

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of 2 Kings

1) **1:1-8**

It is clear that the moral and spiritual rot recorded in the first book of Kings is to continue without abatement in the second. What other ending to the book could there be but the disaster of the Captivity when the beginning portrays the sinister picture of Ahaziah appealing to Baal-zebub the god of Ekron? Not even Ahab's idolatry is recorded so starkly and blasphemously as this (2). There is a swift rejoinder from the Lord, and Elijah is commissioned to pronounce doom upon the hapless monarch. It is the insult to the Divine majesty in such an attitude that angers God so much and calls forth such swift retribution. If the King had only appealed to God in penitence and contrition, he would doubtless have been healed, for God does not turn away from the needy's cry. But to turn to a false god, when he had been brought up to know, through Elijah's ministry in his father's reign, the only true and living God - this was the sin that brought his life to a close. To know the good, and yet in face of it to choose the evil, is to love darkness rather than light and, to use the words of Jesus, to enter into condemnation. This is the truly frightening element in sin, the wilful, obstinate turning of the heart against truth and grace, in defiance of the claims of God upon the soul. Who amongst us has not known this terrible temptation, when the searching challenge of His word has cut us to the quick as it rebuked our sin and called us to repentance and obedience? To know the good, and yet prefer the evil - how does this find us today?

2) **1:9-18.**

In the contrasting pictures presented here of Ahaziah and Elijah we may find much food for thought. To the bitter end, Ahaziah persists in his passionate opposition to the Word and will of the Lord. One would have thought that the awful pronouncement of the prophet would reduce him to a cowed silence, but no, he hurls defiance at the Almighty, and spends the last miserable days of his existence in a renewed attempt to set at nought the purpose of God. There comes a time, it seems when men lose all fear of God and become possessed by a terrible frenzy that finally dashes itself in pieces against the impregnable rock of the Divine will. Sin, when it is finished, brings forth not only death, but a madness that is very, very frightening to see. In contrast, look at Elijah. In him we see the calm dignity that is the ripe fruit of faith and faithfulness in a believer's life. In a right relationship to God human life enters into its own, as it were, and comes to its highest and fullest realisation in the purpose and intention of God. He is unperturbed by the attempts of the king's officers to apprehend him, for the God that answers by fire is with him, and His angel stands by him (15) to guard him and be his strength. It is this hidden and secret upholding that is the heritage of the faithful and the explanation of the calm and the self-possession which characterise the true man of God in time of crisis.

3) **2:1-15**

This is a tremendous passage, and will repay long and thoughtful study. Elijah's end, like the rest of his life, was full of drama, and his translation to heaven in the chariot of fire was in keeping with the meteoric nature of his ministry. The circumstances associated with it and immediately prior to it are, however, deeply interesting. In company with Elisha, he went from Gilgal to Bethel, Jericho and Jordan. We need not doubt that this had its own significance for Elijah, for all these places had historic associations in the story of God's people. It is almost as if the prophet were reminding himself, at the close of his life, of the past covenant-faithfulness of God, seeking to assure himself that He Who had restored the lost fortunes of Israel under Samuel at Gilgal, and Who, far earlier in their history had led them into victory at Jericho, and pledged His faithfulness to erring Jacob at Bethel, would continue to deal in grace with His people in their sin and declension. On the other hand, perhaps he was contrasting those earlier days of grace with the gathering clouds of judgement in his own time. This may well remain a matter of conjecture; but what is clear is that Elijah was paying his farewell visits to the schools of the prophets which by his faithfulness and vision he had established. In an earlier reading (Note on Sat. Sept. 23rd) we suggested that the most significant part of his ministry was not the more obvious and outward series of victories he won against Ahab, Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal, but the deeper and more far-reaching impact he made upon the conscience of the nation. The full implication of this is seen in the legacy of prophetic activity that he left behind him. This is the mark of real greatness and, we may say, success, rightly so-called. Some kinds of work collapse and disappear on the death of a leader, because it has depended upon the strength and force of his personality. Personality cannot be transmitted to personality; but vision can, and this was notably true in the case of Elijah. He committed his ministry to faithful men who carried it on after he was gone. That is the thing that really matters.

4) **2:1-15**

The point of the story of Elijah's translation is that he did not die in the way that other men die. He was "taken up", as Enoch was (Gen.5:24). It is difficult for us who are used to think of death as we know it as being an integral and inevitable part of human experience to grasp the fact that it did not come into the Divine purposes for mankind at all (this is why we are told in the Book of Revelation that in the final consummation when redemption is complete there shall be no more death). This graphic portrayal of Elijah's translation is some indication of how we might have passed from earth to heaven if sin had not entered into the world - apart from death, and in triumph instead of in weakness and corruption. (Not that Elijah was sinless, of course; God chose to take him in this manner to remind a God-forgetting age of another order of existence, in which death does not reign supreme.) Also, and still more important, it points forward to, and foreshadows a yet greater event at the end of time, when Christ comes for His own. "We shall not all sleep (die)", says the Apostle, "but we shall all be changed", and those that are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord shall be caught up to be with Him, apart from death, when the dark midnight of the end-time bursts into light in the blaze of His glory. The record of Enoch's and Elijah's triumphant passing into the invisible world stands as a token that death does not have the final word in man's sorrowful existence, and that God has another way, made known in the fulness of the times in Christ, Who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

5) **2:1-15**

Elisha's reaction to his master's departure is significant. In agitation he cried out, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horse men thereof." This doubtless referred to the vision that greeted his astonished gaze, but it is interesting to realise that ancient Jewish tradition interprets his words as referring to Elijah himself as the chariot and horsemen of Israel, meaning that the prophet had been to Israel, by his life of faithfulness and prayer, as a mighty military protection, more than all the chariots and horsemen of the king. This in fact is what God's people are meant to be in every age. Christ said, "Ye are the salt of the earth" to His disciples, meaning that their presence in society prevents corruption from becoming so widespread that total disaster comes. Elisha's first instinctive feeling was therefore that the nation had been deprived of its only real strength and protection, and was now defenceless in face of its enemies. This is a tremendous testimony to the worth of Elijah's life and ministry. It is certainly true that some men have exercised such a significant and potent influence through the preaching of the Word that whole communities have been lifted to higher levels of living. It was said of Wesley in the eighteenth century that by his preaching he saved England from revolution. We should pray that God will raise up such men today whose word will lay a restraint upon the corruption in society and be a means of protecting it from the evils that constantly threaten it.

6) **2:1-15**

Elisha had been appointed as Elijah's successor in the prophetic office; the great question that must have exercised his mind and heart would be whether his request to Elijah (9) for a double portion of his spirit would be recognized and answered by God. He need not have feared. God does not send any man to this warfare on his own charges. When he commanded Elijah to anoint him (1 Kings 19:16), the Divine enduement of power must surely have been implied. But Elisha now put the word of the Lord to the test and, seizing the fallen mantle of his master he went to Jordan and repeated the action of Elijah, smiting the waters with it and crying, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?"; and the miracle again happened, and Elisha crossed over dry-shod. This is a necessary exercise of faith, to venture on the faithfulness of God's Word; indeed, it is only natural to expect to see some sign of Divine enduement in the lives of those who believe themselves called to the service of the Kingdom. It is not training of this kind or that that elicits such evidences in a man's life; training is meant to give direction and thrust to the life that is called to service, but no training can implant a sense of vocation. The call must be there before any training can be of avail, and where it is, it will manifest itself in unmistakable signs, for God will give tokens that will both assure them and others that His hand is upon them.

7) **2:16-18**

This is an interesting incident. It is clear that the sons of the prophets were out of their depth here. They recognised that the Spirit of God was upon Elisha, obviously - how could they do otherwise, when he had demonstrated it so unmistakably in the miracle at Jordan? But they had failed completely to grasp the fact or the significance of Elijah's translation. But Elisha did. And that is why it was so wrong and so foolish on their part to put pressure on the prophet, to institute this fruitless search (16). They were so importunate that Elisha finally bade them go. It was not that they were not sincere; but they were sincerely and totally wrong and misguided. They were in the wrong dimension, spiritually speaking. This is the real danger-point in Christian work, when well-meaning folk determinedly pursue courses of action - and want others to follow them - that will surely come to nothing, if not do positive harm to the Kingdom, for the simple reason that they are in the wrong dimension and have no understanding of the things of the Spirit. Elisha allowed them to prove themselves wrong, and we hope they were suitably mortified and humbled when their search proved abortive. The trouble is, however, that all too often such people are unwilling to face facts, and persist in their misguidedness long after any rational estimate of the situation has shown them to be wrong. There is something very dogged and very stubborn about those who cannot, or will not see beyond their own limited spiritual horizon. Some folk never learn.

8) **2:19-22**

It is interesting to compare the opening of Elijah's ministry with that of Elisha. There it was the announcement of a drought (1 Kings 17:1) here it is the healing of the waters, and there is considerable significance in this contrast, for the nature of the two prophets' ministries is summed up therein; Elijah's, judgement, Elisha's, mercy. This is not to say that the latter was better or more hopeful than the former, or more truly God-given. The fact is, they were complementary ministries, and this is the pointer to an important lesson in spiritual life. So often conviction and judgement are necessary before healing and blessing are possible. Thus, John the Baptist's stern denunciations preceded the ministry of Jesus, as a necessary preparation for it, and in what is perhaps the profoundest statement of the Christian message ever written, the Epistle to the Romans, Paul begins with the message of universal condemnation before proceeding to declare the matchless message of the Divine mercy. And what is true in doctrine is true also in experience. What our forefathers used to call "the killing-work" of the law has to take place in the heart and conscience, bringing conviction and condemnation and an urgent sense of need, before a man is in a position to receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Without the stern denunciation first, the idea, and therefore the experience, of forgiveness can prove all too superficial, and it is this that explains much of the unsatisfactory nature of Christian experience in modern days when the concept of Divine judgement has been so much at a discount.

9) **2:23-26**

This has been a greatly misunderstood story, and subject to strenuous objection and criticism for its alleged cruelty and barbarousness. Part of this might have been obviated if the phrase "little children" had been translated correctly, and part if the general significance of the incident had been realised. For it was a band of young hooligans, not a group of innocent children, that set upon the prophet that day, analogous to the razor-slashing gangs of modern days, young desperadoes who were the product of the almost incredible corruption and vice of Bethel. Nor only so; this was a time of crisis, when everything, spiritually speaking, was in the balance, and the Spirit of God was brooding upon the land. It is in this context that the jeering insults and blasphemous attitudes of these young men must be understood. They were in fact scorning and deriding the grace of God, and insulting His majesty in their contemptuous treatment of His servant. The words, "Go up" may be a mockery of the rapture of Elijah who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire, and if this be so, then it is not surprising that the Divine anger kindled at such an attitude. The New Testament takes up the teaching of this story in Romans 1 where Paul says that God gives men over to a reprobate mind when they persist in their evil ways, and when this happens even the protection of common grace is withdrawn from them, and they become a prey to all kinds of evil and disaster, Thus it was with these young men. They paid dearly for their blasphemous treatment of the Lord's anointed.

10) 2:23-26

As a commentary on the solemn principle underlying the story of the young scoffers, we give the following comparatively modern instance, recorded of a time of great spiritual awakening, during the 1859 revival, in Banff; "While the gospel became the savour of life unto life to so many, it became the savour of death to others. Some six or seven gentlemen came night after night to the meetings to mock. They did not take seats like the others, but always stood about the passages leaning against the pillars, or in such other position as made the purpose for which they were there very evident. Without entering more fully into particulars, I may say that a climax in their daring ungodliness was reached by Dr. ----- kneeling down, as if under the power that had prostrated so many, and making a pretence of crying for mercy, as had been arranged by his ungodly companions. James Turner (the evangelist), whom it was not easy to deceive, saw through the thing at once, and warned them most solemnly, and went so far as to say publicly that if they did not repent, "My God", said he, "before a twelve-month will sweep you off the face of the earth." These awful words were heard and noted by many at the time, but they were still more so when, within the prescribed space, all of them had died untimely deaths - some by their own hands under very awful circumstances." God is not mocked.

ii) 3:1 -20

There are several things to note here. In the first place there is the fact of the Lord's vindication of Israel against Moab. We have already seen in 1 Kings how jealously God watches over His people even when they are sinning against Him and being punished by Him. This is one of the most striking facts in Biblical history and in spiritual experience, and one that can bring comfort and reassurance to the elect and terror to evildoers. It is true that God uses our Moab's to chastise us, often very severely, but Moab must remember that he is in the hand of God and may not without impunity go beyond the limits of the Divine permission. This, however, he is generally prone and even eager to do, and God very swiftly put him in his place, to his discomfiture and loss. This is something that the enemies of God's children and God's servants would do well to remember. Even when the saints have brought trouble and sorrow upon themselves by their sins, God's gifts and callings towards them are without repentance and His purpose in chastising them is to correct, not ruin them, and when the instruments of His anger take it upon themselves to go further than He intends, they in turn meet with His anger in no uncertain measure. This lesson is echoed in Ps.3 where, as we have seen, David's predicament was due to his own past sin. How quick his enemies were to say, "There is no hope for him in God" and to take advantage of this to do him despite. But in the end, they, not David, were set at nought. The rebellion of Absalom was quashed and David was vindicated. God is faithful.

12) **3:1-20**

There is something in this story reminiscent of the children of Israel's experience in the wilderness when Moses drew water from the rock to quench their thirst. The effect of the miracle was the same here as there, although the method employed was different. We notice here that the appeal to God came only at the point of crisis, and doubtless the Lord, since He purposed to help and deliver His people, was intent upon making them feel their need of Him, and allowed this lack of water to harass them and jeopardise their safety. In this connection it is significant to see that Jehoram was quick to assume that the Lord had brought this about in order to deliver them into the hand of Moab. This is an eloquent commentary on the effectiveness of Elijah's ministry in creating a conscience in Israel for the things of God. It is something when rulers are able to associate national crises with moral and spiritual issues. Would that modern governments did the same. What need there is that a conscience of this kind should be created in our national life by similar, Elijah-like ministries!

Elisha's response to the appeal made to him is interesting. It was because of Jehoshaphat's association with the venture, not Jehoram's, that he was prepared to intercede for them. This must have been very galling for Jehoram and sufficient to correct any false assumption he may have been likely to make that the Lord was relenting towards his sinful ways. This is something we should remember, the presence of the godly with us in business or at home, may be far more responsible than we had realised for the blessing of God that attends us. Isn't that worth thinking about?

13) 3:1-20

Elisha's instructions to Jehoram and Jehoshaphat as to what they must do in their time of need have a spiritual application which reverent commentators have not been slow to point out, for they describe in the spiritual realm the kind of work to which we are committed in the kingdom of God (in much the same way, to change the metaphor as the story of the miracle at Cana does. There, Christ commanded His disciples to fill the water pots with water; it was His prerogative to turn the water into wine). Times of refreshing come from the presence of the Lord, and it is His to give them or withhold, as He sovereignly wills; but it is we who receive His blessings, and for this we must prepare ourselves and others. As the prophet of old said, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert in highway for our God." Ditches must be dug to receive the water that brings life, and we think this is as good a description of the work of the ministry as any. Much therefore will depend on how deeply the ditches are dug; the deeper they are, the more water they will hold. It has certainly been true in the past experience of the Church that when thorough and painstaking attention has been paid to this preparatory spade-work, the subsequent blessing and spiritual renewal have been very considerable. The problem we face today is that the ditches are often made so shallow that there is scarcely room for the blessing of God to be received. This is the real point of a ministry that is intent upon digging deep, and makes no concessions to contemporary superficialities in its determination to make room for God. This takes time; but then, time will tell.

14) 3:21-27

We are always glad to come to a story like this, because it demonstrates the effortless ease with which the Lord sets at nought the wiles of His enemies. There is a certain thrill in trying to anticipate how God will perform His will, and this is what should occupy our minds in time of crisis far more than it does. Too often we are fearfully concerned with the possibilities of danger or disaster that face us, when the real question is not whether God will deliver us - has He not promised? - but how He will do it. He is such a surprising God and always so original in the way He gloriously turns the tables on His foes. Who would have thought that so simple an expedient as making the sun shine on the water in a certain way would have so completely misled the Moabites? But it did, and they were routed. It is as if God were showing His people that it is the merest child's play to Him to discomfit those who oppose Him and His chosen ones. "O Thou God of the surprising and unlooked for, help us to trust in Thee more!"

15) 4:1-7

We pass in this chapter from the turbulent and disordered picture of national life to a very different one descriptive of the experience of "the good of the land", those who were of the seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Nothing could point the contrast more clearly, or show the possibilities that attend the life of faith more graphically than this beautiful story. Here is the providence of God at work, in caring for and succouring for His own. We learn many lessons from it; not least that God's people may sometimes find themselves in great straits. Godliness does not always guarantee sunny skies, and when trouble comes it does not mean that God's love has ceased. Some experiences are meant to test and refine our faith. As someone has said, "If the pilgrim's tent were not rudely shaken at times by winter storms, he might cease to long for the city which hath foundations." In the life of a believer it is not trouble as such, but what he does in trouble, and how he reacts to it, that is the real issue. In this case, the widow woman did the one right thing - she spread out her distress to the Lord through the prophet, and she received speedy and instant succour. Simple, isn't it? And is not this often where we fail? We pray about our troubles, but it is possible to pray about them without really taking them to the Lord in prayer because in our praying we are so preoccupied that we never see beyond ourselves and our trouble to the Lord Who can help us. Might not this explain why we sometimes rise from our knees just as distracted and anxious as when we knelt down?

16) 4:1-7

The application of this story as a parable of the spiritual life is surely obvious, and we make mention of two points in particular among many that it has afforded Christians down the ages. The first is that God multiplies what we already possess. As believers, the oil of the Holy Spirit is our present possession, and we must count upon His presence in our lives and - we say it reverently: - "use" Him, or rather (far more truly), allow ourselves to be used by Him. What Elijah counselled the woman to do was to pour out, expend, what oil she had, and it was in the doing that she found it miraculously multiplied, and it is when we venture out in faith and confidence of the Spirit's unfailing supply that we find Him more than sufficient for our needs. It is not that we receive more of Him (for, having Him we have all of Him; He is a Person!) but that He is allowed more scope and room in us for His mighty working.

Secondly, Elisha bade the woman bring all the empty vessels together to be filled with the oil. Likewise, there are empty vessels within us - empty hearts, minds, wills, affections, talents, - that need to be filled with the oil of the Spirit. This is what God undertakes to do for every blood-bought child of His. Why should any of us have less than He means us to enjoy?

17) **4:8-17**

These verses introduce us to another gracious episode in the hidden life of the faithful in Israel. The Shunamite (8) stands out, like many others in the sacred record, as a great woman. (Why is it that even down to our day, and perhaps especially now, women outshine men so often in the things of God? Is it that they are constitutionally capable of more devotion than men, or that morally and spiritually they respond more fully to the claims of Christ?) And her greatness is seen not only in the discernment with which she gauged the character and calling of Elisha, but also in the provision she made for his temporal needs. Men of God are called to a life apart in the things of the Spirit, but they are still men of like passions as other men, with the same kind of needs - a fact which some good folk apparently have not suspected - and therefore should be entitled to such provision as God's people can supply. The Shunamite honoured him and cared for him because he was God's servant, her respect for his calling and for his God not being divorced from respect for him. This is as it should be, for a man whom God is pleased to use in His service is identified with Him in such a way to neglect or despise the one is to neglect or despise the other. This, at all events, is how God views the matter. He does not take lightly the slights paid to His servants; He takes them to Himself.

18) 4:18-37

One important lesson of this passage is that it repeats what we learnt in the opening verses of the chapter. Here again is one of God's children in deep distress, and as in the former instance, she takes the matter to the Lord. The previous reading called her a great woman, and something of her stature is seen here, in her reaction to the sorrow that has overtaken her. There is purposefulness in all she does that not even the extremity of her need can shake. One is reminded of the drive and insistence of the Syro-Phenician woman who came to Jesus about her daughter in Math.15:21. The Shunamite, with like determination, would not be content with less than the presence of the prophet in her home, to deal with the situation. Nor did she suffer anything or anybody, not even Gehazi, Elisha's servant, to interrupt or frustrate her intention. Not only so: Elisha's first expedient, namely, the sending of Gehazi with his staff, did not satisfy her either. The man of God himself must come. It is not necessary to interpret Elisha's action here as either casual or lacking in concern, any more than Jesus was in His seeming rebuff of the Syro-Phenician woman: he may well have been testing her faith, as Jesus was doing. It seems clear however that Gehazi must have thought that the staff would be sufficient. But he was wrong, and the woman right in supposing that nothing but the most complete identification of the prophet with her son's plight would avail for his restoration to life. This is very deep and has much to teach us about the life of faith and the service of the gospel. No casual concern and no involvement that stops short of identification with the agony and woe of the world will suffice to bring men to life in Christ. It is not that concern that raises them, any more than it was the concern of Elisha that brought the child back from the dead - only the Spirit of God can do this - but the miracle is not to be done in any other way. The identification is, so to speak, the "door" by which God is able to "get through" to the world He longs to save.

19) 4:38-44

Here are two miracles which complete a chapter rich in the grace of God, a chapter which serves to illustrate how unlimited and unfettered the power of God is, even in time of national apostacy, when hearts turn to him in simple, unfeigned faith. God was a stranger in the land, but He was no stranger to those who sought His face in the quiet, unknown places where godliness of life was still a reality. The two miracles relate the Divine provision of food in time of dearth and famine, the one safeguarding existing food from accidental contamination, the other multiplying it to meet the many claims upon it. Not only are they reminiscent of our Lord's miracles, but like them they illustrate spiritual truths of the highest importance. In the one, God was not prepared to allow the supply of food to be harmed by accident or misfortune or even carelessness on someone's part, and we may be sure that when He has instituted a true ministry of the Word in a time of general dearth, He is not likely to allow its existence to be jeopardised by the mistakes that are sometimes made in the course of it, not even by very grave and serious mistakes. When these are made, faith and the use of proper means can neutralise their evil effects. There is nothing impossible to faith. In the other, God multiplied the little into much and He has surprising and glorious ways of making a ministry designed perhaps for a few available to large numbers. To wait patiently for His working in this is one of the great experiences of the spiritual life. The multiplying of the Word is a miracle not by any means confined to the Acts of the Apostles!

20) 5:1-19

The well-known story of Naaman the leper has many valuable lessons to teach us. It would be difficult to find a more superb illustration of the work of God's grace in the saving of the sinner. Not least in importance, in this connection, is the part played by the captive maid in the household of the Syrian leader. Here is an excellent example of how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. She did not have gifts or talents, but she did know there was a man of God in her own land, and what she knew, she told forth. This is what the New Testament means by witness. As John puts it, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you." Viewed in the light of the gospel, the part she played was as important as John the Baptist's, when he said, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." In the last analysis it is only what we know that we can tell to others. It was as the bearers of good news about Christ that the apostles went forth and this is still the Church's task today, to tell men of Jesus, the mighty to save. Humanly speaking, the salvation of men depends on such witness, just as Naaman's cleansing depended on the captive maid's testimony. This should raise two urgent questions in our hearts. The first is, Have we anything worth telling our fellows in their need? The second, Are we telling them what we know, or do we hold our peace? Well?

21) 5:1-19

This was a time of new beginning for the captain of the Syrian host; but before he entered into his newness there were some very sobering and humbling lessons to be learned, and it is certainly true in the spiritual sense that before the good news of God's gift of newness of life there comes the bad news about man's sin and guilt in His sight. And this is what, by way of illustration, the story here teaches us. Naaman was a great man, honourable and of high esteem in the court of Syria. He was one of fortune's favourites, a hero with the people and held in honour by the king. But - he was a leper. And so it is with mankind. A man may have many excellent qualities, he may have a high position, he may be gifted, popular, brave, and well-loved by the people - but there is something else that makes all this different - he is tainted with the leprosy of sin. So long as this is so, all the world's applause and honour will not help him. His greatest need is for cleansing; kings and beggars are alike in this - sin is no respecter of persons, but brings all men without exception under condemnation. This is the first great lesson that has to be learned. It is one, alas, that some never learn, through very pride and self-righteousness, but it is incontrovertibly the teaching of the Scriptures. It is sinners only that can be saved.

22) 5:1-19

Naaman's reaction to the captive maid's news and his subsequent procedure, shows just how many difficulties crop up to make the simple way of salvation complicated and difficult. Her testimony was quite clear, and had Naaman acted upon it obediently, there would have been no difficulty at all. But Naaman must needs complicate matters by introducing his own ideas of cleansing and salvation. This always leads to trouble. Almost everything he did proved to be wrong; he went to the king of Israel instead of to the prophet of the Lord, as he had been told; he was so fixed in his own pre-conceived notions ("I thought" ...v.11) as to what should be done that he nearly missed the blessing he so sorely needed. This attitude diverted him from the God-appointed place of help, the river Jordan, because he thought the rivers of Damascus superior. And even when he was cleansed, he wanted to pay the prophet, not realising that grace is free and that we cannot repay God for His goodness to us save by giving ourselves to Him in gratitude and love. Well might Jesus say that we must become as little children if we would enter into the kingdom of God - for little children believe what they are told and accept at its face value what is said to them in simple faith. Why should people find it so difficult to come down to this lowly level? Is it because it is so costly to humble oneself?

23) 5: 20-27

If we suspected Gehazi's spirituality in the previous chapter, this passage shows our suspicions to have been well founded. It is an unlovely story of a man's covetousness and greed, and it is all the more so by virtue of his association with the holy Elisha. It is a measure of how little Gehazi understood his master or knew his powers of discernment that he could ever have believed, even for a moment, that his deceit would escape his notice. This is one of the amazing "blind spots" in hypocrites and evil men that they should blithely assume that they could pull wool over the eyes of the spiritually discerning. This is doubtless in part due to the idea - shared seemingly by numbers of Christian people, unfortunately - that to be a Christian means thinking that everybody is "nice". This is rubbish. A Christian loves, but loving does not mean pretending people are nice if in fact they are obnoxious or crooked and deceitful, as many people are. Indeed, a true believer with the gift of discernment can sense the duplicity of the heart, and see through insincerity and hypocrisy wherever it may be. This Gehazi learned to his cost, and he paid dearly for his covetousness and for his deceit. We should learn from this that it does not pay to entertain forbidden desires in the secret of our hearts when in the company of the discerning servants of God. They see too much, and too deeply, for comfort!

24) 6:1-7

Here is a "domestic" miracle in the sense that it answered a purely personal problem within the private life of the fellowship of the prophets. It is this which should prove such an encouragement to us as we read it, for the lesson it teaches is that God never fails to be concerned about things which are a concern to us, however trivial they may seem to others. The smallest concern, if it be a source of anxiety to us, it is big enough for God to be interested in on our behalf.

But there is an even greater encouragement here, if we think of the spiritual illustration the story gives of Christian service. When we are engaged in the work of the Kingdom, unfortunate accidents sometimes occur, it may be through no fault of our own; perhaps we inadvertently make a foolish mistake which seems as if it might seriously jeopardise the work; perhaps in all good faith we take a wrong turning or make a wrong move, misinterpreting the leading of the Spirit. It is here that this story helps us; for it tells of a God Who can over-rule our mistakes and stumblings in His service, and retrieve seemingly lost situations by His mighty power. He knoweth our frame, and gently bears with our weaknesses and failures when our hearts are open towards Him. What comfort and heartening is this: Is He not a God worth trusting?

25) 6: 8-12

There are times when the Lord delights in demonstrating His sovereignty - here is an excellent instance - and in displaying His easy superiority over His foes. It must have been unnerving for the king of Syria to be subjected to this kind of supernatural offensive. It maddened him, no one likes his enemy to get the better of him, least of all, an unseen enemy and he was determined to requite Elisha dearly for being the mouthpiece of his God, There are two things to be said about this. The first is, people should not be "taken in" by this almost invariable tendency to make a scapegoat of the Lord's servant and make him the butt of all their venomous rage, for this is simply clouding the real issue. It is God himself they are really opposing; but it is too uncomfortable to admit this even to oneself in the earlier stages of rebellion against Him, and consequently a good deal of self-deception comes into play. It is very discomfiting, however, to have this pointed out to us. The second thing is that there is another alternative to maddened rage at God's dealings with us. It is to bow humbly before Him, acknowledging His Lordship and our own sinfulness. And when the rebel lays down his arms in surrender, no king could be so merciful and royally generous in His pardon and bounty as the living Lord of the Scriptures.

26) 6:13-17

This is an impressive unveiling of the unseen hosts of the Lord. What arrests attention most is the fact that Elisha was certainly conscious of their presence before they became visible in the demonstration of the Lord's might. This is the explanation of the unhurried calm and poise that characterised his demeanour here and elsewhere. The world invisible was a place more familiar to him than the seen and temporal sphere in which he lived. What a lesson there is here for us who are engaged in fighting the Lord's battles. Would it not make all the difference in the world to us if we had the same abiding consciousness as Elisha had, in hours of stress or danger? Look at the prophet's words, "They that be with us are more than they that be with them." This is a simple statement of fact, and it is always true for the soldiers of the Lord, independent of all our feelings or fears. And it is the recognition by faith that it is so that puts us in an impregnable position in face of the enemy. Elisha's young man learned a great lesson that day, and we doubt not but that it changed the whole course of his life. It is something, after all, to have the veil of heaven drawn aside by the hand of God for your especial benefit. But - and this is the point the record of it is given for our benefit. Remember it, then, for today's battles and hazards in the Christian warfare!

27) **6:18-23**

Elisha's next prayer was to bring blindness upon the eyes of the enemy! We should not let the thrill and excitement of this glorious story blind us to the tremendous fact that the Lord God was pleased to do His faithful servant's bidding and provide miraculous power according to His word! Ah, this is the reward of living faithfully unto God as Elisha did. What an intimacy of fellowship this represents, and what an identity of will and desire! Could we have believed it possible that such Divine human partnership could exist? The lines of the well-known hymn referring to the glorified saints in heaven, "We feebly struggle, they in glory shine" are almost applicable to the contrast between our own poverty-stricken experience and that of the mighty Elisha here. God help us. In their blindness, the Syrians were led right into thousands of the Israelite army, much to their astonishment and dismay, and the jubilation of the king, who immediately wanted to smite them. But Elisha was in complete control of this strategy and refused to allow it. Mercy and grace from God were to be shown them, for the absolute superiority of the armies of the God of Israel had been adequately demonstrated, and the Syrians could now go home marvelling at the way they had been overpowered. And marvel they did, for that finished the attacks of the marauding bands from the North. God's victories are easy victories when He is allowed to take control of our destinies. Would that we trusted Him more, to win.

28) 6:24-31

Elisha's act of mercy towards the Syrians stopped their maraudings for the time being (23), but at a later date the pressures began again. It is true also in the spiritual life that such victories are never "once-for-all", but need to be won again and again. Satan is a very persistent foe. The siege recorded here was obviously a protracted one, and reduced Israel to sore straits. But what shocks and revolts us is the depth to which the people sank in their extremity. It is one of the most gruesome stories in the Old Testament. But we should be clear in our minds that it was not the famine that was responsible for this - it was merely brought out by the shortage, and it is an evidence of the moral corruption and landslide that continuing sin and idolatry had brought about in the life of the nation. Extremities of any kind are great revealers of character and of the real state of men's hearts, and it is in this that their potential for ultimate good in the purpose and intention of God may be seen, for when men discover what is really in them, it is open to them to repent and mend their ways through very fear of what they may sink to next (It was something like this that brought the prodigal son to his senses, Luke 15.) But the other danger is likewise present - that of refusing to face facts, and the king took his shameful alternative and, blaming Elisha for earlier sparing the Syrians, vowed vengeance on him for something for which he himself was directly responsible. There is, it seems, no limit to the perversity of men's hearts.

29) 6:32-7:2

Elisha's response to the threats of the king is a prophecy of mercy for the beleaguered people. Not that fear drove him to utter it - after all, it was not he, but God, Who had sent the famine, and Who alone could ease it when it was His will to do so. The man who was conscious of the unseen hosts of the Lord encamping around him was not likely to be put out by the threats of any man. God had revealed His purposes to him and he was able to say with confidence that a miraculous change in the situation would take place within twenty-four hours. This, Elisha knew, would present no kind of difficulty to the Lord, although he probably did not know just how it would be done, he did not need to know this, he had enough experience of God's surprises to realise that however He did it, it would perfectly meet the need. But the king and his courtiers were frankly incredulous and openly ironical in their reaction to his word (2). But Elisha knew that heaven was all windows to one that had faith, and he rebuked their unbelief, and warned the contemptuous noble that he would pay dearly for his skepticism. The seriousness of this unbelief is seen when it is set against the mighty works that the Lord had wrought by the instrumentality of the prophet. The fact is, their continuing sin had hardened them to the extent that they were incapable of belief, even when they could see the hand of God at work in their midst. This is the ultimate issue of sin and its final condemnation.

30) 7:3-11

It was given to the four lepers outside the city gates to discover how the Lord wrought the miraculous deliverance and opened the windows of heaven to feed His hungry people. And what a surprising deliverance it was! In the last chapter we read how He closed their eyes to the obvious, and now He opened their ears to something that was not there! - Or did He? Would it not be truer to say that what the Syrians heard was the sound of the chariots and horses that Elisha and the young men saw in their hour of peril? The hosts of God are not only for the protection of His people, but also for the discomfiture of His foes. The lepers must have thought they were dreaming, but the taste of the precious food must soon have convinced them that this was a real and substantial miracle, and they took their fill. How gracious of the Lord to arrange for such outcasts to discover His bountiful provision! Their reaction however is even more important, especially in the illustration it gives of our responsibilities in the gospel (9). They regarded it as their duty to bring the good news of their discovery to the people within the city, and in like manner, when we have discovered for ourselves the unsearchable riches of Christ we owe it to the world to spread the good tidings. It is inexcusable to hold our peace in such a situation. The unreasonableness of not telling and sharing is seen very clearly in the case of the lepers. Would that it were seen as clearly in the far greater issues of gospel-witness!

31) 7:12-16

The unbelief of the king is, when its implications are realised, a fearful calumny on the goodness of God. Not only was he incredulous; he suspected that there must be a trick in it. It was too good to be true, it must have some hidden ambush behind it to trap and destroy him. In this he illustrates the attitude of the disbelieving in face of the gospel offer. The fact is, the mercy of God operates in a dimension to which man is essentially a stranger; he cannot appreciate free, undeserved mercy because he himself does not dispense mercy to others on these terms. With him it is all a question of deserving help and blessing. He cannot see the force of mercy, he is undeserving and so slanders God in his heart by thinking He has some ulterior motive in offering it. But God's mercy is too good not to be true, and when it is put to the test, we prove it so, we taste and see that God is good. Why should we assume, as we often do, that God is intent upon robbing us or depriving us of things we hold dear when He comes to us in the gospel? His will is to enrich, not impoverish us, and it is Satan who seeks to convince us otherwise, as he did of old in the Garden of Eden. We must learn to trust the goodness of God and believe the love He has for us.

32) 7:17-20

It is almost certain that some who follow these Readings will be disturbed at the summary judgment that fell upon this sceptical noble at the gates of the city. "Was not this an extreme punishment," they will say, "for what was after all only a natural expression of incredulity on his part?" But this depends from what standpoint we look at the situation, the human or the divine. The trouble is, we think like men most of the time, and make human standards the criterion by which we judge the things that happen to us. But we are wrong. We are not the centre of the world, and there are other, more important, standards which condition man's life and destiny, namely the inflexible moral laws of God. Here is a man who openly ridicules the plain declaration of God through His prophet that He will deliver His people (the noble's attitude was simply a variant of the modern gambit, "Miracles don't happen") and contemptuously dismisses the very possibility. This, in face of the miracles that had already been wrought through Elisha, can only be interpreted as wilful blindness on his part, and an insult to God. Not only so, it represented a quality of unbelief that God was not prepared to allow to continue in Israel. There is a point in man's revolt against God at which God has no alternative but to give him over to a reprobate mind, and withdraw His grace from him (see Romans 1). It is possible to go too far, and in this time of destiny the nobleman did, to his cost. Nor must we murmur at this (Romans 9:20) but recognize rather that God has sole right to decide how serious the sin of unbelief is and how it is to be dealt with. Unbelief is never justifiable, for God has revealed Himself so unmistakably to men that to continue in it is to render them without excuse.

33) **8:1-6**

There are two simple lessons we can learn from this incident, without having to look very deeply beneath the surface. The first is to underline the truth that God is no man's debtor, and that He will never allow us to suffer, materially or in any other way, for having acted in obedience to His Word. Elisha had warned the widow of Shunem that famine would come and that she must leave her home to avoid it. She did so, and on returning she found her house and lands confiscated, either by the Crown or by some unscrupulous landlord. But God moved the heart of the king - no mean thing with such a king to grant her full restoration of her property, with every kind of compensation for all she had lost. God is faithful. Is this a word to someone today? "Your heavenly Father knoweth...."

The second lesson concerns the influence and impact of Elisha's life and testimony, even when he was not directly involved in the transaction with the king. He was a force in the land and with the king, strong enough to condition official action. There is something very important here for us. There are two kinds of impact we may make upon men. By our testimony we may lead them to Christ and into obedience to the will of God. But there are many who will not turn to Him, who nevertheless will be considerably conditioned by the power of the Gospel and, indeed, have their lives and actions shaped by it. This is the principle underlying the words of Christ, "Ye are the salt of the earth". We may put it thus: the special influence of the Gospel is to turn men to the obedience of the faith while its general influence is to lay a restraint upon the evil of evil men and to promote deeds, and attitudes, of kindness and mercy. This is the Church's twofold task, and where she is earnest and faithful about the one, she will not fail in the other.

34) **8:7-15**

Elisha's interview with Hazael, the future king of Syria has a certain drama about it. One marvels at the fearlessness of the prophet in venturing into the heart of Syria, Israel's sworn enemy, humbled as they had been through his instrumentality. It is clear that he went under Divine constraint and therefore had sure protection. Whether he knew why he was to go to Damascus, or whether the intimation about Ben-hadad's death came to him only when Hazael approached him, we cannot tell, but in any event the astonishing thing (or is it astonishing?) is that he would have such a clear preview of what was to be in the future. How close he must have lived to God, to know and discern His purposes among men. What need there is today for such insight and foresight in the Church of God! Oh that we might be drawn near enough to be enabled to hear the footsteps of His providence and interpret the direction which they take. But the most striking thing of all here is in 11 - "the man of God wept". We have seen Elisha in his towering and sublime faith, waxing mighty for God, we have seen his fearless stand for truth and righteousness, but here is a glimpse of a rare tenderness of spirit that would seem almost out of keeping with the rest of his character, if we did not remember that strength and gentleness go together and that those who live nearest to God breathe most the Spirit of Him Who, centuries later, wept over Jerusalem. This is a salutary reminder that the prophets, usually thought of as stern men of doom, as indeed they were, were also men of tender heart who felt the woes of their people and the yearning of the broken heart of God as they shed their tears in the burden of their ministry.

35) 8:16-23

The sacred historian is not slow to pinpoint for us the reason for the sinister downward trend in the fortunes of Judah, in the reign of Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's son. He married the daughter of Ahab! One would have thought that the spectacle of Jezebel's tyrannous influence over Ahab, and the immense power that she wielded in the northern kingdom, would be sufficient warning to any prospective suitor of a daughter of hers against any kind of alliance, but Jehoram apparently did not learn from this or from his own father's unhappy associations with Ahab. One wonders whether the first prospects of his marriage with her developed during one of his father's visits to Ahab's palace. Jehoshaphat lived to regret his ill-advised approaches to the northern capital in more than one way!

But notice especially what is recorded in 19. There was a restraint upon the sin of Judah, in spite of all Jehoram did, for God willed to preserve His people for David, His servant's sake, and would not bring final judgment upon them. In this we see the longsuffering of God with His erring people, slow to anger, in face of much that might provoke His wrath. To see the sovereign will and purpose of God at work, whether men will or no, is a very impressive sight indeed. It can never be an excuse on the part of His chosen ones for presumption - He very speedily deals with them if they take advantage of it - but for those upon whom God has set His hand it is passing wonderful to know that nothing will ultimately prevent the fulfilment of His purposes in us and through us, not even the sin which we mourn so much in our hearts!

36) 8:24-29

One lesson we can gather from these somewhat uneventful verses is the dullness of the life of sin. This is something we also learned in our studies in Genesis, where long lists of names appear in seemingly dreary succession, without any kind of comment - a fact from which we deduced the significant lesson that so far as the Scriptures are concerned, the only really interesting life is the spiritual life. This can be proved in experience. It is true that boredom and weariness are a characteristic of life without God - one thinks of the despair and frustration of the ancient world before the glad light of the Gospel broke upon it. But whatever else may be said of the true life of the Spirit, it could never be called dull - it is the most exciting thing in the world, and so full of exhilarating surprises.

We note the mention of the mother of Ahaziah, Athaliah, the daughter of Omri. This is a name fated to play a sinister role later in the story of 2 Kings, as we shall see. The historian introduces it here significantly, without comment, to prepare us, as it were, for what is to come. It is as if he were setting his stage for the next part of the unfolding drama. We should not miss the striking fact that two of the most desperately evil and bloody periods of Old Testament history were dominated by evil women who usurped authority over their men!

37) 9:1-13

This passage begins the story of the destruction of the house of Ahab, as foretold by Elijah. Something of the desperate tension of these days is seen in the instructions given by Elisha to the prophet sent to anoint Jehu. It was a time when no life was safe, and particularly a prophet's. One is reminded of some of the terrible days that have darkened Scotland's history when life was so dangerous for all God's people. It is encouraging for us to see amidst the turmoil and anarchy, the vindication of God's purposes and the fulfilment of His promises, and to know that disorder and chaos do not have the final word in society. Evil is punished, and evil men are requited for their sins.

It is interesting to see Jehu's reaction to his anointing. He was evasive when his companions enquired of him the errand of the prophet, obviously uncertain how they would react to the news. But he need not have feared. They received the news with acclaim. Joram's reign had become so unpopular that the simmering discontent needed only to be given expression in this way to bring it all into the open. God had been silently preparing the ground for this strategic moment. He often works like this, in the interests of His kingdom. It is all a question of waiting for the right time to act. The reason why we see less evidence of this than we might is that we are too prone to intervene precipitately before God's hour of action has struck. This always leads to trouble - always. Why are we so unwilling to wait for Him?

38) 9:14-26

What impresses us about Jehu at this point is his firm purposefulness in bringing about the downfall of Joram. He has all the zeal - and, we may say, prophetic insight - of a great reformer as he compasses Jezreel. The dialogue between Joram's emissaries and Jehu is highly instructive. Jehu could see very clearly, if Joram could not, that peace was an impossibility while the sins of the nation continued as an affront to the Lord. Doubtless the king felt aggrieved by this attitude but this is simply to fail to recognize that life is based on moral categories. In this we may see a lesson for our own day. Men are now anxiously scanning the horizons of the world and asking, "Is it peace?" and feel an increasing sense of exasperation and annoyance when crisis after crisis looms up to cause anxiety and concern. But the fact is, there cannot be peace, so long as we remain a God-forgetting people, careless of the principles that alone can ensure peace. It is the sins of the nation that have brought economic and political blight upon us and the general deterioration in international relationships. How could it be otherwise? The Old Testament commentary on modern world-problems is one which we must increasingly learn to read and understand. Its stark realism shocks and disturbs us, but is very salutary!

39) 9:27-37

The nemesis continues, and judgment rolls on like some huge, remorseless machine moving inexorably against all that stands in its way. Ahaziah, king of Judah is caught up in it, to his consternation. Ah, he that sups with the devil must use a long spoon, and Ahaziah's was not long enough by far. Let us see the needlessness of this tragedy. Judah might have been under the favour of God, for her kings had not sunk to the level of sin found in the northern kingdom. But foolhardy alliances with Israel's kings brought Judah into complicity with the northern evils, and consequently with their judgments also. This is one very practical, down-to-earth argument against the unequal yoke - it is too dangerous, and one has to pay dearly for it - too dearly, as Ahaziah found to his cost.

The fate of Jezebel makes grim and horrible reading, and it befell her as the man of God had prophesied. And she was brazen to the last (30): We have already commented upon the frenzy and madness that is the final issue of sin, and this is borne out in this passage in the final scene of Jezebel's sinful career. She died as she had lived, in baleful enmity against the living God. Is it not a terrible, frightening picture?

40) 10:1-12

There are two things we must remember in reading this grim and gruesome story. The first is that Divine justice was being meted out to an apostate house whose very memory God felt it necessary to exterminate from the body politic of Israel. One has only to think what extremities of evil might have been perpetrated by such an evil progeny as Ahab's was to understand the harsh realism of the holy God of Israel in so dealing with them. The second thing we should grasp is that evil had become so rampant in Israel that God had given it its head, so to speak, and had stood back from it, having given men over to a reprobate mind. This is the real explanation of the atrocious and inhuman barbarism recorded here. It is not that God could ever condone it for a moment; it was because they were God-forsaken that they had descended to such depths. And yet, in that God-forsakenness, God still had the last word, and used and controlled the situation for His own sovereign purposes. This is the explanation of how God can use the spectre of Bolshevik totalitarianism as an instrument of chastisement against our decadent Western civilisation today while in no wise condoning the atheistic inhumanities that characterise the Communist movement. God is in easy control of world-situations, and manipulates them as He wills in the fulfilment of His grand designs.

41) 10:13-17

The terrible purge goes on. Jehu is nothing if not thorough in his work. His action with the brethren of Ahaziah seems extreme, but we must remember that it was a time when the hand of the Lord was heavy upon Israel, a time when men should have been walking softly, and in fear of His judgments. These men ought to have been afraid to do what they did, in coming to associate themselves with the corrupt royal family of Israel. They had seen what had befallen their brother through his association with Joram, and yet they brazenly continued that association. This was how Jehu looked at it, and they paid dearly for their folly.

Jehu's attitude to Jehonadab shows us that he was actuated by principle, not by blind savagery. Here was a man whom he sensed to be at one with him in his dedication to the cause of the Lord in the land, and how willing he was that he should share his zeal. It is good that this incident is recorded for our learning, for it absolved Jehu from the charge of having surrendered himself to blood-lust in this terrible programme of execution throughout Israel. It is easy for us to criticise him, but we must remember that there were no law-courts in Israel to see that justice was done and evil punished. The king was the judge, and as such the minister of God to punish the evildoers. Such was Jehu's calling.

42) 10:18-29

There is something almost Elijah like in this encounter Jehu had with the prophets of Baal. This seems to have been the climax of all his work of judgment and cleansing. We can learn a great deal from the thoroughness and dedication which he showed in this work. There were no half measures with him - whatsoever he did, he did with all his might, in zeal for the Lord of hosts. The Church is in sore need of such a single-minded devotion to duty today - the trouble with us so often is that we give only a token allegiance to the word and will of God, and serve Him with a miserable half-heartedness which is useless to Him and soul-destroying for us. Again, we see something of Jehu's discrimination in seeking out and separating the servants of the Lord from the worshippers of Baal - as the instrument of the Lord's justice he accurately sifted the good and the evil in a way reminiscent of our Lord's parables of judgment where He speaks of the separation of sheep and goats, wheat and tares. Even in the midst of His wrath God judges righteously.

And yet, with all this, Jehu did not go far enough (29). He stopped short. How often we read this of the good kings in the Old Testament. They were fired by zeal for the Lord, and yet a lingering desire for evil things, or lack of courage to go to all lengths for God, kept them from being all they might have been. Is there not much food for thought here in relation to Christian service. Is our eye single? Are there lingering desires for forbidden things in our hearts? Have we the courage to be utterly for God, whatever the cost?

43) 10:30-36

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

44) **11:1-3**

The sacred historian now turns to events in Judah, the southern kingdom, and introduces us to one who has come down in history as "the bloody Athaliah". And she was well named, for these verses record her terrible and unnatural act of butchery in murdering all her grandchildren. Why? Because she wanted power and the throne. There is nothing quite so ruthless as vaunting ambition - it is a dangerous, monomaniac condition in which everything and everyone, friends, loved ones and family alike, is trampled upon or pushed out of the way that the desired end might be gained. It is demonic in origin, and this opens up an important lesson for us. For behind the events recorded here we need to see a deeper significance. The house of Judah stood in the line of the promise, and had its place in the strategy of God for world redemption. This dreadful massacre was an attack by the powers of darkness upon the continuity of the promise made by God to Abraham that in his seed all families of the earth should be blessed - an attack on the house of David. One thinks of the picture in Revelation 12:4 of the devil standing before the woman ready to devour the child as soon as it was born, and of Herod's attempt to kill all the boy children in the hope of destroying the infant Messiah. Athaliah's action is simply another instance of Satan's malevolent design to destroy the plan of God's salvation. We may never know how much evil we do when we sell ourselves to the devil.

45) **11:4-16**

Unknown to Athaliah, the young Joash had been concealed from her murderous fury by Jehosheba, sister of the dead king Ahaziah. Evil does not have its own way, although for a time God is sometimes pleased to let it seem so. His plans for overcoming it are often very unobtrusive and unostentatious - for six years his appointed king was in hiding, just as, centuries later, his appointed Messiah came to earth incognito and was content to live in obscurity until the time of his showing to Israel. God chooses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty! And so the better elements in the land bided their time, all the while concealing the young prince, until finally, in the seventh year of Athaliah's reign, plans were complete for her overthrow (4-12). All went according to plan, and the young prince was proclaimed king, to the consternation of Athaliah, who was put to the sword and destroyed. Brief though the record is, it is obvious that a tremendous wave of power swept through the land leading to extensive reformations in the life of the nation. The story is valuable in that it illustrates the possibility of better things in the history of a people, given right leadership, and that not even a succession of evil reigns is sufficient to prevent such a restoration, if only people have heart for it. It is never too late, until God's plumb-line of judgment is applied to nations, for men to turn to Him in penitence and new obedience. If only they have a heart for it....!

46) 11:17-12:3

The inspiration of Jehoiada was obviously a driving power in the great work of reformation that took place in Judah in those days, reminding us of Samuel's earlier herculean accomplishment in restoring spiritual values to the nation. Something of the quality of this work may be seen from 17; the covenant Jehoiada made between the Lord and the king and the people was that king and people might be the Lord's people. It was no mere ethical reformation, but a spiritual awakening characterised by a return to the things of God and a new personal dedication to Him. All this has lessons for us today. It would not be strictly true to say that spiritual awakening has always been brought about through the instrumentality of one man whom God has raised up for this purpose, but very frequently it has been so, and when it has, such men have been characterised by this singleness of heart that directs men into fellowship with the Lord and devotion to Him. They have been men of a "one-track" mind - "This one thing I do" with a thoroughness and a gracious ruthlessness which frighten and dismay the easy-going, diplomatic natures of many conventional Christian folks. Let us remember however, that spiritual awakenings have not been born in the drawing-room so much as in the desert, where ruggedness and burning fire rather than polite gentility have been the order of the day. Remember John the Baptist - and think of what he was able to accomplish!

47) **12:4-16**

This passage is full of interest in that it reveals the kind of conflict that can arise between those who may have differing ideas as to how far a "reforming" work should go. Joash's instructions to the priests that the temple dues and freewill offerings for the repair of the temple had been left unheeded, until in the twenty-third year of his reign, he took matters into his own hands and impounded the temple monies for this purpose. It would seem that the priesthood had almost a "vested interest" in the money and were unwilling to yield their claims to it. We wonder what Jehoiada's attitude was to this. Did he condone the priests' position? Was he aware of what was going on? And did he acquiesce weakly in this evident neglect of the king's commandment? These questions make us think of a general question that needs to be faced by the Church at large - the question of the rightful apportionment of personal finances in the work of the Lord. We have had brought before us the matter of stewardship, and this is very necessary. But there may be differing ideas as to how far one ought to go in this matter. The Biblical position is quite plain: it is that a work of "reformation" or spiritual renewal that does not reach to profound financial adjustments must be regarded as suspect. Tithing is as a principle, quite unmistakable; but there are those who think we should not go so far as this. This, however, is to neglect the king's commandment. Can we be said to be taking stewardship seriously so long as we allow this neglect to continue? A noted preacher, now dead, used to say that if the Lord's people failed to tithe their income, the Lord would take His tithe from them. That bears thinking about, does it not?

48) 12:17-21

These verses make very strange reading. Have you noticed anything out of character in 18? Here is the man who has been so zealous in the reforming work of the Lord weakly surrendering the treasures of the temple to buy off the king of Syria. It will not do to say that it was a time of extreme crisis and that there was no option but to "buy" freedom in this way. One has only to look back to 3:16 ff. or 6:15 ff. to see a very different story. Had God changed, then, that no appeal was made to Him in this emergency? Oh, Joash, what a lapse of faith this is, after your heroic and dedicated efforts in the restoration of the fortunes of Israel! What a betrayal of Israel's glory! And at the last, an ignominious end, by assassination at the hands of his servants (20). One is reminded of the inglorious end of Noah's career after his long faithfulness in the service of God. Well might Paul speak of the necessity of putting on the whole armour of God that we might be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand!

49) 13:1-9

The reign of Jehoahaz, king of Israel, the son of Jehu, makes interesting reading. It was an evil reign, which brought the wrath of God upon the land. The significant thing, however, is that in the midst of the judgments, he turned to the Lord, with such effect that the Lord raised up a saviour who delivered them from the hand of the Syrians. (How much more might He have done so for Joash, had he only appealed for Divine aid!). The fact that he did repent must surely be due in some measure at least to the memory of his father, Jehu. The Bible lays a far greater emphasis upon the influence of righteousness upon a family than we might realise. Even when a man has deviated seriously from the ways of his righteous father, the power of his witness still lingers, having created a conscience which can never wholly be stifled. It is something to which God can appeal in the work of the Gospel. This is sometimes seen in the fact that hardened sinners are known to have been moved, even to tears, when a once familiar, long forgotten hymn strikes a sudden chord in their hearts, reminding them of other days. This is part of the responsibility of parenthood and of work among the young - to create a conscience in them to which the Word and Spirit of God can appeal.

50) **13:10-19**

Again we see the selectiveness of the divinely inspired commentary on Israelite history. The sixteen years of Joash's (Jehoash) evil reign in the northern kingdom are passed over in a single verse, but one supremely significant incident is given us - his final encounter with Elisha. This tells us that the really important moments of any man's life are those in which he has dealings with God and the things of God. For it is then that the possibility of faith is created and, from the human standpoint, faith is the most important thing in the world. The story of the smiting of the ground by Joash gives us an instance of the exercise of faith and also of its limitations. It is possible to lose so much of the blessing of God because our faith does not, or cannot, rise to claim it. Jesus said, "According to your faith be it unto you." It is a solemn fact that what God wills for us and what we experience are often separated by a wide gap through our failure to lay hold upon it through lack of faith. In this connection we should note the link between Joash's evil life and his puny faith. Faith is conditioned by moral categories, and evil living is like a wasting disease which saps the vitality of the soul and makes faith a shrunken thing that eventually becomes incapable of claiming anything from God. Christ's words, "To him that hath it shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath" applies to faith as much as to anything.

51) **13:10-19**

We should not miss the greeting with which Joash addressed Elisha - "the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof" - which, as in the story of Elijah, we saw to mean that the prophet, by his spiritual stature, was better than an army to Israel, and his presence in the land was a source of protection and strength against all enemies. This truth is very clearly indicated in 20. When Elisha died and was buried, the land was immediately invaded by the Moabites. When an ambassador is recalled, war is usually the next step, and when God called Elisha home to himself, it was as if His restraining grace and protection were withdrawn from the land, and it was left open to the aggression of the enemy. There could scarcely be a greater testimony to the significance of the prophetic office than this, and it gives us some idea of what the function of the Church of God ought to be, and could be, in the body politic of the nation. It is not often realised that history itself bears witness to the wholesome and salutary effect that a strong and vital Church can have upon national and international life. "Ye are the salt of the earth" said Christ, and salt has a twofold function, to add flavour to food, and to prevent corruption. This is as good a commentary on Elisha's ministry as any, as witness the miraculous manifestations and the life-giving vitality on the one hand, and the restraining influence on the other. We should pray that God will again revive His Church, to make her testimony of this calibre in our troubled and disordered world.

52) **13:20-25**

We offer two comments on this unusual and startling miracle. In the first place, it tells us that even in death the prophet was a symbol of life and hope, and that he being dead yet spoke. It is a testimony to the truth that nothing but living faith can give life and that faith is something that never dies, but lives on. (One thinks of the quickening life-giving power that can come through reading the record of past revival movements or the lives of eminent saints of God this is one of God's gracious provisions for His people.)

Secondly - and here we quote from a note by the Rev: William Still, Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen - "This miracle tells us something very wonderful that we should never forget when we contemplate sadly the death of saints: even in death we are held by Christ for the power of God was there with the bones of the dead prophet: How we love the wording of the Shorter Catechism. 'The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory. Their bodies being still united to Christ (some who had perhaps forgotten our present incident have taken exception to this but we should never forget that the formulators of the Westminster Confession knew their Bibles even if we do not) do rest in their graves until the resurrection.' Hallelujah! O grave, where is thy victory?' Yes, indeed, where is it? We have heard it said that some saints are more useful to God dead than alive, and this can mean different things. We had not thought it could mean this, too!"

53) **14:1-20**

This is the record of one of the comparatively good reigns in the southern kingdom, Judah. It is said of Amaziah in 4 that he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord - yet not like David his father. It is remarkable how nearly all the good kings stopped short of complete consecration to the Lord, as if some moral paralysis effectually stayed their progress in reform. Amaziah's downfall seems to have been due to overweening pride and ambition for, intoxicated by his success against Edom (7) he aimed at nothing less than the recovery of the northern kingdom for the house of Judah. Thus his challenge to Jehoash of Israel in 8 which must be interpreted as a challenge to battle. The king of Israel was in no mood to be thus bullied, and bluntly warned Amaziah off, reminding him that pride comes before a fall (10). But Amaziah would not hear (11). Exactly. When hearts are lifted up no rational arguments will suffice to restrain them from their vaunting ambitions. They have to learn the hard way, when their pride is humbled to the dust. It is bad enough in all conscience that this should happen with evil men, but it is a thousand times worse when it becomes the fate of good men, who started off so differently, and might have been a power for good in the land, had they remained humble before God and amenable to His will. But more; Amaziah suffered not only at the hands of his enemies, but also among his own people (19). Pride and ambition are disintegrating qualities and separate a man even from those who think most of him. Satan does his work well!

54) **14:21-29**

Brief mention is made in 21 and 22 of the beginning of the reign of Azariah of Judah, who is better known as Uzziah. Then the historian turns once more to the northern kingdom, where Jeroboam II began to reign. This was one of the most significant reigns in the north, for a number of reasons. It was an evil reign (24), but the remarkable thing is that during his time, the fortunes of Israel began to turn, and her borders extended further than had been known since the days of David and Solomon. A state of material prosperity verging on luxury beguiled the people into a false security, and this had its own significance in relation to the prophetic activity which reached its height during and immediately following Jeroboam's time. It comes almost as a surprise to realise that the brief compass of these verses embraces the ministries of Amos, Jonah and Hosea, with the mighty Isaiah in the south, but we should seek to "fit in" these prophetic books into the historical sequence, in order to have as full a picture as possible of the moral and spiritual catastrophe that was soon to fall upon God's people. To see the gathering momentum of evil in these reigns is to understand something of the urgency of the prophets' warnings of impending doom. It is impressive to realise that when evil was at its height, and material prosperity side by side with moral corruption was driving Israel to her doom, God was most urgent in His pleadings with His people to turn to Him and be healed. Even to the end, God is not willing that any should perish!

55) **15:1-7**

Seven brief verses cover the fifty-two long years of Azariah's reign (better known as Uzziah). He was another of the good kings of Judah, although his good is passed over in this record of judgment and doom. We need to turn to 2 Chronicles 26 both to gather some idea of how much he did for the well-being of his kingdom and also for the reason why God smote him with leprosy. In 2 Chronicles 26:16 we read the fateful words, "But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction." Ah, was not this the downfall of his father Amaziah, (1 Kings 14:10/11). Like father, like son. But the son went further than the father, for he trespassed into the priestly office, committing blasphemous sin, and when he showed anger at the remonstrance's of the priests, he was stricken even in the moment of his arrogance by the hand of the Lord. It is almost terrifying to see how, after years of faithfulness in the things of God, a man can be so disastrously seduced into such blasphemous arrogance as this. And notice, Chronicles states that it was "when he was strong" that the tragedy took place - when he was at the height of his powers, when he had made a name for himself. Ah, this is not the sin of weaklings or failures, but of those who have got on spiritually, and there is much of the specifically demonic in it that we do well to discern. Well might the apostle warn us, "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall!"

56) 15:8-12

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

57) **15:13-22**

The grim farce of enthronement and succession recorded in this chapter bears witness to the disorder and chaos that was rapidly overcoming Israel and dragging her to her doom. One has only to recall the constitutional crisis brought about by the abdication of King Edward VIII in the 1930's to realise the kind of unsettlement and turmoil experienced by God's people at that time, when within little more than ten years six monarchs had come and gone. Lawless might has a very uneasy seat whether it be monarchy, as in Israel, or totalitarian dictatorship, as in Russia and China, and this is evidenced alike in the court of the northern kingdom and in the secret councils of the Kremlin, where suns have risen and set rather too rapidly for comfort since the death of Stalin. But this is only what we should expect since God is God. It is He Who calls the tune even when rulers are most blasphemous in their repudiation of Him, and they are but tools in His hand, did they but know it, for the fulfilling of His will. We must never forget this when we read through passages like this, so full of disturbance and anarchy - it is because He has withdrawn, not because He has lost control that lawlessness abounds. He permits it, so long as it pleases Him to do so, and until He chooses to bring it to an end, in judgment. He is the great Watcher of world events, and He bides His time until His purposes ripen and come to fruition. This should comfort and reassure His saints, and would, if they remembered it more, in times of international tension!

58) **15:23-31**

The beginning of the end for the northern kingdom is recorded in 29 when the mighty forces of Assyria began to encroach upon the northern territory and the tribe of Naphtali was carried into captivity. One would have thought that this would have had a sobering effect upon the rest of the nation, but no, neither Pekah nor his successor seem to have had any realisation that the hand of the Lord was heavy upon them in judgment or that there might still be time to repent and save the remainder of the people. It is one of the terribly frightening aspects of sin that it blinds men so utterly to the warnings of God that they rush on heedless to their ruin. This should teach us a lesson about present world-crises, and explain why governments should be so blind to what some individuals can see only too clearly - that the steady encroachment of totalitarian communism upon the free world is the judgment of God upon our western decadence and spiritual bankruptcy. It would not have mattered who had succeeded Pekah - Hoshea or any other - for the whole evil brood were abandoned to sin and ripe for judgment. This is likewise why it is vain to pin hopes on a change of party in government - it is not a new partyline, but a new moral tone that we desperately need. And, alas, there is little sign of such a change. It may be that the writing is on the wall for the western world!

59) 15:32-39

In the meantime, a new king had succeeded Uzziah in Judah - his son Jotham, who had acted as regent in his father's place after he had been stricken with leprosy. He at least had been able to interpret the signs spiritually, for he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord during his sixteen-year reign. This undoubtedly gave stability to the southern kingdom at a time when her northern neighbour was tottering to her doom. Not that all was well in Judah, by any means, for the high places - long an abomination to the Lord - still remained to affront His holy heart. The fact is, these evil ways were too deeply entrenched in the people for one man's determined efforts completely to uproot in the space of sixteen years. But he did put a brake upon the downward trend in the nation, if he did not succeed in reversing it, and it is on this that Jotham's work will be assessed when the accounts are rendered. If he had been followed by another likeminded king, who shall say what might or might not have been accomplished, but alas, his son Ahaz did untold harm by his evil ways and set Judah back further than ever....What a record of confusion and disorder!

60) 16:1-6

Ahaz had less excuse for his evil ways than even the kings of Israel in the north, for he at least had the example and memory of a good and faithful father and a grandfather who, although he came to grief through pride and arrogance, was nevertheless in his prime a man of God. One can almost sense the feeling of outrage and righteous indignation in the historian's mind as he underlines the extent of the king's iniquity with the word "yea" in 3. It was little wonder that Rezin, king of Syria and Pekah of Israel came up against him. He invited the anger of the Lord by his wilful transgression. We are reminded of the words of the Shorter Catechism, "Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others." To sin as he did, with such a background, and when he might have acted so differently, was asking for swift retribution, and it came. David once prayed, "Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins", and he surely did so because he knew that they could call down upon him the speedy chastisement of God. Ahaz had everything in his favour - he could not even plead that family circumstances were against him. This is the real danger point - not that we should fall helplessly into sin but that when we might have, and could have, chosen differently, we deliberately chose evil. There is a considerable difference in the mind of God between a helpless victim of sin and a wilful rebel determined to do evil.

61) 16:7-20

The parallel account of Ahaz's appeal to Assyria in 2 Chronicles 28:16 ff. will help towards a better understanding of what really happened in Judah at this time. Ahaz was deeply harassed by his enemies, but instead of crying to the Lord, he turned to Assyria for help. His unfaithfulness was all the more blameworthy in that the prophet Isaiah gave him much encouragement to believe that the Lord would help him (see Isaiah 7:4 ff.). He paid dearly for this failure to believe in the promises of God for the price of Assyrian help was, in effect, that Judah became a vassal state and remained more or less so until the time of Josiah. The Chronicles account remarks very pointedly that Tiglath-Pileser was a source of distress rather than strengthening to him. Not only so - and here we see once more that one of the penalties of sinning is that we are obliged to continue sinning - Ahaz fell more and more deeply into sin and incurred the severe displeasure of the Lord. The story of the altar which he introduced into Jerusalem is explained in 2 Chronicles in terms which expose the extent of his spiritual declension. "Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice unto them" he argued (2 Chronicles 28:23), and exchanged the altar of the Lord for the heathenish atrocities. He wanted a god who would help him in any event, whatever his misdeeds were. This is the kind of god that modern man would like, and one is startled by the resemblance between Ahaz's attitude and the common superstitions of our own time. But the true and living God is not a flunkey, to be called upon and ordered about when men need to be extricated from the scrapes their sins have brought them into. He is the LORD, the Righteous One, Who regards sin as an insult against His majesty, and Who will raise up enemies against His covenant people when they rebel against Him. It was not the gods of the Syrians, but the only true and living God Who helped them against Ahaz. But he was too blind to see this, as modern man is also too blind to see this before his very eyes today in the vast and sinister power of Communism. The word of the Chronicler is devastating in its simple verdict! "They (the false gods) were the ruin of him." Exactly.

62) 17:1-6

The long-threatened doom came at last, in the reign of Hoshea, and all that the prophets had so grimly and undeviatingly warned overtook the hapless northern kingdom. The Assyrians had come up against them, and subjugated them by superior force of arms and laid them under tribute. During this time of subjection, which must have been most irksome to Israel, Hoshea intrigued against the Assyrians by trying to obtain help from So, king of Egypt, in order to throw off their yoke. This so angered Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, that Hoshea was imprisoned unceremoniously, and the capital Samaria was besieged for three years and finally conquered. Large numbers of the people were deported to Assyria (6). We should try to imagine what this bald statement really means. It was not as though a thousand or so captives had been taken in battle, it was the abduction of an enormous number, including all in any position of leadership or responsibility, a national calamity of unprecedented magnitude. The large-scale transportation behind the Iron Curtain in our own time affords some illustration of what Israel experienced. Even today, hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons are huddled together in camps, with no hope, and no prospects, but they are at least receiving some kind of help from the harassed nations among whom they now live. But Israel was reduced to serfdom as great as ever they had known at the beginning of their history in Egypt. How truly the words of the prophets had come to pass (see Hosea 8:13)! What Israel had doubtlessly assured herself as unthinkable and impossible had happened. Israel was no more!

63) 17:7-23

This passage gives a brief survey and summary of the reasons for the terrible catastrophe that overtook Israel. It makes a solemn reading, recording as it does, the indictment of God against His people. The verdict becomes even more graphic if we link together the significant statements "The children of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the Lord their God.... (9)...Yet the Lord testified against Israel....saying. Turn ye.... (13). ...Notwithstanding they would not hear and rejected His statutes (14,15). .. Therefore, the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of His sight (18)". We should not fail to notice the phrase in 13, "by all the prophets, and by all the seers". All through this period of Israel's history, God had been speaking to them, and particularly latterly, when the tempo of evil had increased so much. It was not as if the warning had been either fitful or ambiguous; it had sounded forth like a trumpet from the lips of Amos, Hosea and Micah in especial, and we have only to turn to the pages of these prophecies to see that what finally happened to them was exactly what the prophets warned would overtake them if they continued in their sin. This the sacred historian is also careful to point out in 23 "The Lord removed Israel as He had said by all His servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away." It does not require much imagination to see in this a reflection of the continued impenitence of the so-called Christian West. It is probably true to say that the message of Old Testament history is more relevant than anything else in the Scriptures as a commentary on contemporary world affairs. Be this as it may, it is certain that there is as little realisation now as there was in Israel then that disaster could really come. Sin brings blindness, as well as fateful consequences in its train.

64) 17:24-41

The Assyrian emperor's next task was to re-people the land with foreign settlers. This must have added immeasurably to the bitter distress and humiliation of the Israelites in their exile, to realise that the land of the covenant, given them of old by the Lord, was now the possession of aliens. The Lord is nothing if not thorough. But His eye was still upon it, and it did not go well with those settlers when they introduced their heathen religions into it. The plague of lions that afflicted them reminds us of similar plagues that came upon the Philistines in the days of Samuel when the Ark was removed from Israel.

The interesting and significant thing in this passage, however, is the sending back of one of the Israelite priests to instruct the new settlers concerning "the manner of the God of the land" (27). Here was a missionary opportunity if ever there was one! It is ironic to think that it took the king of Assyria to force Israel into her true calling as a light to the Gentiles. But alas, the spiritual rot had corrupted her priesthood to such an extent that no clear testimony to the living God was possible, and, notwithstanding the presence of a priest of the true God among them, every group made gods of its own, and included the God of Israel as one among many deities. This curious mixture, like modern freemasonry, bundling together the true and living God with all sorts of eastern idolatries, bears no relation, it scarcely needs to be said, to the true Biblical faith which asserts categorically that there is only one Name (not many) by which we may be saved. The astonishing paradox in 41 - "feared the Lord and served their graven images" should be sufficient to convince any man that it is impossible to mix the Christian Gospel with anything else whatsoever, least of all with the pagan deities from Egypt and Babylon that flourish in freemasonry.

65) **18:1-8**

The reign of Hezekiah was one of the best in all the history of the southern kingdom, and the sacred records, both here and in 2 Chronicles 29-31, attach great significance to it, as is clear from the amount of space they allocate to it. The account of the revival given in 2 Chronicles makes very moving reading, and reference to it will provide a valuable commentary on these verses before us. The message again is clear: given a king who was prepared for the Lord's will, the whole nation could experience a marvellous recovery. The statements made about Hezekiah in 5-7 give us a spiritual challenge containing all the essentials of New Testament experience - "He trusted.. , he clave...he departed not...but kept....And the Lord was with him; and he prospered and he rebelled against the king of Assyria and served him not." Nothing could point more clearly the road to blessing and victory in the Christian life. It is not without significance to note that before he took issue against the outward enemies, he first set his own house in order, dealing with the enemies within. How wise he was. Wrong loyalties and allegiances (4) had to be set right within before he could expect the blessing of God upon his efforts to throw off the Assyrian yoke and deal with the Philistines on his borders. This is the time-honoured Scriptural order, and no good can come of neglecting or reversing it. It is possible to be too optimistic in thinking that an effective outreach can be achieved on the strength of a casual inner adjustment. But God says, "Not so." There is too much needing radical adjustment in the Church today to allow us to hope for a real advance in our witness. We need to learn to begin where the Scriptures indicate we must. It is in the inner life of the Church that the first victories wait to be won. Read the hymn, RCH 531!

66) 18:9-12

This brief summary of the captivity of the northern kingdom is recorded at this point to stand, it would seem, in contrast with the revival in the south under Hezekiah, and to complete the picture of the two alternatives that face men and nations. To trust, as Judah did under Hezekiah, is to know the blessing and presence of the Lord (7); to disobey Him, as Israel did (12) is to bring disaster. One is forcibly reminded of Moses' words to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 30:19 (did our historian have these words in mind when he penned 12)): "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, " The warnings of Moses were only too clear, but Israel neglected to heed them, and paid the price of her folly. We have the words of a greater than Moses, even Christ, and we may take this solemn record in Kings as a picture-book illustration, so to speak, of His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13- 29) where He presents to His hearers the two ways, and the two foundations, and lays the responsibility of choice fairly and squarely upon them. This is the grim earnestness of life, from which there can be no escape. It is we who must choose, for weal or woe. The responsibility is ours, and ours alone. In this sense, to use Paul's words in Galatians 6:5, "Every man shall bear his own burden."

67) 18:13-37

These verses recount the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib. They are full of interest and have much to teach us. Hezekiah was wrong, of course - was it lack of foresight or lack of faith that caused him to do so? - in engaging in a policy of appeasement (14). It was obvious that Sennacherib would place increasing demands upon him later. Remember Hitler in 1938 and 1939! There is a lesson here for the Christian life: Resist beginnings, for the more we yield to Satan, the more he will demand until we are completely in his clutches. Fortunately, Rabshakeh, Sennacherib's lieutenant, overstepped himself (this is one of Satan's weaknesses, did we but know it): as with abominable insolence and arrogance he poured scorn on the king's faith in God (19), and appealed directly to the people not to be misled by the king's confidence in the Lord, reminding them that other nations whom Assyria had captured had also trusted in their gods, and to no avail. This was a tremendous broadside to launch against the people; it was also very subtle, for it went to the most vulnerable spot of all - the nation's new-found faith, which might well have wavered under such pressure. But, paradoxically, this is also the sort of challenge that makes faith assert itself. Perhaps it is the very extremity of the situation that enables faith to rest utterly upon God (where else can we turn, and what else can we do in utter need?) At all events, Rabshakeh's overtures were met with the silence of faith (36) - we must never argue or bandy words with the devil - that is fatal - and this must have infuriated him beyond words. How right they were. What to do in such a situation is to lay the matter before the Lord. It was to this that Rabshakeh's arrogance drove them, and thus he engineered his own undoing.

68) 19:1-7

It is interesting and instructive to see the process by which Hezekiah was brought from his lack of trust to a complete dependence upon God. God, it seems, allowed the matter of Rabshakeh to go to its furthest extremity, in order to bring the king to an end of all fleshly reliance. Only thus is He free to work on our behalf. We are reminded of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, where he speaks of being "pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life; but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver ..". The king was not as yet come fully to this point - still further pressures from Rabshakeh's threats were to come before the longed-for deliverance was wrought, as the next reading will show. But, in the meanwhile - and this is a great word of encouragement for the spiritual life - there was the reassurance from the Lord through the prophet Isaiah in 6 that all would yet be well. This promise was like a momentary gleam of light in the darkness, and presently the crisis was as acute as ever - and yet it could never be quite the same again, for God had spoken, and to the trusting soul this is sufficient to bring peace. We think once more of Paul's experience in Acts 27:23-25 when, in a similar crisis he received the assurance of God, and responded in the glorious affirmation of faith "Be of good cheer: for I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me." It is worth a very great deal of pressure to be brought to such a place of calm confidence and trust.

69) 19:8-19

This was the final act in the great drama and it brought the Lord's deliverance to Judah. The insolence of Rabshakeh's earlier approach (18:27) was repeated - how true it is in the spiritual battle that the mere repetition of attacks, without any intensification of them, exhausts and desolates the soul! - and Hezekiah brings his urgent cry to the temple and spreads it before the Lord. His prayer is a noble utterance and has much to teach us. Pressing though his need was, he did not rush into God's holy presence with his requests in an importunate self-preoccupation. He worshipped. He took time to dwell upon the greatness and majesty of God before making his requests. This is both good psychology and spiritual wisdom, and is characteristic of Biblical prayers in general, as witness the apostolic pattern in Acts 4:24 ff. To remind oneself of what God is, and Who He is, is to put everything, crisis included, in its proper perspective, and to begin to see the possibility of an answer. Hezekiah brought to the forefront of his mind the fact that the God to Whom he was praying was the God of all the kingdoms of the earth, Assyria included, and that fact alone must have begotten in his heart a confidence that his God was well able to turn his trial into triumph. This is one of the hallmarks of true prayer, and it should never be absent from ours. It is possible to allow our cares so to overwhelm us in kneeling at the throne of grace that we never catch sight of God. When this happens, we are not praying; we are moping, and this dishonours God.

70) 19:20-28

Hezekiah's prayer is given immediate answer through Isaiah, who pronounces the word of the Lord concerning the situation. "I have heard", said the Lord - not merely the king's prayer, but everything else also, and had discerned the true issues that were involved. The seriousness of Sennacherib's invasion was not merely that it had been aimed against God's people but against God Himself (22). "I know... thy rage against Me ..." (27) - that was the real issue, and because of this, the Lord humbled him and set him at naught. That this carries an up-to-date application should surely be clear. Modern dictators whose arrogant and blasphemous pretensions insult the majesty of God will likewise be brought to book and humbled to the dust in His good time. This does not necessarily mean that all will be well for those who meantime fear them. It so happened that Hezekiah shared in the victory of God on this occasion because his heart was towards Him, but had he been an evil king like his predecessors or his neighbours in the north, God would certainly have allowed Sennacherib to devastate Judah first before dealing with the tyrant. What we must never forget is that these great powers were instruments in God's hands of His sovereign will and used of Him to punish His sinning people, but used in such a way as in no wise to implicate Him in their arrogance or to excuse them for their barbarous dealings with His people. By this token, we may learn that God will not hesitate to use Communism to chastise the impenitent Western nations, and if need be, bring them into subjection, while reserving the final demolition of its godless might until such time as He wills.

71) 19:29-34

The Lord now addresses Hezekiah and assures him of ultimate deliverance. The point of 29 is that normal conditions would not return for a year or so, but that sowing and reaping would become possible again in due time. It is, in fact, a promise concerning the rehabilitation of the land after the ravages of war and siege. One has only to think of the large-scale rehabilitation that has had to take place on the Continent of Europe in our time to understand what this word must have meant for Judah. Notice the striking phrases in 30 - "take root downward and bear fruit upward". They enshrine a particularly important spiritual truth. It is only as our spiritual roots go deep down into the soil of grace, drawing constant and enriching nurture for the inner life, that there can be any real growth and any abiding fruit in us. The trouble so often with us, however, is that we expect to see the fruit before the roots ever have time to push down, and this is against the laws of nature and spirit alike. The spiritual life that does not receive any real nourishment is doomed to fruitlessness. What are we to say, then, of Christians who have no desire for the systematic teaching of the Scriptures, which alone can build them up in grace? What service can they render, and what fruit can they bring forth, for God?

72) 19:35-37

And now the outworking of God's answer to Hezekiah's prayer in the discomfiture of Sennacherib and his host. The angel of the Lord moved among them, and mysteriously and miraculously smote them, breaking the invasion effectually. Moreover, Sennacherib, on returning to Assyria, was assassinated by his own sons (see 7) according to the word of the Lord. There is no greater instance of the rewards of faith in the whole of the Old Testament than this, and it is all the more wonderful to read it here, after so much tragic declension for so many generations. How good God is, and how eager to respond to any signs of real faith and desire for His will! Nor should we fail to see here an instance of the strict justice of God at work. Sennacherib had arrogantly (through his servant Rabshakeh) challenged the living God in his attack on Judah, and now he is ignominiously and violently destroyed by his own sons. God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. Sennacherib wielded the sword, and he perished by the sword. And as long as God is on the throne of the universe, this will always be the lot of insolent and arrogant dictators who go on tyrannising the people of God.

73) 20:1-11

There is a good deal for us to learn, if we will, from the story of Hezekiah's sickness and miraculous recovery. Advocates of faith healing have taken it as an evidence of the miraculous power that can be released by the prayer of faith, if it is earnest and vital enough, and it is certainly true that God can, and does, on occasion miraculously heal the sick and dying. The danger, however lies in the too easy assumption that is often made that it is necessarily always God's will that the sick should be healed, and that when they are not, it is a failure of faith on our part. But it is not ALWAYS God's will that sickness should be healed, as the New Testament makes clear - Paul's thorn was not removed, Timothy's stomach was not cured, and Trophimus was left behind on one critical occasion, too sick to travel on missionary service. These instances alone should make us wary of making extravagant claims about faith-healing. It is not always realised that the logical outcome of demanding that God should remove all sickness is that we should also demand that He remove all kinds of unpleasantness from our lives. In other words, we are asking Him to make our lives a bed of roses. The fact is, many of God's choicest saints are where they are today because God did not heal them. Their sickness was not removed; it was converted, and capitalised. And that is the greater thing. This has very important implications, as tomorrow's comment will show.

74) 20:1-11

The basic fallacy underlying the distorted idea some have about healing is to assume that ultimate happiness or well-being lies in not being sick, and not dying, or that mere length of days by itself is necessarily good. We have only, however, to read on a little in the story of Hezekiah to realise that the extra fifteen years Hezekiah was granted through prayer were scarcely a credit to him. Indeed, they clouded and besmirched an honourable record, and brought his reign to a disreputable close. If the hymn writer is right when he says, "He liveth long that liveth well" then it had been better for Hezekiah never to have uttered such a prayer as this, but to have set his house in order and go to meet His Maker. There is a solemn verse in the Psalms, (106:15) "He gave them their request; but sent leanness to their soul" and this is as true of requests for healing as of anything else. It is possible to "persuade" God to answer prayer to our hurt, and to interfere with purposes which have been sovereignly ordained for our good. This does not, of course, mean that we are not to ask for healing or for any other blessing, if it is in His will to bestow it, but it should teach us to seek discernment as to His will before bringing our insistent entreaties to His throne.

75) **12-21**

The comments in 2 Chronicles 32:24-26, 31, should be read along with this passage in order to understand its full implications. There are two points. In the first place, Isaiah had always consistently denounced foreign alliances as indicating deviation from absolute trust in the Lord, and one can sense the urgent alarm with which he strode into the king's presence on this occasion. The sorry history of former years should have been sufficient to convince Hezekiah of the foolhardiness of such alliances. It is the king's failure to see the outcome of his action that stands out, reminding us of the blinding power of sin. Isaiah on the other hand, saw far ahead, beyond the Assyrian domination of the world scene to their conquest by Babylon, whose emissaries, even at this early stage, had come to size up the situation in Judah. This ability to see further ahead than others is one we would do well to recognize and heed when we meet it. In the second place, we note the reason given in 2 Chronicles for Hezekiah's lapse. His heart was lifted up in pride and vanity. The Babylonian embassy was an occasion by which God tried him, to make proof of the inward tendencies of his heart. And it is an unlovely picture that we see as the king's self confidence and vanity were played upon by the skilful representatives of Judah's future conquerors and oppressors. We may see in this an illustration of Satan's wily overtures to the souls he plans to seduce. He knows where to attack us, and if we deviate by a hairsbreadth from our only position of security, and indulge any measure of self-confidence, we will prove no match for his wiles. As Hezekiah found to his cost!

76) 21:1-9

The solemn words in 9 almost make us gasp with horror to think that the nation should have sunk so low after the healthy, God-fearing character of the previous twenty-nine years. To sink lower than the heathen nations who had been cast out of Canaan in the early days because of the enormity of their sins was to descend to almost unspeakable depths of shame and ignominy, and this is a fearful indictment upon Manasseh's abandoned and profligate life. Notice particularly, that he was born during those fateful fifteen years which Hezekiah besought the Lord for - he was twelve when his father died. Had Hezekiah known all that was to come, would he have asked those years of the Lord? Manasseh seems to have gone out of his way to affront the Lord, in a frenzied orgy of evil, and we can only assume that he sold himself completely to the devil. There is certainly much of the demonic recorded in these verses, and all the indications are that he sinned beyond the point of no return and carried Judah with him, as tomorrow's reading will show. There is just so much that even the unaccountable patience and forbearance of God will stand.

77) 21:10-15

Manasseh's reign seems certainly to have been a crisis-point in God's dealings with Judah, and the long-threatened judgment became a certainty which not even the considerable revival under the good king Josiah, could do more than delay for a few brief years. Indeed, as we shall see later, Josiah's reign was simply the lull before the storm finally broke in all its fury. We note here particularly that the sin of the king brought judgment on the nation as a whole. Not that the nation was dissociated from his wicked ways - far from it - but it is clear that it was he who set the example in evil and dragged a whole people with him. It is true in general, but particularly true of those in positions of responsibility and authority, that no-one lives unto himself. One man, if he has sufficient power - as the kings of Judah and Israel had - can decide a whole nation's destiny. This is why the New Testament lays such stress on praying for those in authority over us (1 Timothy 2:2), for it is they, in this sense, who shape national life for weal or woe. This is a ground both for deep concern and for hope concern that national life should be so markedly and inevitably influenced by royalty and government, but hope in that both may be even more deeply conditioned by the prayers of God's people. Pray!

78) 21:16-26

This account of the last years of Manasseh needs to be supplemented by additional material from 2 Chronicles 33:10-20, where we find the astonishing information that he was humbled before God and brought to repentance. This is very striking, not because we could ever doubt God's power to turn such an evil man as he was, but as an evidence of the tremendous influence that a godly parent's testimony can have on even such a wicked life as he had lived. We cannot doubt that Hezekiah's prayers had much to do with this late change of heart in his son, and that they followed him long after the old king's death and finally prevailed with God on his behalf. And so Manasseh died in peace. But this does not mean that God's judgments were to be waived. There is a point at which repentance comes too late - not with reference to personal forgiveness, but as regards the terrible consequences of sin. Psalm 99:8 crystallises this distinction perfectly, 'Thou art a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' No repentance on Manasseh's part could ever have shaken the determination of God to visit Judah for her sins and, be it also noted, no repentance at the end of a long life of evil was to suffice to influence the son who followed him on the throne. Amon followed the mainstream, not the final episode, of his father's career. From which we may learn that it is the long-term influence of parents' lives that prevails in the training of children in godliness. Some parents are too late in getting right with God to have any lasting influence on their families.

79) 22:1-7

Josiah was the last good king before the final calamity of the Captivity overtook Judah. One might tend to think that the occurrence of good and bad kings was apparently haphazard and fortuitous, but this is not so. A careful examination of the chart of prophetic activity will show that Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and particularly Jeremiah, exercised their ministries in Josiah's time, and without doubt conditioned his reign. Scarcely any other period had such a concentration of attention from God as this, and it may signify the urgent and tender concern He felt for His people as He saw the inevitable doom approaching. The fact that Josiah's reformation was the most thorough and noteworthy of all indicates that their ministry was not in vain. It is this that we must understand to be behind the simple but eloquent phrase in 7 - "they dealt faithfully." Nothing could commend more effectively the moral power and integrity of the prophets' word than this, that at the very heart of the nation's life, even after the ravages of so many evil years under Amon and Manasseh, there should be men who were utterly trustworthy and who scorned to stoop to base and unworthy things. Ah, we may sometimes think that a ministry is making little headway as to spectacular results, but if it is creating in the midst of national declension, the possibility of standards of probity and integrity in character and conduct, who shall estimate its worth and significance in the purposes of God? That this - in 7 - should be its fruit is the ultimate vindication of any work for Him.

80) 22:8-14

These verses are amongst the most dramatic in all the Old Testament. They record the discovery and the recovery of the book of the law by the king and people, and the immediate and instantaneous effect this had upon the life of the nation. It was as if the king had taken hold of a living thing - as indeed he had - which galvanised his whole experience and brought a spirit of anxious enquiry upon him that had no relief until he received the assurance of the Lord through His servant concerning himself and his people. We shall hear more of this in the next reading, but, in the meantime, we should recognize in these tremendous happenings the pattern of God's working in spiritual revival. What was the Reformation but a recovery of the Word of God for individual and national life? And just as it caused a moral and spiritual upheaval in Josiah's life, so we should realise that whenever the Word comes with power to men and communities its first effect is one of profound disturbance and unsettlement. How could it be otherwise when it challenges the whole fabric of our lives and calls in question all the thoughts and intents of our hearts? It is not sufficiently realised that a real ministry of the Word is not possible without this probing and hurting at depth. The fact that people react - often violently and in a variety of ways - is a sign that it is effective, that it has "taken". We might as well try to stop the incoming tide on the sea-shore as expect to hear the Word of the Lord without being revolutionised, and those who prefer a nice, quiet life had better have no more dealings with it!

81) 22:15-20

Huldah the prophetess's reply to Josiah's enquiry reiterated the previous pronouncements of the Lord as to the judgment that was about to come on the nation because of Manasseh's sins (21:11,12), but an assurance was given him that, because of his whole-hearted penitence and determination to obey the Lord, the judgment would not come in his time. This is very significant. It means that the over-all purpose of God had become fixed and unalterable, even though there might be temporary delays in its execution through the repentance and renewal of the people. If there is a correspondence between the decline and fall of Judah in olden days and the moral and spiritual deterioration of western civilisation - and are we not being forced to see this as we read the prophets and our newspapers day by day? - then it may be that it is in the context of imminent domination and oppression by the communist bloc that our thinking and praying about revival should be done. It is not too late for revival to come - although there is little, little sign in the land that we are anywhere near it - but it may well be too late for revival to turn back the frightful possibilities that now face us for our sins. That is the real point of this passage for us.

Spiritual awakening in the western world could make a difference to the international situation, just as in Wesley's time it saved England from revolution, but the question is, would God allow it to, even if He gave it? May we not have gone too far in our sins and disobedience for even revival to stay the nemesis of judgment?

82) 23:1-3

One almost wishes for a detailed account of this tremendous scene in which Josiah gathered together all the people of Jerusalem to hear the words of the law which had been found in the Temple. But imagination can supply what is lacking in words, and we can surely visualise the solemn hush that came upon them and the sense of the Divine Presence that pervaded the scene as the word of the Lord was read to them. It was clearly a work of the Spirit of a kind that had not been known for many generations among God's people, and it is not surprising that it led to such a whole-hearted consecration by king and people alike (3). What is important here for us is to see the relationship between the reading of the Word and the consecration of the people. Historically, it has always been the recovery of the Word that has led to the revitalising and renewal of the Church's life, and we can go so far as to say that the deeper and fuller the apprehension of the Word is, the truer and more wholehearted will the consecration be. This is why any attempt to revive the life of the Church that does not base itself solidly upon the Word but on some form of organisational activity, is doomed to failure from the start. The real criterion of a Church's health is not the multiplicity of its organisations but the extent of its interest and the amount of time that it spends on the Word of God.

83) 23:4-20

We see in these verses how the covenant made by Josiah and the people was implemented by a widespread and sweeping movement of reformation. All that was associated with Baal-worship was done away with, the idolatrous priests were put down, the idols and groves associated with the many strange gods adopted by the people were destroyed, and the high places at Bethel and elsewhere were burned down. It is clear that the whole country was revolutionised and turned upside down. This is some indication of just how much can be accomplished by the power of the Word of God when it is let loose in a nation. But not without Josiah finding opposition to his crusade. It is not possible for such a work to proceed without encountering the bitterest antagonism and hatred, for sin becomes deeply entrenched in the life of a people, and the vested interests of evil and unscrupulous men are very dangerous targets to aim at in any programme of reform. One recalls the furious reaction of the Philippian traders when they saw that the hope of their gains was gone (Acts 16:1) after Paul had cast the demon out of their hapless slave-girl. It could not have been so very different in Josiah's experience, nor would it be in our own day, if the Spirit of God came in power. The real opposition to revival would come from the vested interests in the drink trade and the huge gambling concerns which together derive enormous sums of money annually from a conscienceless populace. Ah, revival is a costly business!

84) 23:21-23

The keeping of the Passover was the culmination of the great movement of reform. (See 2 Chronicles 35:1-19 for a full account of it), and we need not doubt but that there was a great symbolic significance in Josiah's ordering it. For the Passover commemorated the beginning of God's dealings with Israel as a nation, and in celebrating it the nation was now being recalled to its origins and assured of a new beginning in grace, with the fresh possibility of experiencing the power that had brought them out of the land of Egypt and the house of bondage. It is not difficult to see in this the pattern of death and resurrection that is imbedded in the heart of spiritual experience. When we fall, when we drift from the things of God, we must follow Josiah's example, and allow ourselves to be challenged and probed by the Word, confess our sins, renew the covenant, put away our idols, tearing them from the throne of our hearts, and take a fresh stand under the shadow of the Cross. In other words, we must die all over again, in order to rise again to newness of life. Josiah's experience in fact illustrates the application of the principle of the Cross to individual and national life, and indicates both its costliness and the rewards and blessings it brings when it is applied wholeheartedly and unreservedly.

85) 23-24-27

The importance of these verses lies in the corroboration they give to the prophetess Huldah's pronouncement in 22:15-20. Notwithstanding the thoroughness of Josiah's reformation and the widespread changes he effected, the die had been cast so far as Judah was concerned, and the sins of Manasseh it is reiterated (26) had brought the nation to the point of no return. It has sometimes been said that the revival under Josiah did not go deep enough to stop the moral and spiritual rot in the land, and this may well be true, but this passage seems to stress the fact that no kind of renewal, however radical and extensive, would have sufficed to turn away the wrath of God after Manasseh's provocations had finally kindled it. We have to go to the New Testament to find words to describe this fearful situation. The Apostle Paul says, in Romans 1:18:32 - "God gave them up" and this is the plain truth that is expressed in this passage. "The Lord said, "I will remove Judah also out of My sight... and will cast off this city Jerusalem which I have chosen!" Ah, let us learn how desperately, seriously God takes sin, and how impossible it is for Him to pass over it, even in His chosen people - nay, especially in His chosen people!

86) 23:28-30

The account of Josiah's death is given in more detail in 2 Chronicles 35:20-27. What a tragic end to a fine and noble reign! It seems clear, from the fuller narrative, that Josiah was foolhardy and rash in going out against Necho, king of Egypt, and that the latter's words to him (2 Chronicles 35:21) were far truer than the king could have realised - "Forbear thee from meddling with God....that He destroy thee not." This was surely a device of the devil, and is written for our learning. Josiah had succeeded in effecting the most widespread spiritual renewal that had been known for hundreds of years, and in his very success had brought himself to the point where he became the target of the powers of darkness. Success in spiritual work is always dangerous in that it invites the particular attentions of the devil. Woe betide any man who becomes unwary and careless in such an hour! He will prove no match for his wily foe. We may remember with profit here, Paul's words in Ephesians 6:13 about withstanding in the evil day, "and having done all to stand." If only Josiah had enquired of the Lord whether he should go out or not, as David used to do (see 2 Samuel 5:19, 23). How easy it is, especially in the flush of triumph and victory, to become over-confident and to mistake momentary impulses for the leading and directive of the Spirit of God. Beware of sudden impulses, and cultivate the quiet spirit that learns to recognise the still small voice of God as He speaks. Many are the disastrous consequences that would be avoided if we did so.

87) 23:31-37

It did not take long, as we see from these verses, for the work of reformation to be undone. After Josiah's untimely death, first one son, and then another, succeeded him, and straightway turned back to the evil ways that had brought ruin and disaster on the nation. Jeremiah the prophet, whose ministry was exercised during these last few reigns in Judah, must have deeply lamented the passing of Josiah, and seen in it the removal of the last stay against Divine judgment. Almost any page of his prophecy suffices to reflect the sense of swiftly oncoming disaster. It is important that we should be able to clothe this skeleton-like outline of the history of the time in 2 Kings with the substantial material he provides in his writings. The significant thing that this shows is that at no time in the long downward trend were the people without the word of the Lord, and that it was in the face of His solemn warnings through the prophets, and in spite of them, that they went to their doom. The warnings were given, but unheeded, and the responsibility was entirely their own.

88) 24:1-7

We are moving quickly now into the final act of the tragedy of Judah, and the threat of Necho of Egypt gives way before the still greater terror of Babylon. One is able to see the inexorable logic of events unfolding here, Babylon - and the others mentioned in 2 - was drawn towards Judah because of the threat of Egypt from the south, and we can now see the fateful consequences of Josiah's rashness in going out against Necho. If only he had let the Egyptians pass unmolested, Judah would never have attracted the attention of Nebuchadnezzar! We see here something of the terrible entail of sin, and something of its tragic complications and ramifications in the inevitable involvements it brings in its train. But our historian goes further. He traces it all back to Manasseh's sins, "which the Lord would not pardon" (4), and we are again brought face to face with this grim and terrifying reality of a point of no-return which was reached in the enormities of that evil king's reign. And so, the troubling and oppression all around them were not only permitted but commanded by the Lord (3) as an expression of His righteous indignation against the sin of His people. Ah, God is not mocked; He means what He says. His warnings are not idle tales!

89) **24:8-20**

The reign of Jehoiachin marks the beginning of the captivity of Judah. This took place in two stages one in 597 BC and the other eleven years later, in 586 BC, in the reign of Zedekiah. If we bear in mind that Jehoiachin reigned only three months it will become clear that he could have offered little or no resistance to Nebuchadnezzar when he laid siege to Jerusalem, but took the line of least resistance, hoping perhaps for some clemency from his conqueror. The closing verses of 2 Kings 25 tell us how, under a successor of Nebuchadnezzar's, he fared very well and it may be that he astutely weighed up the possibilities of preferential treatment and decided to capitulate without a fight. At all events, the cream of Jerusalem's nobility was deported along with him to Babylon, and his uncle Mattaniah, another son of Josiah, was enthroned by Nebuchadnezzar in his place. Mattaniah, re-named Zedekiah, was made of sterner stuff than his nephew, as we shall see, and rebelled against Babylon's yoke at the first opportunity, but to no avail, for judgment was appointed for the abandoned kingdom, and his revolt simply hastened the rod of Divine anger (20). Neither Jehoiachin's pusillanimity nor Zedekiah's stubborn resistance could serve to change the relentless course of events since neither would turn to God. Is there a lesson here for our day? Some say, "Ban the Bomb", others say, "On with the tests", but will either expedient have much effect when the crying - and neglected - need is to turn to God?

90) 25:1-21

Little comment is needed on this final chapter of Judah's tragic story. Its meaning is only too clear. After nine years, in which Zedekiah had been rebelling against the Babylonian yoke, Nebuchadnezzar came up again against Jerusalem, besieged it for two years, and finally broke down all resistance. The defeat was utter and complete, and Nebuchadnezzar's vengeance was unspeakably cruel and merciless as Zedekiah's sons were slain before his eyes, and, having witnessed that terrible spectacle, his eyes were put out. The Temple was destroyed, the city was razed to the ground, and its inhabitants, with the exception of some of the poor of the land left behind as vine-dressers and husbandmen, were deported to Babylon, along with the priceless treasures of the Temple that had been the pride and glory of Solomon's reign. It was a total, incomparable disaster, and the sense of devastation that it brought is echoed in the opening verses of Lamentations which should be read in this connection. What the prophets had warningly foretold with thunder and with tears, became at the last a grim reality. God visited His people, as He had said, and the daughter of Zion was humbled to the dust of Babylon.

91) 25:22-30

One marvels at the persistent godlessness, intrigue, and violence that continued even after the devastation wrought by Nebuchadnezzar. The murder of Gedaliah, Babylon's appointed governor, with the events surrounding it, and their general significance, may be studied in greater detail in Jeremiah 40-43, where it is made clear that the hearts of the people that remained in the land were still set on resisting the Divine will (Jeremiah, 42:20, 21). The flight to Egypt (26), in which Jeremiah was involved as a prisoner, invited a further expression of Nebuchadnezzar's wrath (Jeremiah, 43:10 ff.), which must have made them finally realise how dangerous it was to refuse the word of the Lord through his prophet. Some people learn only when it is too late, and some never learn at all.

The last few verses of the book (27-30) seem to have been recorded, as one commentator puts it, "for the hope it gave of a favourable end to the exile", and reminds us that even in judgment the eyes of God were upon His people, watching and waiting, strong enough, and silent enough, to resist pity for them or succour, until the fiery crucible of grief and desolation had burned their sin out of them and subdued their idolatrous hearts to Himself.