the Old Testament (and indeed the whole Bible) is not a collection of unconnected stories but one complete, continuous, progressive story of God's revelation of Himself and His purposes of salvation in the world. Through the Old Testament the answer of God's power to the plight of man is a word of promise concerning the Saviour King who is to come. In the New Testament we find the promise fulfilled in the coming of Christ. Perhaps the best introduction to these studies is to read Acts 7:1-53, taking two days to do so.

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1:1a

From Acts 7 recognise the unity and the continuity of the story of the Old Testament and be persuaded also of its spirituality. It is a story which reached its climax in the coming of Christ and must be understood in all its tortuous development in terms of this ultimate objective. Dangers and hindrances in Israel's life are to be seen as menaces to and contradictions of this holy purpose. Psalm 78 speaks of this and traces the story up to the time of David. Before going on with the story trace the sweep of the Old Testament. GENESIS is the book of beginnings with the name of Abraham (2000 B.C.) dominant. It ends with the Jews in Egypt and there follows EXODUS, the book of redemption, when Moses led the people out of bondage (1280 B.C.). LEVITICUS sets forth the laws and principles by which the people of God were to live. NUMBERS tells the story of a disobedient and unwilling generation going round in circles in the wilderness, getting nowhere, because of their sins. DEUTERONOMY is a recapitulation and elaboration of the Law with emphasis on the covenant relationship between God and His people. JOSHUA leads the people into the conquest of Canaan, the promised land, to take possession of what God had in fact given them. JUDGES tells of an amazing rot setting in because of the superficial spirituality of the people and the story fluctuates from success to utter failure and ends in anarchy (21:25). The story of RUTH is set in the time of the Judges and among other things indicates something of David's ancestry. The Books of SAMUEL begin with "the glory" (God's presence 1 Sam.4:21) departed from Israel, and go on to record the stories of Samuel (1050 B.C.), Saul and David (1000 B.C.). In David's time there was a united kingdom of Israel ruled by a man after God's own heart. Then follow the Books of the Kings of Israel.

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1:1-4

The Books of KINGS cover 400 years and so from Abraham to the Captivity we have 1400 years of turbulent political and international history centring on the Jews. But it is history with an objective, for God never departs from His righteous purposes of law and grace. Through the long centuries, by means of the Jews, God made Himself known and people

were shown the meaning of holiness, sin, judgment and salvation by the ministry of the prophets who both taught the truth of God and interpreted the experiences of life. In many ways the prophets failed, for right through our story we read of the decline and fall of the nation of Israel because of its sin. It almost seems as if the sin of man was stronger than God and, even though we know that the victorious answer came eventually in Christ, these stories are a powerful lesson, even in these opening verses which are so sad and tragic. How are the mighty fallen! Do not forget David's triumphs and achievements and his suffering for righteousness' sake. Do not forget his sins and failure and decline. Do not pass judgment finally here, for in v.28ff. we have the clear declaration of his determination to do the will of God. Do not pass judgment on the work of God even when in 2 Kings 25:4, 8-11, 21 the final collapse of the nation is recorded. Go on into the Books of CHRONICLES and read a spiritual assessment of and comment on the secular history of the Books of Kings. From there go on through the years to EZRA and NEHEMIAH when, after seventy years of captivity, the people are back again in Jerusalem and the work of God goes on into the future. Here is the lesson: our God is marching on, and He is the God with whom we have to do.

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1:1-4

Why were these difficult and seemingly unsavoury verses recorded? It all seems so unworthy of a man at the helm of God's work, and indeed it is. Some say this practice was quite common but this does not justify it. David had several wives and concubines and this tendency to indulge in relationships was present right through his story. It was evident in the story of Bathsheba, when intense emotional hunger led in a crucial moment to sin that had far-reaching consequences. The king is described here as old and advanced in years, although he was only about seventy years of age. Whether we attribute this to the ravages of sin in his life, or to the strain of costly spiritual service, the fact remains that he was old and weak in a very comprehensive sense. The servants may be blamed for the plan but this does not help for it simply indicates either that they knew their king and his inclinations only too well or that they too, in their own persons, manifested all the signs of a declining nation. The leaders set the standard and the 'common people' follow the pattern. Some say that David never rose to the same heights after his great sin against Uriah and Bathsheba, even though he eventually repented deeply (Ps. 51). This makes daily life very vital. Beware the first signs of that kind of fleshly indulgence which may betoken a fatal weakness of personality. How easy it is to pander to the flesh in so many ways, both in youth and in old age. Unless spiritual life is maintained in a close walk with God, personality flaws, moral weakness and old temptations, held in check in the context of creative service, may find opportunity to reassert themselves.

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1:5-10

The weakness and decline evident in the opening verses are followed very swiftly by the deliberate activities of men of evil intent, who see their opportunity for advancement. Strictly speaking Adonijah, David's fourth son, had a right to regard himself as heir presumptive, since his three elder brothers were dead. Amnon had been murdered by Absalom (2 Sam. 13:19-29), who himself died in rebellion against his father (2 Sam. 18:9-17), and Chileab is not mentioned, his death being assumed. Note how the present confusion stems from past failure and intrigue, and do not fail to observe how a plausible and determined man can gather to himself even trusted counsellors of the king in a plan that was in sheer defiance of the will of God. This kingdom and its work were not man's but God's, and from v.17 it seems that it was already public knowledge that Solomon was to succeed to the throne. But Adonijah set himself blindly to pit his strength against the purpose of God, and to do so he

looked for support. He found it in Joab, who had grounds for a grudge against David (2 Sam. 19:13) because of his dismissal, and who had some contempt for the king because of the business of Uriah's murder (2 Sam. 11:6ff). Abiathar, on the other hand, had been a loyal supporter of David, much loved and well treated by him, yet he too turned traitor. But some stood firm with David, because they recognised him as God's anointed man and believed it was God's province to deal with the king and not theirs. See this whole situation as that inevitable division between what is of God and what is not. Be sure you are on the right side' [Back to Top](#)

1:11-31

What a story, and how positively Nathan the prophet acts in it, recognising the true nature of things and discerning the crucial point of intervention. David himself, in spite of his public weakness, is the key figure and Nathan believed that, having given his word and having made his will known (believing it to be God's will), David would stand by it. He was proved right. We may think the scheme too calculated but if we remember the king's inherent weakness we see the wisdom of the gradual building up of the situation. First David's heart was appealed to through Bathsheba whom he loved. Then (22ff) the trusted spokesman of God added his testimony, after the queen had affirmed the king's dignity and honour (20), awakening the noblest of feelings in David's heart. He was God's king and he knew it in spite of all. In v.24 the prophet began with a question which was virtually the statement, "Lord, you would not make a man like Adonijah king, would you?" This was followed by a declaration of the rebel's presumption, for he was already celebrating in bland assumption that the throne was his. Then in v.26 David was given the assurance that, in this crisis of loyalty to God and His work, the support of trusted men was guaranteed. With swift simplicity the whole situation was resolved, but there is a wealth of wisdom here regarding personal counselling, for those with eyes to see it, just as there is a great challenge to all to know and recognise what is of God and what is of proud presumptuous man. If we spiritualise the story the lesson is: when situations suddenly precipitate danger, go right to the King and tell Him. His word stands, and it is sure.

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1:32-40

The swiftness of the events is exhilarating and the portrayal of the king here must (as we suggested earlier) qualify our interpretation of the opening verses of the chapter. Perhaps it was the pressure of crisis that made David rise to his old heights of faith and decisiveness. If this is so we must ask God to shake us out of our spiritual dullness and weakness. The story of Samson, at times a great servant of God's purposes, shows that sometimes a man may long to rise to spiritual greatness and activity, only to discover God's enabling presence, unction, and power are no longer with him (Judges. 16:20). Look back to v.28-30 and be proud of David in his testimony. How could he allow weakness to hinder the clearly declared will of the God who had redeemed him and made him all he was? God's will shall be done, and without a moment of hesitation David gave instructions for the carrying out of the coronation of Solomon, leaving nothing to chance. The rebels were addressing themselves to a human situation, men against men, but David knew that the work was God's. Three passages here should be consulted: Ps. 2; Acts 5:38-39; Matt. 16:18. There is such a thing as "the Lord's anointed," be it a person, a work, or both. Concerning all that is so anointed the word is clear, "touch not the Lord's anointed," (1 Chron. 16:22), a principle that David himself had lived by when he was persecuted by the dark and diabolical Saul (1 Sam. 26:5-12). This is the assurance, the confidence and the caution of faith.

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1:32-40

It is the swiftness of events that must awe us here. It is like the Lord's scythe cutting through the field of men. What is more, it was all done out in the open for all to see. David declared the will of God and Benaiah said, "Amen". But what is finally needed is the Lord's "Amen" (36), for without the seal of God's confirmation there will be no assurance or peace. Of course, along with this decisive action of God through David, we must see also God's restraint upon the powers of wicked men. In a real sense they were blinded as to the true state of affairs and were kept thus until it was too late for them to do anything to counteract Solomon's anointing. This is one of many examples in Scripture of the fact that Satan is a defeated foe. However he plans his evil designs and however much people seek to bring to pass what is not of God, there is the glorious and active restriction of God's sovereign providence. In His wisdom God allows many strange and evil things to come to pass but always God's affirmation is, "Thus far, and no further" (Job.38:1-11). Read also Ps 21:11 and learn to rejoice and to live your life in the light of the confidence God has in himself.

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1:41-53

Princes and rulers may take counsel against the Lord's anointed, and in their workings may manifest the inspiration, dynamic, cunning and confidence of all the demons of Hell, but their work will come to nothing. *Temporarily* they may seem to carry all before them, but their downfall is inevitable. The bearing of Adonijah the usurper was marked by arrogance and complacency, and the thought of failure never crossed his mind. Such bland confidence gave him immediate success with some men of note and together they simply dismissed, as irrelevant, Nathan and Solomon. This, in practice, can be very painful and difficult to live with, and it presents one of the most testing aspects of evil. The arrogance of evil and its celebration of immediate success can easily rile you and cause you to give way to precipitate action which is really reaction. Hold your peace, unless you are as sure as Nathan and his colleagues were concerning God's will. Do not be taken in by the braggart confidence of evil men. When the time comes, as it came to Adonijah, their bravery is seen to be mere bravado and their confidence simply lack of thought. Take a good look at Adonijah. trembling like a jelly, clinging to the horns of the altar for the sanction of religious protection, and see him for what he really is – nothing! It is in adversity that our character and our religion are revealed.

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2:1-11

The dignity and realism which mark David's dying words have already been reflected in some measure in Solomon. His words at the close of the previous chapter (1:51-53) show the marks of quiet dignity and assurance, grace mingled with firm realism, and tolerance which speaks of a deep confidence in God. There is a grandeur in the old king's words. He is dying, he knows it and he is not afraid to face it and to speak of it to his family, giving them wise counsel to do right by God. Read 1 Chron. 22:1-13; 28:1-10, 20, and mark how in 28:2 David stands to speak as if he felt he was already in the presence of God the great Judge and King and about to give an account of his stewardship. It is wonderful to see a man of God finishing his course with dignity and with grace in spite of all the battles and failures and present weaknesses. Read Paul's words in 2 Tim. 4:1-8 and see how with him, as with David, past, present and future are brought together in a moment of solemn review and glorious expectation. One by one the servants of God die, but the work goes on, to be carried forward in its next stage by faithful men prepared for that very task. Undergirding all is the faithful promise of God, and in the faith of that promise we must walk before God and teach our

children by prayer, precept and example to do right by God. This is of the very essence of life.

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2:1-11

Do right by God, for the whole of life depends on it and the richness of family life, personal life and Christian service are determined by it. When we do right by God there is a future to look to, but when we deal wrongly with God the future is imperilled and we may well be laid aside. Do not be deceived by the promise of prosperity (3), for it may not necessarily mean material prosperity. After all, Jesus reduces possessions to their real dimension (Luke 12:15) and Paul speaks of the riches of a man in Christ who possesses nothing (2 Cor.6:10). He knew, for he did in fact lose everything for Christ's sake and considered it a glorious bargain (Phil. 3:4-14). Circumstances, be they of rich possession or deep need, do not in themselves determine our life, it is what we do with them. Rich prosperity and pressing poverty may both signify the blessing of the Lord. In doing right by God we may not be granted all we hope and long for, and indeed we are often blessed most richly in the long term by the withholding of our heart's desire. We may not know this *at the time* and others may put a wrong construction on our experience. But the fact remains that God *is* working in our interest eternally, and this will minister to the glory of His name, as well as to our blessing. Through many sore experiences as well as through rich successes David had learned this lesson. But he also learned that often we must live to see the bitternesses and wrongs of the past working out in the present and future, even within the forgiveness and restoration of God. Sin can set in motion a sequence of consequences which simply cannot be escaped from.

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2:1-11

Are we to brand David here as being sub-Christian because of his stern words of retribution, or are we to seek the explanation in past history and in relation to the onward movement of the work of God? The latter must be our method if we are not to set up a false contradiction between v.5-11 and the opening of the chapter. Such passages as 2 Tim. 4:14-15 and Rom. 16:17 indicate that what may at first sight seem to be personal grudge may in fact be costly and courageous speech and action to safeguard the holy work of God from devilish human activity. In the past, in spite of many deeds of courage in the service of the king, Joab had shown himself to be a murderer at heart, ruthless and implacable in self-will (2 Sam 3:27; 20:8-10). By the law of his day he should have been dealt with, but David was either too weak at the time or too compromised and hindered by Joab's knowledge of his own sins and no action was taken. Shimei, who had cursed David in his day of weakness (2 Sam. 16:5-14) later found clemency in the day of David's power (2 Sam. 19:16-23). But it would appear that Joab certainly, and Shimei possibly, revealed by their present action in the attempted coup that their hearts were still set in enmity to God's man and God's purpose. They were prepared to work against what God ordained and because of this they had to be dealt with. We dare not judge David. See to it that we humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. Time will reveal all! (Rom. 12:17-21; 1 Pet. 5:5-9).

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2:12-25

Time does reveal all and sheds light on David's much criticised attitude. What a man shows of himself in crisis and danger is one thing, but when the pressure is off the man's real heart will be shown. Commentaries tell us that it was the custom for a king's successor or conqueror or rival to take the monarch's wives and concubines. This was the sign of a

deliberate claim to the throne (2 Sam. 16:20-23) and Solomon understood Adonijah's request in exactly this light and took action accordingly. Adonijah is seen to be a man determined to have his own way by any means and prepared to pursue that course regardless of delays or reverses. Note, however, that Bathsheba was taken in by the man's apparent change of heart and failed to recognise in v.15 his complaint that he had been *cheated* of the kingdom. The wicked man used pious language about the will of the Lord, but beneath the surface he was bitterly resentful of the fact that he had been publicly humiliated by his defeat at the hands of Solomon. There is a deep lesson here. To be humiliated and exposed and proved to be in the wrong does not necessarily result in a work of *humbling of heart*. To acquiesce in the will of God (because after all there is no option) is not the same as accepting or welcoming the will of the Lord. Be careful! Do not wear your spiritual heart on your sleeve. By their fruits you will know what people are, but give the fruit time to appear.

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2:26-27

Solomon takes the initiative and banishes Abiathar the rebel priest. This man's long story goes back to the early days of David (1 Sam. 22: 19-23); he served in holy things (1 Chron. 15:11-12) and was a trusted counsellor (1 Chron. 27:33-34). But at the end (1 Kings 1:7) Abiathar sides with David's enemies in the ill-fated rebellion. Why? Could it have been that over a long period, secretly but progressively, the man's heart had become estranged from God? How solemn it is that we can be associated with a holy work and honoured in it, taking an active part in its activity and yet through carelessness and neglect drift away from God. It is thus we become insensitive to the promptings of the Lord and begin to work at cross purposes with God, perhaps without being aware of it. We will certainly be aware of our criticism of others who do not share our disaffection! It was the crisis of Adonijah's rebellion that revealed Abiathar's defection. There are always crises. What will the next one reveal? The priest was dismissed his post and excluded from further participation in the holy work of God. From now on he lived as a private person, but always with the remembrance of what he *might have been*. How awful!

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2:28-35

Joab's story (already referred to in 1:5-10) is too long to summarise here. Suffice it to say that he was a multiple murderer who reached the place of power and influence by disposing of his enemies and competitors with ruthless and heartless efficiency. He had been allowed to go on unchecked partly because of David's weakness and partly because of his knowledge of David's guilt in the case of Uriah, husband of Bathsheba. David's secret failures and wrongs had produced a moral and spiritual debility which made him afraid to deal with this evil cancer in the kingdom, although he did prophesy that God's judgment would come (2 Sam. 3:22-39). Time and again Joab defied and contradicted David, as in the case of the killing of Absalom (2 Sam. 18:14-33). Even when he was dismissed his post as commander, Joab soon disposed of his inefficient successor and had himself reinstated (2 Sam. 20:3-23). Why, oh why are wicked people often more efficient than good people? After David's death Joab sided with the rebel Adonijah and even after Solomon was on the throne Joab was still on the side of the king's chief rival. How long can this defiance of righteousness go on? It must be brought to judgment and when the reckoning came Joab's essential cowardice was seen in that he tried to shelter by the altar. That is, he claimed the protection of the God he had deliberately and consistently defied. It was an exhibition of religious convenience and God was not impressed. Neither was Solomon, and the judgment was carried out. Joab was

motivated by self-interest and self-preservation. That is not repentance. Joab is seen for what he is. His sins have found him out.

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2:36-46

Here is another instance of the persistence and presumption of iniquity. There is no evidence that, as some suggest, Solomon set a trap for Shimei by the restrictive conditions specified in v.36-37, expecting that the parole would be broken. The king was in such a position of power that he had no need to resort to such subterfuge. The truth is that Solomon showed great clemency to this sly and bitter man (2 Sam. 16:5-14; 19:16-23). He was put in a position where he could prove and demonstrate his repentance and genuineness. He was in fact a man who could *not* be trusted and to keep from him the opportunity of doing evil he was placed under open arrest for the good of the kingdom. He might well have lived a long time in the safety of Jerusalem, but after three short years, during which his memory of past experience and his awareness of stern spiritual lessons faded away, he acted according to the dictates of his own heart and broke his oath. Did he do it in forgetfulness (a dangerous thing) or in defiance? Did he do it secretly or openly? We cannot really say. But, recalling his defiance of David, and his glowing allegiance to Saul who was then being driven on in enmity to God by a spirit of evil, we can only recognise Shimei as a man with an evil, incurable heart of unbelief. It was a simple incident that brought the crisis and signified the end. It is not wise to harbour secret antagonism to God. He is a God of righteousness and judgment.

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3:1-3

The story of Solomon is the story of a man of God, chosen by God, preserved by God and ordained by God for holy service in relation to the kingdom of God. The first two chapters of Kings have told of how at first all manner of difficulties, frustrations and enmities stood in the way. But by human activity and divine over-ruling, all the barriers were removed and Solomon stood at the threshold of his life's work under God. Today's verses give an anticipated summary of his whole reign and also the underlying reason for the prayer recorded later in the chapter. The truest thing about Solomon was that he loved the Lord and walked in His statutes. Yet at the same time there were reservations. His heart was divided, so that both by holding back at times and by rushing ahead at other times he complicated the ways of God in his life and service. To be fair to the man we recognise that he did not live and work in a vacuum. He did not start with clear territory but with a situation containing the legacy of the apostasy of the Judges and the weaknesses of David. But that was all the more reason why he should see to it that at all times he walked right in the centre of God's will, making no concessions to the innate tendencies of his own personality. We are told here that Solomon made a marriage alliance, a real commitment of affinity, with Pharaoh as well as with his daughter and this seems to suggest that the king placed more reliance than was wise on political and human alliances. The comment in v.2-3 about sacrifices at the idolatrous high places by both Solomon and the people likewise indicates a situation of compromise, a reluctance to come to grips with basic spiritual issues. This may not seem much at the moment, but eventually the king's heart was turned away from God (11:1-4) by his personal emotional affairs and the nation's heart was seduced by idolatry. Love for the Lord, real though it be, if it does not eliminate competitors is neither real enough nor safe enough.

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3:4-15

God is eager and willing to bless His children as far as He can within the limits set by those alien things they allow to remain in their lives. We do not deny or ignore the lessons pointed out in yesterday's note, yet we emphasise here that the Lord takes the initiative and draws near to Solomon, prompting him to pray. The king's prayer was gloriously simple: "O God, make me the kind of man you can use, and use me." Without doubt Solomon was awed by both the privilege and responsibility involved in being part of the work of God. No doubt his heart thrilled to the possibilities that lay before him in a life of service caught up into the gracious purposes of God. But he was also aware already of the inabilities and disabilities of his personality. It is as if he said, "Lord, there is so much in me and about me that is likely to be a hindrance rather than a help. Make me what I should be." He asked for an understanding heart or mind, "a heart with skill to listen" (N.E.B.), a heart attuned to God, resting in God, kept in peace and power with God, and consequently a heart of humanity and compassion to shepherd God's people. This was a wonderful prayer considering all the natural and legitimate requests he might have made in response to the invitation to ask whatever he wanted. Solomon's prayer must have gladdened the heart of God more than our often selfish prayers do. And what an answer it received (13) in terms of human blessing and fulfilment that far exceeded his hopes. Seek ye first the kingdom (Matt. 6:33) Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give ... (Ps. 37:4-5). But remember that blessings can sometimes be more dangerous than battles!

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3:16-28

Here is the wisdom of Solomon and here also is the humanity of the king in a situation which manifested human nature "red in tooth and claw". This was part of Solomon's kingdom, part of the covenant people of God. The women were harlots, hard and wretched, and in their relationship there is seen that merciless inhumanity that seeks only its own gratification. They were not attractive and there is no suggestion of any reformation of life, yet they had access to the king to plead their case. The issue could not be decided on the basis of evidence for there were only two testimonies and they flatly contradicted each other. Solomon realised at once that only by appealing to natural instinct and affection could he reach the truth, and it is this basic humanity in the king that marks him out as a spiritual man who loved the Lord. What he did by his strange decree in v.24-25 was to place the onus of decision on the two women and it was the response of the real mother that became the verdict of the judge. Had Solomon been the hard, aloof, clinical, coldly righteous, spiritual type of person one meets all too frequently, he would have been of no use at all in this situation. But he was human, he had a heart and feelings, and could reach the hearts of others. Is not this something that points us to Christ, the greater than Solomon? In Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Col. 2:3; Heb. 2:16-18; 4:15-16). It is this Jesus who dwells in our hearts by faith. Why are we not more like Him?

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4:1-6

Even the glorious Solomon was not able to run the work single-handed and here are named the men who were his trusted associates. In David's reign the captain of the army was usually mentioned first for it was a time of war and conquest (2 Sam. 8:16; 20:23). But in Solomon's reign the dominant note was peace and prosperity and the first named was Azariah, the son of Zadok, who was priest. One man is marked out as the king's friend and we cannot but think of Jonathan, whose friendship so strengthened David in the Lord (1 Sam. 23:16). Court

circles in these days were often bitter and dangerous through flattery and intrigue and a true friendship must have been an oasis of sanity and peace. Try to imagine some of the conversations that took place between the king and his friend. Such spiritual service can never be measured and it is balm indeed when compared with so many relationships, even within Christian service, when you do not really know where you stand with people, nor what they actually think. True and deep friendships are more easily made and maintained in battle than in prosperity. On both the human and spiritual levels many can look back wistfully to times of sweeter and richer friendships in days of poverty and restriction than they now enjoy when things are so much easier. It is certainly true that when a congregation's finances are flourishing there is a tendency towards spiritual carelessness. Be watchful, and remember, as Solomon no doubt did, that the time of peace and prosperity was founded on the earlier times of battle and cost! One final word about being the King's friend. We have access to the King of kings. Someone wrote to a Christian friend, "Remember me when you have the ear of the Master". What a thought!

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4:7-28

We have already noted that David's warfare and conquest were the necessary precursors of Solomon's reign of peace and prosperity. This peaceful establishment of wise administration was the way by which the kingdom rose to its greatest heights during Solomon's reign. For the first time Israel entered into full possession (21) and enjoyment of the territory promised them in the days of Joshua (Joshua 1:4) and of the blessing promised to Abraham (Gen. 22:17-18). We need to look far into the past and to hold firmly to the promises of God if we are to understand the contemporary scene with all its developments. Do not fail to note that Israel rose to its heights by peaceful policy and not by might of war. Yet at the same time we must not forget that from this high point the kingdom divided after Solomon's death, the secret deterioration having operated for many years. First one half of the kingdom and then the other played false to the God who had made them what they were and who had remained faithful to His promises. The decline was delayed but never fully stopped in spite of the ministry of the great prophets, and in the end the land was left desolate and the work lay seemingly in ruins beyond repair. Why should this happen to a work that began so well and which was marked, as we read here, by peace and prosperity? The answer may well lie in the first three verses of chapter 3.

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4:7-28

Many see Solomon as a "type" pointing to Christ the Prince of Peace, and the conditions of blessing during this reign are certainly illustrative of those belonging to Christ's kingdom, when men shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:1-5). Certainly what is spoken of here in earthly and material terms is meant to point us forward to that blessing which is spiritual and abiding and which cannot ever fade away as Solomon's prosperity did (1 Pet. 1:3-6). Note in v.25 how individual identity, liberty and fulfilment are all signified by the picture of the rural independence. Now contrast this with the hideous de-personalisation of our present generation with its take-over bids in which the working unit gets vaster and vaster, people become more and more mere cogs in the machine, and communities and family homes disappear under the totalitarian might of the bulldozers operating in the interest of efficiency. Is it not the case that efficiency and organisation are becoming the new idols to be worshipped under threat of direst consequences? We know we cannot put the clock back and in many ways we thank God for that. But we must learn to

stand back from the machine of progress, for what does it profit if we gain all and lose our selves in the process? What can man give in exchange for his soul?

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4:29-54

In these verses it is evident that in terms of domestic prosperity and in outgoing influence Israel had never had it so good. They were on top and they knew it, and the nations knew it. God's giving to Solomon was on a vast scale, we might say the scale of the riches of His glory (Eph. 1:7, 17-21; 2:6-7; 3:14 21). It was indeed a success story, but just as material affluence and security have bred in our nation a spirit of godlessness and indulgence, so spiritual success can easily make people forget both their dependence on God and their calling. It is noteworthy that while it says in v.29 that God blessed Solomon it goes on to say in v.30 that it was the fame of Solomon, not of Solomon's God, that spread far and wide and became the focus of attention. Little wonder we find in Proverbs a wise saying from Solomon which highlights the danger of blessing (Prov. 30:7-9). When we pray that God will pour out His blessing on us do we ever pause to consider what that would do to us? Can we be trusted with blessing? Solomon began well (see note on 3:7-9) and the story tells just how much God can do with a life that is given over to Him, however imperfect that life may be. That Solomon's work failed after his own day does not obscure the fact that God was able to use him and bless him. With many, God cannot even make a start. Was it not William Booth of the Salvation Army who explained his success under God by saying, "I decided that God would have all there was of William Booth." One translation of James 4:5 is, "The Spirit within us yearns for the entire devotion of our hearts." God wants all of us.

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5:1-12

Chapters 5-9 contain the story of the building and consecration of Solomon's temple and concern one man's dealings with the House of God and the God of that House. It was work executed in obedience to God; all the detail was in strict accord with the word of God; at the heart of the temple was the word of God, and the issue was a temple, a king and a people focussed on the glory of God. We are dealing with vital and contemporary truth. Of course the details of Solomon's Temple have been put to some strange uses by societies such as the Freemasons, and we must speak a word of caution and correction. All material buildings and ceremonial sacrifices in the Old Testament have one end in view. They point to Christ who is the reality of which they are but the shadow. If people become preoccupied with the shadow in preference to the reality they go away from God. This is true of those who accept the "church" but not Christ. Further, at the heart of this building venture Solomon made an alliance with Hiram, King of Tyre (5:12) and commentators agree that in doing so he made a pact with Hiram's gods and accepted them as equal to his own, as was the custom in those days. But any system that even begins to suggest that other gods stand alongside the God of salvation, or that anyone stands alongside Christ as an alternative or associate saviour, is not of God. There is one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), one name given (Acts 4:12) and only one way (John 14:6). To depart from this position or even to be confused about it is to minimise all we mean by evangelistic impact. We cannot help people towards God by joining with them in their confusion. The testimony must be clear.

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5:1-12

Some commentators make the point that the building of the Temple was not initially by divine request or command but rather by divine permission in answer to the desire of David.

Others say that Solomon seems to have been raised up specifically for this work of temple building. The full narrative of the background is found in 2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17; 1 Chron. 28 and it is clear that the initiative and plans were executed by David, as was the gathering of much of the material, while the actual building was done by Solomon. We do not seek to answer the question whether or not it was right to build the Temple, for certainly God was prepared to use it. But keep in mind that when God promised to David that He would build him a house, God was speaking of a "house" not made of stones but of people (1 Pet. 2:4-5). It is interesting also to recall how in the Gospels and Acts the Temple was the focus of opposition to the fulfilment of the promises of God in Christ. In the Epistle to the Hebrews the illustrations are taken largely from the Tabernacle, not the Temple, and in Revelation there is no Temple. Certainly the solidity of the Temple contrasts with the movability of the Tabernacle and it was more likely to anchor the people of God in time and in geographical location and so cause them to forget their pilgrim status. Nothing, however worthy in itself, must be allowed to deflect the heart from God Himself.

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5:13-18

The vast scale of manpower and finance involved in this building makes the mind stagger. No doubt Solomon made use of slave labour, compulsory recruitment and vast taxation as all rulers of that age did. But at the same time in v.14 there is evidence of a tremendous humanitarian consideration. This recognition of family commitment, human dignity and the sacredness of human personality is something that has to be learned again in our own complicated industrial society where all too often everything is subjected to the interests of efficiency and profits. This is a realm in which Christian men and women in administrative positions of every kind have a glorious opportunity to witness. When we think of the kindness and forbearance God has shown to us, how much should we show this humanity to others. The building of the Temple was a vast and complex venture and it is astonishing to see how willing and co-operative Hiram was. We cannot tell his motive nor can we discern his understanding, even when he refers to Solomon's God as Lord (Jehovah, the God of salvation) in 5:7. One thing we can say from experience. It is possible to be involved in a spiritual work, led and inspired by the Spirit of God through a chosen servant, without ever becoming in any personal and spiritual sense a real part of that work. Perhaps if Solomon had stood a little aloof from Hiram and so maintained the clear identity of his testimony it might have been better for all concerned.

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6:1-10

Note how the first verse emphasises that the Temple was not a thing or a work in itself. It had its roots in the mighty deliverance of God at the time of the Exodus. The present is rooted in the past and owes a great deal to it and must lead on to the future. The measurements of the Temple were double those of the Tabernacle. We are told in v.7 that the stones were made ready, polished and prepared before being brought to the building site and fitted into their appointed place. In spiritual terms the application is clear if we allow our thoughts to be projected forward to eternity. The world to come is not the place for the stones to be polished. That is being done now. Indeed we can understand our present experience and curb our natural impatience by remembering that God does not want rough-shaped boulders in the fabric of His spiritual temple but truly polished stones. When the stones are ready they are brought and there is no hammering or last minute manipulation to make things fit in. If a work is worth doing, it is worth doing well, and only the best is worthy of the temple of the Lord. Preparation time and discipline are not wasted. Mighty men of God such as Moses and

Paul, to name but two, had their time in isolation and inactivity being polished and prepared for service.

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6:11-38

This long passage of detailed specifications for the building and its furnishings has a spiritual lesson to teach. As with the Tabernacle, the true glory of the building was seen only from within, where all was overlaid with gold. This is why the most bitter criticism of a spiritual work usually comes from people who have never dared to enter in to see and to experience what is going on! The whole passage is introduced by v.11-14 where it is seen that God is more concerned with Solomon's spiritual and moral character than with the minute detail of the workmanship. This is not to suggest that "anything will do" for the House of God, nor does it allow Christians to be slapdash and careless about any work they have to do, secular or spiritual. Indeed the very opposite is true. In v.14 emphasise the word "so". It was in the light of and by the inspiration of what God had said in v.11-13 that Solomon addressed himself to the work. The initiative was with God. It was His word and His work that gave both meaning and direction to man's work. If this is true in respect of spiritual work, it is equally true with regard to the whole of our life including our secular activity. Take away from life the awareness of God and the conviction of His reality and His presence and you find eventually that the whole of life degenerates. Where there is no vision the people perish, and all their work is blighted with a "couldn't care less", "anything will do", "it isn't my responsibility" attitude. When you think of the godlessness of our society you cannot be surprised by the economic stagnation. There can never be buoyancy of any kind while people's backs are turned upon God.

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6:11-38

Solomon's temple was in fact small compared with many temples built to pagan gods and yet it had a magnificence that was inescapable. There was painstaking craftsmanship and beautiful intricacies, things which seem to be despised in our generation which has tended to reduce all to dull uniformity and chilling utility. Think of the monotony of the vast housing schemes, the petty sameness of suburban estates and the huge impersonal blocks of concrete and glass in city centres. So much of what is created is soulless and man's spirit becomes more and more a prisoner in the barren monotony of his own making. In many ways we are losing the capacity to see beauty let alone appreciate it. It reminds us of the story in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* of the man with the muckrake, so busy grubbing in the dirt that he failed to see the golden crown being offered to him from above. One of the thrills of being associated with a real ministry in the life and power of the Holy Spirit is to see personalities being awakened into newness of life and beginning to flower with a fullness that is almost unbelievable. It is the variety which can be found in harmony of association in the fellowship of the House of God that thrills. But there is a shadow on Solomon's story. Our last verse tells of seven years work on the house of God and the next chapter begins by telling us that Solomon spent nearly twice as long in making his own house. Where your treasure is, there will your heart and interest be, and there is where you spend your time.

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7:1-51

Unless you are interested in the artistic magnificence of this temple, concentrate on v.1, 7-8, 14, 51. However much Solomon devoted himself to the Temple, and he was indeed thorough in all its detail, the fact remains that in proportion he gave twice as much time and energy to

building his own house. However much he was dedicated to doing God's will in a worthy way the fact remains that in the midst of it all he had time also to build a house for Pharaoh's daughter, whose standing as a pagan princess required that she be treated worthily. No doubt that house was filled with Egyptian idols and they remained there within the shadow of the House of God. It is amazing that Solomon saw nothing inconsistent in this, but it is a token of his divided heart and signifies a mind that is compartmentalised. In one part of the mind and heart there is earnest and efficient interest in the things of God, and in the other a commitment to people and a way of life that is totally contrary to God. Little wonder his kingdom disintegrated so soon after his death. In v.14 Hiram, the artificer, not the king, is described as being the son of an Israelite widow who married a heathen man of Tyre. He was a man of great skill and artistry in metal work and was a product of the "golden age" of this Phoenician empire with its great culture. While we admire the skill at the disposal of this nation, we must remember that not many years later the ruler of Tyre arranged the marriage of his daughter Jezebel to Ahab, king of Israel, so further establishing the worship of Baal (Phoenician gods) among the people of God.

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7:13-14

In Israel's past, when the Tabernacle was being constructed, it was two men from among the covenant people who were appointed and anointed of God to carry out the detailed artistry of the building (Ex. 31:1-11; 35:30-35). Such work needs not only skilled men but spiritually minded men, yet Solomon's choice was a man of doubtful spiritual standing. Now we recognise that the Spirit of God works in many ways and the inspiration of that Spirit finds expression in many areas of human endeavour. Indeed, what is best and highest in the whole realm of human achievement can be attributed to the inspiration of God by His Spirit. Yet while we recognise that God raises up men of capacity in many spheres of human affairs, and through them accomplishes many benefits to humanity, we must not accept all inspiration as being necessarily good, nor must we accept all gifted and talented people as being necessarily good for the work of God. Gifted teachers who are not themselves committed in faith to Christ cannot truly lead the young within the life of the church. Gifted musicians of great technical capacity cannot lead God's people in true worship if they themselves are not yielded in faith to that God. Solomon no doubt looked for the best craftsmen the world could produce, and got a magnificent job done, but would not God have been better pleased with humbler work from a devoted heart? It is one thing to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. It is another thing when men speak of worshipping God in the holiness of beauty. The first centres on God's grace and the second on man's achievements.

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8:1-11

So far the Temple is only a building like other buildings, but something is now done which marks it out as a place set apart for God. The ark of God is brought into the innermost holy place or shrine of the Temple. This ark was the chest which contained the tablets of stone inscribed with the law of God (Exod. 25:10-22) and was associated with the coming of the Lord to His people that He might dwell with them and bless them. When this ark was brought into the very heart of the building and when all men had withdrawn, then the glory of God came down on the House of God. There is a vital lesson here. When the Word of God is placed at the heart of the work of God, given its place to stand by its own inherent value and authenticity, and when all men stand back, then and only then does the glory of God come down upon the worship and work of the Church. There is no other way. The only thing God will honour is His own Word, and it must stand free from people's attempts to decorate or

manipulate it with their cleverness (1 Cor. 1: 17-18). Just as the Law was given in its completeness, a revelation of God's righteousness which stands in unqualified demand over against sinners, so must the whole content of the Word of God, by which God has been pleased to reveal Himself to all, be declared in the midst of God's people. The less there is of the Word, the less there will be of the manifestation of the glory of God. It is a lesson the church is slow to learn, but it must be learned. This is the priority of mission, not least because the Word of God in its solemn comprehensiveness is a word of grace unto salvation.

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8:12-21

It is a solemn thing to stand in the presence of the glory of God, and both Solomon and his people are awed. Yet at the same time the king is able to speak and so is able to give expression to his heart. It is almost as if the more a man is aware of the might and majesty of God, the more he is able to speak. Certainly, he will speak with basic honesty, for he knows this God will not be impressed by a spiritual performance. But it is to the people that Solomon speaks first and he blesses them by giving testimony to the past mercies of God. This people must be reminded that their existence, their continuing identity, and their blessing and prosperity all stem from and are undergirded by the great work of redemption which God Himself has worked sovereignly in delivering them from Egypt. Apart from this they are nothing. But with this they stand individually and corporately guaranteed in salvation. They were a people delivered out of bondage and led into newness of life in and by the promise of God. Now that word of promise, the word of the faithful covenant-keeping God, stood at the heart of the Temple to remind them of all their blessings. The Lord had kept His word (20). Let it be seen that His people trust Him. They are a chosen people, for God's own possession (1 Pet. 2:9-10). This is the kind of fact on which you can base a whole life.

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8:22-30

It is a great day in a man's life when he realises how great a God he has, how faithful that God is, and how that God has lifted him up and made him part of an everlasting purpose of grace and glory. It is almost too much for our poor minds to grasp and yet we must believe it. It seems that the thing which staggered Solomon most of all is the fact of the humility of this great God. If even the highest heavens cannot contain Him (27) certainly a mere temple cannot. This is something we must never forget, for we all tend to restrict: God and His working to the confines of our experience, understanding and expectation. He cannot be limited, yet He remains constant and consistent. He will not say and do now that which will contradict what He has said in the past. Never be swept away by the novel and extraordinary. God is too big to need to be petty. But always be awed by the fact that this God is willing and eager to come down to dwell with His people, to work in them, for them and through them. It is this God who dwells in our hearts by His Spirit, making our very bodies temples of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:16). If we thought more of these things, not only would our lives be purer, our prayer life would be marked by a new dignity of realism and worship.

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8:31-53

Grounded firmly in the facts of past redemption and recognising the spiritual facts of the present, Solomon looks to the future. The whole of this passage can be summed up in the word "fellowship". This is what God desires and this is our blessing. At times we find it hard to accept that God has set His heart on His people and longs for the unshadowed pleasure of

their company. But this is exactly what v.53 declares. Two things can mar this fellowship: sin and disobedience, and these are spoken of throughout the passage. But there is a remedy in the mercy of God for both these blights. If we confess and forsake our sins and are prepared to walk in the light with God and with others then we shall indeed have fellowship (1John 1:3-9). Solomon recognises the constant potential for backsliding in the hearts of the people. Perhaps more at high moments of prosperity than at any other time, we need to watch and pray. This is realism, and if we fail to recognise this inner treachery of the heart we shall be caught unawares in some moment of crisis and we shall fall. In v.38 there is reference to every man knowing the “plague” of his own heart (AV), or the “remorse” of his heart (NEB) or the “affliction” of his heart (NIV). Is not this often the start of our prayers? We need more and more to interpret our experience as individuals and as a church in terms of the activity of God and the presence or absence of prayer. But never think of prayer as merely a recovery measure to be abandoned when the immediate crisis is resolved.

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8:31-53

Read 2 Chron. 7:1-3, 12-22 as a comment on both the story of Solomon and of the Christian church. When we see churches standing desolate we need to ask the reason why. Solomon is clear that the building in itself is not to be idolised and equally clear that God is not essentially more present in a certain building than anywhere else. The place may be a means of grace and a focus of direction, but the significant location is heaven itself (35-36). Yet it is true that God lays His hand on a certain place and chooses that people for His purposes. This means both place and people are thereafter publicly known and identifiable, and the honour of God's name as well as the furtherance of His work are involved. This is a tremendous privilege and responsibility and means that the people so chosen and commissioned can never leave God out of their reckoning. Because of this and in the interest of both fellowship and service, the whole of life must be brought within the healthy scrutiny of God. In v.31-32 personal relationships are dealt with. In v.33-39, 44-49 the theme is that of public judgments in the life of the nation and the church, and these sound very stern, for God is not slow to express His displeasure and withdraw His blessing. But the objective is restoration of individual and nation alike (47-51). Thus the theme of the passage is really that of the amazing forgiveness of God. One issue will be evangelism by means of the magnetism of holy living (41-43).

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8:54-61

Having finished his prayer, Solomon assumes the function of a priest and blesses the people (Num. 6:23-27). These are not empty words. They signify the burning desire of the heart of the living God in respect of His people. God wants to bless and He is prepared to break through the barriers of our resistance and reluctance, at whatever cost to us initially, in order to do so. Note that Solomon describes this God as the faithful One whose promises never fail, and he goes on to link his own and Israel's present experience and future hope with the experience of the fathers in the past. This brings our thinking on to a glorious dimension. We are not to think of ourselves as a temporary, rootless segment of a religious and spiritual work. We belong to the past and to the future. This gives the day-to-day business of life, work, prayer and worship a tremendous significance. The Lord will not forsake His people, and it is the awareness of His faithfulness that inclines the hearts of the people towards their God in holiness of life and willingness of heart. The unchanging God will maintain the cause of His people as each day requires (59). This is the daily bread we pray for in the Lord's prayer, and it causes us to think of the manna provided for Israel which had to be gathered

day by day (Ex. 16:21). But look at v.60. The reason for Israel's election and blessing is that through her and through God's dealings with her, all the peoples of the earth might know the name of the Lord. Let your heart therefore be right with God, for His purposes of grace are still to be worked out through you (John 17:14-20).

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8:62-66

The seriousness and solemnity of the earlier verses are not contradicted by this passage full of rejoicing. Indeed it is that spirit which most takes God seriously that is able most to rejoice in God. This kind of realism is healthy. It is focused on God and we must learn to rejoice to the very depth of our hearts in the fact that God has laid hold on us, given Himself to us, and called us to be participants in His great, gracious and glorious purposes. Granted this may, under the inspiration of the Devil, cause us, as it often caused Israel, to lapse into a hideous and most repelling kind of spirituality which is totally taken up with itself. But it need not be so, and will not be so, if we allow God to take hold of us and cause us to rejoice in Himself. This is far more spiritual than to be for ever preoccupied with our sins and unworthiness. Of course we are unworthy, totally, absolutely and eternally. We are in fact nothing. Christ is everything. But we prefer to say such things about ourselves and resent it rather deeply if other people agree with us when we say so. If the truth be told, we often moan about our unworthiness in order to get people to say nice things about us. We go on about our sins, battles, difficulties in a way that fills our horizon. There is a preoccupation with sin and unworthiness that is simply a thinly disguised form of pride. We want to be *superior* to other people in our *humility*. True humility does not speak belittlingly about itself; it just does not speak about self at all. Never forget that if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart (1 John 3:20).

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9:1-9

There are deep lessons here and we note that this second appearance of the Lord to Solomon came when the man had finished the mighty task of building the temple. It was a time of achievement sealed by a wonderful service of dedication, a high spiritual occasion. It was inevitably also a time of relaxation after sustained effort in the full glare of publicity and in consequence it was a time of danger. The greater the work and the more far-reaching its significance, the greater the danger. When mind and heart have been strenuously engaged and then find a sudden emptiness with no demands and no challenge of responsibility, there will be an immediate casting around for a new interest, which may prove to be worthy or unworthy. "Satan finds plenty work for idle hands to do." Was it not when David was idling, casual in his confidence of achievement, that he fell into terrible temptation (2 Sam. 11:1ff)? Is it not true that Israel was in better heart spiritually when battling to conquer Canaan than when the land was possessed and enjoyed? Is not the church stronger when persecuted than when at ease and accepted by society? It is best for us that we should be kept busily at work on an *unfinished* project, sensing the challenge, and straining every effort to accomplish the objective. It is in the wisdom of God that we are often denied what we would call success. The subsequent story of Israel testifies that the people failed because of their unfaithfulness. Why do nations fall from national and international greatness? Why do churches, once centres of great evangelical witness, die and become centres of worldly entertainment, antagonistic to the evangel they once rejoiced in? The answer is unfaithfulness (6-9). And the criticism and opposition can be bitter. Think how the temple and its devotees persecuted Jesus when He came!

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9:10-14

These verses are difficult to understand. It would appear that as a result of his huge building programme (seven years on the Temple and thirteen years on his own house) Solomon was short of ready cash and pawned or mortgaged twenty Israelite towns in return for the sum mentioned in v.14. Such a transaction was possible because Solomon and Hiram were already bound together in solemn league which had religious involvements as well as commercial transactions (5:12). Hiram seems to have taken Solomon's word as to the transaction, but when he later examined the territory which had been ceded he protested. He named them Cabul, a word which indicated their poor condition. These cities seem to have been returned to Solomon, either then or later, possibly on repayment of the loan and Solomon rebuilt them (2 Chron. 8:1-2). What spiritual lesson is there here? Solomon was no doubt embarrassed and humiliated by the exposure of his rather deceitful business transaction which had been made necessary by an element of extravagance in his building plans. This no doubt put him under obligation to Hiram, but it is never a good thing when God's men are involved in this way. Abraham's attitude in Gen. 14:21-24 is much more worthy. But another lesson concerns the way Solomon was prepared to cede territory of the promised land to a man outside God's covenant. This cannot be a right thing. What belongs to God may not be manipulated in this way to further human plans. Think well about the complications and alliances in Solomon's life and of how the fruit of them emerged in due time.

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9:15-28

Solomon's involvement in the international finance market brought him difficulties, and so did his home policy in respect of the taxation burdens and work force levy he instituted. Some years later (12:1-5) the heavy yoke of taxation is the ground of an appeal for a change of government policy. Granted the nation prospered (4:25), and according to this passage expansion was the dominant fact in the life of the nation. Granted that Solomon's rule was one of peace, and according to v.20-22 it was the Canaanites and not Israelites who were the real slaves. Yet we cannot shake free from the awareness of the complications of Solomon's life. Here we have Pharaoh (16) and his daughter (24) and the religious as well as political aspects of the alliances. If we begin to ask where all this is leading, we must remind ourselves that within another three chapters of the story we begin to read of the division and disintegration of Solomon's kingdom. We may not be able to pinpoint what was wrong, but there was something wrong. Some things, in spite of all their apparent prosperity and promise, just do not work out.

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9:15-28

That God's hand was on this nation and its king cannot be denied, and peace and prosperity came to them. As we shall read tomorrow, fame and success also came to the king and through him to his people. We might even spiritualise the reference in v.20-22 and think of the one-time possessors of the land being made servants of the children of promise, although the incomplete victory of Israel over the Canaanites is also recorded there. We may legitimately follow some commentators and see in Solomon, David's son, a type of Christ the glorious Prince, whose reign is one of peace and not war. But we cannot escape the challenge that Solomon's success made him careless, and he allowed himself concessions that were not wise. In v.24 we have Pharaoh's daughter whose house was in the shadow of the temple, and in v.25 we have the altar of the Lord and Solomon's participation in spiritual worship. Did he try, as many do, to keep his business success, his romantic success and his spiritual success in

different compartments of his life so that they each had an independent existence? Read carefully 2 Cor. 6:1-18, and remember how much depends on the choices and decisions we make. Their immediate significance may not be great, but as time goes on it will be apparent.

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10:1-13

Had Solomon been challenged in terms of the previous readings, he would no doubt have brushed aside the criticism and adduced this kind of story to prove how wide and far reaching an influence he had and how through him the name of Israel's God had become known. Certainly it was the fame of Solomon in respect of his God that drew the Queen of Sheba from Northern Arabia to make the journey in order to hear the wisdom of Solomon. What a testimony this is to the far reaching influence of a man and his work when they are blessed by God. When there is such evidence of the blessing of the living God there remains no excuse at all for not heeding and responding. This is the application of the story made by Jesus in Matt. 12:42 and it is a severe rebuke to a people who had long been blessed with the riches of God's truth and grace. In fact, these privileged Jews of Jesus' time had so much of the good things of God that their appetite had grown jaded, just as their forefathers had tired of the manna. This is still repeated today in places where God's blessing is known in its riches. Those most familiar with it become casual, and it all seems so ordinary, but strangers come from afar to eat and drink of spiritual food and are overflowing in their gratitude. They come, they hear for themselves, and discover that the truth is even more wonderful than the rumour. But is it not true also of ourselves that we are beginning to discover that the half has not been told? To be a Christian is to live a life of on-going discovery.

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10:1-13

The whole world knew that Solomon's God was blessing His people. In spite of all Solomon's faults we see the extent to which God can work through a man who is willing. But note how constant the reference is to gold and silver, and think how much of all this trade had to do with luxuries rather than necessities, a distinction we are gradually becoming unable to make. This is not a plea for asceticism which can sometimes be a form of pride. God gives us much richly to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17), and yet we must not abuse or overuse what the world brings to us (1 Cor. 7:31). Remember that it was good that the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon in her searching for life when she did, for very soon his kingdom was in decline and was no longer an attraction to unbelieving people. When you think of all the riches that the queen herself had, you must conclude that in measure at least she was a hungry and thirsty woman who longed for life. She overcame her prejudice and difficulty and came to see and hear for herself. Whatever her motives, and they may well have been very mixed, she certainly found more than she expected, and returned to her own home a different woman, full of gratitude. But how many were there who heard but did not come? This is one reason why we need to go out and look for them and bring them in (Lk. 14:15-24). But in terms of outreach consider Zechariah 8:23 and Ezekiel 36:23 AV.

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10:14-29

When you read this story of fabulous wealth, you understand why Jesus spoke of Solomon in all his glory. Remember also that Jesus said the lily of the field outstripped Solomon in glory (Matt. 6:28-29). These material terms are used to signify the extensiveness of God's blessing on this man, and we are to think in terms of spiritual blessings when we seek to apply the message to ourselves. If Solomon is a type of Christ, then we are being made to think of the

immeasurable riches that are ours in Christ. This is a great theme of the New Testament (Eph. 1:3, 7, 11, 14, 18ff; 2:8, 16ff) and one we need to ponder deeply so that we might begin to appropriate all that is ours in Christ. It is an interesting contrast to this picture of wealth in our passage to think of the incident in Acts 3:1-11. It was then a glorious temple in the estimate of men but it had no power for the healing of broken lives. Silver and gold have I none ... BUT ... It is Christ we have, and we have Him to give to others.

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11:1-8

This is very sad. We have seen the greatness of Solomon, his tremendous potential for good, how God blessed him and used him in the blessing of others, and how the name of God was heralded far and wide because of him. In his early life he loved the Lord (3:3) and we have described him as one who said to God, "Make me the kind of man who can be used, and use me." God trusted him, gave him wealth, prominence, success and service, and for ten chapters the story is one of progress and advancement with the glory of God's presence manifest in the midst of Israel's worship. But now, within one chapter, the whole fabric of his work crumples like a pack of cards. The secret flaw within his personality and life now proves fatal in terms of spiritual usefulness. It had been there all along but somehow had been kept in abeyance, perhaps by the sheer pressure of the man's work. Perhaps the self-will and self-indulgence had not been in abeyance, but only concealed by his manifest successes in every realm. Do not be deceived by the reference to old age in v.4 for he was only about sixty. The verse does not plead senility as an excuse but rather points out that this failure was not the result of youthful impulsiveness. He was a well instructed man of spiritual experience but he fell. Read 1 Cor. 10:1-15.

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11:1-8

Were people in Israel surprised by the kind of women their king chose to be his companions and wives? How could Solomon have done this? It seems such a contradiction of all his spiritual convictions. Did he think himself too wise in the things of God to come to harm, so well established and so clear in what he believed and where he stood that he felt there was no danger of being turned away from God? His mind was clear but his emotions were vulnerable and once committed he could not or would not turn back. The very fact that he was able so to take a wife, and then other wives, who could never share his faith and had no intention of doing so, signified that he did not stand spiritually where people thought he stood. The pleasure and success: of his business life stole his heart from God (Mk. 10:23-25). His emotional life blinded him to his spiritual desolation. Even his religious life took second place to pleasing his wives (7-8). He was no longer at one with God (4), he had begun to depart from Him (5), and negative reservation became positive contradiction (6). Guard your souls. Watch and pray.

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11:9-13

Here is the beginning of the end of a great work and a glorious kingdom. When people deal falsely with God, even though their sin may as yet be concealed in the privacy of a palace, as Solomon's was, it is only a matter of time before their downfall is assured. The size of Solomon's harem (3), with even more wives than concubines, tells us that the man's problem was not merely unchecked lust. Most of his marriages seem to have been political alliances in the interest of his royal advancement, and of course, along with the wives he had to take and give patronage to their pagan gods. Perhaps Solomon could live somewhat detached from the

spiritual implications of his actions, but in the course of time the sinister effect of this evil introduced into the life of the nation would become fatal. The long term influence of this evil initiated by Solomon is seen in the fact that as far on as 2 Kings 23:13 these shrines of idolatry were still in existence, in spite of various attempts at the purging of the nation by some of the godly kings. Little wonder God was angry with this man to whom He had appeared twice in glorious promise. God had not dealt shabbily with the king, nor had He been quick to judge (12). But God was concerned with the whole progress of His redeeming work, which had been put in peril by the sins of His chosen servant. Solomon had broken faith with God. God must act. That there was a remnant of the kingdom spared was a testimony to the greatness of David, not Solomon (12), and Solomon had to live out his days with this knowledge.

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11:14-25

This makes solemn reading. Solomon's reign began with great victories in which his enemies were put down, apparently decisively. But these victories were won by God not Solomon, and now, when the king had elected to go his own way contrary to God's will, the restraints of God were no longer operative over the old enemies. Old enemies, things that had seemed past and gone for ever, came stirring out of their hidden places to afflict the backslidden king. This is not just a coincidence. God stirred up a variety of distresses to afflict this son of disobedience and the nation which had followed his compromised example. There is a deep warning here. No man lives to himself. Each one of us is exercising an influence for good or ill, bringing others, including our families and friends, into the line of God's blessing or under the rebuke of His displeasure. How very important it is to be right with God and to keep faith with Him. Solomon began to feel that everything was going wrong, and it was. Whatever a man or a nation sows that shall be reaped, together with the inevitable increase of the harvest. When spiritual integrity and obedience depart, every aspect of life and experience begins to disintegrate, though not necessarily at once. The mills of God grind slowly, but they do grind! Think of the predicament of the church in our land that has abandoned the authentic faith of its fathers. It is a weak church, whose influence at home and abroad is declining, and it cannot be hidden. Think of a nation that no longer walks in God's laws. Its whole industrial, social and moral welfare is in disarray. How could it be otherwise? God is not mocked.

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11:26-43

Take the whole of this passage at once to show how swiftly the reign and kingdom of Solomon deteriorated and fell. Do not fail to note that this process is not to be explained and interpreted simply in terms of political, social and moral cause and effect. If we link 11:9, 14, 23, 30-31; 12:15, 24 we see most clearly that God was at work. Now, we must learn for our own generation that, as in all generations, God is active, doing two things. He is causing His work of salvation to be moved forward irresistibly and at the same time He is bringing to people and nations the harvest of righteous retribution. With calm balance of thought we must recognise the fact of the operative wrath of God (Rom. 1:18ff). We must also recognise the strange methods of God, for here we are told of God's rending of the kingdom of Israel (30-32) and His giving to a wicked and proud man the possibility of service (37-38). We see also the strange sight of Solomon, the man who had been so richly blessed, becoming the fierce persecutor of Jeroboam, the God-appointed successor to the throne. Think of how the darkened and crazed Saul persecuted David, the Lord's anointed. Is it not frightening to see what a man can become when he departs from God? Think of what Paul says when he speaks

of God giving men over to a reprobate mind (Rom. 1:28). Truly, there is a God with whom we have to do.

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11:26-43

God does move in a mysterious way. His ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33-36); but His ways are higher than ours and far more sure (Isa. 55:8-11). The united kingdom of Israel was about to come to an end and the two parts of the nation would from now on have independent histories. What is the meaning of this? The answer is, divine surgery (30-31). God is not afraid to wield the knife, to sever the vast section of the ten tribes so that the remnant might carry forward His pure and holy purposes. The three main characters of the drama are pinpointed. In Solomon the fallen king we see how a man's past service, however rich and successful, does not excuse his present failure but rather highlights it. Solomon had taken liberties with God for a long time but the reckoning had come. Jeroboam, promoted at first by Solomon because of his industry and capacity, was an ambitious man and when he was forced to flee for his life he no doubt nursed his wrath to keep it warm and waited for the time to come when he would be the focus of the nation's discontent. Commentators point out that the rebellion in v.26-27 took place some twenty years after Solomon came to the throne, early in the second half of his reign, and it was a possible threat until his death, when it came to the forefront again. In the prophecy of a kingdom for Jeroboam (37-38) we are to understand this as being instituted as a discipline to the house of David (Judah) and not a replacement for it. Rehoboam, aged forty-one (14:12), born when Solomon seemed at the peak of his career and his spiritual stature, is the only member of the king's family mentioned. Was this all Solomon left behind him? When Rehoboam was put to the test, he failed.

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12:1-15

This is the beginning of the story of the divided kingdom and we must keep clearly in mind what is happening. After the death of Solomon, and brought to a crisis by the harshness and failure of Rehoboam, the kingdom was divided into two parts which went their separate ways and maintained their separate identities. The ten tribes of the north formed the kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Samaria, and Jeroboam, son of Nebat, its first king. The remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, formed the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem and its first king Rehoboam, son of Solomon. Israel had a sorry succession of evil kings who refused to walk in the ways of God, while Judah had quite a number of good kings who in measure did the will of God but who failed to stem the tide of unbelief, idolatry and evil. The story of the divided kingdom goes right to the end of the Books of Kings and incorporates the ministries of most of the great prophets (see the first three notes on chap.1:1-4). Because of its persistent sins the northern kingdom fell to its enemies in 722 B.C. after some 210 years of separate existence. The kingdom of Judah, in spite of all the warnings of the prophets, also fell to the power of Babylon in 586 B.C. That the southern kingdom lasted some 136 years longer than the northern kingdom is a testimony to the influence of the good kings, encouraged by the prophets, and to the forbearance of God who was prepared to forgive and restore again and again whenever there was a sign of repentance in His people. That both kingdoms did eventually fall is a testimony to the fact that apostasy brings inevitable judgment. We have much to learn in the succeeding chapters.

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12:1-15

In the first clash between these two men, each proud and wilful in his own way, the kingdom is divided beyond hope of remedy. The fact that Rehoboam went to Shechem to be crowned by the northern tribes suggests that the long jealousy between north and south from as far back as Saul's days was still operative. In this atmosphere of incipient revolt there arose the issue concerning the huge burden of taxation imposed by Solomon in order to build his magnificent kingdom. That there was injustice in this taxation seems clear and certainly there was resentment. Now, past bitternesses have a habit of influencing political decisions, and the situation favoured Jeroboam's aspirations to a throne. Had Rehoboam acted according to the wise advice of humility and humanity given by the old men he might well have held, at least temporarily, the loyalty of the north. But this proud young man preferred the harsh advice of his contemporaries who had grown up with him in the position of wealth and power which the court had given, and Rehoboam resented any suggestion of curbing his totalitarian power. Certainly he wanted to be king, but not in order to be a servant to the people (7). Here is a man so preoccupied by his own position, person and privilege that he failed completely to be aware of the far-reaching crisis that had come upon him and the nation. He had no spiritual vision and consequently no sense of spiritual responsibility. It would appear that God featured in the young man's life as little as in his father's latter life. Like father, like son! God was in it all, but for judgment and not mercy (15).

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12:16-24

It was now 1070 years since God called Abraham; 350 years since God led the people out of Egypt; and about 70 years since David took the throne in Jerusalem over a united kingdom. All that long work is now seen to be torn to shreds, and for the next 350 years the story concerns strife and destruction and the demise of this people who bear the name of the Lord. In the case of these rival kings selfishness, pride and weakness all have a part in the debacle. The people are not guiltless, but at the same time the situation is never out of hand, for God is on the throne. Trace the swift development of the story and sense something of the satanic drive. Rehoboam's temper is roused by the defection of the tribes and he sends the tax ambassador to assert his rule. When the man was stoned, the army was mustered for civil war and the whole issue became one of gigantic proportions. BUT GOD (22-24). Amazingly God's word was accepted, perhaps because Rehoboam's self confidence had been shattered by events and he realised that faith demanded submission rather than action. When God is in a situation (and there are none from which He is excluded) and when God is working out His determined purposes (as He is in all sets of circumstances) we must learn to be very careful before we rebel and kick against the pricks of experience. Learn to ask, "What is God doing and what is He saying to me in this thing that is happening?" This is faith, and it is profitable (Heb. 12:5-11). To be determined to manipulate the situation and make it work in the way you think best may very well be sheer unbelief.

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12:25-33

Jeroboam, also involved in the outworking of God's purposes, has a lesson to teach. He was determined to go his chosen way, to hold on to what he had gained by way of a kingdom, and to frustrate any possibility of reversal. He was living contrary to God and he sought to hide the fact by being doubly spiritual. Do not fail to see the man's blatant unbelief. God had promised him a kingdom (11:31, 38ff) on condition of obedience, but a heart of unbelief distrusts the promise of God and, reckoning that God is unable to carry out His own designs,

prefers to trust to human manipulation. Fear, ambition, and impatience all contributed to Jeroboam's actions, but he recognised that spiritual considerations are really fundamental and he instituted a form of state religion that would meet the desires of the hearts of the people and at the same time consolidate his own power and position. Many try to conceal the fact that they are adrift from God by setting up a spiritual institution in which *they* are the controlling factor. The priests were not ordained by God (31) and the whole “spiritual” set-up, which was basically a rejection of God's word of promise, was a perversion of the truth and a distraction from God. The subtlety of its power lay in its attractiveness, its convenience, and its appeal to the senses (28-29). It gave king and people a religious sense of being right with God while living in direct contradiction of His will. This is convenient religion, and people like it. But God is in it only for judgment.

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13:1-10

The story of Jeroboam is a revelation of the deceitful heart of unbelief and at the same time a declaration that there is mercy with the Lord for those who repent. In 12:32-33 we saw that the man's religion, though it seemed like the real thing, was in fact just a projection of his own heart and thoughts. It seems that he had silenced all the prophets of the northern kingdom (at least for the time being) perhaps by protesting his sincerity. But sincerity is no substitute for truth. Jeroboam stood by the altar, but he was not in fellowship with God and he prayed to himself (Luke 18:10-12). Then God sent a prophet from Judah, for the true word of God must be spoken, and if those inside will not speak it, God will send an outsider who will no doubt be resented. The prophecy about Josiah concerned the distant future (2 Kings 23:1-5ff and 15-17ff) but that concerning the altar was immediate. The king was furious at this public denunciation of his religion and reacted in anger, to his cost. The judgment here is a warning one, not a final one, as is evidenced by the swift healing of the king's withered hand (but not the repairing of the altar). God was implacably against the false altar and idolatry, but He would have mercy on the sinner. The call to repentance went unheeded. There was no acknowledgment of guilt, no change of heart, no request for instruction and guidance from a prophet who was manifestly speaking with God's authority. Instead there was the patronage of friendship and the offer of reward. The prophet would have none of it. He who would work for God must be clear of compromise.

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13:11-32

This story concerns two men of God and their dealings with each other in relation to God. In yesterday's reading we found the man of God testifying with mighty spiritual power in the context of idolatry. What courage, faith and obedience he showed! Now we find that same man assailed by the Devil when he was no doubt tired and in some state of anti-climax. Satan desired to have him (Luke 22:31). Think also of Elijah's reaction after Carmel (1 Kings 19:1-4). But in this case the Devil came as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:13-15) through the old prophet and his words. Now it may have been the prophet's seniority of age that influenced the other, but if it was, the younger man should have wondered why this experienced prophet had remained silent in the context of idolatry and why he was not available for God to use as the messenger to the king. It seems more likely that it was the older man's claim to have had some special revelation or intimation from God that beguiled the younger man (18). But this was devilish work and the young prophet should have known that God is not self-contradictory and that the clear command of the word of God is more authentic and authoritative than angelic or spirit revelations. You can check the message of one part of God's word by comparing with another, rightly dividing the word of truth, and comparing

spiritual things with spiritual things (2 Tim. 2:13-16; 1 Cor. 2:12-13). But you cannot check on a man's visions because they are subjective and personal. We must learn not to be taken in.
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13:11-32

We must learn not to be taken in by specious words that stem from a spurious spirituality. We must also learn that it is dangerous to interfere with the work of God and with the workers of God. We have already indicated that the old prophet was in no spiritual condition to be used by God, whatever he had been in the past (1 Cor. 9:26-27; 10:12-14). Why did he go after the other prophet? Can we tell? Did he know? We do many things contrary to God's will when we are out of line spiritually! He would not be setting out deliberately to ruin God's servant, yet he knew of the refusal to stay in Bethel. Could it be that in bringing the man to his house he would feel that somehow he was a part of God's working even though his heart was not right? Being far in with God's man is no substitute for being far in with God. Consider the influence of this old prophet. He led God's "man for the moment" out of God's will and into disaster, just as some people who are out of tune with God gather young Christians round them and by spurious advice in spiritual things make shipwreck of their lives. Think of the influence on the work of God when it became known that God's man had been compromised. This was indeed a day of victory for Satan. Watch and pray.

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13:11-32

Do not be deceived by the words of the old prophet in v.20-22, 26, 29. This man, like Balaam, was compelled against his will, and with no real change of heart to speak the word from God, and the judgment of God exposed both men in their failure. One prophet forfeited the rest of his life of ministry, cut off before his full term of service, and it was his tombstone that remained a testimony to Israel. The other prophet was left with nothing but regrets, and said, "Bury me beside the faithful prophet for he could have been a great servant of God but for me." One prophet, disobedient in a time of crisis so that the testimony of God was compromised, met summary judgment but in that chastening he was not condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11: 31-32). The other prophet and the evil king went on their way, with their judgment yet to come. God is a God with whom we have to do. Always remember that the man who triumphed in the great and demanding piece of service was the man who fell in the subtle temptation when the pressure was off. Little wonder the apostles and prophets say, "Brothers, pray for us."

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13:33-34

Jeroboam, who knew the message of the prophet and his downfall, felt encouraged in his wickedness and had not the slightest thought of repentance. Indeed his institution of such a miserable priesthood is a testimony to his contempt for the holiness of God. This man, who started off with the promise of possible blessing (11:37-38), became the man consistently described as "Jeroboam... who made Israel to sin." Such blasphemy as is seen in this man brought the judgment of God to cut off both him and his house. There is a solemn word in Proverbs 29:1 and a similar warning in Genesis 6:1-7. God sets a limit, and when that is reached all hope is gone, for the possibilities of grace give place to the actualities of judgment. Today is the time for setting things right with God. There may be no tomorrow, or a tomorrow in which there is no awareness of the promptings and calling of God. This is how a man loses his soul, and in the process he becomes more and more an instrument of evil and

a stumbling-block to the people and the work of God. It is one thing to consider lightly what we are at the moment. It is another thing to consider what we may be becoming.

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14:1-20

Wicked people often get a great shock when painful circumstances force them into having dealings with the prophets of God whom they have despised and cast off as irrelevant. It is not for nothing that Scripture declares that God's servants are made like flames of fire (Heb. 1:7) and the fire tries everyone's work to see what sort it is (1 Cor. 3:13). Remember that whenever we have dealings with God, His Word is living and powerful, and it pierces through every possible disguise and expedient. Jesus said that there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed. Jeroboam's scheme for deceiving the prophet is very revealing. In spite of having instituted a priesthood of rabble (13:33), it is clear he had no respect for them nor did he put much trust in the religion they administered at his command, for it was to the prophet of God he turned in his personal family distress. He knew the prophet was the representative of the living God who was full of compassion, but he also knew that this prophet would have stern words to say if the king came anywhere near. It is a sign of the king's total lack of respect for both the prophet and the Lord that he thought both could be so easily deceived and bought over by means of a gift. Contempt for God's servants, so that they are mocked and reckoned rather pathetic and to be patronised, is a sign of a person's own spiritual emptiness. Granted there are preachers who do anything but inspire respect. But who said they were necessarily God's men? A man speaking God's word in the authority of the Holy Spirit is a different proposition.

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14:1-20

Ahijah the prophet, who had protested against the idolatry of Solomon, had featured earlier in Jeroboam's life (11:31-33) but had no doubt later proved a nuisance when the king turned to idolatry. Ahijah was possibly banished to Shiloh and may well have languished there, growing old and frail, feeling that his work was done and that he might as well be dead. But there was one more mighty piece of service to be done and the old man was still in close fellowship with God and able to do it. His speech, beginning in v.6, is magnificent and his spiritual grandeur and comprehensive utterance showed up the king for the petty weakling that he was. Right through this message of judgment there runs the emphasis of cause and effect. There was good reason for this final pronouncement of punishment. God would make an end of the whole house of Jeroboam which had become an offence to Him in its persistent iniquity. God had had enough. There was no remedy. An interesting comment on Jeroboam's reign is found in 2 Chron. 13:2-20. The face of the Lord was against this wicked man (1 Pet. 3:12). There is no hope left.

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14:21-31

Much of the historical material concerning Judah is repeated in the Books of Chronicles where the story is often amplified and its spiritual application is given. In this way we see these kings assessed in the light of their dealings with God and His purposes. This is the only true assessment of a man's life. In today's passage we read of how a whole nation deteriorated and fell away from grace and from God to such an extent that spiritual treasures (shields of gold) were replaced by cheap replicas (27). They looked the same, and people pretended they were, but a deep loss had occurred. We are told in 2 Chron. 12:1-14 the underlying spiritual story. It was when he was established that Rehoboam forsook the Lord. In his earlier days,

when struggling with the situation created by his own personality and his headstrong actions, he was a better man spiritually. But when, by the grace of God, he had battled through to become something worthwhile, reaching a place of some maturity and stability, he forsook the Lord who had brought him through. It is an oft repeated story! Do we stand where we once stood? If our highly polished shields of spiritual defence were scratched would they prove to be gold or substitute brass or bronze?

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14:21-31

When you think of the brash spiritual rebellion of Rehoboam and the accompanying moral decadence throughout the nation you cannot be surprised by the intervention of God in judgment. There comes a time when evil will not be allowed any more opportunity, and then people who have initiated that evil and encouraged it will find themselves at their day of reckoning. How solemn to think that some such people in earlier days had been active and blessed in the work of God. Peter has a solemn word to say about this (2 Pet. 2:20-22). There is something frightening about backsliding (Luke 11:24-26), and experience testifies that backsliders are the hardest of people to deal with. When we read in v.25 about the enemy coming right to Jerusalem and plundering it we not only see God's judgment, but recognise how Rehoboam in his spiritual wrongness had become a destroyer of the work he once built up. But the whole scene would have been even more desolating if God had done nothing, as is sometimes the case in some situations. Some people are so totally insignificant to the work of God that their spiritual departure makes no difference and is scarcely noticed. But here, God had set His heart on a people whom He wanted for Himself and for His service. He was not prepared to see them destroy themselves, at least not without a fight to save them.

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15:1-8

This is a short and sorry story and not even the exciting narrative in 2 Chron. 13 redeems it. From Chronicles we know that Abijam (Abijah) believed certain things and in a very practical way defended true and spiritual religion against those who would prostitute it. In some ways he could be described as an orthodox theologian of the conservative and traditional school, but the annals of the kings tell us his heart was not right with God and his life was patterned on the evil ways of his father before him. How we need to recognise that to be a parent out of the will of God is to be a terrible liability to our children. But at the same time we see something of the sovereign grace of a faithful God in the fact that the king was granted a godly son. This was done for David's sake, not Abijam's. Indeed, it was in spite of Abijam and in answer to the spiritual integrity and prayer of the man of God four generations previously that the next king was raised up to be a blessing to the people of God. We cannot measure just how true this is of our own generation and our own congregation. Other people laboured, doing business with God and laying the foundation in prayers and tears, and we have now entered into their labours (John 4:34-38). Abijam lived, sinned and died, and it was a mercy he reigned only three years.

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15:9-15

The reign of Asa for forty-one years was like a beam of light flooding the nation and bringing a measure of health to its soul. We saw yesterday that this break in the tyranny of evil came in answer to the prayers and tears of men and women long since dead. Of course we cannot live for ever on the spiritual capital of the past, and we in our turn must consider what we will hand on to those who come after us. If God is blessing us (and He is), we must look not only

to the past source of blessing, but to the present realisation of all the possibilities of that blessing, so that the future purposes of God might proceed without hindrance. Asa did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and not even his own family was allowed to be lax or to escape the purging discipline of righteousness (13). It is one thing to stand and speak against public immorality and organised vice and blasphemy, but it is a harder thing when you are tempted to temporise and compromise within the family circle. What a challenge to faith and obedience. Happy is the man whose family are one hundred per cent with him in loyalty to God. Asa's whole life was centred on the House of God which he loved. He did right, but the fuller story in Chronicles tells us that he could have been and done more.

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15:9-15

The full story of Asa is in 2 Chron. 14-16. He was not without his problems for he inherited a broken nation and it was true of him, as we have noted, that a man's foes may well be those of his own household (Matt. 10:36). When you think of Asa's parents it is a miracle when you read his prayer in 2 Chron. 14:11. How did this come about in a spiritually and morally decadent nation? There was a prophetic ministry (2 Chron. 15:2ff.) and the Word of God came to the man in power, promise and relevance. The king received the Word in joy and lived in the hope of its promise. There is hope for a nation so long as there are prophets! But at the same time the privilege of having such ministry highlights the fact that the man failed to press home to the full extent the opportunities and possibilities thus opened to him (1 Kings 15:14). His failure to go right through with the business of obedience had, in time, a debilitating effect. Both Kings and Chronicles emphasise that Asa's heart was true to God all his days ("perfect" or "faithful") and he was certainly in earnest (2 Chron. 15:12-15). We must not, and we have no right to, blacken his character, yet we must reckon on the sacred historian's insistence that "the high places were not taken away." This meant that the Devil had still a foothold in the nation and would bide his time to make capital out of it. It is this activity of the Devil in enmity against the good king that we consider tomorrow.

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15:16-24

Read 2 Chron. 16 for a fuller account and to discern the assaults of the Devil against this good king whose influence might well have eradicated idolatry from the kingdom. Hebrews 3:12-19 speaks of the danger of an evil heart of unbelief which leads a man away from God, and it is sheer unbelief, unexplained but powerful, that lies at the heart of Asa's failure here. Why did he doubt God and why did he panic? He was not a novice (2 Chron. 16:1). Having proved the faithfulness of God in the past why did he now put his trust in an alliance with the king of Syria? It is impossible to justify unbelief! This was the message of the prophet (2 Chron. 16:7ff) and in the king's reaction we may see some explanation of his decline. When God's word was reassuring the king received it and rejoiced in it, but when it was rebuke and challenge he resented it. The king was so angry at being spoken to in such terms that he vented his wrath on the prophet and people alike. Here is the limitation of the man's service. There was a death to self that he refused to die. The confirmation of this self-will attitude is the end of the story. Even when circumstances in his kingdom and in his own health convicted him and called him back to God he was so truculent and stubborn that he refused and called on the physicians (possibly foreign ones) rather than on the Lord. He died with a cloud on his spirit and a brake on his service. How sad, when you think of how much more he could have been for God.

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15:25-16:7

Godlessness brings a very grim and complicated life to individuals and nations and there is no escape. People refuse to retain God in their knowledge, and God lets them go their chosen way, confirming them in it (Rom. 1:18ff). Keep reminding yourself of the flow of events and you will see the relentless fulfilment of God's word in the affairs of both northern and southern kingdoms. During the 41 years of Asa's reign in Judah, Israel had six kings who reigned in anarchy and moral declension. Two of these kings were murdered and one of them committed suicide after only a week on the throne. There is a fury and ferocity which is quite frightening when you see evil men taking power into their hands. We could not bear to look at it, let alone live through it, were it not for the fact that we are persuaded that the God of righteousness and justice sits on the throne. But we can grasp this only from the standpoint of faith and by being willing to take a long-term view of history. At the beginning of today's reading we have the fulfilment of the prophecy of 1 Kings 14:7-14. The house of Jeroboam is ended. But wicked men, carrying out the punishment of other wicked men by their own carnal authority and having no thought or fear of God, simply repeat the same evil and guarantee their own judgment in due time. It was so with Baasha. Yet he reigned for nearly quarter of a century. God's time comes. Wait for it, and do not allow your soul to be embittered by the works of evil that surround you. That would be to play into the enemy's hand.

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16:8-20

These stories seem to be all about people and there is no sign of God. But God is there, His judgments are active among the nations, and the king and people of Judah no doubt heard of what was going on in the north. But did they learn anything from it? When you begin to find drunkenness and debauchery among the leaders of the nation the reckoning is not far off. There is no record of any public protest against the way things were going and the people, by their own choice, followed their leaders, and the nation got darker and darker as it lived with the consequences of its own choices (Prov. 29:18; Deut. 30:18-19). There seems to have been a spirit of judicial blindness upon Israel which made the people quite unaware of the ultimate disaster that was bound to come upon them. When you think that all this is happening in Israel, so privileged in its knowledge of spiritual things, a mere 115 years after the reign of David it staggers the mind to realise how swift is the process of national declension. Were there no voices of the older generation raised to warn? Were there no young visionaries who could see the issues and call the people back to God? Would they have been listened to, or would they have been mocked as in our own day and branded as being "Puritan"? God was preparing a prophet but the times were not yet wicked enough for him to emerge.

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16:21-28

Do not fail to discern the principle of judgment running through these sordid stories. It was because of sins and evil-doing that disaster struck again and again at the throne and the nation (16: 7, 13, 19, 25). The fact that God made use of evil men to carry out His judgments must not cause us to stumble, for God is never complicit in human evil. In every turbulent and baffling situation, and in all our praying, we must affirm, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). But what is God doing and saying in this situation? When people say in unbelief, "Why doesn't God do something?" there are several replies possible. "Why should God do something? He is not the author of the hideous situation and if He did remedy it wouldn't people then dismiss Him? Or again, what do people want God to do? The brash

words of one dying thief on the cross are typical of impenitent man who wants only to be let off the hook when his sins have found him out, and are causing him pain and danger (Luke 23:39-41). In fact God was speaking in Israel by the voice of circumstances and national decline for God never leaves Himself without a witness (Acts 14:15-17). But the nation would not hear, and in the time of Omri, a man of some capacity, things reached a new peak of wickedness, for this kind of situation is cumulative and iniquity becomes heaped upon iniquity until the very memory of righteousness is forgotten. Indeed sin can become so much the norm that any man speaking of righteousness becomes resented as a wicked and unjustified innovator. It becomes all too easy to capitulate in hopelessness, but what is the outcome? All Omri's great wickedness seems as nothing compared to what he bequeathed to the nation in the person of his son Ahab. There is worse to come.

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16:29-34

At this stage in the life of the nation there is no restraint at all in Israel and Ahab is established as the unquestioned leader of the avant garde school of free-thinkers whose supreme aim is the unfettered expression of all that their hearts are capable of. When such a man as Ahab is established in power there is almost no limit to the permutations of iniquity that can be experimented with. The inventiveness of this wicked man in respect of sin is frightening, for he went beyond the bounds of all that had gone before and he took the nation with him. It was no longer enough to indulge in the orgy of "ordinary" sins and Ahab quite deliberately sought out a pagan princess for his wife in order that he might be introduced to all the varieties of "religious" experience in which Jezebel was well versed. She was a fanatical devotee of Baal whose worship involved all the lasciviousness and obscenity of the fertility cults. Our own generation's obsession with sex as a thing in itself seems the modern form of this idolatry of self-gratification. Jezebel had a staff of 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the associated Asherah, a Canaanite mother-goddess (1 Kings 18:19). Ahab, being determined to have as much "fulfilment" as possible, threw himself into the worship of Baal in the most public way possible (31-32). What is more, he knew what he was doing, and did it deliberately in order to disassociate himself from the "old-fashioned inhibiting" religion of the spoken Word of God (32). The whole nation was infected and the story of Hiel is a typical illustration of how, given the opportunity, men will fly in the face of God in the most contemptuous unbelief. The warnings of God are ignored (34) and the price is paid (Joshua 6:26), but the iniquity does not slow down, let alone stop. Ahab had sold himself to the powers of evil and Jezebel urged him on (21:25). Such a dark day needs an Elijah, and God had His man ready.

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17:1

The whole fabric of the nation was rotten, spiritually, morally, socially and economically, and evil was coming out into the open, brash and arrogant. Godlessness was the motivating principle of the nation and no voice was raised in protest, even though God had many men in Israel (19:18). Perhaps their voices were directed to God rather than man, for as there is a time to speak and preach so there is a time for silence and prayer. This is a lesson the church needs to learn, for godlessness will not be challenged and stopped by the church modifying herself to become the patron of the arts or the handmaiden of social services, and certainly not by an escapist preoccupation with forms and ceremonies, state-honoured or state-ignored. Who can say but that the preparation and emergence of Elijah was the answer to the prayer of the remnant church in the nation? Nearly sixty years had passed since the death of Solomon, years in which godlessness had carried all before it. But now, without warning, God's man

burst in on the nation like a thunderbolt, declaring that its time of reckoning had come. Before anyone could react the prophet had gone, and king and people may well have written him off as a religious maniac. Certainly they took no notice of the warning uttered with such comprehensive simplicity and authority. Was this just another abortive encounter with godlessness? Time would tell, and it took three years!

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17:1

God prepares His prophets for public service so that when the time comes they will stand sure. Elijah was a man of prayer (Jas. 5:16-18). His own sense of weakness (and he was subject to moods of deep despair) together with an awareness of the desperateness of the situation persuaded him that prayer was the only answer. Laid hold on by God and raised up for such a time as this, Elijah stood before the Lord. This strips a man of all pretence, conceit and corruption, makes him real, and draws him into the secret counsels of God. In this way, knowing the mind of God, the man begins to pray. It was at this point that God indicated to Elijah that he was to be the spokesman and the effective instrument of the whole plan of confrontation, and Elijah went and thundered to Ahab and Israel. But why did he pray for the stopping of the rain? He knew his Bible in a way that we must learn to do. Read Deut. 11:13-21; 2 Sam. 7:12-17, 25; 1 Kings 8:35-36. God means what He says and He does it. But the significance of the prophet's first brief sermon was not grasped. Things carried on as they had been, and perhaps the people rejoiced in the best and sunniest summer there had been in living memory. But then the streams began to dry up and the people looked for rain anxiously, just as our nation looks for an economic miracle. But the rain did not come, for God was bringing the nation to judgment.

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17:2-7

Elijah was perceptive enough to know what the consequences would be of the long drought, and he would know that when the pressure was on, the nation would blame him for the whole predicament. It is not easy to be God's faithful spokesman! The prophet's prayer and pronouncement heralded an economic slump, unemployment and food shortage. It is very grim, but when a nation is losing its soul something has to be done, and done effectively. Note how total the famine was to be, for neither dew nor rain would come. And, just as there was total withdrawal of water leading to a famine of bread, so there was the total withdrawal of the prophet, leading to a famine of the Word of God. It is no use people saying that it is the "duty" of the prophets to comfort and encourage the people. There is no comfort for those who turn their backs on God as the nation had done. What is more, when God orders withdrawal, no man dare countermand the order. But when God begins to reintroduce the prophetic ministry into the nation, then there is a token of hope! If this is so, then it is time we were learning to stand before the Lord like Elijah. In the place of obedience he was provided for by God even though his faith was tested as he watched the stream slowly dry up. Sitting still did not come easily to such a dynamic character, especially when there were no signs of fruit from his ministry, no converts in Israel, no people seeking him out for his counsel and leadership. He perhaps felt a failure. Certainly he *was* forgotten. But remember that he himself had said it would take three years. Elijah lived by faith. There was nothing else he could do!

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17:8-16

God prepared Elijah for significant service, spoke through him, removed him to Cherith for safety, provided for him there while the nation began to feel the pressure of God's displeasure, and then commanded him to go to Zarephath. This required a journey right through Israel to Sidon in the north, and in making it Elijah was not allowed to add his voice to the testimony of circumstances. To keep silent must have been a trial of faith. But then God was always placing him in situations where he had to have faith, and this is very much so in the story of the widow woman. It is not easy to have to place your well-being in the hands of such a person, especially since Elijah was so thoroughly a Jew, and she was a Gentile. But he did it, as he did other things, in obedience to God. Perhaps the prophet was aware that God the Lord was in fact shielding him from the evil wrath of men such as Ahab, who were virtually demonic in their antagonism to God. Remember there was not the slightest suggestion of repentance in Israel. Now, in Sidon, which was Jezebel's territory, Elijah found evidence of faith in the woman, and he must have marvelled at God's working in such a place. But Elijah had no commission to preach there, and he remained silent. No doubt the great man's presence was a blessing to the widow, but it was the woman who ministered to Elijah and kept him in health and safety in preparation for future service. Was it irksome to the great man to be so dependent? Grace makes us willing to be ministered to as well as to minister, and into the bargain it makes us humble.

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17:17-24

The fiery prophet possibly found it more to his liking to be provided for miraculously by the ravens (6) than ordinarily by the widow, but these were but the instruments of provision. The miracle each time was from God, who chooses His own methods, and they are often very simple, as in John 6:1-14. The widow's faith was real, but it had to be strengthened as the incident shows. This was an attack by the Devil on the woman for helping the prophet, and an attack on the prophet through her bitter words. It would have been easy for a man of Elijah's temperament to flash out words of anger at the woman. But for the prophet's arrival the woman and her son would have been dead already because of the famine (12). Now that her son had died the woman seems to have felt the presence of this gentle giant a very disturbing thing, and some incident from the past became a sore burden of guilt (18). In spite of the provision of God's goodness these many days (15), she now felt that God was only a stern God of judgment. In this crisis Elijah knew what to do. He took the lifeless boy (and the woman was willing to hand him over) and he went directly to God. The prophet did not understand why this had happened, but he trusted his God, and in prayer and in stretching himself out on top of the lad the prophet identified himself with the tragedy, felt its burden and prayed for life. What faith! This is as great a confrontation with God as in facing Ahab and in facing the prophets of Baal. Whether in a bedroom, a kitchen, a palace or Mount Carmel this man stood before God. The issue of the miracle was a glorious confirmation of the woman's faith. She knew now what to do with grief and loss: take it to the Lord in prayer. But what an encouragement this must, have been to Elijah. His God was still with him for service, not merely for preservation.

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18:1-16

For three years of increasing famine God had provided for the prophet, sufficiently but not indulgently. The nation suffered and the prophets of God; of whom there were many, also suffered (19:18). During these years God had not worked any significant work of power

except the relentless drought, and now the testing time had come, for the famine was to be ended. What this would mean is indicated by what the king and queen had been and done during the three years. They had persecuted the prophets (4), even though they had no direct connection with Elijah. God had kept them away from him for their own good even though Elijah must often have longed to have some gathered to his side to share the burden. Ahab was totally motivated by self-interest, and without a qualm of conscience he would have given water to his horses rather than to dying people (5). He was possessed of a spirit of vengeance against Elijah (10) which he vented on anything that seemed associated with God. Nothing about Elijah was acceptable to the king, and he had not even the sense to be afraid (16). The king was impervious to the appeals and warnings from God. On the one hand we have the ranting, raging Ahab, fuming his impotent fury, on the other we have the calm, stern prophet of God (remember his tender heart in the story of the widow) waiting in the confidence of God. Lord, give me such a faith as this!

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18:1-16

Obadiah is a problem, and we who have no knowledge of living under an alien, anti-God regime must be cautious before condemning him. Remember that Joseph in Egypt, Moses in Pharaoh's court, and Daniel in Babylon were all significant administrators in godless regimes. Should all such seek to emigrate, if they can, or should they court instant martyrdom by defying the authorities? We are told by *God* in 19:18 that He had 7,000 faithful men who had not bowed to Baal. Some of them had been obvious enough to be persecuted (18:4), being recognisable as servants of the same God as Elijah, and Obadiah had been instrumental in saving the lives of 100 prophets, no doubt risking his own life in the process. But why was Obadiah not persecuted when he was so available at the palace? Did he stand for principles of faith and purity in theory while in practice he made gain out of evil associations? He knew Elijah and sympathised with him (7) but, to say the least of it, he was reluctant to take his stand, and Elijah's comment in v.8, "Go tell *your* master", is biting. Can you imagine Elijah trotting alongside Ahab looking for water for the horses? Christian separation is a great principle and a necessary exhortation (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1), but do not forget "the saints in Caesar's house" (Phil. 4:22). We must be slow to judge another (Rom. 14:1-4). It is easy to judge from outside a situation and it is possible to stand firm in a situation of filthy evil and not bow the knee to Baal. But you must be very sure you are doing right, because the sight of your seeming involvement with evil may lead another person astray.

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18:17-20

Ahab and Elijah face to face present a wonderful picture, because both men were totally confident. When challenged, the king went to gather the prophets of Baal for a confrontation, never dreaming for a moment that he and they would be confounded. Such is the blindness and insensitivity of unbelief. Such is the pride of godlessness that it cannot even imagine the possibility of being wrong. Although Elijah refuted the accusation of being the troubler of Israel in order to lay the charge at the door of the king, in one sense he would acknowledge that he was such a troubler. After all, our Lord said He did not come to send peace but a sword (Matt. 10:34). *He* was certainly a disturber of the peace, as were the apostles after Him. It cannot be otherwise. To preach the word of the living God is to introduce an element of sifting, rebuke and challenge into the contemporary situation and it will always be resented by some. But when that Word is accepted in faith and obeyed, it becomes the source of peace and the bringer of life. God's commandments are only grievous to those who rebel against

them. The destroyers of the nation are those who would lead it contrary to God. It is those who stand for the righteousness of God that keep the nation's soul.

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18:21-24

This was indeed a day of decision. There is Elijah's decision to obey God; Ahab's decision to resist God; the people's sullen and silent refusal of God; and the powers of evil's decision to come out into the open and make a public challenge to supremacy over God. Now, remember the issue. It is between religion and God. Elijah stood for the God of the Law and of righteousness and of salvation, but Israel, following their king and his pagan queen, had elected to follow the kind of religion that is simply a natural expression of the human heart in all its fallen-ness. Israel preferred the golden calf, the shrines of Baal and their sensuality. Of course, they would have liked to keep Jehovah as well and did their best to do so, and to make religion popular and acceptable and non-interfering instead of puritanical and dogmatic. But men cannot have it both ways, as Elijah made perfectly clear in his appeal for religious honesty. If the God of the Scriptures is God, then serve Him. If the god of the free-thinking, worldly indulgence is God, then go after him, whose name is Mammon, and worship love, sex, sport, lust, greed. You cannot serve God and Mammon. But the sullen people, in accepting the challenge, assumed that Elijah's God does not answer by fire. He does! He is a consuming fire (Deut.4:23-24; Heb.12:28-29), which not only burns out sin but brings warmth and drive and holy passion to those who were cold and dead. Stand at the fork of the road and make your choice. Let God be God, and prove Him to be all that He claims.

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18:25-29

There are important lessons to grasp here, particularly from the total silence and the absence of answer from the gods of the prophets of Baal. This does not mean that these false gods had no power. To think thus would be very dangerous and unbiblical. Think of how Pharaoh's magicians were able to mimic the mighty signs worked by Moses, and recall the warnings of the New Testament concerning the signs and lying wonders worked by evil spirits to deceive the people of God. Do not doubt the Devil's power, for he is behind the false gods that beguile people (1 Cor. 10:19-22; 2 Thess. 2:3-10). But here, the power of God so over-rules the whole situation that evil powers are simply not allowed to make a single move so that the utter impotence of Baal might be demonstrated to this people who had succumbed to his enticements. The prophets of Baal continued their incantations and performances until they were in a frenzy, but still their gods were silent. Now if, as is very possible, they had at other times gained some kind of "response" from the evil spirits of their gods, this silence would be both baffling and demoralising and they would know that they were dealing with a power greater than their own dark gods. But by this time these "priests of evil" had so involved themselves and so identified themselves with the powers of darkness that there was no remedy for them. There was still remedy possible for Israel, and that is why Elijah proceeded to the next stage of the confrontation. Do not tamper with evil. It is far more dangerous than you realise.

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18:30-35

There was a commanding presence and authority about this holy man. He knew what he was doing and he was trusted by God to do it. Not a word of protest was uttered as the prophet commanded that these barrels of precious water (probably from the king's supply) should be poured on the sacrifice. Then, commanding the attention of the people, Elijah repaired the

altar of the Lord that was broken down. This seems to point to the first step in the restoration of a backslidden life. The altar of worship, prayer, communion with and obedience to God that has been allowed to fall derelict has to be restored. How many have a neglected altar and a neglected Jesus in their lives? Put that right, starting now. The twelve stones also seem to symbolise the essential unity and perfection of God's work from age to age, which has to be affirmed even when wilful men seem to tear that work into pieces. That silent altar is far more significant in the story than the fire from heaven. The magnificent manifestation was truly the seal of God, but the work does not consist of a series of fiery crises, as Elijah was to learn later in the cave (19:9ff). Israel must have been impressed by the quiet assured dignity that marked this man of faith. But Elijah had never been so alone in his life. Yet he was not alone, and he knew it. The preparation of past experience was now bearing fruit.

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18:36-40

In quietness and confidence that come only by faith (Isaiah 30:15) Elijah drew near to the God in whose presence he knew he stood, and he prayed to the faithful, unchanging God of the covenant. It was a short, simple, quiet prayer, and it was all that was needed, for God and His man were at one in this matter. It is the prayer of a man who is right with God that prevails, and the real battle of prayer is in the life that is being lived out day by day in obedience to God. Too many Christians are like the prophets of Baal and try by passion and fervency, worked up emotionally and verbally in prayer, to get fire down from heaven. It will not be, unless the heart and life are right. At the heart of the prayer was a request that the people might see Elijah as *merely* a servant and that the whole effect of this mighty spiritual exercise should be to turn the hearts of the people to God alone. This is exactly what happened (39) for the man was forgotten, and the people knew they had been brought into the presence of the Lord God. But this visitation of mercy was a visitation of judgment on those who had blasphemously sold themselves to Hell and who had been corrupting the holy people of God. If this people were to return to God and be blessed and used, then evil must be purged out by fire. There can be no other way. God is in earnest.

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18:41-46

The heart of this story is not the fire but the rain. As we go on we shall see that the confrontation on Carmel failed in respect of Ahab, Jezebel and Israel, and Elijah himself was disappointed and dejected with the result. The lessons to learn here are that commotion is not conversion; reaction is not repentance; and to start a work is not the same as to finish it. After the fire from heaven, we see Elijah pressing through to the final stage of this part of his work. The issue was rain which speaks of life and hope: it was not the fire which speaks of judgment. More than ever there comes into evidence the fact that prayer was the central and fundamental dynamic of all this man's life and service. It is a reflection on our superficiality and emotional preoccupation that we prefer to read about Elijah standing and praying for the fire to come down, rather than seeing him on his knees in earnest, prolonged, prevailing prayer for the water of life to come to the nation. We all like the thrill of confronting the Ahabs of the world in the name of the Lord, but we forget that Elijah could do this only because he knew a great deal about being on his knees before God. Few of us know much about spiritual power, for we are either too activist (often in a carnal way) or too pietistic (often in a spurious subjective way). In Elijah there was balance. But it was costly. It took priority over all other claims on the great prophet's time. We must consider this again.

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18:41-46

Read James 5:16-18, 1 Kings 17:1, and 18:1. God had spoken and the rain was going to come. Now God can work sovereignly and independently but most often in Scripture you see Him acting in answer to the prayers of His people. So it is in the story here. In answer to prayer God spoke (18:1). In answer to prayer the fire came down (18:38), and it is clear that, having begun, God would see it through to the end. It had to be, else the people would despise God. But prayer was still needed and the great test for Elijah was not to stop praying too soon. Was the reference in v.41 to the fact that the leaves were beginning to rustle, a sign of the storm coming, or was it an affirmation of utter faith in the integrity of the word and purpose of God? Whichever it was, could not Elijah now assume that all was well? NO! When there are signs of blessing coming there is all the more need for prayer. Don't pray *only* when you are up against it, and don't stop praying too soon. Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17) and remember that this is the heart of all we mean by spiritual warfare and witness.

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18:41-46

Consider the stature and dedication of this man of prayer and try to sense his loneliness and isolation as he went to the place of prayer while the people he prayed for went to their feasting and rejoicing. What separation there was in this man's life: separate from distraction to be before God, separate from presumption that assumes all will be well (Ezekiel 36:36-37), and separate from pride. Can anything look more weak, incidental and ineffectual than a man at prayer, especially when nothing happens? Six times over there was nothing, no token, no encouragement, and the heavens were as brass. But the man of God persisted. This is the prayer of faith and the man kept praying because he kept believing in the promise of God who had said that the rain would come. There was nothing extravagant about it all, nothing emotional, although his whole being was engrossed. It was specific, watchful, expectant prayer. Can you imagine the unseen world crying to Elijah not to stop? Of course, he could not hear them, but the Holy Spirit prompted and urged him on, and the rain came. God will answer the prayer of faith because He has promised to do so. But what should we ask? When we live before God as Elijah did, that will be no problem. But remember that there is no such thing as easy prayer. It is the one who prays that counts, and it is the whole life or nothing (Rom. 8:14-27).

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19:1-2

The best commentary on these verses is Eph. 6:10-20, Rev. 12:10-12, and Luke 4:13, because we are dealing with spiritual warfare and the stratagems of the Devil. Before considering Elijah, think of the powers of recovery and determination in the forces of evil immediately after their public defeat on Carmel. Far from surrendering, we find Ahab and Jezebel roused into greater enmity than ever and uttering threats against the person of the prophet in a way that is very fearsome. We must expect this kind of reaction if we dare, in the name of the Lord, to confront and confound entrenched evil. The fiery darts of the wicked one are no fiction but, lest we overbalance and end up being afraid of the Devil, note that evil is not all-knowing nor is it always wise in its actions. Jezebel planned to act the next day and Elijah made his escape. Some suggest that Jezebel delayed one day because she feared a clash with the prophet but this seems unlikely and Elijah, right there to assess the situation, certainly felt she meant her threat. Note that there is no mention of the fact that the rain had come and the strain of the famine was now over. Jezebel had no desire to see any good at all in the God of Elijah. We emphasise this to show the terrible evil of unbelief. It is against God whether He

acts in judgment or mercy. It is against God's men even when they do all in their power to keep the peace, as Elijah did by running as a courier at the side of Ahab's chariot. The prophet was not the opponent of the throne but its conscience. Of course, a conscience can be a difficult thing to live with.

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19:3-4

The threats of Jezebel did what all the three years of famine and conflict had failed to do, and the prophet collapsed. But consider the circumstances. For three years this man had carried a mighty spiritual burden on his own. This reached a climax in the confrontation on Carmel, the fire from heaven, the judgment of the prophets of Baal and the prolonged travail of prayer until the rain came. Immediately after this, the prophet ran some 18 miles with Ahab's chariot to the city of Jezreel. Within a very short time it was clear that no real change had been wrought in Israel, and when Jezebel's threat came, and Elijah realised she was in a position to carry it out, all the accumulated tiredness of costly spiritual service came flooding into his consciousness and he simply collapsed, physically, emotionally and mentally. He panicked, fled from imminent death (as he thought) and in no time was asking God for death. In his exhaustion he drove himself on, isolated himself from even his loyal servant, and landed in a condition of deep depression, bitterness, criticism and self-despair. So total was his exhaustion that his sense of failure tempted him to believe suicide was the only escape. Learn well from all this story not to take liberties with the human frame, which can stand only so much. Learn to rest! Recognise that spiritual service is costly and takes its toll and that the Devil is waiting for the unguarded hour of reaction. Remember that the days following a high crisis of spiritual activity are very dangerous.

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19:3-4

In 18:36-37 Elijah's mind was fixed on Jehovah (Isa. 26:3) but in 19:4 it was dominated by circumstances and his own feelings. It is too simple to say that his faith failed, even when we have made allowance for the human considerations of exhaustion spoken of yesterday. These were undoubtedly contributory, as was the deep loneliness that the prophet seemed to know all his life. He seemed unable or unwilling to share his agony even with his faithful servant who, of course, must have been too timid to broach the subject to make Elijah talk. That Elijah faced a terrible assault of the Devil is also quite clear. But what exactly seems to have been the focus of his dejection? It was disappointment: disappointment which came down like a thick cloud on all his rising hopes. Had he expected too much too soon, or had he expected the wrong kind of result? Elijah was disappointed with his work, judging it to be a failure, although he was in no position or condition to assess it. He was disappointed with the people of Israel who had not rallied to his side and he assumed that he was totally alone, which he was not. He was disappointed because he had felt that this cataclysmic victory on Carmel would have been the final all-embracing revival that would save the whole nation there and then. But he had not yet learned what God was like nor did he realise that these earth-shaking methods were not the only, nor even the best of God's methods. When a man feels like this it is not a sermon or an exhortation he needs, but a God of care. That is what Elijah discovered he had. This is the God who chooses the weak things of the world to do His work and show forth His glory (1 Cor. 1:26-29; 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 12:5, 7-10).

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19:5-8

Elijah's first need was a very long session of sleep, broken only for necessary food. After the therapy of rest he was ready to learn a deep spiritual lesson. There was no rebuke from God in this situation, for Elijah would have broken completely under it. There were things to be said, rebuke to be received, challenge to be presented, instruction to be grasped and further service to be engaged in. But none of these spiritual exercises was within the man's capacity at that precise moment, and God understood the human frame and its frailty and gave His man just the suggestion of encouragement by speaking of a journey to be undertaken. This was the first impulse of thought towards the future. The germ of hope had to lie in the prophet's mind and heart for a little time yet to prepare him for what was to come. Contrast God's treatment of the prophet with the man's own treatment of himself. Elijah was whipping himself into total misery and dejection because the work had not turned out as he had expected. He could see no good in himself at all and could sense no divine interpretation. He succumbed to the lies of the Devil, was persuaded that God's work had collapsed (as if it ever could!) and that it could never recover from this reverse brought about by the power of Jezebel. The prophet was overwrought, and tender restoration was needed, so that the thoughts of his heart would again centre on the Lord. This is exactly what God was doing. Would that we had the same wisdom, tenderness and gentleness in dealing with souls in crisis. We are too quick to look for some dark, sinister, secret, sinful explanation for every crisis and sometimes we extort a "confession" when we should be imparting consolation.

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19:9-13

From Beersheba to Horeb (Sinai, the mountain where God spoke and made Himself known, the mountain of God's presence and glory - Ex. 33:11-23) was a distance of some 200-300 miles, depending on the route taken, and since it took the prophet 40 days to travel there, we can only conclude that the man was still somewhat dispirited and reluctant to stand in God's presence. From Elijah's words in v.10 it would appear he had been rehearsing his answer to God, as it were stating his position. It seems he was still very much trapped in his own disappointment with himself and with God, and was still too aware of his unique loyalty (18:22). God encouraged the man to talk, to speak out his ill-feeling and disaffection. He did so giving a very selective assessment of the situation which suggested Elijah was the only one in the right. What is more, the prophet was really complaining that a magnificent demonstration of the power of God in famine, fire and rain, and in the judgment of the prophets of Baal, had signally failed to effect a national transformation. If such mighty works fail, what hope is there? Is not the only thing to do to give up? When we reach this stage in our thinking we need to be detached from the immediate situation in order to get our thoughts straight. This was necessary for Elijah's own good and for the continuance of the work of God in which he had still a very significant and varied part to play. Are you not glad that God does not grow wearied of His servants when they faint and become dejected at the half-way stage?

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19:9-13

It is very important to understand what God is doing, else we shall be distracted by the appearance or the non-appearance of the wonderful. The obvious and evident and exciting working of God's power is not necessarily the deepest and the most significant. Earthquake, wind and fire are wonderful manifestations, but God is not necessarily in them. We talk much about power, but would we recognise it if we saw it? There is such a thing as the deliberate

hiding of God's power (Habakkuk 3:4 AV), for the kingdom of God does not come with outward show of external signs (Lk. 17:20). It may be that Elijah was too concerned with the signs of God's working when he should have been concerned with the *fact* of God's continued working and his *understanding* of it. It is reasonable that men should expect to see results from their work, but in dealing with God we may not prescribe what the results will be nor in what form they must come. Had Elijah paused to consider how much God had already done he might not have been so truculent. Had not God worked through years of famine, miraculous provision by ravens and by the cruse of oil, raising of the dead, fire and rain from heaven? Were these not results? Would God do all that and now simply let the whole work wither and die and come to nothing because a wicked king and queen would not repent and because a nation was so spineless that it followed their example rather than the call of the man of God? Elijah had to learn that his work was only beginning, and it was a lie of the Devil who suggested that he was finished. Granted, his work to come was quieter, including as it did the reinstatement of the schools of the prophets begun by Samuel, but it was more far-reaching. It was the reintroduction of the prophetic ministry into the life of the nation, and this is broad-based strategy.

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19:9-13

People tend to take the wrong message out of mighty demonstrations of God's power, as the feeding of the multitude and the day of Pentecost both indicate (John 6:11-15; Acts 2:12-13). Remember that the "signs" at Pentecost produced commotion and excitement, but it was the sermon, interpreting the saving purposes of God that produced the repentance and salvation. In other words it was the broader work of God that was the vital and continuing thing, while the astonishing and the God-given "fireworks" were but some of the ways by which he advanced that work. By nature and temperament Elijah preferred the turbulent and dramatic events, yet he was taught here by wonderful action that God need not be in these exciting things. The earthquake, wind and fire came and went and God was not in them. But God *was* in the voice of gentle stillness which followed. Had Elijah been restored to service without this lesson he might well have gone on to "produce" earthquake and fire by the sheer drive of his own personality. That would have been disastrous to God's work and a gateway for the entrance of the Devil to work all manner of harm. This was a vital day for the prophet. In God's question, "What are you doing here?" each word could be emphasised to point a lesson. The picture of Elijah in the cave in the mountain seems to point a contradiction. He was not being true to himself. He was no escapist, coward, nor an ineffectual pietist. While he was there what was happening to God's work? Had the prophet decided there was no more work to do? Must God stop because Elijah was out of sorts, and must the Almighty wait for the temperamental prophet to come to terms with his "chip on the shoulder" before spiritual advance could be made for the good of the nation? There are big issues at stake. Forget about your complaints and consider your usefulness.

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19:14-18

The prophet was still dejected but no longer in such darkness of soul as earlier. He had expected sudden transformation of the whole nation and had looked for God to strike while the iron was hot immediately after Carmel. But this was to suppose that Ahab and Jezebel were the ultimate problem. The present is seldom as significant as we, in our limited vision, suppose. In fact, God was already moving His plans forward to the next stage of fulfilment and Elijah would have saved himself much anguish if only he had waited long enough to ask God what the situation meant and what he should do next. To act precipitately is very often

wrong unless you are very sure of your own spiritual integrity and balance. We may read into v.13 a gentler tone than in v.9, and into v.14 a less truculent and less justifying tone than in v.10 Yet at the same time we would wrong the prophet if we failed to sense the costly loneliness of his life in a decadent nation. Think of our Lord's loneliness in Gethsemane (Mark 14: 32-37). Think also of Elijah's awakening thrill as he realised not only that God was forging ahead with His plans but that he was involved in them in a significant way. It was at this point no doubt, that the significance of the seven thousand faithful but frightened souls registered with the prophet. Who was to minister to them, to teach and train them, to prepare them to be a ready people in the future day of God's power? It was to be Elijah, who a little earlier had been presenting God with an unqualified resignation! Aren't you glad that God is slow to accept such resignations? The prophet was recommissioned.

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19:14-18

God made it clear to Elijah that He was still the God of judgment and that He would carry it out in His own way and time. In due time God would ordain that Hazael should be king of pagan Syria, for it is God who decides authority (Dan. 4:17). Power belongs to God (Ps. 62:11 AV). This came to pass when Hazael took the throne by means of murder (2 Kings 8:7-15) and became God's scourge of the nation of Israel. God is not blind to national evil nor to spiritual apostasy and though He waits to be gracious yet His ways are stern. Jehu also was to reign over Israel for 27 years and in due time he took the throne (2 Kings 9:1-16) and exercised an influence of evil (2 Kings 10:28-32) which on the one hand demolished the influence of Baal and on the other made the life of Israel so sore that the people began to listen for the voice of God. In such a developing situation the prophetic voice was not going to be silent. God had His man, Elisha, waiting to carry on the ministry of Elijah, and with the two prophets there was a remnant of faith, seven thousand men who had to be sought, found, called out, trained, prepared and commissioned. Such a task called for immediate response and Elijah went ahead, reassured by God, confident in the promise and purpose of God, and persuaded that what God begins He will see through to its end (Phil. 1:6). Think of God's word to Paul in pagan Corinth which on the face of it seemed such unpromising territory (Acts 18:4-6, 9-11). God knows what He is doing, and He is doing it.

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19:19-21

There is a double reassurance here for Elijah. The young man Elisha, destined to be a prophet, was ready, willing and obedient when the call came. He was one of the seven thousand who had not bowed to Baal. What a seal this was right at the start of a new stage in Elijah's ministry and how he must have reassured the young man that a whole generation was waiting to be ministered to. The other reassurance to the older prophet, who carried the marks and scars of spiritual warfare, was that God gave him a spiritual companion in the work who remained totally faithful through thick and thin right to the end (2 Kings 2:1-10). Elijah never again had those spells of deep desolation for God, in wonderful humanity, gave him a companion who strengthened and encouraged him in the Lord (cf. 1 Sam. 23:16). There could scarcely be two more contrasting characters than the fiery Elijah and the gentle Elisha but, like Peter and John in the New Testament, they were made complementary for the advance of God's cause. Do not fail to see the great emphasis on the future in these incidents. God prepares well because He knows where He is heading, and that is more than can be said of many who call themselves Christian workers. It is only when people realise the vast dimension of the working of God and are awed by the thought of being part of it that they

begin to be of use to God. God has His men, and when He calls them there must be no hesitation. This we must look at tomorrow.

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19:19-21

There is a glorious sovereignty in Elisha's call as in that of Amos (Amos 7:14-15). God does not plead or beg but calls, and the call came through the action of the prophet when he cast his mantle on the young man. It was a call to leave everything, to follow now, and to be prepared for the future. Elisha was already committed to a flourishing career in which he had proved his competence (twelve yoke of oxen is no job for a novice). He was as far as we know not thinking of the prophetic ministry nor was he ready for it, yet there was an immediacy of response, and this is in no way qualified by the request and answer in v.20. It may signify that Elijah was saying that the call of God does not annihilate our humanity nor the affectionate expression of it. The young man does not say, "Who am I to do this?" or "Why me?" or "How can I do this work?" All these questions have satisfactory answers, else God would not have called, and in due time the answers *may* be given. The important thing this day was Elisha's answer to God's call and it was given without hesitation. It may well be such a day for someone reading these notes. Consider well the young man's attitude. There was to be neither temptation nor occasion to turn back, for he took the symbols of his farming life and made a sacrifice with them and arranged a feast, declaring not only his commitment to a new life but perhaps also his desire that friends and family should have fellowship with him in it. This great spiritual crisis, fraught with such significance for the whole nation, was not allowed to "de-humanise" the young man. True spirituality will never do this to us. None was more spiritual than Jesus, and He was gloriously human.

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19:19-21

Misplaced and misguided spiritual enthusiasm is such a blight on Christian testimony that we linger with this theme and consider such passages as Luke 9:46-54; Rom. 14:13-22; 1 Cor. 9:18-23. Consider this passage taken from a commentary on Elijah and Elisha by R.S. Wallace. "H.R. Mackintosh, a great and wise teacher, once said to his class: 'Gentlemen, after a man is converted, he has sometimes to be made into a human being again - and sometimes it takes a year or two for that to happen:' It sometimes happens that when men have undergone a great and deep religious experience, in the enthusiasm and wholeheartedness of their first response, and in their desire to express the radical nature of the change that has come over them, they tend to go to extremes of rigour and self-discipline, and are tempted to act inhumanly and unnaturally where there is no need for it. In the Middle Ages sometimes men newly initiated in the monastic orders would take up their religious discipline and fasting and scourging with such thoroughness as almost to kill themselves. Today sometimes enthusiastic young people in their very keenness to give expression to the call they have heard from Jesus Christ will needlessly grieve parents and friends by the distant nature of the new attitude they take up to former companions and dear ones, and while cutting out evil things from their lives will sometimes unnecessarily also cut out much that may be good and humanising." Think well of this. It may be that your highest spiritual service may well be to go back and kiss your father and mother again and then go after the call of God, not compromised in any way, but leaving behind you hearts warmed to God in Jesus Christ rather than hearts broken by human harshness.

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20:1-14

There are many profitable aspects of this passage which tells of God acting gloriously on behalf of Ahab, the wicked, weak and impenitent king of Israel. Any of our proud spiritual boasting and criticism should be ended by the advice in v.11, and judgment of Ahab left until the end of the story or at least until the critical man has something positive and permanent to show for his life. An unidentified prophet, not Elijah or Elisha, but one of those who never bowed to Baal comes forward to speak God's word of grace. God always has His men ready at all times and in wisdom He sent this man and not the other two mighty, public characters. Such was the intensity of Ahab's fear, hatred and enmity in respect of Elijah that his mind and heart would have reacted against the man. The king would never have heard the promise of God's grace because he would never have believed that such a preacher would ever have a tender sermon to preach. May God give *us* grace to know when a job is ours and when to pass it to another. Sons of thunder and sons of consolation alike need at times to step aside and let the fitter man do the work (Mk. 3:17; Acts 11:19-27). The absolutely amazing grace of God is seen in the promise to Ahab in v.13. Even though God's intervention was in the interest of the remnant of righteousness within the nation, for the purposes of salvation centring on them, and for the glory of His own name, yet Ahab was being allowed to be God's servant. This opportunity of grace does not necessarily presuppose some repentance on Ahab's part after Carmel, but it does demonstrate the over-ruling of God in the affairs of wicked men and nations. The rising might of Benhadad had to be checked and Ahab, first cravenly weak (4) and then stiffening when pushed too hard, was God's instrument. God's ways are past finding out, mysterious but never mistaken.

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20:15-22

There are two lessons here. What God says He will do, He does, and all the apparent might of evil in its arrogance and super-confidence is seen to be nothing. Power among men is very temporary, and power-intoxicated men are essentially to be pitied because they have learned nothing at all from the lessons of history which make it so plain that, "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be." (Tennyson) Power belongs only to God, and He exercises it effectively (Ps. 2). The second lesson (22) is that winning a battle, however gloriously, is not the same thing as winning a war, and it is a foolish man who, in the context of spiritual warfare, assumes he has won and consequently forgets to watch and pray. But a third lesson emerges in that we can be so concentrating on the presence and malignant designs of evil men and evil spirits that we forget that it is God the Lord who always has the initiative. He does not necessarily smite evil when *we* think the time is opportune, nor does He use methods which we would consider suitable and effective. But it is God the Lord who restrains the wrath of wicked men and the demons who inspire them to their wickedness. And all the time God restrains also, without any contradiction within Himself, the operation of His righteous judgments in order that people might repent (2 Pet. 3:5ff. and 15ff.). But the judgment of evil is a certainty, as the king of Syria was to discover. What confidence we should have in God! And there is forgiveness with Him, that He should be feared.

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20:23-30

Like all sinners Benhadad refused to interpret circumstances in terms of moral and spiritual issues and his reaction to defeat was one of arrogance and determination. Note how he equated his gods with the God of Israel, regarding all gods as mere territorial influences. Now when evil masses its power its intentions are plain and to be faced with faith but not bravado.

While we know that in the death and resurrection of Christ all the powers of evil are conquered, we are not to conclude casually that evil is altogether weak. The powers of Hell will hold their ground and yield only to the advance of faith. This involves conflict and when the armies of evil seem to eclipse the puny forces of righteousness a clear word from God is needed. This word was given by an un-named prophet (was it another of the faithful remnant, and was Elijah encouraged as well as ashamed at his earlier pessimism of unbelief? 19:10) and the issue was put in very clear terms. The sin of the Syrians was not that of seeking to brutalise weak and wicked Ahab and to gain revenge, but blasphemy against the great and glorious God. The name of God had been smeared with contempt (28) and the government of God despised and rejected. This could not be allowed, and such was the intervention of God by His Spirit that the powers of Syria were smitten and the proud strutting king fled for his life and hid in the innermost room of the citadel, holding his breath in terror. Now, he was being seen for what he really was!

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20:31-34

Note very clearly the complete absence of any humbling of heart or sign of repentance. Having withstood God, in the persons of His people Israel, in arrogant determination, Benhadad now displayed his contempt for God in this play-acting of penitence. It was all very calculated and totally self-centred, but it worked because of the treacherous self-interest of Ahab who had already forgotten the God who had so recently accomplished his deliverance. This answers our earlier query as to whether there may have been some softening of Ahab's heart after Carmel. There was none, although there may have been some sentimental fluctuation of his thoughts in the vague general direction of God. Ahab was no doubt very happy in his victory over Syria and gave himself all the credit, perhaps rejoicing in the weakness of a God who seemed too soft-hearted to give him up to judgment. Then again, the further kingdom of Assyria was already rising in power, and Ahab did not want to weaken too much or alienate the king of Syria whose territory might prove a useful buffer state if Assyria was to turn belligerent. When the king of Israel gives brotherly embraces to the king of Syria you know you are dealing with two unbelievers, both of whom prefer their own will to that of the Lord. Do not judge a man's spirituality when he is embroiled in crisis. He will pray then. Wait till the skies of his life are blue and you will get a truer assessment of how he stands with God.

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20:35-43

The "sons of the prophet" seem to have been disciples of the prophets Elijah and Elisha (and Samuel earlier), possibly trainee prophets or members of the prophetic guilds. They were authentic prophets, known and recognisable as such, and this explains the need for disguise (38). Here, as in other places, the prophet acted out the message at the command of the Lord in order to declare Ahab's sin in sparing Benhadad and to indicate his coming punishment. If a prophet was punished for sparing a friend and colleague against the command of the Lord, how much more would Ahab be punished for sparing the enemy of Israel? It is not clear to whom this acted parable was directed, but it was a necessary message to the remnant of faith and also to all the people. Then the prophet told his story to the king and, just as in the case of David and Nathan (2 Sam. 12), the king passed judgment and in so doing condemned himself. Ahab was trapped into agreeing with God's judgment on himself and he went home sullen and angry (34). Here we see the real Ahab, a man who considered himself a law unto himself and who resented most bitterly the fact that he was called in question by God. Remember, of course, that Ahab was quite willing to be at the receiving end of God's favours,

but objected when God was not prepared to satisfy his every selfish whim, as tomorrow's story tells. How this brands a man as spiritually immature.

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21:1-4

Read as far as v.16 to sense the ruthlessness of Ahab and see the necessity for the intervention of the great prophet in person. It is the story of pathetic self-indulgence, corrupt business practice, perjury in the courts, total self-will on the part of the king and queen, and sheer defiance of the will and word of God, because an Israelite was not allowed to sell the family inheritance (Lev. 25:23-28). It is the story of consciences seared and insensitive to God, and this in a generation that had seen the mighty works of God in both judgment and mercy. On the one hand you have the weak consent of the ecclesiastical and secular leaders when threatened by Jezebel (11), and on the other you have the brave stand of faith by Naboth in the face of the sulky king's inducements and veiled threats (3). Knowing full well that it might cost him his life, Naboth made it quite clear that he would obey God and not man, and that he was not prepared to sin against God and violate his conscience. Note how clear Naboth was concerning the teaching of the law of God and how radical he was about his own commitment to the God of the Law. Here is yet another example of the thousands in Israel who had not bowed to Baal. How terribly wrong Elijah had been when he protested that he alone was left faithful (19:10, 14). But it may well have been Elijah's own witness and ministry, even more his prayers, that had so changed the atmosphere in Israel that more people were finding the courage to take the stand of faith.

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21:5-16

Petulant little men such as Ahab, knowing God but adrift from God and living by the whims of inclination, soon become the tools of the Devil working through unscrupulous individuals who are only too clear about the objective of total dominion for which they lust. There may be some excuse for Jezebel, for she was a self-confessed pagan who all along made it plain that she preferred her own convenient though ineffective gods. (She must have been most exasperated with her gods in the debacle of Carmel, 18:25ff.), There was no excuse for Ahab. Some of the poor creature's sulky tantrums may well have been caused by the realisation that he was really quite irrelevant in the nation. Jezebel was the power behind the throne and Elijah was the spokesman of God. It is interesting to think that while Ahab was busy with all his political complications and time-consuming wars, Elijah and Elisha were left alone to get on with the job of establishing again the prophetic ministry up and down the land. It was not so much the immediate ministry carried out by the un-named prophets that was vital, though it must not be belittled, but the long term ministry that was to undergird the mighty developments of generations to come. The martyrdom of Naboth was a vital factor in the development of the situation. He was God's man for such a time as this, even though it involved his family in a costly way (2 Kings 9:26).

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21:5-16

The depth and dynamic of Jezebel's wickedness together with its utter ruthlessness and arrogance mark this woman out as a servant of the powers of Hell. Right to the end she was resolute in her defiance of God. Determined to be magnificent even in her death, she painted her face, possibly thinking that her appearance would deter her executioners. But it was not so. It could not be so. She died in utter ignominy in a way befitting her nature (2 Kings 9:30-37). But that is the end of the story. Here she seems to be virtually absolute in her power,

operating freely, and no-one in a position or of a spirit to withstand her. The weakness of Ahab is seen in v.6, but we must not lay the full blame on Jezebel for, as v.25 declares, the man sold himself to do evil. This is the tyranny of evil and men are all too often deceived by it. Man of himself is not able to say just how far he will go in doing evil, and once man is involved, the personal powers of evil can take over and drive that man on relentlessly to his ultimate destruction. Evil is not to be trifled with. Its end is death, but the destruction it works before the terminus is reached is beyond measurement (Jas. 1:12-16). Jezebel was well satisfied with her work, but there was still God to reckon with and He had the very man to deal with the situation.

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21:17-29

The God who now intervened at the critical point of judgment is the God who did not intervene when this evil injustice was being perpetrated. This does not mean that God is unmindful of the individual nor that he overlooks social iniquity. But God is also a God of judgment, and part of the exercise of His judgment is in allowing evil to come out into the open, to demonstrate its total wickedness and so make clear and plain the necessity for its judgment. Had God acted earlier it would not have been so obvious that the evil pair had gone beyond the bounds of remedy. This is a solemn and frightening truth, but it is one we live with in our own day, and in the utter denial of and persecution of individual freedom by bureaucratic power we see the inescapable fruit of spiritual apostasy. When a nation is adrift from God and when the executive powers of the nation are in denial and defiance of God, the issue is not freedom but tyranny. What is more, in the very fact that the prophet was commanded by God to confront Ahab, not Jezebel, we see very clearly how God holds guilty in respect of social iniquity, those who had the power to act for righteousness but who failed to do so because of craven weakness and essential self-interest (Jas. 4:17). There is great dramatic power in the fact that in the very moment of Ahab's taking possession of Naboth's vineyard the word of judgment was pronounced. The sin of Ahab and Jezebel had found them out (Num. 32:23) and to this evil pair, who had so consistently refused the word of God, the end could only be disaster (Prov. 29:1-2).

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21:17-29

The story of this husband and wife team, sold to do evil, is an illustration of what the New Testament means when it speaks of the human condition as being "sold under sin" (Rom. 7:14), and as being children of disobedience and wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). The situation is all the more dangerous in that we do not really believe that we are capable of such iniquity. This is why God at times must allow us to go the way of the dictates of our flesh so that we might be discovered to ourselves while there is still the gracious possibility of repentance. Remember how Jesus warned Peter that Satan desired to have him (Luke 22:31). Think of how Paul speaks of the "law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2) and of an alien principle working in his personality and capacities (Rom. 7:14-25). In that context of realism he declares a Christ who is mighty to deliver and save. Such truths about the God of salvation had been spoken and demonstrated to Israel and to the king and queen, but *they* refused to give heed. There was nothing left but judgment and God sought out the wicked ones and ran them to earth with unerring justice. Ahab was dismayed but bitterly resentful. The king's tears in v.27 and his subsequent careful walk were largely self-interest, and yet God's hand, raised in judgment, was stayed temporarily. How different it could have been if, in v.20, Ahab had not confronted God, through the prophet, as an enemy, "However long from mercy we may have turned

away" there is hope when God comes near through the prophetic word. But what urgency these moments of gracious crisis are vested with.

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21:17-19

It is very unlikely that we would have recognised Ahab's tears as being in any sense genuine repentance and yet God's hand was stayed. This is the astonishing forbearance of God (2 Pet. 3:7-10, 15), and we must learn not to pass judgment before the time (1 Cor. 4:3-6), not least because our knowledge is *always* limited (1 Cor. 13:9, 12). But this does not mean we are to remain silent or inactive in the face of evil as it operates in the nation. We must be prepared to suffer the reviling and maledictions of men, when these are directed against us personally, in the same spirit as Christ, who is our example (1 Cor. 4:10-13; 1 Pet. 2:19-23). But as servants of God we are to be both light and salt within society and this is not only by the passive influence of genuine godliness and moral integrity, but by the open declaration of the truth and the equally open rebuke of unrighteousness. Even when the church is but a remnant within the nation and held in derision by government and people alike, as in the days of Elijah, it must exercise its prophetic influence and speak the word of the Lord. It will be surprised, as Elijah was, to find so many who have not bowed the knee to Baal and who are waiting for the emergence of a leader. Without doubt, through individual testimony *for* righteousness and *against* evil, and by means of the public testimony of the church uttered in unmistakable terms, the kingdom of evil is challenged and its expression restrained. May God give us wisdom to know when and how to speak and when to keep silent.

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22:1-4

Ahab had been frightened, but that is not the same as repentant, and he pursued a quiet policy for three years during which there seems to have been little turbulence and no shattering sermons from Elijah. We are not surprised that the evil king's confidence began to return and his thoughts of military action against Syria began to stir. Now it seems clear that Ahab had no thought whatever as to whether this venture was in accord with the will of God. But when a man is not in fellowship with God it is utter folly to set in motion far-reaching projects for they will have neither divine sanction nor protection. But the danger here is not primarily to Ahab but to Jehoshaphat, the good king of Judah, and we must see the wily stratagems of the Devil in seeking to work deep harm to Judah, who would carry on the plan and work of God after Israel had fallen and disappeared. The astonishing thing is Jehoshaphat's prompt willingness to enter this unholy alliance with Ahab, whose wickedness and disaffection from God must have been public knowledge. Why did this happen? Was it that the king of Judah, enjoying prosperity in the blessing of God, allowed carnal, military and nationalistic ambition to cloud his thinking? Jehoshaphat had qualms and reservations almost immediately after the decision was taken, but it did not bring him to the kind of repentance that would break the liaison. Read the amplified story in 2 Chronicles 18 and 19, especially 18:1 and 19:2.

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22:5-10

Having already committed himself to the unequal yoke (2 Cor. 6:14-18), Jehoshaphat decided that he and Ahab should pray for guidance (5). But you cannot speak to a man such as Ahab on a spiritual level, and if you try you must be prepared for a very impressive religious answer, for the wicked king was indeed crafty. Like all people who are out of touch with God, Ahab had chosen his minister well and could depend on the nature and substance of the sermons in the royal chapel! For good measure he produced 400 prophets (Jezebel would

have been only too willing to lend her private religious staff) and they were quite unanimous in pronouncing the scheme valid and from God. We do the same kind of thing when we choose to discuss guidance only with those we know will agree with us. Jehoshaphat was not impressed with the hired prophets and his request for a "prophet of the Lord" (7) was rather a slap in the face for Ahab and not likely to endear Jehoshaphat to Jezebel. Ahab's reaction was typically petulant and he named Micaiah, of whom nothing is known save this incident, although there is a tradition that he is the unknown prophet of 1 Kings 20:35-43. We know, of course, that there were other prophets, notably Elijah, but he had not been prominent in national affairs for a little time, much to Ahab's relief. Micaiah was called to appear and the kings sat in pompous array waiting for the sermon.

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22:11-18

Ahab has already made it clear why people hate some prophets and preachers (8). It is the message not the man that is objected to. Zedekiah (an Israelite name), the chief of the false prophets of Jezebel, led the preaching of assurance to the kings, creating an atmosphere that would daunt Micaiah and possibly bring pressure on him to concur in the message or at least to remain silent. The messenger's words in v.13 seem to be an earnest plea rather than a threat, in the hope that somehow confrontation with the king might be avoided. But that could not be. A prophet's job is to deliver a message, nothing more and nothing less than what God has spoken. When the word spoken is sore and condemns it is not a matter of personal attack. Indeed a prophet's commission may well be revoked if he indulges in that kind of thing. The truth is what matters, regardless of the disturbance it causes. Even Ahab recognised that Micaiah was not being true to himself when he spoke the words the king wanted to hear, and he insisted on having the truth. He got it, but he did not receive it. It is one thing to recognise the truth, another to respond.

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22:19-28

The solemn vision of the true prophet was very plain in its message both to the king and to the false prophets who were branded as being instruments of Satan. We must not be distracted here by thoughts of reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility. That is not the issue. The heart of the matter is the deliberate choice of Ahab to engage in this campaign and to do so against all the warnings of God. Repeatedly this man had hardened his heart against the Lord, and it would seem that his self-confidence was not in any sense broken down nor even restrained following on the judgment pronounced in the previous chapter (21:20ff). In this kind of situation we begin to see the activity of Satan and the evil spirits who are his servants, and the issue in which men believe a lie because they will not believe God (2 Thess. 2:3-12). We could well consider here the opening two chapters of the Book of Job where there is seen, not merely the activity of Satan behind the earthly experiences of men, but also the sovereign restraint of God whereby even Satan and all his hosts are compelled to do the will of God and only the will of God. These two kings, planning their war, had to be made to know that they were dealing with God from whom they could not escape. Ahab had to know that the God of judgment had given him over to a reprobate mind (Rom. 1:21-25, 28, 32).

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22:19-28

To recognise that the conflict between true and false prophets is a continuing fact in the experience of the people of God, read Jeremiah 28: 1-17 and Ezekiel 13:1-23. One thing is

clear. The most vicious opposition to those who set themselves to speak the whole counsel of God will come from those men who, having sold out their commission from God (if they ever had one), have become false prophets who preach convenient words which have neither inspiration nor authority except that of their own suspect motives. The secular powers likewise will take action against the men who speak with authority in God's name, resenting the fact that religious authority has dared to question their persons and their actions. But time will authenticate and vindicate that which is of God. This was Micaiah's answer to priest and king. He staked his life on it. So did the king, and the king died while the prophet lived. The most disturbing element here is the utter contempt that Zedekiah had for Micaiah: "Since when did the spirit leave me and go to you, ... you of all people" (24). It was a public action of deep and intentional humiliation. God would mark that, for no one smites a prophet with impunity (1 Chron. 16:22).

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22:29-40

In spite of every sign and warning, Ahab went his chosen way and Jehoshaphat went with him. Was it some misguided sense of loyalty that made him do this foolish thing? When will we learn to part company with those who will manifestly do nothing for us except take us away from God? Ahab's scheme for self-protection was not merely to disguise himself but to make Jehoshaphat wear kingly robes so that he would be mistaken for Ahab and become the target for the enemy while Ahab went through the conflict safely. But God is not mocked. Stupid Jehoshaphat, quite awed and overpowered by brash Ahab, suddenly realised what was happening and squealed in his fright. That was enough to persuade the Syrians that it was not Ahab, and the unfortunate weakling suffered the ignominy of being abandoned as quite irrelevant to the issue. Poor man, he was never humiliated like that when he walked with God! Then an archer fired an arrow in the general direction of the battle and that was the end of the great king Ahab, mortally wounded by a poor quality soldier of the Syrian army. He was propped up in his chariot facing the enemy until evening but, in spite of this last act of defiance, he died a miserable and ignominious death. God is not mocked. It had been spoken (21:19).

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22:41-53

We cannot but feel the sense of acceleration of evil as well as its determination. Ahab's son, having learned nothing but evil from his father, walked in ways that were an offence to God. He invited judgment and it came in due time (Deut. 32: 35). Jehoshaphat was a better man and a godly one. His story is fully told in 2 Chron. 17:20. His accomplishments are stated clearly in today's passage as is his folly (44). But the man was learning to keep himself tuned to the voice of God's providence. The trade expedition after the manner of Solomon (10: 21-23) with its potential for increase of wealth was frustrated by God and the king did not insist on going on. Again, when Ahaziah wanted collaboration (49) Jehoshaphat would have none of it. He had learned where that kind of alliance led and he was not prepared to lose the blessing and fellowship of God for any suspect and uncertain advancement that the king of Israel might give. Having once wandered from God's will, and having been restored painfully by the grace of God, this man was wiser. Would that the same could be said of all of us. Too many of us are like Ahab and his son. They chose their path and refused to change.

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22:41-53

In all these stories we are learning much about the providence and disciplines of God in the interest of His people and the furtherance of His work. God's long-term purposes are in the hands of His people and this explains both the assaults of the Devil and the disciplines of God. Consider Heb. 12:5-11; Rom. 5:3-5; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; 4:12-19; Jas. 1:2-4. Are you not glad you have a God who is in earnest? Would you have it otherwise? Dare you go your own way?

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