

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of I KINGS

(These Notes were first printed in September, 1961)

The Books of the Kings continue the history of the people of God from the last days of David to their captivity in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. With 1 and 2 Samuel, they form a single unit of historical sequence. 1 and 2 Samuel mark a period of transition in that the priestly rule now gives way to the kingly. But they also record the emergence of another and even greater order, the prophets, of whom Samuel was the first, and it is this prophetic ministry that is of the greatest significance in the message of the Old Testament. The history recorded in 1 and 2 Kings is the period in which the prophets of Judah and Israel ministered in the name of the Lord, and forms the background against which their message can be understood. It is striking to realise that the ministries of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah all fit into the framework of these two historical books.

1) 1:1-14

The opening verses of 1 Kings present a strange and unpleasant picture, and we might well feel at a loss to know what to think of them if we did not ask ourselves what the Holy Spirit's purpose could be in permitting this unsavoury incident to be recorded. When we begin, however, to ponder its possible significance, we remember that this is the book which records the decline and fall of the kingly office in Israel, and its message begins to become evident. For it stands as a symbol at the beginning of the book - the symbol of a tragic and disastrous moral and spiritual declension. Just as, under the old priestly code, the people were trained to watch for the tell-tale marks of leprosy or the plague, so this story, for those who have eyes to see, marks the first 'ominous signs of the degeneration which finally led to the captivity of the people of God. David was the greatest and best of the kings, and a man after God's own heart, but even in David there were costly flaws, and the sacred history shows that it was his vices far more than his virtues, the liabilities rather than the assets, which were transmitted to his posterity. This sad, even pathetic, story of the deterioration of a noble monarch in a dishonourable old age proclaims in effect to us: "This is what the book is about, the collapse of the ideal of kingship." And, chapter by chapter, the theme of these opening verses is unfolded in grim detail, until nothing was left for God's people but the judgment of the Captivity.

2) 1:5-10

Adonijah was David's fourth son. Amnon and Absalom, the first and third were now dead, and Chileab, his second, is not mentioned significantly in the sacred record and may also have died in battle, so that Adonijah would have had some right, by succession, to the throne. But it is clear enough that natural succession was not a foregone conclusion, even in Adonijah's mind, for why otherwise would he have attempted his coup d'état? This kingdom was not like the kingdoms of the world; God's sovereign purposes were being worked out in it, and His appointed successor was Solomon, the fore-shadower of Christ the great King of peace. It is in this light that we should view Adonijah's attempt to seize the throne. It was a rebellion not only against his father David, but also against the purposes of God.

There is a remarkable similarity between Adonijah's course of action and that of Absalom's, and one wonders at the blindness of men in their determination to do evil. He should surely have been warned by the fate of his brother, but no, he must needs tilt at the Lord's anointed and suffer a like humiliation. It seems he was possessed of considerable personal charm and persuasiveness - how otherwise could he have beguiled so many of David's trusted counsellors? But many charming rogues have learned to their cost that it is dangerous to pit their strength against the mighty hand of God. This, however, is a lesson but slowly learned in human experience and - sadly enough usually learned the hard way.

3) 1:11-40

Adonijah appears to have had a supreme confidence in his well-laid plans for seizing the throne and was celebrating as if all had already been accomplished. This heightens the drama of the story in these verses, as we see behind the scenes, as it were, the purposeful working of the Divine Will through the timely intervention of Nathan, and the swift response of David to his counsel. There is something very reassuring in the effortless way in which the Lord accomplished His good pleasure in the affairs of men and this should prove an encouragement to believers and a terror to evil-doers. We are reminded of the words of Psalm 2, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision". It is not only presumption, it is also foolhardiness, for men to suppose that they can outwit God, however cleverly or immaculately they plan. The resulting jubilation among the people at the accession of Solomon shows the rightness of David's decision in the sight of God. There is always a smoothness and ease when God is at work. His machinery is always well-oiled and there are no harsh gratings or repeated mishaps. None can hinder Him.

4) 1:41-53

Laughter in heaven (Psalm 2) often promotes laughter on earth: There is something almost comical in the debacle which followed Solomon's proclamation as king. One moment Adonijah and his henchmen were feasting and making merry in the supposition that their intrigue had proved successful, the next they had disbanded in disorder and fear, and the hapless Adonijah fled for refuge to the horns of the altar, his erstwhile arrogance and ambition pricked like a bubble. It is not what a man is in prosperity but how he reacts to adversity, that shows his calibre, and his pathetic, cowardly flight recorded here is in marked contrast to the wisdom and kingly dignity of the young Solomon in his attitude to his brother's treachery (52). We may already see in this the mark and effect of the Lord's anointing upon him. The unction grace from on high that comes upon those whom God chooses is unmistakeable in the quiet authority that it imparts, and this is nowhere seen more clearly than in the lives of those truly called to minister His Word and speak in His Name. Nor is this a merely natural impressiveness, although every natural endowment is enhanced and brought to fruition by the Spirit's power; it is that men partake of and reflect the authority of the Word they are commissioned to proclaim. Nothing makes a man so manly or godlike as the Divine endowment for service.

5) **2:1-11**

The opening verses of David's dying words are full of nobility and may be said to express the whole philosophy of the Old Testament that the way to prosperity is to live a life well-pleasing to God. In the old dispensation, this generally - but not invariably - meant material prosperity, and this has sometimes worried people in the new when they read our Lord's warnings about the possibility of losing possessions and suffering loss for the Gospel's sake, but we would be unwise to assume that prosperity is to be equated with material riches. A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth, and in Christ, even if he has nothing (2 Corinthians 6:10) yet he possesses all things.

The truth is, when a man is wholly dedicated to God, his heart is fixed upon the unseen world, as witness the heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11, and it is because he sits light to the things that are seen and temporal that God often gives him so much of them. It is safe for him to enjoy material prosperity because it means so little to him in the deepest sense; his treasure is elsewhere, and he would still be rich even if, like Paul, he had nothing but "cloke, books and parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13) to call his own. Material prosperity in the light of the gospel is irrelevant; sometimes it is given, to be wisely used and enjoyed; sometimes it is withheld, and the withholding is pressed into service by God to enrich and bless our lives. All things work together for good to them that love God.

6) **2:1-11**

But what are we to say of David's attitude towards Joab and Shimei? The usual answer given is that David was a child of his age and should not therefore be judged by Christian standards of morality. But this, we think, is too simple a solution. The harsh note in David's words comes from another source, and there is a direct connection between this implacable spirit and his former "softness" towards the captain of the host. Remember Joab's history. He should have been punished long ago for his atrocious and bloody crimes, but David had failed in his duty as king to maintain law and order and bring him to justice. Whether it was weakness on David's part, or fear of Joab that made him spare the guilty man we may not know; at all events, wittingly or unwittingly, he confused personal feelings with the vindication of the law. Neither fear of Joab or fondness for him should have weighed with him for a moment in the proper discharge of his duty as custodian of the law of God. It is not without significance that, later, the king who neglected to honour the sanctions of the law gave vent to bitter vindictiveness. This has a particular relevance for our time. It has become the custom to vilify our penal laws, particularly those anent corporal punishment, and in the name of enlightened social conscience the idea of retribution must be modified if not excluded from our conception of punishment. This, we are told, is the only civilised and truly humane attitude. But it is precisely this mistaken supposition that is undermining the stability of our social structure and leading to lawlessness and inhumanity. The law, rightly understood, is not a reprehensible thing but fundamental to the true ordering of life, and it is those who uphold its sanctions most faithfully, and not those who through a mistaken sentimentality evade the fulfilment of its inexorable demands, who prove themselves most truly human and humane. We venture to suggest that if David had been strong enough and honourable enough to deal with Joab in accordance with the rightful demands of the law at the time his crimes were committed, the story of his later days would have read very differently and this lamentable vindictiveness would have been absent from the record of the closing scenes of his life.

7) 2:12-25

A little background knowledge will help us to understand the seeming severity of Solomon's punishment of Adonijah for presuming to ask for Abishag the Shunamite. Commentaries tell us that it was a universal eastern custom for a king's wives to be taken by his successor or rival. (See 2 Samuel 16:21, where Ahitophel counselled Absalom to go in to his father's concubines) If, then, Adonijah had publicly espoused Abishag, it would have been a virtual renewal of his claim to the throne, and it is clear that Solomon viewed his request in this light (22) - "Ask for him the kingdom also" - and acted accordingly. It was nothing more than a bare-faced attempt to renew his treasonable activities, and as such brought final disaster upon him. One would have thought that having once been defeated and had his life spared by the clemency of the king, he would have been content to live quietly, thankful for such favour, but no, he must make another ill-advised attempt to reinstate himself on the throne. From this we may learn that to be humiliated does not always make a man humble, but on the contrary sometimes drives him nearly mad with a perverse determination to assert himself, however foolhardy it may be and at whatever cost. Such men are dangerous, and they had better be dealt with, summarily. But more. It is clear that Adonijah mistook Solomon's meekness and magnanimity in showing clemency to him as weakness. This is a very common error that evil men make, Merciless themselves, they cannot understand mercy in others and despise it as something to be presumed upon. Never did he miscalculate more disastrously, he suffered the just reward of his rash folly and forfeited his life by rebelling against the Divine will.

8) 2:26-27

And now Abiather, the priest, comes up for judgment. His long history goes back to 1 Samuel where we find him associated with David in the early days of his adventurous career (1 Samuel 22:20). And yet, having survived the hazards of those turbulent days, we find him at the last choosing wrongly in following Adonijah (1:7). One cannot but wonder at this fateful decision. Why should Abiather have made such a blunder? Can it be that his heart had gradually become estranged from the Divine purposes being worked out in the royal line of David in such a way that he could not discern where the God-appointed succession lay? If this be so, there is a clear lesson for us to learn: it is possible to be associated with the work of God, to be deeply involved in it and committed to its outworking, to be participating in His service, with hearts that through carelessness and neglect of the things of the Spirit have become all unwittingly insensitive to His real purposes, and to be at cross-purposes with His will without being aware of it. The truly frightening thing is that this can, cancer-wise, remain undetected for a long period, until suddenly circumstances force a crisis upon us which obliges us to declare ourselves, and shows us in our true colours. Thus it was with Abiather. The affair of Adonijah drew out into the open the hidden spiritual declension that had passed unnoticed over the years. Lord, give us truth in the inward parts, for Thy great Name's sake.

9) **2:28-35**

We wish we could transcribe the whole of Dr Alexander Whyte's remarkable character-study of Joab for today's comment. He describes the captain of the host as having risen "on the stepping-stones of murdered men to the shining top of power and honour, only to fall under the sword of a too-slow justice, an outlaw from the love and pity of all men". This aptly characterises the evil genius of David's reign and the source of many of his sorrows. It may be that David did not see clearly enough until latterly - and too late - the danger that Joab represented to the interests of his kingdom; it may even be that David, only too aware of all this, had rendered himself morally unable to deal with him as he ought by the shameful crime against Uriah in which he had invited Joab's connivance (2 Samuel 11:14). Did Joab have some hold upon the king, that he could thereafter treat him so insolently? At all events, Solomon made no hesitation in bringing him to justice. He could see how unthinkable it was that such a man should be allowed to continue unchecked. Joab cut an incongruous figure in his last extremity, clinging to the horns of the altar which during his lifetime he seems to have despised. True, there is mercy with the Lord for the vilest offenders, and even Joab might have found mercy had he come in true penitence, but God refuses to be used as a convenience in the way that men sometimes use lucky charms. This is something that should be remembered in times of national crisis when churches are suddenly filled with unfamiliar faces and voices are raised in prayer that will presently be taking God's Name in vain again when the emergency is over. What kind of God do men imagine Him to be, who is expected to be taken in by this kind of exhibition? There is such a thing as insulting the Divine majesty, and God does not hold them guiltless who do so.

10) 2:36-46

It has been suggested that Solomon laid a snare for Shimei in the conditions imposed upon him (36, 37), and that the latter's visit to Gath, innocent as it seems to have been, was made a pretext for finally disposing of him. But if Solomon had been so intent on disposing of him, why should he not have had him executed immediately, in accordance with his father's dying wish? (2:9) The plain reading of the passage surely indicates that Solomon showed this evil man clemency beyond his deserts, and he might have lived long enough in safety in Jerusalem had he been careful enough to observe the conditions of freedom. We think that the writer has a more profound lesson to teach here. It is that the justice of God inevitably overtakes the wicked and it is He Who ordains their doom. The straight line of His purposes weaves its way unerringly through all manner of complicated circumstances until it reaches its desired end. The mills of God grind slowly, as the poet says, but they grind exceedingly small, and the merest incident often proves, in His hands, momentous in the fulfilment of His will. No man can hope to escape from God - it is this solemn lesson that we are meant to glean from the story of Shimei's end.

11) 3:1-3

Opinions differ on the alliance that Solomon contracted with Egypt, but it would seem that the sacred historian, in recording the fact here without comment meant to indicate that this was something which would have significance later. In the first place, it seems to show that Solomon placed more trust in political alliances than was wise for the leader of God's people. Not only so, however; it was an alliance with someone outwith the covenant, and this was invariably warned against. It may be that here already we have evidence of what proved to be a fatal weakness in Solomon - the allure of strange wives (11:1) which brought about his downfall, and the writer may be drawing our attention to the first ominous sign of Solomon's declension. It is all the more impressive, if this be so, that in 3 his love for the Lord should be recorded also. The wonderful vision that follows this passage (5-15) is evidence enough that that love was real and profound, but it is solemnly significant that alongside that love we find the record of this unwise union and also, in 3, the reserved comment about high places, for what was involved in the one eventually brought Solomon, and in the other, Israel, to ruin. From which we may learn that a love for the Lord that does not exclude such competition is neither great enough, though real, nor safe enough. We heard recently an impressive sermon on king Amaziah (2 Chronicles 25:1, 2) who "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart", when the perils of such divided loyalties were suitably emphasised. Is not this the point of Christ's persistent challenge to Peter, "Lovest thou Me more than these?"

12) 3:4-15

Having noted the warning of the previous reading, we can take this passage as an example in its own right of how God responds to the love His people show to Him. This does not contradict what has been emphasised in the opening verses of the chapter. We need to remember that God is prepared to bless us within the limits which we ourselves set upon His bounty by the alien things we allow in our lives. It is a wonderful passage, and Solomon's prayer is beautiful in its simplicity, giving us a lesson in the meaning of true worship - that is to say, man's true position low at the feet of a great and mighty God, When one thinks of all that a powerful eastern monarch might have asked of his God - power, dominion, wealth, luxury - indeed, when we think of what we so often ask for ourselves, we begin to understand how truly and with what measure of the Spirit of God he prayed. How glad God must have been at this response from His anointed servant. Let us ask ourselves today if our prayers have gladdened the heart of God, and what an answer to receive. Not only a wise and understanding heart, though that were bounty and enrichment worthy of His royal hand, but riches and honour and length of days. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" said Jesus, "and all these things shall be added unto you". Have you found yet that the unasked blessings are the glad surprises of God's love to those who put first things first?

13) 3:16-28

An instance is now given of the wisdom with which Solomon was endued by God. It is a simple enough story, but one which amply demonstrates the need for practical discernment. For there was no kind of evidence that could be adduced in support of either woman's contention. On what basis then, was a judgment to be made between them? It is here that Solomon's wise penetration is seen. With unerring insight he saw that by appealing to natural instinct and affection he would discover who the real mother was. And his apparently absurd decree, to cut the child in two, did precisely this, and the problem was immediately solved. It is interesting to realise that what he did was in effect to lay the onus of the solution on the two women themselves. He made them solve the problem, and the very words the real mother spoke (26) became the judgment of Solomon in her favour. He simply repeated her own words, as he declared her to be the mother of the child. In this we may well see the shadow of a wisdom greater than Solomon's, for this is how Christ so often dealt with His detractors when they sought to trap Him with difficult and seemingly impossible questions, as witness the story of the tribute money (Mark 12:13-17), or the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) where Jesus makes the lawyer who asked "Who is my neighbour" answer the question himself at the end (Luke 10:36). Nor should we be surprised at this, for Solomon had received the Spirit of Him in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, even Christ, and it was natural for him to speak in His accents.

14) 4:1-6

There are generally profitable lessons to be learned from even the most prosaic list of names in the Scriptures, for the Holy Spirit records nothing in vain. It is interesting, for example, to notice the contrast between the order of precedence of Solomon's officers and David's (See 2 Samuel 8:16-18 and 2 Samuel 20:23-26). Priests, scribes and recorder have precedence in Solomon's reign over the captain of the host, and this is surely symbolic of the peace of his reign in contrast to the turbulence of his father David's, and reminds us of the immortal words of the prophet, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks... neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4). Nor is it fanciful to make this association of ideas, if we remember that Solomon was a type of Christ the Prince of peace.

Zabud, son of Nathan (not the prophet Nathan, but Nathan the brother of Solomon) is designated the king's friend - does not this open up a noble picture? Kings in olden time were not specially noted for friendships - flattery and intrigue made true friendship well-nigh impossible in eastern courts - but here is the record of a friendship which we may well suppose to have been as intimate as that between David and Jonathan. It is a happy thought that in an environment of growing splendour and magnificence this ancient simplicity should flourish. It is not always so. Many rich and affluent people look back with wistful longing to simpler days when they were poorer in material resources but infinitely richer in the warm kindliness of true friendship. We should take good care that if riches increase they do not impoverish us in the things that really matter.

15) 4:7-21

We should not miss the import of this chronicle of the extensive boundaries of Solomon's kingdom and their administration. It means that, for the first time, Israel entered into the full possession of the territory promised them in the days of Joshua (Joshua 1:4), and indeed into the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 22:17. The words in 20 clearly echo the ancient words spoken by God to His servant on Mount Moriah. It is certainly true also that during Solomon's reign, Israel rose to heights of prosperity and splendour never again attained in her history. The astonishing thing is that Solomon achieved this greatness not by military conquest but by wise administration and peaceful policy. This, to our nuclear-minded generation must seem incongruous and even ludicrous, but the magnificence and opulence of that ancient kingdom stand as a testimony to our tortured and perverted age, in which armaments swallow up the millions needed to feed a hungry world, that peace is to be sought by the help of God and not by the might of men. It is significant that what force of arms failed to accomplish for warlike David was effected by his peace-loving son through the wisdom bestowed on him by God.

16) 4:22-28

We have before pointed out that Solomon stands as a type of Christ the Prince of peace, and the conditions obtaining during his reign surely are illustrative of those belonging to Christ's kingdom. The picture of peace and prosperity, indeed of well-being and rejoicing, with individual independence and fulfilment (25) is a real foretaste of what awaits us when Christ comes to reign. What the age of Solomon experienced was a fulfilment, on one level, of the Divine promise made at the beginning by God. The fact that after Solomon's time declension set in and the kingdom diminished simply indicates the partial realisation of the promise and the typical character of events in the old economy. It is as if God were saying: "Here is but one illustration of what I mean, and it will serve as a pointer to what in the fulness of the time I am going to accomplish through My Son". Thus, in the New Testament, we see the still greater spiritual joys brought to birth through the gospel. One has only to read in Acts of the impact the message of the apostles made wherever they went to realise that it brought indeed a reign of peace and joy. Nor is this all. The best is yet to be. He Who came in humility will come again in all his glory, and only then will the full meaning of this Old Testament picture become clear. The words in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) - "they began to be merry" indicate that the blessings of the gospel here and now, great and wonderful as they are, are but the beginning of joys. As it is written, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him". Blessed be His Name!

17) 4:29-34

These verses show the manner in which God keeps His Word to those who trust Him. In 3:9-11, we have the record of the assurance He gave to the king in his dream; here we see how God implemented it to him. "God gave Solomon wisdom"; not in any niggardly fashion but so super-abundantly that he became a by-word throughout the nations of the earth. This teaches us not only about the royal bounty of God but also how much God can do with a man who submits himself to Divine control. For, whatever else can be said about Solomon's after-life and its tragic decline, this much is obvious, that at the beginning of his reign he was in a place of true and humble dependence upon God (3:7). This is the attitude that God honours and uses for His glory, and it is this lesson in particular that we need to take from the passage. The truth is, God can do so little with us and in us because we are so unwilling to humble ourselves as Solomon did and give Him the undivided submission and surrender of our hearts. There is a word from the epistle of James which fits well here (4:5); we give it in a Chinese translation: "The Spirit within us yearns for the entire devotion of our hearts." Well?

18) 5:1-12

The next five chapters record the building and consecration of the Temple, and there can be little doubt that among many splendours this was the glory of Solomon's reign. He seems to have been specially raised up for the purpose. The building of a temple was first proposed in David's reign (compare 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17 with 1 Chronicles 28). But David was not permitted to build it because he had been a man of war. Instead, God indicated that his son should have the responsibility and honour of doing so. Such is the background to the passage before us today. And it is the knowledge that this was a work ordained and approved by God that explains the smoothness of the arrangements for it to be commenced and continued. It is not every king, be he never so great, who can require neighbouring rulers to send such unstinted help and materials and receive it with such goodwill. But Solomon was able to do it, not primarily because of his own greatness, but because the hand of God had been at work preparing the way beforehand. It was God who put it in Hiram's heart to help him, through the love he had had for his father David before him, and God who gave Solomon wisdom to ensure that an amicable settlement was made with Hiram in return (11,12). God is no man's debtor and those who are pressed into helping His work are never the losers for it. And while the complementary fact is true that no work of God may be expected to proceed without pressures from the evil one, it is never wrong for us to look for smooth, even working when God has a hand in the matter. After all, oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

19) 5:13-18

Much has been written by historians about the vast sacrifice of human labour and life involved in the building of the great monuments of ancient splendour, and there have not been wanting, critics who have castigated Solomon also on this score. Be this as it may, the consideration he showed to his workmen (14) - one month in Lebanon, two months at home - speak of conditions of work scarcely equalled in our own day. This has surely something to say on the question of industrial relations. Here is a situation in which Divine wisdom has brought about a truly humanitarian approach to the needs of men. The question is not whether Solomon made use of slave-labour - all the evidence shows that he did, as every ruler of that age invariably did - but how they were treated. This is where the great difference lay. Within the limits which the custom of that age imposed, it is clear that he had regard for human dignity and the sanctity of human personality, and this still remains the great need in industry today - a greater need than ever before when the vast complexity of modern civilisation bids fair to de-personalise man completely and reduce him to a mere cipher, or a pawn to be manipulated at will by unscrupulous hands. Solomon recognized that his men had a right to be human, to have homes and family-loyalties, to have time to live. The picture in 4:25 of every man under his vine and under his fig tree contrasts strangely with a world in which vast take-over bids are the order of the day, and prompts us to wonder whether we are not being led, steadily and unwittingly, into a new kind of slavery from which there will be no escape.

20) 6:1-10

If we compare the measurements of the old Tabernacle given in Exodus 26 with those of the Temple given here, we shall see that Solomon's building was in proportion a replica of the mosaic one, each dimension being doubled, the resultant temple being eight times the size of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. That it was based upon the earlier pattern gives us warrant to see in it a foreshadowing of things to come, as was the tabernacle before it (see Epistle to the Hebrews, chapters 8 and 9). We may justly apply these verses, therefore, as an illustration of spiritual life. In 7, for example, we are told that the stones used in the building were made ready cut, squared and smoothed before ever they were brought to the building site, and no sound of tools was heard in the house while it was a-building. There is a parable of Christian things here. We as believers are to be living stones in the temple not made with hands (see 1 Peter 2:4, 5), and it is here, in our earthly pilgrimage, that our rough-hewn ungainliness is cut and squared and made ready for our position in the life hereafter. The world to come is not the place for living stones to be prepared for the temple of God - the prepared people are prepared on earth, and this realisation should colour our whole attitude to the disciplines we undergo as Christians. It would be unthinkable, would it not, to graduate to the higher spheres unfinished, with the work of polishing only half-done?

21) 6:11-14

These brief verses imbedded in the technical details of Solomon's building programme have a particular significance in relation to the completion of the work. The operative word is in 14 - "So Solomon built... ", that is to say, he did the work in the light of God's word to him and all that was done from beginning to end was conditioned and inspired by that word. It is this which gives meaning to life and work, whether it be specifically religious work or belonging to the ordinary secular duties of everyday life. It is vision of God that gives character and integrity to what we do, and lack of it has been the means of endangering the whole economic and social structure of national life in our day. Nowhere can the disastrous effects of the lack of true religion be seen more clearly than in industry today, where the inferior workmanship that this has caused and the "couldn't-care-less" attitude that has lost almost all its pride in quality production have all but paralysed some industries and are in danger of crippling others to such an extent that the Government has had to make drastic enquiry into the situation. The objection so often made by the unchurched masses is that religion has no practical relevance to daily life, but it is now becoming painfully and frighteningly clear that lack of it is having very serious practical consequences in our nation's life. It is as true today as it was in olden time that "where there is no vision the people perish".

22) 6:15-38

The sacred historian is obviously delighting in the detailed description of the building which he gives us, and it is this fact that brings us our thought for today. There was undoubtedly a great deal of attention paid to intricate detail in the building of the Temple, and although it has not survived the vicissitudes of history for us to see it, many ancient monuments of architectural excellence have, and it is impossible, in viewing them, not to be conscious of the contrast presented by the chilling mediocrity, not to say dullness and untidiness of much of twentieth-century architecture. True, we have lived through a disastrously costly war and have become, almost by necessity, utilitarian in outlook, but architecture is the expression of a philosophy of life, and building today gives expression not merely to the bewilderment of men's minds but also, frighteningly, the lack of integrity that so often characterises this restless, impatient age of ours. No-one in his senses would wish to turn the clock backwards - there is much of which to be justly proud in modern technological development - but we are in sore need of recapturing some of the older mental and spiritual attitudes which were able to produce the painstaking craftsmanship and the marvellously detailed and beautifully executed intricacies of ancient masterpieces. The inspiration of God produces wonderful originality; it is the one great creative force, and bears witness to it that it is so.

23) 7:1-51

We take this whole, long chapter at one reading. Solomon's Temple may not have been vast in size even by ancient standards, but few buildings could have compared to it in sheer magnificence and grandeur. Again, as in the previous chapter, there is a wealth of detail recorded, and now we are told of the man who was responsible for the execution of much of the work, Hiram of Tyre, who by his parentage combined in himself the spirit of the Israelite worship and the practical skill of the Tyrian artificer (14). The significant thing recorded of him is that he was "filled with wisdom and understanding, and cunning to work in all works in brass" (14). The implication is surely that he was inspired by the Spirit of God for this work, just as Bezaleel and Aholiab were for the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 35:31, 32). This gives us a valuable insight into the Old Testament doctrine of work as being dependent for its true performance on the Spirit of God. One commentator writes: "There is something especially remarkable in this broad comprehensiveness of conception which recognizes the illuminating and inspiring power of the Spirit of God, not only in the moral and religious teaching of the prophet and the devotional utterances of the psalmist, but in the warlike enthusiasm of the judge, the sagacity of the statesman, the imaginative skill of the artist and the wisdom of the philosophic thinker. Nothing could more strikingly illustrate the apostolic declaration: 'There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.' As a postscript, let us read through George Herbert's hymn "Teach me, my God and King" (Church Hymnary No 511)

24) 8:1-11

The association of the Ark of the Covenant with the manifestation of the glory of the Lord has a real significance for us today. The ark was the chest which contained the tablets of stone inscribed with the law of God. Ever since its construction in the time of Moses it was regarded with sacred awe - although there were periods in which it was grievously neglected, to the detriment and loss of Israel and in those early days, it was associated with the coming of the Lord to His people, the place where He was wont to commune with them (Exodus 25:21, 22). At the completion of the temple, when Solomon brought the ark into its rightful, central place, the glory of the Lord filled the house. The implication for us is very clear and plain. Would we know the glory of the Lord descending upon the worship of the Church? Would we seek a similar manifestation of His presence in the work of the Gospel? Then the ark, His holy Word must be established in the centre of all our thinking, of our worship and witness, and of our congregational life. There is no other way; it is His Word that God has promised to honour, and when the Word of life is at a discount in the life of the Church, as it has been for so long in our day, it is little to be wondered at that God has become as a stranger in the land. Have we as yet begun to learn what must have priority in the churches of our land?

25) 8:12-21

This is a high moment of dedication for Solomon, and the awe of God's presence has brought a hush to his spirit, as he humbly rehearses His dealings with his father David and himself. One can almost sense the wonder in his voice as he says (20), "The Lord hath performed His Word", and this gives the greater force to his simple, yet profound, statement in the next verse, "I have set there a place for the ark", for to prove the faithfulness of God's Word in one's experience is the best incentive to giving that Word its true and proper place. What a grandeur there is about 21! He could have done no greater thing than this. Happy is the man who makes this the summit of his ambition in the service of God. Well would it be for the Church in our time if this were to become the aim of its leaders!

26) 8:22-30

These verses constitute the opening of what must be one of the greatest prayers recorded in the whole Bible. Biblical prayers are usually quite short and very much to the point, but here Solomon is caught up by the inspiration of the Spirit, and utterance of an unusual kind is given him. There can be little doubt that the manifestation of the glory of the Lord was the inspiration for his reverent worship and supplication. We are reminded of how, when the risen Christ appeared to His disciples, it is written, "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord", (John 20:20), and it was surely an experience of this nature that opened Solomon's lips and heart to pray as he did. In the opening expressions of worship, it is the mystery that the great creator God, maker of the ends of the earth, should humble Himself to dwell in a house made with hands that grips Solomon's heart (27), and we may well in our prayers join with him in reverent awe and wonder that such a God as He is should deign to indwell our sinful hearts and make of them temples fit for His use. Is our prayer-life touched with the sense of His majesty and humility, or has familiarity with holy things blunted our spiritual senses and made us take these things for granted?

27) 8:31-53

It is the breadth of vision in Solomon's words that impresses us, and the penetrating spiritual wisdom that is evident throughout them. It is not difficult to see exemplified here many of the evidences of the Spirit that are mentioned in the New Testament - one thinks of Peter's list of Christian graces in 2 Peter 1:5-7, or the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23 - none more so than the grace of discernment given to the godly king. With unerring foresight he expresses the possibility of declension and backsliding in the people of God, as if, in spite of the heights of prosperity to which God had raised them, he was only too aware of the tendency towards sin that lurked in the nation's life (how penetrating, in 38, the comment about every man knowing the plague of his own heart!) This is not to be interpreted as a morbid pessimism on Solomon's part - subsequent history proves how well-founded his insights were - and we will do well to learn from this that when God bestows His Spirit of wisdom and discernment on some men they are worth listening to. Modern history itself teaches us the folly of disregarding the warning prognostications of prophetic voices in national life, and when similar voices are speaking within the Church and to it warnings that are both unpalatable and unwelcome, it is fervently to be hoped that some ears will be open to what they say.

28) 8:54-61

Having finished his prayer Solomon stood and blessed the people (55). In this he assumed priestly office, for it was the duty and privilege the priesthood to bless the congregation of Israel (see Numbers 6:23-27). We discern a typical significance in this, foreshadowing the day when prophet and priest alike will be superseded in the coming reign of the Prince of peace when He will be all in all. Indeed, the rest spoken of by Solomon in 56 is finally fulfilled only in that coming Day.

We note, however two other points. In 56 Solomon raises up a monument to the faithfulness of God, which we may surely take to ourselves for our comfort and encouragement, for He is the same yesterday and today and forever. Not one word of all that He has promised concerning us will He fail to perform. Now look at 60. Here we have the reason for Israel's election of God. It was that through her and through His dealings with her, all the people of the earth might know His Name. This, sadly is something that the generality of Israel never really understood. One of the most unaccountable facts of her history is her persistent failure to grasp this principle and so completely misinterpret the meaning of God's choice of her. Only the discerning could see it. Only they were capable of a world vision. Consequently the Jews as a whole have never been able to understand their own history. Nor will it make sense to anyone today who reads the Old Testament, without this key.

29) 8:62-66

There is a very important spiritual lesson imbedded in the last verses of this chapter which records the sacrifices made by the king on the days of dedication. We quote from notes on the passage by the Rev W Still, Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen to whom we are indebted for this insight: "it is significant that there were no trespass or sin offerings. In the high moments of Christian experience our thoughts must not be upon our own unworthiness but upon Christ's worthiness. It is a Satan-inspired 'humility' that desires to bemoan its sins (its motive being display of superior humility), whereas true worship and true humility are lost in joyous contemplation of the glories of the worthy Lamb. " It is to this that the unaffected rejoicings of Solomon and his people bear witness, and it is a salutary reminder to morbidly minded believers that constant pre-occupation with their sins and unworthiness is not necessarily a sign of grace. It is to be feared that some of the devotional literature of the past has been responsible for the development of this unhealthy attitude. We would be the last to decry the writings of men of bygone days who walked with God how much indeed we have learned from them and how much they have to teach us today - but in the devotional life of some Christians they seem to have displaced even the Bible, or have been allowed to distort the sane and healthy attitude of the Scriptures by an overlay of morbidity. This has had the effect of making them unnatural and stilted in manner and, even worse, sometimes a little inhuman. How much better and safer to allow our lives to be shaped by the robust and natural spirituality of the Bible!

30) 9:1-9

Commentators have drawn attention to the contrast between this vision and that recorded in 6:11-13, while the temple was being built. As one says, "Then, all was promise and encouragement; now, not only is warning mingled with promise, but, as in Solomon's own prayer, the sadder alternative seems in prophetic anticipation to overpower the brighter." There is a spiritual lesson in this. It is that men are generally in a far healthier state spiritually when they are busy at work on an unfinished project, straining every nerve to reach their goal, than when, having finished it, they sit back in relaxation. Israel in process of possessing the land under the leadership of Joshua was a far more spiritual and obedient people than Israel fully established in her inheritance, years later. David, in his trials and tribulations before he reached the throne was a far better man than David the king; the Church under persecution is infinitely stronger and more steadfast than the Church at ease in Zion. Well might the prophet pray, "O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years" - not at the beginning when all is bright with hope, and hope acts as an anchor to the soul, but much later on, when earlier inspiration has faded. Then is the real danger point. It is this Paul has in mind when in Ephesians 6 he urges us to be girt with the armour of God, to enable us to "withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand". Having done all. That is the force of the warning note in this later vision given to Solomon. The events which follow in this book show how timely the warning was, and that, alas, it went unheeded.

31) 9:10-14

The exact significance of this transaction is not quite clear, but it would seem that Solomon had ceded cities to Hiram in return for his help in men, materials, and gold, for the building of the Temple. But the cities, apparently in a state of neglect and disrepair, did not satisfy Hiram, and he made his protest to Solomon in the words of 13. The cities must have been returned to Israel, as we may gather from 2 Chronicles 8:1, 2, for he rebuilt them, and settled Israelites in them. There are two points here. Firstly, it seems as if Solomon was guilty of niggardly conduct in offering some ramshackle cities to his friend and ally for all the help he had received from him, and Hiram's reproachful words, marked by such courtesy and restraint, show Solomon in a bad light. This must have displeased God. But in the second place, what would have displeased Him even more was the unwarranted cession of so many cities of the Promised Land, dilapidated though they were, to someone outside the covenant. It was an action at cross purposes with the whole strategy of God, which was to extend, not diminish, the boundaries of Israel according to promise. God frustrated Solomon's intentions in no uncertain fashion and made him smart for his error. No-one can cross the Divine will with impunity.

32) 9:15-28

Solomon has sometimes been criticised for the burdens he laid on his people, and it certainly seems clear from what was said to Rehoboam, his son, after his death (12:3) that, latterly at any rate, those burdens were grievous. But this should not blind us to the significance of the picture that is presented in these verses, Solomon raised this great levy for peaceful uses. This is the great fact that faces us; it was not for war and conquest, but for the purposes of peaceful construction and expansion and development throughout the nation. The picture in 4:25 provides us with an apt summary of the effect of the wise king's administration, and this should be borne in mind when we try to make any assessment of his reign. We in modern days should be able in a particularly personal way to appreciate the greatness of his achievement, when we think of the enormous burden of taxation that is borne by the great nations of the earth for the purpose of sustaining the arms race and the stockpiling of nuclear warheads. Solomon apparently succeeded in doing what we have signally failed to do, to exploit the nation's wealth for peaceful uses, instead of using it to threaten universal destruction. How was this achieved? Look at 25. For all its faults, his was a God-centred reign. He recognized the truth expressed by the Psalmist that "except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." This has all too clearly been forgotten today. So great is the contrast between the old and the new.

33) 10:1-13

There is much that we may learn from this important story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon, The fact that she should come at all bears witness to the amazing rise to fame and prosperity which Israel had experienced over the years Israel had been known in the past as a despised people. Yet, in accordance with the promises, God had raised her to a position of eminence among the nations. To look back to the days of Exodus and compare them with the glory that was Solomon's is to gain some idea of what God can do in His sovereign grace with men. This must have been a tremendous witness to His faithfulness and could not but have impressed neighbouring nations, the more so when it had been so clear that Israel's leaders, particularly David and Solomon, had sought to live under the leadership of God. A modern parallel to this may well be discerned in the undoubted influence that Scotland as a people has had in the past. Scots character in older days was no fiction; and it was certainly derived from the strong and vital religious background of our covenanting forefathers, not only in religious life, but also, as a direct consequence, in trade, commerce and industry. Sadly enough, Scotland, like Israel of old, made the mistake in subsequent generations of living on her moral and spiritual capital in such an improvident way that bankruptcy was inevitable. The lessons of history are often the most neglected of all.

34) 10:1-13

The real beauty of the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba lies in the illustration it affords of spiritual realities. For Solomon is a type of Christ, and her coming to him from afar gives an apt picture of the coming of the soul to Christ. She had heard reports of Solomon's glory and wisdom, and this had drawn her. So it is in the spiritual life. When men hear, through the preaching of the gospel, of the glory and wisdom of Christ, and His all-sufficiency, their hearts are inclined towards Him and they come. And having come they testify, like the queen, that it was a true report that they had heard. We are reminded by 7 of the incident in John 4 when the men of Samaria said that they believed not because of the woman's saying but because they had heard Christ themselves. So it was with the queen and so it is with all who come to Christ. First, the message is heard with the hearing of faith, then we come, and we taste and see that the Lord is good. Then we realise, as she did, that the half had not been told us; the reality is so much greater than the report of it. We can never hope to plumb the depths of Christ's love and grace when first we come to Him - all eternity will be too short in which to do that!

35) 10:1-13

Two other "typical" points we note in this story: the queen came to prove Solomon with hard questions, questions about life which had baffled and perplexed her, and she found that Solomon could answer them all. And when we in our frailty, burdened with many things, come to Christ, we find that He answers all our need, and bears all our burdens. There is no problem which He cannot solve for us. He is made unto us wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30). Then, in 13, we are told that Solomon gave her all her desire, and in like fashion, when the soul comes to Christ, it finds its deepest yearnings fulfilled out of the King's royal bounty. As Solomon points out in Ecclesiastes 3:11, "God hath set eternity in man's heart", and only the eternal, infinite love of Christ can answer the deeps within the soul of man.

In face of all this, Christ's words in Matthew 12:42 take on a particularly solemn meaning. The queen came from afar at the fame of Solomon to hear his wisdom, but the men of Christ's generation were so indifferent to the One Who was greater than Solomon in their midst. And many today, like the queen, have received the true report concerning Christ and yet have not shown the wisdom that she did in coming to the king. This, says our Lord, will be a matter for judgment on the great Day. We may not neglect the example and admonition of the Scriptures with impunity. Well might the prophet lament, "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?" (Lamentations 1:12)

36) 10:14-29

As we read these fabulous verses, we begin to appreciate what our Lord meant when He spoke of "Solomon in all His glory". It is an astounding picture of prosperity and well-being. Never before, not even in David's time, had Israel achieved such eminence as a nation, and since this is directly attributed in the Scriptures to the faithfulness of God's promise to them and to Solomon's dedication to His purpose, it enshrines a spiritual principle which we are at liberty to apply generally. The glory that was Solomon's is an illustration of the spiritual wealth that is ours in the promise of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and may be tapped through obedience and submission to His good and perfect will. After all, God chose to bless Solomon in this particular, material way, because it was in His sovereign purpose so to do, for a testimony to the nations. That He chooses in general to bless the saints with spiritual riches is likewise in His will, nay indeed, it is the fruition of His will in them and for them. The principle is the same in both cases, which stand in relation to one another as shadow and substance - it is unfortunately true that some believers confuse the one with the other, and would prefer the shadowy, material riches to the substantial spiritual wealth: - and the condition is always the same too. If a man is prepared to stand where Solomon stood (3:5-9) he will surely inherit. This is an unalterable law of spiritual life.

37) 11:1-8

But now we come to the dark side of Solomon's story. And just as all that has gone before has testified to the blessedness of a life well-pleasing to God, and provided a picture of the blessings of the reign of Christ, Whom he foreshadowed, so now all that follows shows the inevitable fulfilment of the warnings given to the king about the disastrous consequences of disobedience. This does not in any wise invalidate what has been said in previous readings, nor is it any contradiction, but rather confirms the Biblical view of human nature that, when left to its own resources and bent on its own will and way, it invariably gravitates downwards. When we stray from obedience to God, we also remove ourselves from Divine protection and become easy victims of the devil. This is what Solomon did. The first trace of his weakness with strange women may well be in the brief record in 3:1-3. Here, however, it has come into awful fruition, and wreaked terrible destruction in a life that once told so greatly for God. Again, the Spirit's warning comes to us in stark simplicity - resist beginnings, for sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

38) 11:9-13

The real question that arises for us from these verses is whether we are able to read them with any kind of insight, and understanding, of the tremendous thing they are saying. For this is the record of the beginning of the decline and fall of an empire, a decline caused by a departure from the principles and laws that made it great. Nothing could illustrate more pungently the truth underlying the words, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" and "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." This is a much needed word for our own nation. It does not seem to have dawned as yet on masses of Britain's population that we are no longer a great world power, that in fact, in the struggle between East and West, we are not regarded as very important any more. Leadership in world affairs has passed from us, not only in politics, but in economics, trade, commerce and industry. The decline and fall of the British Empire is a subject we have scarcely got used to as yet, but that it is in process is very evident to other nations. The fact is, God has taken greatness from us as a nation because we have forsaken His holy laws and the principles that made us great. Some of the kingdom was spared to Solomon (13), but for David's sake, not his own, and likewise, what remains of our fading and diminishing influence and authority does so not because of our merits, but because of the prayers of our fathers. This should be a humiliating thought to us. The proud boast in "Rule Britannia" that "Britons never shall be slaves" has not only become somewhat tattered; it also looks as if it might not even be true in a few years' time. Has it ever occurred to us that an alternative to devastation and annihilation by nuclear warfare might be domination and tyrannisation by the Communist powers? Have we any moral right to suppose that we in the West will be able to outwit the wily Russian leaders when we have immorally departed from God?

39) **Divided Kingdom****THE KINGS OF THE DIVIDED KINGDOM**

(after the death of Solomon)

ISRAEL**THE PROPHETS****JUDAH**

931-910	Jeroboam		Rehoboam	931 915
910 909	Nadab		Abijam	915-912
909-886	Baasha		Asa	912-871
886-885	Elah			
7 Days	Zimri			
885-874	Omri			
874-852	Ahab		Jehoshaphat	875-850
852-850	Ahaziah		Jehoram	850-843
850-842	Jehoram		Ahaziah	843-842
842-814	Jehu		Q. Athaliah	842-836
817-800	Jehoahaz		Jehoash	836-797
800-785	Joash.....	Joel	Amaziah	797-768
785-745	Jeroboam II.....	Amos Jonah	Azariah	791-740
			(Uzziah)	
6 Months	Zechariah		Jotham	751-736
1 Month	Shallum			
744-735	Menaham		Ahaz	736-721
735-734	Pekahiah			
734-730	Pekah			
730-722	Hoshea		Hezekiah	727-693
Captivity to Assyria			Mannasseh	693-639
			Amon	639-638
			Josiah	638-608
			Jehoahaz	3 Months
			Jehoiakim	608-597
			Jehoiachin	3 Months
			Zedekiah	597-586

Captivity to Babylon

40) 11:14-25

The record of the last days of Solomon's reign make grim reading and stand in marked contrast to its opening chapters. There, it was the story of how God put down all his enemies under him; here, God moved adversaries against him, who troubled him for the rest of his days. This is but one of many, many passages which reveal the truth of the warning that "the way of the transgressor is hard", and it has a lesson for the easy-going complacency of an age which no longer takes the idea of the wrath of God seriously. Divine judgment is not something that belongs only to the hereafter; it is being revealed, here and now, against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, as Paul avers in Romans 1:18. One can well image Solomon feeling that everything was going wrong, and this was the simple truth, for, when we cut across the Divine will, nothing will be right in our lives. Is it difficult to see in our own national life the development of a similar situation? As a nation we have abandoned the Divine laws, and have gone after strange gods. It is not surprising - it is inevitable - that things should have gone wrong, in the economic and industrial sphere and in international relations, and that recurrent crises should loom up to distract and disturb our peace. And what is true in national life is just as true in individuals. When a man refuses the rule of the gospel, or having once known it departs from it, God will bring distress upon distress, misfortune after misfortune upon him. It is an inviolable and eternal law that those who flout the holy law of God will surely pay dearly for their folly.

41) 11:26-43

A further distress was to trouble Solomon's declining reign - the emergence of Jeroboam, and the promise made concerning him that he would inherit ten of the twelve tribes of Israel and rule over them, with the assurance that if he walked in the ways of David and kept God's commandments, He would build him a sure house. When Solomon learned of the prophecy of Ahijah, he sought to destroy Jeroboam, who fled to Egypt, from whence he returned after the king's death to become king over the newly constituted northern kingdom of Israel. Solomon was to learn that no desperate measures of his could thwart the purpose of God when He had decreed his downfall. The circumstances in this last tragic picture of Solomon's faded glory remind us of Saul's jealousy and hatred of David and of his desperate attempts to destroy his God-anointed successor. It is some indication of how far Solomon had fallen from grace to realise that, in his downfall, he acted like Saul. The Spirit of God that had transfigured his earlier life had now departed from him, and when He leaves a man, He will do when disobedience is persisted in, there is no saying to what depths he will not stoop. It is a grim and frightening truth and this is what the Bible calls His "strange work" - that God sometimes gives men over "to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient" (Romans 1:28).

42) 12:1-15

The death of Solomon marks the end of the united kingdom of Israel. From this point on, the fortunes of God's people must be followed in two divergent lines. It will be convenient at this point to indicate briefly the nature of the division of the kingdom, Rehoboam, son of Solomon, promptly failed in the time of testing following his father's death, and the prophecy mentioned in 11:30 ff. took effect, and Jeroboam, son of Nebat, became king of the ten northern tribes, leaving Rehoboam king of the remaining two - Judah and Benjamin. This breach in the kingdom was a permanent one, and the two separate kingdoms were thenceforward known as Israel, in the north, with its capital Samaria; and Judah, in the south, with its capital Jerusalem. The remainder 1 and 2 Kings deals with this twofold history. It became a period of increasing turbulence from this time right down to the time of the captivities. This is the period in which most of the prophets exercised their ministry: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Joel, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Jeremiah; some burdened with one kingdom rather than the other, some prophesying to both alike. The two kingdoms went into captivity to foreign powers, the northern to Assyria in 722 BC; the southern to Babylon in 586 BC. The reason for this disparity of nearly 140 years is not the mere accident of the balance of power in the ancient world, but the fact that in the northern kingdom there were no good kings at all, whereas, in the south, there were several, and this stayed the inevitable judgment upon them. This fact should indicate to us how eagerly God looked for a change of heart in His people, and how willing He was, at the first sign of repentance, to stay His hand in dealing with them. He is slow to anger, but persistent and repeated disobedience finally left Him with no option but to punish His wayward flock.

43) 12:1:15

Rehoboam's reaction in this story presents an interesting study. The question at issue was what his reaction was going to be to the approach of the people (3, 4), with their request for relief from the burdens imposed upon them by Solomon. It is clear enough from the latter part of his reign that, in his obsession for wealth, the nation was taxed mercilessly and was now ripe for revolt. It was likewise clear that what they had stood from Solomon they would not be prepared to stand from his son. But Rehoboam does not seem to have been conscious either of this or of the fact that it was a time of testing for him that was quite crucial in its significance. Why was he so obtuse? The elder men of the court, who had been his father's advisers, could see very plainly what was likely to happen and urged upon him a wiser policy of restraint and relaxation of oppressive measures, but the new king heedlessly disregarded their advice in favour of that of the younger courtiers who had been his companions before he came to the throne. The truth is, his senses and insight had been so blunted by the atmosphere of magnificence in which he had lived in his father's court, that he had become insensitive to the real responsibilities of government. This is something that must ultimately be laid at Solomon's door, for he was obviously too pre-occupied with his sinful ways in his later years to have either time or inclination to train his son in the ways of kingship and in the paths of righteousness. That was the real fault, and in this case, the sins of the father had ruinous and disastrous consequences in the son. Solomon sowed the wind, and he reaped the whirlwind in his degenerate posterity.

44) 12:16-24

The interest for us in these verses lies in Shemaiah, the prophet's word to king Rehoboam - "This thing is from Me" (24), The king's instinctive reaction to Jeroboam's coronation was to prepare to contest the secession of the northern tribes, but the prophet's warning voice stayed his hand. The wonder is that Rehoboam should have heeded his counsel. Perhaps his confidence and easy-going complacency had been so rudely shattered by the startling events that followed his own ill-advised words to the people (14) that he was prepared to accept the spiritual reading of the situation. For all his weakness and waywardness, Rehoboam has imparted a great and crucially important lesson to posterity, and one that we are generally unwilling to learn. The truth is that we often rebel furiously and stubbornly against adverse circumstances that buffet us, determined to thwart what seems to us to be the cruel fate that dogs our footsteps, but in so doing we may be rebelling against God's purposes. It is a dangerous thing to attempt to twist events to suit our own will when God has decreed otherwise. It is possible to spend most of our days - and some do fruitlessly kicking against circumstances which, if accepted as gracious limitations imposed by God, would be the making of us. Is God speaking this word to someone today?

45) 12:25-33

These verses record the response of Jeroboam to the promises of God (see 11:38). Never was there a more disastrous failure. It could, humanly speaking, have been so different with him, for God had been prepared to be with him and build him a sure house. But Jeroboam decided in his heart (26) that God's word was not to be trusted, and took steps, as he thought, to consolidate by subtle strategy what God had freely given him. It did not seem to occur to him that the God Who had separated the two kingdoms in His own wise purposes could keep them so without any connivance from him (27). Jeroboam's solution was fateful, in its consequences, for by it he instituted idol-worship once more among the people of God, setting up two golden calves in Bethel and Dan for the people to worship. This was the beginning of a long practice of idolatry which finally brought down the wrath of God upon the chosen people, Jeroboam has come down in history as the man "who made Israel to sin", and the next chapters show how thorough he was in that sinister role. The truth is, no-one can estimate the depths to which a man may sink when he fails of the grace of God, and refuses to believe His word, for to do this is to withdraw from the protection even of common grace and finally be given over to the devil. God help us to trust Thy word!

46) 13:1-10

There are several points of interest to note in this story. In the first place, it is significant that the man of God came out of Judah, the southern kingdom, to prophesy against its northern neighbour, Israel. Were there no prophets in Israel then? In tomorrow's reading we shall see that there were, but, evidently, they were silent in face of Jeroboam's idolatries. God has often had to do this in history when the official Church has failed to speak out in His Name, He has raised up someone outside it to bear witness to His truth. In the second place, Jeroboam learned to his cost that it is dangerous to react in anger against the Lord's anointed when he speaks the Lord's word against one's sin. It is generally the servant of God who suffers the brunt of the reaction but the Lord has His own ways of vindicating and protecting him, to the discomfiture and dismay of his enemies. God's warnings often take time for their fulfilment - "the mills of God grind slowly" - but in this case judgment was swift and sudden, and Jeroboam's arm was paralysed in the moment he reached out in anger against the prophet. We should notice, the third place, however, that this was a "warning" judgment rather than a final one. It was as if God was showing Jeroboam warningly what He could do to him if he did not mend his ways. He was still willing to bless the erring king, according to his earlier promise (11:38), hence His swift restoration of his hand at the intercession of the prophet. But, if this be so, the warning went unheeded, and we shall see at the end of the chapter that he went deeper and deeper into his sinful ways. This is one of the mysteries of human experience, that men should be so blind in face of the warnings God gives them in the sorrows, sicknesses and other adverse circumstances He sends upon them to turn them to Himself.

47) 13:11-32

This is a striking and solemn story. The man of God who had so fearlessly braved the wrath of king Jeroboam in prophesying against him and refusing his hospitality (8, 9) falls in disobedience through the trickery of the old prophet of Bethel, and paid for this costly lapse with his death. It is an incident full of instruction on the perils to be met in spiritual life in the first place, we must at all costs learn what it teaches us about false guidance. The prophet had already been warned by God not to take food or drink in Israel (9), and this counsel had taken him safely away from Jeroboam's palace. But now the old prophet of Bethel came to him with the false message purporting to be from the angel of the Lord and beguiled him out of obedience to His will. Many Christians become a prey to conflicting guidance of this nature, and are led into serious error, if not spiritual disaster and shipwreck. What we must learn is that God does not contradict Himself in the guidance He gives us. Leadings which purport to come from an angel or other seemingly impressive or spectacular source needs to be very carefully sifted by "spiritual rational" standards before we can possibly assume that God has sent it. We are to "try the spirits, whether they be of God", In any case, "unusual guidance" ought always to be proved before action is taken, Jesus said, "My sheep know My voice, and a stranger will they not follow". Why should we think that the Lord Who has promised to lead and guide us would suddenly and inexplicably speak to us in a different voice from that in which He always speaks to us? To think He would is to charge Him with trickery, which is unthinkable. Experience should teach us that on those occasions when we have been unmistakeably led by Him, He has spoken to us in His usual way, not by any angelic intervention.

48) 13:11-32

Another lesson that emerges from this passage relates to the old prophet of Bethel. We have already suggested (see note on Friday, 25th) that he had lapsed from his high calling and certainly all that we read of him here corroborates this. If this is so, then we may learn what fearful harm a man out of the will of God can cause, to His work and to His servants. His determination to bring the man of God back to his home, in face of all he had heard of his encounter with Jeroboam and of his refusal to eat bread in the palace, needs some explaining. Was it that he thought that if he could persuade him to come to his house that might somehow bring the blessing of the Lord upon him? Ah, not thus easily is the blessing of God regained when once it has been forfeited. Some Christians like to be "in" with all the prominent spiritual leaders of the day for this very reason, perhaps in the belief or hope that this might cover their own spiritual backsliding and declension. But see what his meddling led to. It brought disaster upon a man who could ill be spared to the Lord's work in that critical time, We have known backslidden Christians who have gathered young lives around them and interfered with God's purposes for them by pressing on them what they regarded as Divine guidance until they have been led into hopeless confusion, if not spiritual shipwreck. O for clear sighted vision to discern between the false and the true in those who seek to influence our lives,

49) 13:33-34

Jeroboam did not learn wisdom from the warning God sent him. These verses show the extent of his evil ways. We need not be surprised at the extremity of wickedness recorded of him. It is inherent in spiritual issues that if a man does not grow better, he will grow worse, No-one can remain stationary in this sphere of life. Shakespeare speaks of the tide which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune, but it is another story when the tide is missed. Opportunity recedes with it and sometimes all is lost. It was so with Jeroboam; he went back from the promise of blessing to the depths of wickedness, as if intent upon outdoing his former evil habits. It is only too true that one of the penalties of sin is that we are driven to continue sinning, and sin begets sin until it reaches terrifying proportions. Jeroboam's sin verged on the blasphemous; he deliberately desecrated the holy priesthood and made a mockery of it in the institution of the priesthood of the high places. It may be a measure of how near godless Communism is to the judgment of God to realise that in East Germany, Russia and China, a "rival" Gospel aping the things of God in pagan ribaldry has emerged, complete with blasphemous slogans and symbols. It is the insult to the Divine majesty by arrogant atheism that is spelling the doom of that anti-God system, as surely as Jeroboam's blasphemy brought about the cutting off and destruction of his house from off the face of the earth.

50) 14:1-20

Jeroboam's attitude in this story is very revealing, and it reflects the contempt that many of the godless and the careless have for the servants of God. He obviously thought that it would be a simple matter to deceive Ahijah the prophet, and "pull the wool over his eyes", hence his naive suggestion to his wife in 2. We cannot think that a man so accomplished in wickedness as Jeroboam was could have thought that such a subterfuge would deceive any but a simpleton, and this is what he apparently considered the man of God to be. It is a common mistake that evil men make, to equate holy meekness with weakness, and Jeroboam's wife suffered a rude shock when the prophet penetrated her disguise and devastated her with the word the Lord had given. What men need to learn is that real holiness is a fire perilous to trifle with, and not a contemptuous relic of an outworn system, and that it confers a clear-sighted discernment and vision well able to pierce and expose the crooked designs and subtle machinations of the ungodly.

The judgment of death that fell upon Jeroboam's son seems to have been a direct consequence of his attempt to deceive the prophet. It was as if his deceit brought to a head the gathering storm of retribution that his sin had initiated, the final insult, so to speak, to the Divine majesty that filled the cup of wrath to overflowing, and make it pour forth against him. God is not mocked; whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

51) 14:21-31

The scene now shifts from Israel to the southern kingdom, where Rehoboam, son of Solomon reigned for 17 years. They were years of declension, as the brief record shows, and they brought the chastisement of God upon the nation for their wicked ways. Shishak's invasion must have been a fearful blow to national pride, involving as it did the pillaging of the Temple and the royal palace. All the glory that had been amassed by Solomon was taken as booty. It is a grimly sad picture, and affords a parable whose message has been repeated again and again in the history of the sins of men and nations. For, as in Israel's earlier history, the glory had now departed from them because they had departed from God. The replacement of the gold shields by others made of brass is a startling indication of the spiritual "devaluation" that took place during these fateful years. This is always what happens when men turn from God; the enemy of souls steals all that is precious and fine in individual and national character, and base metal does service in its place. Think of the lives of those who used to, but now no longer, give the things of God highest place; think of our nation which used to give moral leadership to the world, but now has descended to premium bonds, football pools and bingo. Has there not been a devaluation? Has not the gold been replaced by brass?

52) 15:1-8

There seems to have been nothing of interest for the sacred historian to record about the reign of Abijam in Judah, following the death of Rehoboam.

The significance of the passage lies in 4, where the "lamp in Jerusalem" refers to his son Asa, who became one of the few really good kings in the southern kingdom. This was an act of God's grace, to raise up such an one, and it had no relation to Abijam's achievements, but was for David's sake. This is important, and it is necessary for this fact to be recorded. What we have here is that the judgment of God was stayed, at least temporarily, for the sake of someone now long dead! It may be far truer than we realise that God's chastisements are turned away from us because of the prayers and faithfulness of our forefathers, and that when in times of crisis danger finally passes, it does so not because He favours us or regards our behaviour with any equanimity, but because He has respect for the prayers and tears of those who in the past honoured Him in individual and national life. In our blindness however, we assume that all is well, not realising that the goodness of God is meant to lead us to repentance. We should carry such principles from God's Word into contemporary life far more than we do. We look for relaxation of the cold war and the deadly armaments race; if it should come, let us not presume to see in this the favour of God upon us, but look rather in another direction for the explanation. There is little in our national life at the present moment that could encourage a holy God to side with us!

53) 15:9-15

Asa's was a long reign, 41 years, and one of the best in Judah's history. One can almost feel the dynamic of grace throbbing in the words in 11, "Asa did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord", and it is this that explains the purposeful vigour of the following verses. The sacred historian gives his account in summary form, but we are able to gather a good deal more from the parallel record in 2 Chronicles 14. A comparison of the two passages is very helpful and revealing. Asa's strong and resolute stand against idolatry did not even exempt his own mother (13) from the godly discipline he imposed upon the land in his efforts to rid it of its evil ways. On any estimate, that was a brave and costly thing to do. It was as true then as in our Lord's day that "a man's foes are those of his own household", and consecration meant, then as now, dying to our nearest and dearest when they come between us and highest dedication to the Lord. 2 Chronicles 14 gives us a glimpse of Asa's spiritual calibre. His prayer in 11 does much to explain his steadfastness of purpose - "We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go" - nobler words than these could scarcely be found in the whole of the Old Testament. Well would it be for the world of our time if its leaders were to be guided and actuated by such a spirit!

54) 15:16-24

The account of the moral and spiritual awakening during Asa's reign is recorded in stirring words in 2 Chronicles 15, which should be read along with the Kings record. It would be difficult to find a more hopeful assurance than this to any man or nation, in time of declension, and it is clear that Asa rose magnificently to the challenge and opportunity, and for over thirty years spiritual prosperity and peace reigned in the land. It is all the more surprising therefore, that in the war with Baasha, king of the northern kingdom Israel, he should have resorted to an alliance with Ben-hadad of Syria. This is interpreted in 2 Chronicles 16:7 ff. as being a declension of faith. The prophet Hanani reminded him of the notable victory won against the Ethiopians through faith in God, and chided him for his faithlessness in the other encounter. It was a costly lapse for the good king, for it brought him wars until the end of his reign. It also proved a stumbling-block to him, for, not liking the rebuke of the prophet, he threw him in prison. We can scarcely doubt that there is some link between this sad lapse and the disease which brought him to the grave. Chronicles emphasises that, in his illness, he sought not the Lord but his physicians. The suggestion seems to be that in stubbornness of spirit he refused to acknowledge his fault before the Lord, and died with a cloud on his soul - a sad end for a good and noble monarch, reminding us that the enemy of souls is constantly on the watch to harm us and injure our testimony, and will do so at the slightest carelessness shown by us. Not for nothing does Paul exhort us to take to ourselves the whole armour of God, so as to be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand!

55) 15:25 to 16:7

We return once more to the northern kingdom, where Nahab succeeded his father Jeroboam shortly after Asa came to the throne of Judah. The contrast between the two kingdoms at this point could not have been more complete; in place of the stability and prosperity and spiritual vigour of Judah, Israel in the north entered a period of great turbulence and disorder. A glance at the table of the kings of Judah and Israel (See middle pages of this Record) will show that, during Asa's reign, no less than six monarchs occupied the throne of Israel, two of them reigning for little more than a year, and one for a week. This, in a period of some 40 years is some evidence of the anarchy that was even then beginning to lay hold of Israel, and bears out the truth of the word in Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people perish". In the southern kingdom, on the other hand, God was gloriously at work in grace, and the picture there is as bright as the other is dark. The lesson this is meant to teach is surely obvious: it is as if God were saying, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore, choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." (Deuteronomy.30:19). These are the two possibilities, set before each man and each nation. The choice is ours, and when we choose wrongly the consequences are inevitable and inescapable. May God help us to learn the lessons that sacred history teaches, and be wise!

56) 16:8-20

The reigns of Elah and his successor, Zimri, were brief and full of evil. The picture of the former drinking himself drunk in his steward's house is not an edifying one, and bears witness to the moral corruption that came in the wake of the spiritual declension of his time. The Bible is so insistent upon this sequence that it is more than surprising that so many are blind to it in our own day. Ungodliness is always followed, sooner or later, by unrighteousness. Another aspect of sin, however, is evident here - its shamefulness and degradation. When we consider how low the ideal of kingship had fallen since the time of David, the man after God's own heart, the wonder is not that God should have visited His people with judgement, but that He was so long in doing so, and so patient and forbearing with them.

Zimri's reign must be the shortest on record in any nation. The astonishing thing is that he was able to cram so much evil into such a brief space of time. All the house of Baasha was put to the sword in the seven days in which he occupied the throne. We should see here how sovereignly God controls the affairs of men and nations. Without any kind of complicity in the evil, He used this wicked man to fulfil His will and His sentence of judgment on the house of Baasha (12). This is something the natural mind cannot understand; only the spiritual can see the possibility of a harmony between the sovereign will of God and the responsible actions of men. That God should raise up a man and make him an instrument of His wrath and nevertheless righteously punish him for his evil ways (19) presents a situation which spiritual discernment can not only appreciate but applaud. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

57) 16:21-28

Omri was obviously a man of considerable calibre, and it seems likely that with his accession to the throne the opportunity was present for Israel to recover her spiritual strength and to return to the pure worship of God. There is a significant phrase in 27 - "his might that he shewed". This, along with his obvious sagacity in establishing a new capital at Samaria seems to argue no mean ability and potential for good. One can almost feel the disappointment in the repetition of the now familiar phrase in 25 - "But Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord" - it is as if the sacred historian were saying to us, "It might have been so different with him, but alas, he followed the tragic downward trend and added to the cumulative declension of his people". It is always sad to see those who have undoubted potential for good in the kingdom of God taking the wrong turning, and with wilful, stubborn pride, refusing to walk in the way that leads to blessing and spiritual prosperity. There are those who, because they are not prepared to pay the price of personal surrender to Christ, not only remain useless in the service of the kingdom, in spite of their undoubted ability, but actually become encumbrances to the work of God. And God has, sadly but firmly, to remove them. This is the solemn lesson that 1 Kings teaches us.

58) 16:29-34

If the reign of Omri was dark, that of his son, Ahab, was even worse, for it was in his time that new extremities of evil were reached. It was not enough for Ahab to continue in the pattern of wickedness set by Jeroboam (who first made Israel to sin); he made an unholy alliance it would seem wilfully and deliberately " with the pagan Jezebel., and through her introduced the worship of Baal into Israel. The frenzied orgy of evil in which he indulged, as if to see how deeply entrenched in it he could become, flying in the face of the warnings of God's Word (34) - the rebuilding of Jericho was forbidden under pain of the most terrible curse (see Joshua 6:26) - makes it clear that Ahab had sold himself to the dark overlord of hell and was acting as his willing vassal. It was into the midst of this gross darkness that the Lord sent his servant Elijah and we shall see in subsequent chapters that if the darkness was great, here was a man great enough to combat it. God had his man to match the hour. This is grace indeed. For there is a greater tragedy than that times should be dark and iniquity abound in the nation, and it is that in such times there should be no word from the Lord. The truly ominous sign in our day is not so much that the world is trembling on the brink of nuclear destruction, but that there is such an absence of any real summons to repentance being thundered out by the Church to the nations of the earth. Where are the Elijah's of the twentieth century?

59) 17:1

Elijah, the Tishbite, burst upon the darkness of that godless age like the flash of a meteor in the night sky and with a suddenness and unhesitating abruptness that was to characterise his whole ministry. There was nothing of the diplomatist about this man, no carefully chosen words and finely balanced sentences, but urgent, fiery utterance, fierce as a whip-lash, searing and blistering the conscience of the apostate king and bringing a great dread upon his soul. One senses the tremendous drama of these words, as he reminded Ahab that there was a living God in Israel, whose holy laws he had flouted, it is as if an electric current had suddenly galvanised the whole situation. This is in fact as good and as true a way of describing it as any, for, from this point onwards the atmosphere is charged with power as the storm of Divine wrath flashed and rumbled about the hapless king's ears. What we should note particularly about this verse is the simple and unerring certainty of Elijah's pronouncement. He spoke as one having authority. It was a sure word from the Lord, albeit one of judgment. This is the abiding characteristic of all upon whom His Spirit truly rests. Men may disagree, react violently (as Ahab did) and even repudiate that word, but they have not any doubt as to its authority. The word of a real man of God is a word to be reckoned with. God sees to that!

60) 17:2-7

A close study of the record of Elijah's career will reveal that there is rather more written of his personal spiritual experience than about his public ministry, and there is surely a great lesson for us in this. The reason why he was so mighty in his public encounters with men and in delivering the word of the Lord is that he had proved God so wonderfully in the secret place. Our passage today provides ample evidence of this. After thundering the word of judgment to Ahab, we may well suppose that it became dangerous for Elijah to be within the radius of the king's fury, and it was as much for protection as for provision during the famine that God directed him to the hiding-place at Cherith. But what lessons he learnt about the faithfulness of God in his long hours of solitude as he lived, a day at a time, on the heaven-sent provisions. It is one thing to know in theory that God will provide, but quite another to prove it in experience. It was this experimental knowledge that made him so sure of God, and when a man is sure of God he can wax mighty in his service. The Apostle James reminds us that Elijah "prayed earnestly that it might not rain" and the astonishing picture that this presents is of a man holding firm in preventive prayer in the solitary hiding-place of Cherith keeping the rain back by the power and integrity of his intercession. Well might Ahab learn to fear such a man who could so move the hand of God against him!

61) 17:8-16

Our God can be prodigal in miracles when the need arises. Here was a different kind of provision from that at Cherith, and its New Testament counterpart is the story of the feeding of the five thousand, when little was turned into much by the word of His power. The story is rich in obvious lessons for the spiritual life, but we ought to pay particular heed to the reference our Lord Himself made to it (Luke 4:25,26). What He brought out of this lovely episode in the prophet's life was the sovereignty of God's grace reaching out beyond the confines of the chosen people to a widow woman of an unprivileged race. There were many widows in Israel to whom he might have been sent, but grace chose the outsider and conferred the blessings upon one who was outwith the covenant. How well Christ rebukes the narrow bigotry in our hearts that resents the intrusion of any beyond our own little circle whom God wills to bless. This is a great sin which carries its own punishment with it, for when we seek to exclude others from our privileges, we end by excluding ourselves, to our loss, from the blessing of God.

62) 17:17-24

We may well suppose that salvation had come to that home in Zarephath through the sojourn of Elijah and that faith in the God of Israel had been born in the widow's heart. And so faith was put to the test when this great sorrow came upon her. The instinctive reaction expressed in 18 is very human and we can understand the desolation that was sweeping over her, almost overwhelming her new-found faith. We are reminded of the agonies Mary and Martha passed through when Lazarus died, and the wail of their grief in the words, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died". Elijah dealt with the crisis with his usual directness, and cried to the Lord for the child, stretching himself out upon him, identifying himself utterly with his need. What thrill there is in the words in 22, "The Lord heard the voice of Elijah" - not even death was immune from the power of this man's faith. The trial wrought something decisive in the widow woman - "Now by this I know" - and she was brought out into a large place. To come through to bedrock conviction about the word of the Lord as she did is not a little thing nor is this often attained outside the crucible of suffering. Elijah's words in 19 seem parabolic - "Give me thy son" - it is when our grief and sorrow are handed over to God (and this is not always done, what a release there would be in many lives if it were that He transforms them for us into spiritual energy and power. Is this a word for some grief-stricken heart today?

63) 18:1-16

The figure of Obadiah in this passage presents us with a perplexing problem. It is said of him that he feared the Lord greatly (3), and he was doubtless one of the seven thousand in the land who had not bowed the knee to Baal (19:18). He was also able, during one of Jezebel's criminal purges of the prophets of the Lord, to preserve a hundred of them from her wrath (4). But what are we to say of his association with the wicked king? It will clarify the issue for us when we ask ourselves if we can imagine Elijah working thus with Ahab, especially on this particular mission to find water and provender for the royal stable. It would not matter to Ahab that the people were dying of thirst, if only his horses could have water! (What a contrast to Elijah's tender ministrations to the unknown widow woman of Zarephath!) No, we cannot see how Obadiah can avoid the charge of compromise in his association with the corrupt court, and the pusillanimous spirit which he showed on meeting the prophet seems to indicate something wrong with his spiritual life. No man walking close with God would behave in such a fashion, or have such a hangdog look. Fellowship with God imparts stature to the personality, and stature is what Obadiah lacked. Jesus said, "By their fruits shall ye know them", and the fruits of holy character and integrity seem conspicuously absent in a man who was too weak to take a stand for righteousness.

64) 18:17-20

Ahab's question to Elijah (17) and the prophet's reply have a very considerable significance and we should try to see the application to spiritual work in general. There is a sense in which Ahab was right; Elijah was the troubler of Israel. Any man who preaches the word of God faithfully will inevitably be a troubler, for the word that he speaks is necessarily a disturbing factor in the lives of those who listen to it. The word of God divides men, and sifts their hearts and precipitates a crisis in their lives. In this respect every true preacher is liable to be charged, as Elijah was, with causing disturbance in the community. But - and this is the important thing to realise - the troubling comes because hearts are resistant to the word of the Lord. Ahab was the real culprit, not Elijah, because he had rejected and repudiated the summons to repent and mend his ways, because he had forsaken the commandments of the Lord. A collision had taken place between the will of God and the proud, arrogant will of the king and his court, and since God is stronger than man and in a position to assert His will, disturbance is inevitable. There is no troubling in hearts that accept His word and will, but contrariwise blessing and peace. His commandments are not grievous - except to those who refuse them!

65) 18: 21-24

The all-important part of this famous and thrilling story is not the contest itself on the mount, but the words which Elijah spoke to the people prior to it, and we concentrate on these today. Two statements in particular did he make to them, elemental in their stark simplicity, and summing up all that is of final importance in spiritual life, "If the Lord be God, follow Him" (21); and "The God that answereth by fire, let Him be God" (24). We are reminded of the statement made by C. T. Studd, the famous pioneer missionary. "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him", and this well expresses Elijah's sentiment here. For him, the Lordship of Jehovah was absolute, and it demanded absolute obedience and submission from those who named His Name. It is very difficult to resist the logic of this position; to give Him halfhearted allegiance is as illogical as it is unacceptable, and no-one can reasonably halt between two opinions in the matter. It is not even as if He could not substantiate His claims, for He is the God that answers by fire. "Look what the fire of God can do," says the Bible, "it scorches and burns out sin from men's hearts and brings the warmth of grace into cold, shrunken lives, transforming them into newness and radiance and beauty." Should such a faith offend? Verily, let Him be God.

66) 18:25-29

It is interesting to compare Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal with that of Moses with Pharaoh and his magicians (Exo. 7-9). There, the evil powers of the magicians were able to produce lying wonders in answer to the miracles wrought by God through Moses; here however, Baal was completely silenced, and no voice answered the prophets' frenzied cries. The comparison should remind us that evil powers are a reality, not a fiction. Satan is the dark spirit behind the idols of wood and stone worshipped by the heathen. In the story of Moses Satan's authority was being challenged for the first time in a land where hitherto he had held undisputed sway, and not without a struggle did he give way. But here it was different; he had usurped power in a land that had formerly known the true worship, and the challenge made by Elijah (24) was such that God could brook no sort of opposition to Him, and He sovereignly suffered him not to speak. This was necessary to demonstrate to the wavering people the impotence of Baal in face of the true and living God. This is a useful distinction to bear in mind in Christian work. Not without battle and opposition will the powers of darkness yield ground to the Gospel, but when it comes to a "showdown" between light and darkness, God will silence the devil utterly and spread confusion among his minions. Where the honour and integrity of His great Name is in question, all His sovereign might and power will come to our aid.

67) 18:30-35

Elijah's calm, almost unhurried preparation is impressive as against the frenzied excitement of the prophets of Baal during the day. The purposeful air of the man who is sure of God is unmistakeable. Reverent expositors have thought to see a significance in his actions preceding the great prayer in 36, as suggestive of the things that make prayer prevail - first of all, the repairing of the altar of the Lord that was broken down, indicating that the things of God must be restored to their rightful place in the life of His people before real prayer is possible; then the digging of the trench round the altar (32), setting apart as sacred and sacrosanct the things of the Spirit, allowing nothing from the outside world to contaminate them; and thirdly, the laying of the sacrifice on the altar, signifying the death that brings life in the experience of the believer, through absolute surrender to the will of God and willingness to be broken for Him. Whether this is fanciful interpretation or not it is certainly a true reflection of Elijah's spiritual position. Never was a man more dedicated to the will of God. The eye was single, and consequently the whole body was full of light. This is the great and challenging lesson Elijah's life teaches us. Effectiveness in the service of God depends, in the last analysis, neither on outstanding gifts or superlatively efficient technique, but upon a heart right with God and a life utterly yielded and given up to His will and purpose. It was this that made the lonely prophet mighty in word and deed.

68) 18:36-40

These brief verses are tremendous in their import. In the first place, notice how simple, - and how brief - Elijah's prayer was. Two sentences were sufficient to call down the fire of God from heaven: Ah yes, but look at the man who spoke them: It is not the prayer, but the "pray-er" that is important. His life of patent surrender and one-ness with the will of God was the real power behind his intercession. It is what we are when we pray our prayers that counts with God. The real battle and wrestling of prayer come beforehand in the battle and wrestling for holiness of life and integrity of character, and where this battle has not been fought and won, not even the tongues of man and of angels will make prayer prevail.

We should notice in the second place the reaction of the people. They said (39), "The Lord, He is the God" - not "What a mighty prophet is Elijah". God had all the glory in this man's life and ministry, and his work directed men to Him. O for grace to live like this, that our testimony might exalt the Lord and Him alone!

Finally a word about 40. Elijah has often been castigated for what seemed to be a needless act of barbarity in slaying the prophets. Two things may be said concerning this, first, that in this tremendous time of crisis there could be no half-measures. These men had blasphemously challenged God Himself, and were ripe for destruction; second, it was a time of anarchy, when normal justice had gone by the board, and for the time being Elijah was surely God's minister, the revenger to execute wrath on them that did evil (see Romans 14:4). How else was justice going to be enforced, when Ahab and his court had forfeited the right to be regarded as the lawfully appointed rulers of the nation. Elijah stood alone, and the mantle of authority from God had fallen upon him. This was not a personal, but a judicial, act of execution.

69) 18:41-46

Elijah's statement in 41 must be understood as an expression of unwavering faith, for as yet the drought seemed as binding as ever, and six times the prophet's servant returned from the brow of the hill with the bald statement, "There is nothing". This is a striking example of the prayer of faith at work. Elijah was resting on the faithful promise of God given in 18:1 and counting upon it so utterly that circumstances and evidences to the contrary were irrelevant. To him, as to the writer of Hebrews, "faith was the substance of things hoped for." But resting on the promise did not absolve him from the discipline of intercession and supplication - on the contrary it brought him to his knees before God (42), and this ought to remind us of the dangers of complacency and presumption in relation to the promises of God. It was Luther who said, "The prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work", and we must learn to understand the mysterious relation between the Divine promise and the human response to it that brings it to fulfilment. The important thing is that Elijah waited for the fulfilment, and kept on believing until his faith and hope were rewarded. He "staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief (Rom. 4:20)". It is this that proves that faith is real; the truly believing man will not be discouraged - by anything.

70) 18.41-46

Notice the sequence in the climax of the story of Carmel - first the fire, then the rain. There is a symbolism here suggestive of the Divine order in the things of the Spirit. In the new dispensation, the fire that fell on the sacrifice of Calvary was followed by the descent of the Spirit with refreshing showers of Pentecostal blessing. There is a lesson here for the Church; indeed, the whole pattern of events in the story has much to teach us. We should remember, for example, in all our thinking about revival, just how much had to be done before the heavens opened for Elijah, particularly the repairing of the altar of the Lord and the laying of the sacrifice upon it. This is a pointer to the real need; to repair the broken down altar of the Lord is an act of penitence, and deep heart-repentance by the Church must precede her prayers for revival. The fire of God must fall upon the sacrifice before the rain comes, and in this connection we do well to recall David's words, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:17). This is just as true in the life of the nation. In time of crisis it will not do to call the nation to prayer for the intervention of God. What our nation needs is a call, a summons, to repentance, and without this the mighty sin-hating God of the Scriptures is not likely to heed our hapless cries.

71) 19:1-4

The lessons of this passage are, from the point of view of the spiritual life, among the most important a Christian can learn. No greater contrast could possibly be conceived than that between the towering giant of Carmel and the forlorn figure we see here under the juniper tree, whispering in his extremity his desire to die. What can be the explanation of the extraordinary change? It would be easy to criticise Elijah, reminding him of Paul's exhortation about being "able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph 6:13) -and doubtless there was failure on his part - but we are more concerned to learn wisdom for ourselves from his failure than to sit in judgment upon him. One lesson we can learn is that after great exploits for God the danger of reaction is a very real one. It seems clear that in the aftermath of glorious victory at Carmel he was seriously overwrought who would not have been? - and a serious reaction set in, bringing a dark and enervating depression upon his spirit. He was "not himself" as we would say, and this explains much that was out of character in his behaviour. We need to remember that the life we live by faith is a life lived in the flesh (Gal 1:20), and even the best of God's saints are subject to its frailties and weaknesses. Elijah was a man of like passions as we are, and God chooses the weak things of the world as the instruments of His grace.

72) 19:5-7

God's treatment of his over wrought servant is wonderfully encouraging. There was no word of rebuke, only a merciful provision for his immediate needs. Would that we were always as tenderly understanding of one another. But what stands out most graphically is the kind of treatment God prescribed for Elijah - sleep, rest, and food. It does not seem to have occurred to some good, well-meaning Christian folks that spiritual problems may have their origin in physical factors. When confronted by dark dispiritedness and black depression and discouragement, in themselves or in others, they must needs endeavour to discover some sinister spiritual defect, some unconfessed sin that has dried up the life of the Spirit in them when over-tiredness and over-strain have been responsible. There are some kinds of spiritual distemper for which the only real answer or cure is physical and mental rest and relaxation. When physical exhaustion overtakes us, and still more mental tiredness, we become an easy prey to the attacks of the evil one and the application of "spiritual" measures will not relieve, but only aggravate, the condition, if the obvious need is for physical and mental recuperation. It is quite amazing what a few good nights' rest would do to lift the clouds of depression and put the sparkle back into the lives of some of God's downcast children. This is something that can be proved, and needs to be, far more than it is.

73) 19:8-13

This strange and dramatic experience has been variously interpreted. It obviously lends itself to spiritual application in many ways. We can but suggest one or two for today's thought. We may note in the first place, as someone has pointed out, that the spectacular manifestation at Horeb must have proved an undoubted stimulus to Elijah. In his exhaustion, the Lord had ministered to his physical needs by giving him rest and sleep, and now he was ready for such a mental and emotional exhilaration as the earthquake, wind, and fire supplied. We should not underestimate this very "human" need in our assessment of the problem of complete spiritual renewal and restoration. The old adage "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" has more basic spiritual insight than we might imagine. There is such a thing as mental weariness and dullness which can be greatly accentuated by an over-wrought state, but which can be caused also by lack of adequate mental stimulus. It has been noticed by one missionary organisation, for example, that in the rigorous conditions of the field, missionaries who did not have some cultural interest tended to crack up much more readily than those who did. This is too significant to be passed over lightly. A spirituality that neglects either mind or body is not truly Biblical in its emphasis, God's care is for the whole man, body, mind and spirit, and thus did He minister to Elijah - first his bodily needs, then the mental stimulus, and then the still small voice speaking to his spirit.

74) 19:8-13

We need not doubt that God was teaching Elijah other lessons also in this unusual manifestation. There is a sense in which it constituted a parable of his own experience. He had indeed been a prophet of turbulence and drama - he had burst on the scene like a meteor and his actions at Carmel all partook of the spectacular. But now God revealed to him that there are other ways by which He speaks. It may be of interest in this connection to recall that on the day of Pentecost the spectacle and drama of the tongues of fire evoked lively interest and curiosity and the question, "What meaneth this?" But it was Peter's sermon, much less dramatic and spectacular, that made them cry out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" The still small voice of God spoke to their consciences in the word of preaching rather than in the mighty rushing wind. It would seem that God was intent upon leading Elijah into deeper things. Still waters run deep, as we say, and this may be the significance of the still small voice. The quiet persuasiveness of the Spirit avails far more than the force of the spectacular. This is a lesson we all need to learn. There is something in our spirits that craves for excitement, and this can be truly disastrous in spiritual work. "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe" said Christ, chiding the unbelief of His generation. There are some who are not prepared to wait quietly for God to work, nor to allow Him to work quietly and unobtrusively. They must have earthquake, wind and fire, and when God does not oblige, they set about producing them themselves. But the Lord is not in them. As Alexander Maclaren, that prince of preachers, once said, "Souls go away admiring, excited or agitated, but there has been no intercourse with God."

75) 19:8-13

One wonders whether this incident was the answer of God to the secret thoughts of Elijah's heart about the work in which he was engaged. Was Elijah disappointed that God had not accomplished an even more decisive victory over Baal-worship and above all over Jezebel? Was there a desire in Elijah's heart for a once-for-all vindication of righteousness that would establish the kingdom without further delay? And was the parable of the still small voice an indication to the fiery prophet that God accomplishes his purposes in other, less obtrusive ways? It is true that Jezebel continued to be a sinister influence for evil in Israel, and that Ahab soon shook off the effects of the great demonstration of Divine power at Carmel; but it is also true that the less obvious, long-term influence of Elijah proved in the end to be far more significant than he could have then realised, for what his ministry did was to create a conscience in the life of Israel to which all his successors in the prophetic office made their appeal with such devastating force in after days. At the end of the day, when the full story is told, that may prove to have been the great and abiding contribution Elijah was enabled to make to the strategic purposes of God in the redemption of the world. But that is much more in affinity with the idea of the still small voice than of the earthquake or the fire. This should hearten and encourage those who sometimes think they "have laboured in vain and spent their strength for nought" when they do not see a speedy regeneration in the spiritual life of the nation. The fact is, God uses such men at two levels, the obvious and evident one on which men are blessed and victories are won on a limited scale, and also - and this can be seen only by the discerning, and that often only after the passing of the years - on the deeper and hidden plane where influence is decisive. Elijah not only routed the prophets of Baal at Carmel, in earthquake, wind and fire; his whole ministry speaking in a still small voice made possible the prophetic ministry for the next three hundred years. That was the real measure of the Divine purposes in and through him.

76) 19:14-18

Two things should be noted in these verses, Elijah's consciousness of a great loneliness and desolation of spirit in the service of the Lord (10, 14) should not be interpreted as merely the evidence of his depressed state at this point in his experience. In times of moral and spiritual declension there is a great loneliness that comes upon the faithful; this is part of the cost of true cross-bearing; and indeed, from the strategic point of view, God cannot afford to have many of His true servants clustered together in one place. Even seven thousand are not many, scattered throughout a population of many millions!

The other thing is this: God has His seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. It is they, therefore, who need to be mobilised and made ready in His service. This warrants the closest concentration on their spiritual training and equipment, for with them lies the responsibility - and the hope - of blessing in the future. If this were understood more, it would perhaps prevent a great deal of well-meaning efforts from being wasted, as endless sallies are made in the arena of evangelism with ill-equipped and ill-trained forces. The Allies learned this to their cost when they complacently and with their gay songs crossed the Channel at the beginning of the last war with scanty and obsolete equipment to meet a ruthless and devastatingly organised war machine. But they did learn, and spent years re-equipping and training their armies into a real fighting force able to match the enemy in battle. The Church, however, has apparently not; anything will do, and anyone can serve, (agnostics and atheists included) in the kingdom of Christ. Is there no limit to our absurd unrealism?

77) 19:19-21

Following the thought of the previous reading, we now see the Lord laying His mighty hand upon one of the seven thousand of whom He had spoken to Elijah, and calling him into training for his future work. This is not only an evidence of God's gracious condescension to His lonely servant, in providing him with a companion in his work so much after his own heart; it is also an indication of the unfolding pattern of the Divine strategy in preparing for days ahead. We have for long felt that the ultimate test of any work of ministry is not merely that souls should be gathered into the kingdom of God, but that there should also be those in whose lives the great work of character-building should be manifested, with a view to significant and effective service in the future. A true ministry not only begets enthusiasm for its cause, but also a holy determination, in at least some, to walk in the steps of true discipleship. The tremendous potential of even one such may be seen in the story of Elisha which we read in the following chapters. In the deepest sense, God's Elijahs can never truly say, "I, even I only, am left" for they beget likeminded men through their ministry who themselves leave their mark and thereby continue the work that has been begun. All this God's servants should remember in the loneliness of their calling.

78) 19:19-21

In connection with the call of Elisha we would like to quote a comment on these verses from the Notes of the Rev. William Still: "This is the call of Elisha. It has the authentic ring about it. Many young folk are languishing at their work looking for a call from God, but this man is going hard at his ploughing, the job God had given him, and while working hard (twelve yoke of oxen to manage!) Elijah came to him with God's call. Too many want into Christian work to escape the drudgery of what they call secular work in the world, not remembering that God has put them there to witness to the ungodly. In any case, no legitimate work is secular for a Christian. God is not likely to choose for His work people who have been unhappy misfits in their own. Besides, those who lay aside the burdens of duties in this world take up far heavier burdens. But it is not a heavier burden that such people are seeking, but the limelight. Worldly folk envy musicians the ovations of great crowds, but they would not envy the stern discipline and strict training that lie behind the concert platform. When we covet another's place, let us know the whole story, and we may come to the conclusion that we are better as we are. Certainly if God is calling us out it will not be to a bed of roses but to another garden, Gethsemane. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

79) 20:1-14

It comes almost as a surprise to read in this chapter that the Lord is on Ahab's side against the Syrians, after all we have read of his evil and abandoned ways, and we must assume that the challenge of Elijah at Carmel must have had some effect on him. Two lessons emerge from this. The first is about the amazing grace of God. How ready He is to show His grace and forbearance at the least sign of real repentance from His people. Is there not a ray of hope here for our own dark days? The second lesson however is rather different. It is that the situation presented a challenge to the honour of Jehovah's Name and primarily the victory was promised to vindicate His honour. Again and again in Old Testament history we find that God chastised nations that hurt His chosen people, even when He was using those nations as the rod of His anger against Israel. It was the arrogance of those nations who were being unwittingly used by Him that angered God so much, and it may be we should view the episode of the Syrian invasion in this light, rather than as giving Ahab any false sense of security or comfort in leading him to suppose that the Divine favour was now resting upon him. And while it is true that the least sign of real repentance is instantly noted and encouraged by the Lord, we are not to suppose complacently and presumptuously that a minimum of repentance will ensure a maximum of Divine favour. Not thus easily is His anger turned away. A token gesture in a crisis like Dunkirk is not sufficient to absolve the weight of national sin and put things right for a people that have drifted from their anchorage in the things of God. What do we take Him for?

80) 20:15-21

It is amazing how topical and relevant the Scriptures can be: It would be difficult, in reading these words, not to think of our modern Ben-hadad, Nikita Krushchev, Ben-hadad was drinking himself drunk in the pavilions with his satellites assuming with drunken, arrogant swagger, his easy superiority over Israel's armies, and Krushchev is drunk with nuclear power, strutting about on the stage of the world like (to change the illustration Goliath of old, challenging the nations of the west to a test of strength. But power-intoxicated men usually forget some vital factor in the situation, and Ben-hadad left the God of Israel out of the reckoning, with fateful consequences, and the mighty Syrian came crashing down ignominiously from his self-made pinnacle and had to run for his life with the horsemen. "He that is in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision" (Ps. 2:4). One would have thought that the recent history of arrogant dictatorships would be a sobering influence upon the blasphemous pretensions of the Soviet leader, but apparently not; and so, as surely as God's Word is true, he will be humbled to the dust, in a debacle which will perfectly match his pride and ambition. It will be grimly interesting to watch how God does it, and when.

(The above Note, written nearly eleven years ago, makes particularly interesting reading in the light of subsequent events. The fall of Krushchev is now past history, and if reports emanating from Iron Curtain countries are to be believed, it was caused through his having been converted to Christ. How sovereign is our God!)

81) 20:22-30

Some men never learn: Ben-hadad had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Israel; but rather than face facts, he must needs concoct some highly improbable explanation of the rout his army had suffered. (It is of course one of the hardest things in the world to accept full responsibility when something goes wrong; any explanation or excuse will do, if it saves our face and prevents us seeing the dismal truth about ourselves. This is as true in individual experience as in armies. And so he tried again, assembling another great army that eclipsed the puny strength of Israel (27) in unmistakeable fashion. Again the man of God (not apparently Elijah, but some un-named prophet) came to King Ahab assuring him of the Lord's intervention for His own great Name's sake, and an even greater disaster befell the hapless Ben-hadad, who fled in terror from the unnerving spectacle and hid himself in an inner chamber. Various readings are given for the phrase in 30 "inner chamber". One says, "he fled from chamber to chamber", another, "a chamber within a chamber". Well might the Scriptures say "He that is in the heavens shall laugh." Who would not laugh at the sight of the mighty Ben-hadad hopping from room to room and hiding himself in a cupboard or a pantry from the arm of the Lord. How are the mighty fallen!

82) 20:31-43

There is a plain conflict in these verses between Ahab's attitude and God's towards Ben-hadad. God had appointed him to utter destruction; Ahab spared his life. We must beware of thinking that Ahab was magnanimous towards his enemy, more magnanimous than God. This is a mistake that could be made only by those who mistake sentimentality for love to the extent of bowing righteousness off the stage altogether. Ahab was duped by the Syrian's assumed servility; perhaps his vanity was touched at the thought of his enemy so helpless at his feet. It is a measure of how completely Ahab had misunderstood God's purposes in giving him this victory that he thought that he had the disposing of Ben-hadad's destiny. Not so, saith the Lord, and straightway intervened by His prophet to show how wrong he was (35). We once heard of a British officer in India who had a summer house on the top of a hill overlooking the jungle. One year a great flood covered the fields, and the native people took refuge on the hill around his home. As they looked out over the rising flood they saw the head of a great Bengal tiger, swimming directly for the hill and for dry ground. When it reached dry ground it shook itself and lay down on the grass as quietly as a lamb. It was more afraid than the people who had been terrorised by its coming. Some pitied it; but the officer took his gun and shot it dead. He knew, as perhaps they didn't, that its docility would very soon disappear and its real nature would assert itself to the peril of those around it. Which thing is a parable. Ben-hadad in defeat might seem harmless and servile, but Ben-hadad spared and set free would be as ruthless and implacable as ever. His cup was full to the brim and his sins were come up for judgment. The Lord had spoken.

83) 20:35-43

A word is needed to explain the rather mysterious action of the prophet in this passage. We have already seen, in Old Testament studies, that the prophets often demonstrated their message from the Lord by an acted parable, and this is the key to the understanding here. The first part of the parable is meant to show Ahab's error in sparing Ben-hadad. The prophet commanded his neighbour by the word of the Lord to smite him, and upon his refusing spoke the Lord's swift punishment upon his disobedience (36). The implication is of course that if a prophet were punished for sparing his friend against the express command of the Lord, much more would Ahab, who had spared one appointed by the Lord to destruction. In the second part the prophet told his story to the king with the object of making him condemn himself, as Nathan had done to David (2 Sam, 12). The case he presents to the king is: A prisoner taken in battle was committed to his custody with the warning that if he escaped, his own life would be forfeit. Through carelessness (40) the prisoner escaped. And the prophet paused, to hear the king's judgment on the case. Ahab fell into the trap, and pronounced his own condemnation. God had delivered into his hands a prisoner, and not through carelessness, but wilfully and deliberately he had set him at liberty. Thus the prophet turned the king's own words - 'thysself hast decided it' - against him, and pronounced the forfeiture of Ahab's life and the life of his people for this act of folly. Is it not startling to see that in God's judgment of men He makes them agree with the justice of His case against them!

84) 21:1-4

There is a wealth of teaching about human nature in this ugly story of Ahab's covetousness. Naboth's refusal of the king's request was not made in any spirit of churlishness, but on religious grounds. By the Law of Moses (see Lev. 25:23-28) he was forbidden to part with his paternal inheritance, and Ahab's demand was an inducement to violate his conscience to satisfy a momentary whim. It is an indication of how pathetically weak and characterless the king was that he should have reacted as he did, like a spoiled child, sulking in bed and refusing to take his food. In other circumstances it would have been merely laughable, but in this case it was fraught with peril, for behind him there stood one who was neither weak nor characterless, the wicked Jezebel, and with purposeful malignity this she-devil set about the ruin of the hapless Naboth. The picture all this gives of Ahab is not an edifying one - weak, indulgent, self-willed, petulant, sadly lacking in any royal characteristics, a shrunken little man even when stretched to his full height. This is what sin tends to do to such men - they become spiritually and morally wizened - and, alas, all too often, the helpless tools of strong, unscrupulous tyrants, in the home, in the community and in the nation. Satan is never slow to make use of sulky, thwarted desires in children of whatever age and the more authority they have the better he is pleased, for the greater will be the potential for doing serious harm!

85) 21:5-16

Jezebel's plot against Naboth can only be described as fiendish. With a ruthless cunning bearing the stamp of modern secret police methods, she initiated a horrible conspiracy against him and "framed" him by means of false witnesses. One cannot help exclaiming at the thoroughness of her work - it was a masterpiece of evil ingenuity, all accomplished officially so that the people had no inkling that grave injustice was being done. It is clear that Jezebel held complete sway in the court - else how could she have kept such a plot shrouded in secrecy? Such power is never merely the power of a very strong human personality, but derived from the dark overlord of hell himself. Jezebel was not only wicked - she was abandoned to wickedness and the result was demonic power and cunning. This is borne out in the whole tenor of the passage; the harsh arrogance in her voice (7), and the pitiless drive against a humble man, and the satisfied, triumphant way in which she bade Ahab take possession of the coveted vineyard (15) all these are tell-tale pointers to the origin of the evil urge within her. We do not see this in Ahab himself; his sins were the sins of weakness, and he was merely the dupe of her infernal schemings. Where and when the one kind of sin develops and merges into the other it may be difficult to say, but it is certain that the more specifically "spirit" -ual, as opposed to fleshly, sin is, the more demonic it becomes, Ahab was the victim of sensual appetites; but Jezebel was consumed by vaunting ambitions and raging, implacable hatred against the living God. That was why she turned into a devil.

86) 21:17-29

Ahab's satisfaction was short-lived. God had seen what had happened, and Naboth's blood cried to Him for vindication. Elijah was once more called to stand before the guilty King, and with characteristic dramatic suddenness, and blazing with the fire of God, he charged home the terrible nature of his crime upon him at the very moment he was gloating over his acquisition. There is a real significance in Elijah's action here. There is a certain temper of mind that would advocate silent submission to such acts of injustice, in the belief that this is in line with the New Testament teaching not to resist evil, but this is to misunderstand our Lord's words. It is one thing meekly to submit to evil when it is done to you, quite another when it is done to innocent people around you. One of the God-given tasks of the Church in its prophetic ministry is fearlessly to rebuke and challenge evil things that are done in society, and expose them and call them by their proper names. It is a common error many evil men make to mistake meekness for weakness in the people of God. We in the Church must not make the same mistake and suppose that we must acquiesce in injustice and oppression. There is a time to be silent, but verily there is also a time to speak; and for Ahab, that time had come.

87) 21:17-29

Ahab had indeed shot his bolt; this crime was the climax of a terrible career and now the hour of requital had dawned. In 20, the words of the king and Elijah are full of suggestion. Here is a man who had consistently violated the dictates of his conscience in turning from the ways of God, a man whose sins had progressively hardened his heart, and yet one to whom God had willed to be gracious. Wherever there is a prophet of God there is opportunity to repent. But instead of looking at Elijah's ministry as an opportunity, Ahab had regarded him as a thorn in the flesh, a constant goad to his guilty conscience. Hence his words, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" - words that might be placed on the lips of many who have fled from God's grace and mercy. How tragic that men should regard the grace that could have saved them and transformed their lives as an enemy they must at all costs avoid: Elijah's rejoinder was terse, and to the point, "I have found thee." Exactly. God always catches up. "Be sure your sin will find you out." God always gets His man. No-one ever escapes His hand. Doom was pronounced on Ahab and Jezebel alike, and God made the punishment fit the crimes they had committed. Ahab's reaction, it is true, was to humble himself in sackcloth, and the strict justice of God reacted thus late to the slightest sign of penitence (29) how forbearing He is - but there is little sign of a real change of heart in him, as we shall see in the next chapter. But even then, it would seem, God was prepared to deal in mercy with him, had he only forsaken his evil ways. As the paraphrase puts it,

"While the lamp holds on to burn,
The greatest sinner may return."

88) 22:1-4

A comparison between this chapter and the parallel account in 2 Chron. 18/19 is useful and indeed necessary for a true understanding of the situation here. Syria continued to be the chief thorn in Israel's flesh during the reign of Ahab, and little was usually needed to stir up trouble between them. During a visit of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to Ahab's court, the latter brought up the matter of Ramoth Gilead, which had been annexed by Syria from Israel. Should they not join forces and wrest it from the enemy's hands? Ahab should have let well alone. To initiate an undertaking of this nature with impetuous rashness when he was so out of touch with God was to ask for trouble. It is never wise to venture very far afield without Divine sanction and protection. It is generally what we do and say when we are out of God's will that has such disastrous consequences and repercussions. But what are we to say of Jehoshaphat? He was one of the good kings of Judah, and it is difficult to understand his alliance with the depraved Ahab. One can almost sense the ominous note in 2 Chron. 18:1 when it says he "joined affinity with Ahab", and the unwisdom of his action is explicitly stated in the following chapter (19:2). Jehoshaphat would have been better to give him a wide berth. Paul's word "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" is of wide application. To enter into alliance with someone so estranged from the Lord as Ahab was generally leads to taking sides against Him also. And who knows what harm will be done before we get right with Him again?

89) 22:5-9

So Jehoshaphat has already begun to be uneasy about the situation! (5) As well he might. But it is rather late to be seeking the Lord's will after you have committed yourself to your desired course of action. The subsequent happenings should certainly have made him pause to think, but apparently they did not, for he continued in the unfortunate alliance with Ahab even into battle against the Syrians, to his peril and discomfiture. The fact is, when we are set upon going in a particular direction, our minds are usually blinded to any kind of spiritual intimations that might show us to be wrong, and with sublime (self) confidence we assume that all is well.

However, the mind of the Lord was to be enquired about, and in spite of the unanimous verdict of Ahab's prophets, who prophesied just what was expected of them, that Ahab should be victorious, Jehoshaphat had doubts about this display of the "yes-men", and asked if there was no prophet of the Lord to be consulted. Micaiah was mentioned by Ahab, but with manifest disfavour and disapproval. There is a transparent ingenuousness about the King's comment on the prophet that speaks volumes, and which made him say what most men hide in the secret of their hearts - "I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil" (8). There are many who would never face up to the real reason why they hate the servants of God - they must needs concoct excuses in real or imagined faults in their character or conduct. We should certainly realise that these are but excuses; the reason for the hatred is that their word has condemned them. And that, it seems, can never be forgiven.

90) 22:10-18

We need not suppose that the messenger sent to summon Micaiah was necessarily bitterly antagonistic towards the prophet or threatening him in what he said to him in 13. He may have been genuinely desirous of avoiding strife and tension with the king. There are those who are prepared to go to almost any lengths to maintain peace and harmony. Truth - aye, and honour too, - can go by the board so long as we are all "nice" to one another. "What a happy time we would all have if only you 'prophesied good' to Ahab, and poured soothing syrup upon him like the other prophets". One can almost see the pleading look in the messenger's eyes. But peace at any price is not a doctrine that a man of God can ever acquiesce in. The fallacy is to assume that God is also like that. But God is not like that nor is He concerned to preserve peace and harmony when truth and integrity are the issues. The Lord is a man of war, and when He became incarnate in His Son in the fulness of the time, He said, "I come not to send peace but a sword". Where there is evil, and where men are at cross purposes with the will of God, the coming of His Word always causes disturbance and often the greatest upheaval. Micaiah is so fearless that he can afford to employ heavy irony with Ahab, and then, this having drawn the king, he utters the word of the Lord concerning his coming doom in the vision of the sheep without a shepherd. We should learn from this passage that in times of declension and godlessness, the gloomy word is generally the true one.

91) 22:19-28

This weird vision of Micaiah's is very frightening in its implications. Before we instinctively react against the idea of God being responsible for the lying spirit that deceived Ahab into going to his doom at Ramoth Gilead, we should turn to Romans 1, where Paul teaches - as a distinctive part of the Christian revelation - that God sometimes gives evil men over to a reprobate mind. This is the real key to the understanding of this passage. It is also true that lying spirits are the minions of Satan, but even Satan is in the control of God and his spirits must work in obedience to the Divine will. This is confirmed to us in the opening chapters of Job, where Satan appears before God in heaven and is given permission to tempt Job, but forbidden to go further than God allows. In this case, Ahab had repeatedly gone against God and in the passage of the years had steadily hardened his heart against the good until God judicially and in righteous anger hardened his heart, and confirmed it in the tragic course of evil which he had chosen for himself.

Micaiah suffered inevitably for uttering such a prophecy, and was imprisoned, with the bread and water of affliction for his fare. Those who stand faithful to God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation are very likely to suffer for it, but there is a hidden sweetness in their prison fare. "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me" said our Lord, and those who follow in His footsteps will not lack for Divine nourishment. Them that honour God He will surely honour.

92) 22:29-40

Ahab is set upon his own wilful course, and is determined to thwart God's purposes and the warnings of Micaiah. He thinks to deceive the Syrians by disguising himself in the battle line. But more penetrating eyes are upon him than those of the Syrian hosts – the hosts of the Lord are watching him. He learned too late that all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do. A chance arrow - if there are any chance arrows in the battles of the Lord - sought out the hapless king and slew him, and the dogs licked his blood from the chariot as it was washed at the pool of Samaria, in fulfilment of Elijah's prophecy (21:19), an ignominious end to an inglorious career of sin and shame. We should not miss the sense of final precipitation in Ahab's doom; in the end he hastened his own death by the unholy determination to have his own way in spite of all the warnings around him. There is that in sin which is self-destroying, and in its further expressions, it gains momentum until, like the Gadarene swine careering down the slope into the sea, it rushes to ultimate doom. When it comes to this, everything contributes to the final disaster, and archers drawing bows at a venture are pressed into service and no kind of disguise or shield will protect. How truly fearful are the wages of sin!

93) 22:41-50

The story of Jehoshaphat's reign makes better reading than that of Ahab (it is told more fully in 2 Chron. 17-20). One significant point to note here is his refusal (49) to continue the alliance with the northern kingdom. Jehoshaphat had planned to resume trade with the east that had been initiated by Solomon, but the hand of God was against him and the ships were wrecked. Ahaziah son of Ahab, suggested collaboration, but Jehoshaphat saw his error in embarking upon such a course and refused to pursue the matter. In addition, he had learned from the incident of Ramoth Gilead the folly of associating with the northern kingdom. This is something he can teach us today. It is something to be able to see from the misfortunes that overtake us that God is speaking in warning to us, and to be wise enough to heed His word and change direction. Ahab could not, or would not. To have a heart sensitive to the Divine leading is the greatest of blessings, and there is always hope for such a man in the spiritual life, however many mistakes he may be making. It is when we are not prepared to receive the admonition of the Lord, and are set on our own way, come what will, that the hardening and blinding process takes place which finally leads us to disaster. Well might the Apostle say, in Hebrews, "Today if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts."

94) 22:51-53

The first book of Kings closes on a sombre note. Ahaziah, Ahab's son, clearly intended to follow in his father's footsteps and involve his people still further in Baal-worship. The repeated disasters that had overtaken Israel during his father's reign had seemingly no effect upon him, and no sense of the Divine displeasure seems to have been with him. The melancholy, and by now almost monotonous, refrain in 52 stands almost like a preface to the second book of Kings, as if to say "More chastisement and judgment will surely come upon this continued impenitence and apostacy." And come it did. This is the mid-way point, so to speak in the headlong rush to doom, and the tempo soon accelerates as evil follows evil. It is useful however to look back as well as forward at this stage, to see how far and how steadily Israel had fallen since the days of David. It is now, at the end of the book rather than at the beginning, that we see the truly fateful consequences of their having been determined to have a king like the other nations. Well, they did become like the other nations, in sin and idolatry, and often worse than them, outdoing their neighbours in the shame of their Baal-worship. The warning given them by Samuel (1 Sam. 8) was abundantly fulfilled; they proved to their cost and to their woe that the way of the transgressor is hard. And the tragedy is, it could have been so different. It need not have been thus with them, for even within the wrong choice they had made in clamouring for a king, God had been prepared to bless them and do them good; even then He sought to gather them to Himself. But they would not. Is it not often so, with men? "Ye will not come unto Me, that ye might have life."