

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of Chronicles II

1:1

In the introductory Notes to 1 Chronicles it was pointed out that the Chronicler divides his double book into four sections: 1 Chron 1-9 contain genealogical material, and 1 Chron 10-29 record the story of David. 2 Chronicles is similarly divided into two parts, 1-9 dealing with the reign of Solomon, and 10-36 with Solomon's successors down to the captivity of Judah in 586 BC. This represents a major sweep of the divine history and, as we would understand - and have seen repeatedly - the writer is very selective in his choice of material, omitting many things that we find recorded in 1 and 2 Kings, and sometimes adding things not recorded in Kings; but always with a particular purpose in view.

The opening chapter here has, it is clear, three sections: 1-6 speak of the offerings Solomon made at Gibeon; 7-12 record the vision God gave Solomon, and his asking for divine wisdom; while 13-17 give us a synopsis, a thumb-nail sketch, of the pattern of Solomon's reign. It will be useful to look at each section in turn, and then look at the chapter as a whole, to seek to discern what its message is for us today. The opening verse, which speaks of Solomon being strengthened in his kingdom, is meant to denote his firm establishment in his rule. He firmly grasped the reins of power and showed himself a strong ruler - such is the force of the phrase. It will be seen that the verse is there to be regarded as a summary of his reign, and a heading to the record of his glory and magnificence.

2) 1:1-6

In our study of 1 Chron 28 and 29 we saw something of the sense of high destiny that both David and Solomon had in Solomon's coming to the throne of Israel, and that the kingdom was God's, and that his kingship was a stewardship committed to him by God. Without doubt, the Chronicler has this thought, at the heart of his record here: the sacrifices at Gibeon were of a public nature, and to be regarded as consecrating his reign in the sight of God. All the same, a question does arise in that the parallel passage in 1 Kings 3: 3,4 almost seems to suggest that it was hardly wise for Solomon to have sacrificed at Gibeon, a 'high place', Making sacrifice in the high places was one of the sins that later prophets thundered against, and this seems to be what the significance of the word 'only' in 1 Kings 3:3, giving the sense of 'sadly enough', as if to say, "Solomon loved, the Lord, and walked in the statutes of David his father, but, sadly enough, there was this". Is the writer of Kings suggesting that, while in Solomon's case, such an action was morally and spiritually 'neutral' (after all, the Temple, as the one centralised place for worship, and sacrifice, was not as yet built), succeeding generations following his example became, contaminated by the evil associated with these high places. This the Chronicler passes over, however (as he passes over also many indiscretions and sins of Solomon), doubtless because his purpose in recording Solomon's story was not to give a full biography of his life, so much as to show, the significance in the construction of the Temple and the establishment of Temple worship.

3) 1:1-6

Clearly, the sacrifice that was offered by Solomon a thousand burnt offerings was a very magnificent undertaking, and if we take what follows in the light of this, then it seems evident that it was well-pleasing to God (see 7). But it was pleasing to God not because the sacrifices were many, or that it was a magnificent occasion, but because Solomon's heart was humble in the sight of God, and therefore identified with the-spirit of the offering. That is the important thing that we need to grasp. In the light of New Testament teaching it may be questioned whether the magnificence of the occasion was either necessary or wise. Jesus seems to have hinted at this in His words, "Consider the lilies of the field how they grow....Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." There are things, in other words, greater than human magnificence. But magnificence was the order of the day in those times, and this is one of the things that the Chronicler is underlining the reason for it being that it was the evidence of God's blessing and approval upon David's son. Let us not, however, lose sight of the inward reality within all the magnificence, namely Solomon's humble devotion to the Lord (1 Kings 3:3): this is the all-important consideration, and it underlies what follows in the account of the night vision in 7-12, to which we turn in the next note.

4) 1:7-12

Following the day of worship, there came the divine manifestation. This was doing it the right way! The sacrifices at Gibeon were inaugural for the new reign, and now at its outset God met Solomon in grace and love. This is the setting of the vision: both the offering of the sacrifices and the manifestation of God to the king have to do with the inauguration of his reign. Solomon was intent on beginning with God, and God was content to begin with him....It will help our understanding of all this to look back to 1 Chronicles 22:12, 13, and 28:9, to see David's exhortations to his son, that must have left such an impression on his mind. It is in the light of these words that we can best appreciate what is recorded in this vision: "Ask what I shall give thee", and "Give me now wisdom and understanding". It is quite clear that these earlier passages-represented a momentous experience for the young king elect. The Spirit of God impressed his father's words upon him so tremendously that they-must have burned into his deepest spirit. The request for wisdom and knowledge came from a heart solemnised by his father's testimony and prayer. Nor was his asking with a view to-obtaining the other blessings (11,12), but a simple and sincere desire for God's honour, and a due sense of his own weakness and need. One-recalls Paul's famous words in 2 Cor 1:15, 2:5, in relation to the Divine calling to the ministry: "Who is sufficient for these things? And-"Our sufficiency is of God". When we get there, all other things are added. In effect, what Solomon asked for were the qualities of kingship, the true, necessary qualities to enable him to be what God had said he was to be. That was the measure of his dedication.

5) 1:7-12

We should not under estimate the importance and significance of Solomon's confining of himself to asking for wisdom and knowledge. There is a sense in which it cuts right across all natural, human aspirations, since in ancient days all oriental kingdoms were noted for their wealth, opulence and magnificence, and it would have been natural for Solomon, and entirely in line with contemporary custom, to have asked for riches and splendour, and all the other normal accompaniments of royal power. That he did not is a measure both of the impact of his father's counsel and prayers for him (1 Chron 22, 28), and of his dedication to the divine ideal of kingship. This is what must have been such a pleasure and joy to God.

'Wisdom' and 'knowledge' are words that figure largely and repeatedly in the Book of Proverbs. Kidner, in his fine commentary, defines 'wisdom' as "instruction or training, a far from static term, giving notice that wisdom will be hard won, a quality of character as much as of mind. The word has usually a note of sternness ranging from warning to chastening, whether by the Lord or by the rod. Its frequent companion is 'correction', a noun whose derivation emphasises verbal, rather than physical persuasion; an appeal to reason and conscience. The two terms together can be summed up as 'discipline'. They give the reminder that wisdom is not to be had through extra-mural study; it is for disciples only. Another word for wisdom is 'understanding', or 'insight'; a third word is 'wise dealing', good sense, practical wisdom; other words are. 'shrewdness', 'discretion', also 'knowledge' and 'learning', the former implying not so much an informed mind as a knowledge of truth and indeed of God Himself." Such is the equipment that Solomon felt he needed - and asked - for the task to which God had called him.

6) 1:7-12

The result of Solomon's asking is seen in 11. Wisdom and knowledge were given, and all the other things too. One is reminded of our Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you". The message for us is clear and plain: we must become so disciplined by the Word and Spirit of God in our deepest hearts that we are brought to this place where we can truly say that our first and foremost desire is to be enabled by God's grace to be what God has called us to be. It is- when we are really there that all other things-will be added to us. God gives us just as much as we can stand of these other things. Some people are very perplexed as to why God has not prospered them in this, that or the other way, in human terms. But the answer may be that He cannot yet trust them with these blessings, because their hearts have not been thirled sufficiently to His honour and glory. One thinks of this in relation, for example to the apostle Paul, and the silent years he spent in being prepared for his life's work. It needs and takes time to put Christ on a solitary throne in one's life in such a way that He will never be dislodged by the slightest competitive interest that comes across the horizon; and this may be the basic reason why God withholds either material, or human, or other blessings from us: it is because He cannot trust us with them as yet.

7) 1:13-17

These verses give a thumbnail sketch; so to speak, of the kind of pattern that developed in Solomon's reign. It is a very brief statement (there is a much fuller description in 1 Kings 4/ 5) but a very eloquent one. The words in 15, "The king made silver and gold at Jerusalem as plenteous as stones", sum up the situation. It is the economic prosperity of his reign that is being underlined; with gold reserves in an extremely healthy state, and the Jerusalem financial times index" at its highest for years; no balance of payments deficits, no tariffs placed on imports. Now; in all this, the pattern is significant, and the Chronicler's message is plain: first of all, in 1-6, 'worship is given its central, proper place, the sacrifices being offered by the entire people. They were a nation with worship at its heart. Then, in 7-12, there is the vision of God and the response of the king; then and, as an inevitable result - the economic prosperity. Here, surely, is a pattern that is just as relevant for the 1980's as it was in 950 BC; and furthermore, just as true for the individual, and for the Church, as for the nation. It is all a question of getting priorities sorted out and put straight. One of the important lessons in 1 Chronicles, especially in its later chapters, was David's determination to live by the Word of God and its teaching. David learned this the hard way; it was not without cost and pain that he came to this; but when he did, he stuck by it, and from that point onwards he made up his mind that so far as he was concerned, he was going to live with his conscience captive to the Word of God, and everything was going to be done according to the pattern revealed there. And, clearly, Solomon his son took over this attitude. This is what is unfolded in these verses.

8) 1:13-17

The message that comes over loud and clear for us as a nation in this introductory chapter is simply that unless and until we get our priorities sorted out there will be no real resolution of the recurrent pattern of crisis and recession for the fundamental reason that our problems are not economic and political, but moral and spiritual. The Chronicler relates the booming prosperity of Israel in Solomon's reign to the moral and spiritual health of the king and the people. In the later chapters of the book, as we shall see, the pattern of prosperity changed when the moral and spiritual climate deteriorated, as indifferent or bad kings came to the throne who abandoned the principles of worship and obedience. Then, economic stringency came, and enemies gathered to threaten their national security, until finally disaster became inevitable. The message is stark in its simplicity simplistic, even, some might be tempted to think: but it is beyond all doubt the uniform message of the Old Testament, and it underlines the truth of the words in Prov 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people perish". Scripture is not, ultimately, concerned with secondary, or contributory factors: it goes to the heart of the issue, which is that until we as a nation put God in first place in our lives, nothing can be right.

9) 2:1-18

We come in chapters 2-4 to the Chronicler's account of the building of the Temple, so long prepared for by David, Solomon's father. Chapter 2 tells of Solomon's contract with Hiram, king of Tyre, to supply materials for the building, and chapters 3 and 4 the actual work of building. If we are familiar with the account in the book of Exodus of the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, we shall see that Solomon's building is in proportion a replica of the other, and that the earlier construction is in fact the model for the latter. The measurements in Solomon's temple were doubled in each case, as to the main structure, and this made a considerably larger building. This gives us a key to interpretation, from a spiritual point of view for, as we know from the epistle to the Hebrews, the Tabernacle was a foreshadowing of things to come in spiritual terms, and a pattern of spiritual life. We may recall that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that 'your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost'. So that, in reading these chapters we are able to spiritualise very legitimately - we have New Testament warrant for doing so - and gather lessons in this way as we go on.

10) 2:1-18

This whole section of 2 Chronicles is paralleled in 1 Kings 5 ff., and it will help if we make reference to the earlier account. Solomon 'told out' 70,000 men to bear burdens, 80,000 to hew in the mountains, and 3,600 to oversee them (2). The whole question of the vast expenditure of labour, and indeed perhaps of life also, in the building of the Temple arises here. We know from ancient history of the enormous numbers of slaves used by despotic monarchs to build the great monuments of the past, and it may well be asked whether Solomon is to be castigated and condemned for so press-ganging such an army of men into this work. The answer that must be given to this question is: Not necessarily so. We need to bear in mind that Solomon was, after all, a child of his age, and this is how monarchs did things in those days. It is true that he employed slave labour, but then everybody did; it was part of the custom of the time. And the important thing is not that he should have employed slave labour, but rather how he treated them. This is where we see the difference between Solomon and other despotic monarchs of ancient time, who mercilessly drove their slaves, often to death, in the fulfilment of their capricious whims. In 10, for example, we are told of Solomon's provision for Hiram's servants, in wheat, barley, wine and oil. It may be thought that this was to go to the king, not his servants; but 1 Kings 5:14 reveals something very significant: the workmen from Israel were to be one month in Lebanon, then spend two at home. This is surely a very humanitarian arrangement: Solomon did not ride roughshod over his workmen and say, "You will hew wood in Lebanon until you drop down dead". The record in fact underlines the humanity of the king's arrangements for his workforce. He recognized that his men had a right to be human, to have homes and family loyalties (cf 1 Kings 4: 25), and time to live in dignity in their own homes.

11) 2:1-18

What is said in 3 ff bears testimony to the extraordinary nature of Solomon's friendship with this heathen monarch, Hiram, king of Tyre. The friendship might be said to have been for David his father's sake, but we would still need to ask how it was that David had such a friendship with him, a friendship of the sort that moved Hiram to cooperate so willingly with him. To understand it, we must look deeper than merely human attitudes and relationships. It was basically because God's hand was on the situation, and because He was prepared to bless the building of the Temple, that matters worked out as they did. When a project is right in God's sight, then God will prosper the means whereby it is carried out, and there will be a characteristic smoothness about the entire operation: things will flow, and work well and harmoniously. We sometimes speak of a machine being well-oiled in order to run smoothly, and this is just as true in the spiritual world as in the natural. Oil is, after all, one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit, and when He is in a situation, things will tend to run smoothly.

Solomon, then, had no problems in obtaining the materials, or the men who had skill in construction work. One commentator points out that the fact that he applied to Hiram for skilled workers is some evidence of how poorly off in the arts and in culture Israel was at this point in their history, and this may well be so. But that is no barrier to the work of God, if His hand is on it. He will bring in the needed workers. It is not every king, be he never so great, who can require neighbouring rulers to send such unstinted and willing help (16); but Solomon was able to do it, not primarily because of his own greatness, but because the hand of God had been at work preparing the way beforehand. This is the way God works.

12) 2:1-18

Solomon's request in 7 recalls again the record of the building of the Tabernacle (Exo 31: 1-16, 35:31, 32). When God has a work to be done, He Himself supplies what is needed for it. In any company of God's people, in any congregation of the Lord, this must be recognized as the divine pattern. This is one of the meanings of the bestowal of the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in Romans 12 and 1 Cor 12. He bestows the gifts to meet the need. Here, the need was for skilful craftsmen, and the Lord provided (we are told explicitly in Exo 31:3 that Bezaleel was filled with the Spirit for the task committed to him). There are two things here that require consideration: the endowment of natural providence, and the special anointing of the Spirit of God; and these things need not be mutually exclusive, but rather thought of together. It is evident, for example, that the craftsman asked for by Solomon would have been one naturally endowed with the skills needed for this particular purpose; but this does not mean that Bezaleel in Exo 31) was not also naturally endowed with such skills, and it would be to confuse the issue to suggest that the skills he displayed were due to the supernatural anointing he received. Rather, we should realise that, so often, the Spirit of God works along the line of such natural endowment. It would certainly be true to say that latent potential often does not emerge until the anointing of the Spirit has been given, at conversion. Often, it is only then that the warping caused by sin become straightened out, and the wrong lessons unlearned, and the emergence of a true man, a new man, take place. Only then does he 'come into his own', as God meant him to be.

13) 2:1-18

What was said in the previous Note must not allow us to set too much store by natural gifts, as such. For by themselves they do not, of course, qualify a man for holy service. Talented men can be very graceless, and if they lack the endowment of the Spirit of God for service, it is safe to say that they are far more likely to do harm than good in the life of God's people. The fact is, both natural qualities and Divine anointing are requisite for the Lord's work. And there are two opposite dangers to take into account. One is the emphasis on natural gifts to the neglect of spiritual anointing, we recall with dismay the attitude of one theological teachers towards a new intake of divinity students whom he described as 'the best men we have-had for years'. What made him so describe them was simply the fact that they were all honours graduates. But the best men for the ministry are not the honours graduates, but those with the mighty ordination of the nail pierced hands upon them and for this, an honours degree is not the primary or important qualification.

The other, and opposite, danger is to emphasise the spiritual anointing by 'playing down' natural endowment. In this connection it perhaps needs to be said that there is such a thing as a spiritual 'dunderhead', and that is just as disastrous for the pulpit as the other. It is true that God can use any material - He used Balaams ass on one famous occasion but He does not ordinarily use asses for His service: The usual pattern is much more likely to be the natural endowment baptised into the service of the kingdom, and therefore bringing a spiritual endowment for the work in hand.

14) 3:1-17

The first lesson we may gather from what is recorded in this chapter relates to what has been said in the past two Notes. What strikes one in reading these verses is the immense amount of detail that was involved in the construction of the Temple. Just as in the passages in Exodus dealing with the Tabernacle, so here we see the clear delight shown in the production of these intricacies of design, and the painstaking craftsmanship, even in those parts that would never be exposed to the human eye. One cannot but contrast this kind of painstaking workmanship with the 'anything-will-do' approach in so much in our public life today, with the inferior production and shoddy manufacture bedeviling industry and destroying what was once a reputation for quality and integrity second to none in the world. But we can make another contrast also, with the 'anything-will-do' attitude to the work of the Lord, as if enthusiasm (often undoubted and very great) is made to do duty for high standards and the resultant work bearing very unfavourable comparison with even ordinary competence in secular life. The Lord is worthy of the best we can give, and to suppose that it does not matter how shoddily it is done provided it is done at all is to betray a spirit very different from that exemplified in the Chronicler's account here. We may learn from this that it is vision - the vision of God - that gives character and integrity to what we do, and that it is the lack of it that has put at risk so much in Church and nation today. Where there is no vision, Solomon was later to write (Prov 29:18), breakdown inevitably follows.

15) 4:1-22

A distinct impression that comes over in reading both this and the previous chapter is that neither is so strikingly interesting, exciting or 'message-bearing' (if we can use such a word combination) as chapter 5 is going to be (take a quick glimpse at it) as it tells how Solomon assembled the elders of Israel for the consecration of the Temple. With the best will in the world, we could hardly call chapters 3 and 4 thrilling in that kind of way. But there is a message for us even in this fact, here we have- a workshop picture, and work is often a hard slog, and unremitting, and frequently has more than an element of drudgery in it. When a work is in progress, there may at times seem little order of design about it, with little, if any visible, demonstrable outcome of all the labour involved. Most of the time, it may frankly look untidy, even shambolic. This is something worth remembering in spiritual life and progress also. The Church of God is probably much more like a workshop than anything else it is the place where people are being remade. And therefore at any particular stage in the process they may have a very unfinished look. This is inevitable: we are none of us as yet what we will be, and what God intends us to be, and although at any given moment we should be concerned not to be more shambolic than we need be, we should recognize that there is a continuing work going on, and that in the intermediate stages there may be no demonstrable outcome for all the labour that is being expended. But then, it may not be the right time to look. Only God can see (the end from the beginning), and this should bring a certain measure of realism into our thinking about ourselves as fellowships of God's people. There is a real danger, in this connection, of becoming masochistic, and flaying ourselves needlessly and remorselessly, instead of recognizing and accepting that God's work in rehabilitating us is progressive and takes time. Rome was not built in a day.

16) 4:1-22

In relation to this 'workshop' idea, and its ordinary, humdrum nature, we may look back to the parallel passage in 1 Kings 6:7 ff, to see something that the Chronicler has not seen fit to reproduce - not because it was not important, but rather because it was not his particular concern. What the writer of 1 Kings points out is that the stones for the building of the Temple were shaped and smoothed and cut square before they were brought to the building site, and no sound of tools was heard in the house. There is something very important here from the spiritual point of view. God is preparing a Temple for His own gracious indwelling (cf Eph 2: 21, 22), and He is at work preparing the stones now (cf 1 Pet 2:5) down here in the workshop, not on the building site where the Temple is going to rise resplendent, majestic and glorious. Here and now, in the workshop, the stones are being chipped and cut and squared and polished. When we go there, we will be ready to be put in our place in the vast design. Do we see the pattern? It is here, in our earthly pilgrimage, that our rough-hewn ungainliness has to be dealt with. The rough granite out of the quarry really goes through the mill, with all sorts of processes -grinding, chipping, chiseling, hammering, polishing before the finished product is ready to be built into the building which has been designed and which is already waiting for the process to be completed. This is how we need to think of these things. The world to come is not the place for living stones to be prepared for the Temple of God - the prepared people are prepared on earth, and this realisation should colour our whole attitude to the disciplines we undergo as Christians. It would be unthinkable, would it not, to graduate to the higher spheres unfinished, with the work of polishing only half-done?

17) 5:1-14

We continue in the account the Chronicler gives of the completion of the building of the Temple and its dedication to the service of God by Solomon. This chapter tells of the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant into its appointed place, and of the coming of the glory of the Lord to fill the Temple. The time indicated is that of the Feast of Tabernacles, the feast of the seventh month (3), and there is surely a happy association of ideas in this, since this feast both commemorated the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness and now the 'wilderness' idea with its moveable tabernacle was at an end, with the Ark having 'arrived' at its permanent home - and also celebrated the harvest of God - and here was the harvest and climax of the Chronicler's presentation of the story of Solomon, the completion of the Temple. The symbolic significance of the sacrifices in 6 is explicated, so to speak, in the New Testament spiritualised conception, as in 1 Peter 2:5, where the Apostle speaks of God's people offering up spiritual sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise (cf also Rom 12:1 - 'living sacrifices'). There can be no doubt that the sacrifices here were symbolic of that spiritual reality. This was really a high moment in the life of Solomon and of the people of God, and there was an outgoing of their hearts in worship and thanksgiving and praise.

In 9, the meaning of the reference to the staves of the ark appears to be that the ends of the staves could be seen in the darkness of the most holy place, but that someone outside could not see them 'a perpetual reminder', as one commentator puts it, 'to the priests that the sacred chest was not to be touched by hand, at peril of sudden death' - from the spiritual point of view, a warning against presumption in approaching God. Only by blood may we come before Him (cf Heb 1:19, 'Having boldness therefore.... by the blood of Jesus....').

18) 5:1-14

The statement in 10 indicates that the literal two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments had been engraved by the finger of God at Sinai were still there after these many hundreds of years after the time of Moses. But this is not really the point that the statement is making: the very way in which the verse is couched - 'there was nothing in the Ark save the two tablets seems to pose the question 'Should we be thinking that there was anything else in the Ark save the two tables of stone?' For one immediately thinks of Heb 9:4, which speaks of 'the golden pot that had manna' and 'Aaron's rod that budded' as also being in the Ark. The pot of manna (cf Exo 16:33 ff) was a memento of the Israelites being fed by manna for forty years in the wilderness, and this was placed within The Ark as a testimony and. memorial. Similarly, Aaron's rod (Numb 17:10) was so deposited. This raises problems for our understanding. Is the Chronicler implying that though these things were laid up 'before the testimony', they should not have been in the Ark along with the tables of stone? Delitzsch thinks that these two 'articles' were in fact placed within the Ark by Moses, others think that they were simply placed in front of it. In rabbinical tradition the pot of manna and Aaron's rod were not in the Ark, but beside it; but it seems clear from Hebrews.9 that the writer there represented them as being inside the Ark. Perhaps the most we can say is that the Chronicler is going back to the original instructions with regard to the Ark, when in fact only the two tables of the law were enclosed in it.

19) 5:1-14

The brief passage at the end of the chapter (11-14) records a truly tremendous happening. This was the culmination of the whole exercise, the coming of the glory of the Lord upon the completed Temple. In the parallel version, 1 Kings.8:1-11, the dramatic moment comes when the priests emerge from placing the Ark in the holy place, but here, it is when the choirs strike up their praise. There is no real discrepancy here, for surely both things were simultaneous. All the Chronicler does is to insert 11b-13a, an explanation of the presence of the priests, who were not on this occasion, as usually, serving by course, but all together (for the reference in 12 to Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun (Ethan) see 1 Chron 6:44, 25:1). Here is the fulfilment of all the instructions and preparations David had given and made (cf 1 Chron 15), Here, the choirs come into their own. There needs to be some use of the imagination here, especially in relation to the one hundred and twenty trumpets sounding in the Temple (12), -when one remembers that even in a large modern orchestra the whole brass section does not ordinarily number more than twenty pieces in all! This, along with the threefold choir, must have produced a volume of sound quite overwhelming in its magnificence. It is not difficult to see what an overpowering experience it must have been. From the aesthetic point of view it must have been tremendous; but it was not the aesthetics that were the important thing, but the fact that within that context the glory of God came down and so enveloped them (13b) that the priests could not stand to minister. That was the measure of the overwhelming!

20) 5:1-14

Two further points must be mentioned. First of all, we should note the association of ideas between the singing and praising on the one hand, and the coming of the Ark into its proper place, on the other. Historically, the restoration of the Word (and the Ark, containing the tablets of stone, represents the Word) to its proper place in the life of God's people has always signalled song. In the great evangelical revival of the 18th century, in which the glory of God descended on the darkness and blackness of England, was accompanied by a new hymnology, in the great hymns of Wesley and Watts. The living Word generally sets men a-singing: always where the glory of the Lord is present, hearts are tuned to sing His praise. But and this is the second point - we need to think particularly of the manifestation of the glory of the Lord in relation to the Ark of the covenant, as representing and symbolising the Word of God. When the Word is given its proper place, it is then that glimpses of glory become possible. Have we not seen it to be so, and known it in our midst, in these years. When the living Word of the living God has been put at the centre of everything, glory has come down and touched people's lives. And is this not the great need of the Church today? It is just not possible to speak of spiritual renewal except in terms of a restoration of the Divine Word in the life of God's people. Renewal apart from the Word is a misnomer, indeed it is a fraud: it is His Word that God has promised to honour, and where the Word of God is at a discount in the life of the Church, we can hardly be surprised that God should have become as a stranger in the land. This is the message that the Chronicler is speaking to our time, across the intervening centuries. Let us recall, for our learning the words in Exo 25:21, 22, about the mercy-seat above the Ark: "There will I meet with thee, and there will I commune with thee" - there, where the Word is!

21) 6:1-11

This long chapter divides into two unequal sections, 1-11 giving Solomon's address to the people, and 12-42 his great prayer, and perhaps the longest prayer recorded in all Scripture. The 'then' in 1 refers back to the previous verses - that is to say, when Solomon saw the glory of the Lord coming down upon the Temple, he was reminded of what Scripture says about the nature of the Divine coming to dwell with His people, and quotes from Exo 19:9, 20:21, relating in 2, in the reference to the 'house of habitation', to the dark inner shrine of the holiest place, which would befit the dwelling place of God. It is the sense of mystery surrounding the Divine presence that Solomon is so conscious of here. We today would do well to seek to recapture something of this, for in a day when an attitude almost of 'chumminess' towards the Almighty, holy Lord desecrates so much of Christian worship, we are in danger of losing altogether the fundamental sense of reverence that should mark any human approach to the One Who is the 'Father of an infinite majesty'. Nor should we be too concerned lest such a spirit of reverence lead to remoteness in worship, for - paradoxically - 'the thick darkness where God was' (Exo 20:21) is the source of exquisite and tender comfort. We do not have to be afraid of dark places if we meet God in them; for the real God Whom we meet there is so much more - nay, infinitely more - than our feeble, theoretical conceptions of Him could ever lead us to expect. The God Who is 'infinite, eternal; unchangeable' is the only God worth meeting!

22) 6:1-11

In 3, 4 we should notice the two different meanings of the word 'blessed', a distinction preserved in the New Testament in the use of two quite different words. When it speaks of Solomon blessing the whole congregation, the reference is not merely to his wishing them well, but rather conveying, from God, the divine blessing upon the people, acting, indeed, in a priestly capacity. This 'blessed' means 'happy' - it is the 'blessed' that Jesus uses in the Beatitudes in Matt 5. They are happy because God has made them happy in His blessing of them, doing them good. And, in turn, they 'bless' God, - here the word (in the New Testament it is ['eulogetos']) means 'to speak well of Him, giving Him the worship and glory due to His great Name. Not that, ultimately, the two words are so very different basically, for to 'speak well of' God in this sense is to make Him happy. We do well to remember this in our worship. It is a most wonderful and astounding mystery that the God of the universe should find pleasure in the worship that we, the worms of the earth, give Him. Reverently we would say this, with what we believe to be true scriptural warrant (cf Ps 149:4): It makes His day, and thrills His holy heart, to hear His people magnifying His Name and singing the praises of His Son. A true appreciation of this would do more to transform Christian worship than any other consideration.

23) 6:1-11

This is a high moment of dedication for Solomon, and the awe of the Divine presence has brought a hush to his spirit, as he humbly rehearses God's dealings with his father David and himself. There is almost a note of astonishment in his words as he realises that in all that has been going on over these years, in the inner compulsion that has driven him to this work, God has been fulfilling His word and His promise; and with amazed awareness he says, in effect, "Yes, God's word has come true, because see, the Temple is up, and I am king, and God said it would be so, and it is so. O God, how wonderful Thou art!" If we bear in mind that this section of the book covers a span of years, we get some flavour of the wonderful nature of this fulfilment. It was many years previous to this that David had had it in his heart to build the Temple, and when God had first spoken to him; and now it was an accomplished fact, and all that God had promised had now come about. This gives all the greater force to the simple, yet profound, statement in 11, 'In it I have put the ark' (containing the tablets of stone with the law inscribed on them), for to prove the faithfulness of God's word in one's own experience as Solomon had done is the best kind of incentive to giving that word its true and proper place at the centre of both worship and life, Solomon could have done no greater thing than this. Happy the man who makes this the summit of his ambition in the service of God. Well would it be for the Church in our time if this were to become the aim of its leaders.

24) 6:12-21

These verses constitute the opening of what must be one of the greatest prayers recorded in the whole Bible. For all its length, it is a very orderly and precise prayer, which can be divided up very adequately: there are two verses of introduction, 12, 13, then a preface, 14, 15; then, in 16-21 follow three petitions - to perpetuate the line of David (16), to have regard to the place (Jerusalem) where His name is put (17-20), and to hear the prayer addressed to Him there (21). This is followed by a sevenfold prayer (22-42), following from what is said in 21, which rehearses a series of situations in which God's people might seek divine help through prayer, in time of need.

The introduction to the prayer, 12, 13, mentions a 'brassen scaffold'. This was a kind of pulpit or platform construction made specially for the occasion, on which Solomon got up before all the people, then got down on his knees before all the people, to pray this wonderful prayer. It is easy to see how deeply moved Solomon must have been, and subdued by the divine goodness, as 14, 15 make plain. A spirit of reverence and adoration was in his heart and on his lips. It is the consciousness that this great Creator God, Maker of the ends of the earth, should humble Himself to dwell in a house made with hands that gripped his heart and spirit; and we may well in our prayers join with Solomon in reverent awe and worship that such a God should deign to indwell our sinful hearts and make of them temples fit for His use. Is our prayer-life touched with the sense of His majesty and humility, or has familiarity with holy things blunted our spiritual senses and made us take such things for granted?

25) 6:12-21

The strength and significance of Solomon's petition in 16, 17 lie in the fact that it rests on, and pleads, the promise of God. 'Let thy word be verified' (17) is very bold, but it cannot be thought presumptuous; rather, it represents what our forefathers used to speak of as being 'on praying ground'. To relate what we ask in prayer to the promises of God is simply to be realistic in prayer, in the sense that we have firm grounds for believing that such prayer will be answered. We would save ourselves a good deal of trouble and spiritual energy if we took time to discern whether in fact we were asking things of God that we had no warrant for believing He would grant us. One recalls how Jacob, in the dramatic incident at Peniel (Gen 32) prayed in similar fashion:

'Lord, Thou saidst....' To remind God of what He has said puts us in an invincible position: there is a sense in which God hands over His sovereignty to men when He gives them His promise, for heaven and earth will pass away before His promise shall ever fail. This is what Solomon discerned: it is something that we also need to learn, in our prayer-life.

26) 6:12-21

In 18, Solomon catches himself up, so to speak, as if astonished at the temerity, not to say absurdity, of what he has been saying! Nevertheless, in a way that he could not possibly have foreseen, these words, 'Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth?' has been wonderfully fulfilled in the Incarnation of the Son of God. When we are in the Spirit, as Solomon assuredly then was, we can say things that have a much much deeper import and truth than we could ever realise. It is true that heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, and this thought is wonderfully captured in Christina Rossetti's words,

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him,
Nor earth sustain....

Yet, in the mystery of the Incarnation, 'a stable place sufficed the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ'. Ah, yes, there is a deeper mystery, Solomon, than you could grasp at this stage, but this is what the story is all about, and this is what the Temple is all about, for it points forward to this glorious reality.

And what is true in the absolute sense, in relation to Christ's coming, is as true of the Christian experience. The ultimate paradox of the gospel is that Christ, by whom all things were created and held in existence, comes to dwell in our poor hearts. Our Lord's words in the Upper Room (John 14:23), 'We will come to him, and make our abode with him' underline this wonderful truth. There, in the Upper Room, a greater than Solomon was speaking. 'Will God in very deed dwell with men?' Ah, more than that, and better than that: He comes to dwell in men, by His blessed Holy Spirit!

27) 6:22-25

The supplications referred to in 21 are now enumerated by Solomon, and are given here as examples, or illustrations of the appeals God's people might make to Him. One commentator interprets 22 as follows: "When one is charged with crime, and made to affirm his innocence by taking an oath, or curse, or having one invoked upon him by the priest, God is asked to decide by fulfilling the curse if he is guilty, or leaving him unharmed if he is innocent". This is the usage of Old Testament times, as we may see from passages like Exo 22:7-12 and Numb 5:19-22, and what Solomon is asking is that if an oath were taken to prove or to demonstrate the rightness or wrongness, the innocence or the guilt, God would vindicate the innocent by protecting him and leaving him unharmed with regard to the oath, but visit the guilty with judgment from on high. It is, as the Rev. William Still puts it, "an appeal for the laws of sin and righteousness inherent in the universe and in the affairs of men to quicken and show the truth sooner than normal. For history does proclaim, at least in many cases, the rights and wrongs of men's actions, and often in very contemporary history indeed."

As to 24, 25, defeat in battle was evidence of Divine displeasure caused by sin in God's people (cf Joshua 7). This is a principle imbedded in the biblical revelation. If, then, God brings temporal judgments upon nations because of sin, and if this is a constant principle, we need to apply it to modern conditions; for if true, then the real problems that we face in our nation today are not so much political, or economic, but moral and spiritual, and therefore they are not likely to be much alleviated except in the context of national repentance. Here is the real pattern of renewal and hope, if only we were prepared to see it.

28) 6:26-31

Next, it is natural disasters, and the use of natural calamities to chastise and break down the pride of the people. We need to underline two things here: one is that it is not intended to mean that all natural disaster is caused by sin -it would be dangerous as well as misleading to suggest this to be the case, although the fact remains that some natural disasters are caused by national sin, and we do not need to look very far in the Old Testament Scriptures to discover this grim truth. The other point to underline is that there are different kinds of drought – there is spiritual as well as natural drought, and Solomon's words apply as much to the one as to the other (cf Amos 8:11-13). Spiritual famine or drought is an incontrovertible reality in the life of nations and communities, which are often left of God for their want of seeking Him, and He turns His face away from them, causing a famine of the Word (cf 1 Sam 3, where the word of the Lord was a scarce commodity and there was no open vision). We should note particularly the phrase in 27, 'When Thou hast taught them the good way' (cf also 31). The meaning is that the drought and the affliction are used of God, and designed by Him, to teach His people the good way wherein they should walk. This is surely an eloquent word for the contemporary situation, because it enables us to see possible good in all the stringencies and crises that have come upon us. How much more bearable will it all be if the experience of such stringencies - and they may get worse - leads the nation at last back to the things of God. This is why the Christian may not view the situation as one of utter despair - for God can mean it unto good, and no situation is too far gone for Him to retrieve and transform.

29) 6:32-33

The reference in these verses to the stranger coming to pray is interesting. One has only to think of the attitude of the Pharisees in our Lord's Day to the Gentile 'dogs', as they contemptuously called them, to see how very different Solomon's was, broad, generous towards those not of the family of Israel. This is very impressive, and prompts the reflection that in earlier days in Israel there was not that hard and intransigent attitude to the outside world, and that it was only at a later date that the Jews became so bogged down in their narrow and bigoted insularity that they forgot their calling to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and abused it so shamefully. The coming of the stranger from a far country stands in contrast to our Lord's command to go into all the world and preach the gospel, but we must not take from this that Solomon has 'got it all wrong', for in fact both belong properly to the all-round influence of the gospel, for just as there is laid upon God's people the mandate to go out with the gospel, so just as undeniably there is a drawing power in a living fellowship of believers that exercises a magnetic and often compelling influence on others. The story of the Queen of Sheba (9:1ff) is a case in point - she was drawn to Jerusalem by what she had heard of Solomon. We need not set these two contrasting aspects in opposition to one another, for both have their place, and play their part, in the work and witness of the gospel.

30) 6:34-39

In 34, 35 it is the people going out to war. We need to note two phrases, 'by the way that Thou shalt send them' and 'maintain their cause'. God is directing His people in war against His enemies, and the prayer is made that He would maintain their cause. Here we have the doctrine of 'the just war' unfolded, for the words, if they mean anything, presuppose a divine directive. One is prompted to remark that if the powers that be are ordained by God (Rom 13) to be a terror to evildoers, then by implication a nation can also be mobilised to be an instrument of justice in the service of God. The final petition (36-39) shows Solomon in a prophetic vein how fatefully his words were fulfilled in Israel the later chapters of Chronicles will show. The important words are the "ifs" in 37, 38, and "return to Thee....in the land of their captivity". God will keep them there, Solomon means, until they come to a new heart and a new spirit, and then He will deliver them. Given real turning of heart, real repentance and real desire for restoration, this is the basis of prayer, and it can bring a true confidence that prayer will be answered. This constitutes a wonderful assurance to sinning saints, in the sad and tragic experiences in which they drift away from God and land themselves in distress and bondage and captivity of various kinds. The word of the Lord may come to them a second time, as it did to Jonah, to restore, renew and forgive.

31) 6:40-42

Here is the conclusion of Solomon's prayer. In these seven instances of prayer (22-39) he can hardly be thought to have exhausted all the possibilities, rather, they are to be regarded as representative, and we could well place at the beginning of the catalogue the words 'for example, this....or this....or this....' But he has said enough to let it be known and to convince the people that, whatever prayer was made, God would hear and forgive. Solomon is praying very scripturally in these verses. If we look back to Numbers 10:35 we will find the original reference to the idea of God 'arising' (41). Furthermore, David, his father, had prayed these very words in Psalm 132:8ff, and now the son speaks the father's words after him. We see from this how much at one Solomon was with his godly father. Again, he is simply pleading the promises. God had promised and covenanted to do these things, and he is now intent on entering into the promises, and making them his own. "Do as Thou hast said, O Lord our God". This is the kind of prayer that God delights to answer.

32) 7:1-3

These verses record the descent of the fire of God, the Divine response to the king's prayer, God's assurance to the king that he had not prayed in vain. Doubtless, the words refer to a literal fire coming down upon the burnt offering and the sacrifices, for it seems from 1 that it was distinct from the glory of the Lord filling the house. We can hardly find words to describe what it could possibly mean. What would be the modern equivalent? Revival fire? It may well be questioned whether we have any clear idea in our minds when we speak of revival fire, due doubtless to the fact that we do not read enough Church History in relation to times of awakening, and we therefore have not sufficient conception of the immense and tremendous things that happen when God comes down in power upon His people. But there is something else we can say. The two disciples on the Emmaus Road said, "Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked with us by the way?" Would it not be true to say that the fire of God came down on the Emmaus Road on that occasion? There are surely times in the context of Christian fellowship, sometimes in prayer, sometimes in listening to the Word of God being ministered, sometimes in the context of worship, that we feel our very inmost hearts burning within us. This is the fire of God coming down in answer to our cries, and is often a real, subjective indication to the believer that prayer has been heard and will be answered.

33) 7:4-11

We should bear in mind that the people had gathered from the furthest corners of the land for the dedication of the Temple. It must truly have been a vast convocation. What a celebration of the feast (8)! The phrase in 10, describing the return of the people to their tents 'glad and merry in heart' contains a twofold lesson for us. On the one hand, it is a pointer to the nature of true worship and its effect on God's people. We often tend to associate the great feast days of the Church - our communion season - with the spirit of solemnity. It is true, of course, that worship in the presence of a holy God is a deeply solemn and solemnising thing; but solemnity is not sadness, and we must be careful not to confuse this sense of awe with something that is akin to sadness, not to say lugubriousness. It is not a funeral we are attending! There was none of such sadness here, only joy and gladness. The solemnity of the Old Hundredth - to take an illustration - as it intones the words 'All people that on earth do dwell' needs to be tempered with the 'lilt' (almost) of its alternative version 'O all ye lands unto the Lord make ye a joyful noise', to the tune 'Glasgow'. Awe and solemnity must not be allowed to become incompatible with gladness and merriment of heart in our worship. Nor need any fear that gladness and merriment will mean levity, for true merriment is a deep-hearted reality, possible only when we take God, and life, and ourselves with the utmost seriousness.

The other lesson in 10 we leave for the next Note.

34) 7:4-11

The gladness and merriment of heart (10) also represents the fact that the people had given themselves without reserve to God, and that God had returned the compliment, and given Himself without reserve to them, and the fire had come down in another way than literally, making their hearts overflow with gladness and joy. Here is a comment on this from the Gilcomston Notes, by the Rev. W. Still:

"We often say of an activity or pursuit that we get out of it what we put into it. This is true here, but not in the sense that we get out merely what we put in; for we put in our own puny sacrifice, albeit it is the best we have to give, and what do we get out? The joy of the Lord. This is of the kindness- and sweet reasonableness of the Lord, that for our unworthy best, He gives us His best, in all its perfections - a blessedly unfair exchange! That is why the people went away so sublimely happy: they had found the secret of tapping the infinite resources of divine joy: namely, total self-giving. And this is not surprising, for the Lord is not running a business, but making a Home for Himself. Nor is His chief concern to appoint it with furnishings, He has inexhaustible resources for this, but to people it with loving hearts. Their hearts' love may not seem worthy of His, but if it is the best they have He accepts it', and in return gives the best He has. The question is not how much we have to give, but have we given our all? Is the altar of our heart overflowing with the fat of our whole burnt-offerings? If so, he will flood it with joy so that we will know more about mirth, holy laughter and uninhibited happiness than we have ever known. Men try to seek their pleasure apart from the Lord, but it is to be found only in Him; but many have not found it so, because they have given Him of themselves grudgingly. Did ever grudging love gain abundant response?"

35) 7:12-22

These verses give an account of a second vision given to Solomon in answer to his prayer in chapter 6, and there is a sense in which it is also to be regarded as part of the 'fire-coming-down' sequence in 1 ff. It is certainly part of the Divine response to the completion of the Temple work and to Solomon's great prayer. Indeed, 13 ff are particularly parallel to the prayer in chapter 6: Solomon supplicated God to do all these things, and here God promises to do them, provided that the conditions that Solomon himself mentioned in his prayer are in fact fulfilled. It is interesting and instructive to compare the supplication and God's reply to it, for He deals with the requests one by one. They are all covered; and that in itself should be an encouragement to us in prayer. God does not speak to His children in cavalier fashion. When we bring specific requests before Him, He takes note of them one by one. He annotates them, so to speak, and is precise in His attending to them: This one, He says, Yes, I will look after that; and this one, I will look after that too. There is preciseness about God in His answering of prayer. He is faithful. Look particularly at 13: these are the very words that Solomon used in 6:26. God takes this up, and says, "All right, Solomon: If I shut up heaven that there be no rain..." - He might have added, "As you say". God takes our supplications literally. This is the point that is being made.

36) 7:12-22

The famous words in 14 call for some comment as it is a tremendous statement, but it needs to be understood aright, and it needs to be hedged in against wrong and unwarranted interpretation. For one thing, it must not be used in such a way as to suggest that renewal and revival are simply a matter of becoming programmed to this verse's pattern, as if we could oblige God to give revival upon our fulfilling the conditions stated here. It is never by any means as simple as that. We cannot twist God's arm in that, or any other, way. He is God the Lord, not a penny-in-the-slot machine, and it is to be feared that sometimes this famous verse is used like this, in a way that can only be offensive to God. Also, we need to see clearly what the verse really says and refers to. 'My people' refer to Israel, and 'the land' refers to the land of Israel. But the words are spoken to a covenant people, and of a covenant land; and therefore the real spiritual parallel is not 'the Church' and 'the nation', but 'the Church' and 'the state of the Church'. The verse is not saying to us as Christians that if Christians repent and get right with God, He will bring revival to the nation. That is an unwarranted inference to draw from what is said here. It is true that a renewed Church will be an incalculable blessing to the whole nation, and we must pray for this earnestly, but that is not what is envisaged in this verse. 'Land' for Solomon was the 'covenant land' and the 'covenant people'. So much, then, by way of introduction. We shall proceed to look at the verse's message in the next Note.

37) 7:12-22

What is advocated in these words (14) is humbling, praying, seeking, turning. This is the need. But let us look back to 6:28-31, which is the corresponding part of Solomon's prayer, and note the salient points: 'when everyone shall know his own sore and his own grief' (29) - this corresponds to the humbling here mentioned; 'whose heart Thou knowest' (30) - this is the heart repentance and heart turning; 'so long as they live' (31) - this is the lasting nature of the transformation. When we read these phrases into the tremendous words in 14, they become all the more graphic and all the more living, and enable us to see that what is referred to here is not a performance, still less a technique, but a true humbling of heart leading to a life-long change of attitude. The Scriptures do not envisage a ding-dong alternation between spiritual vigour and backsliding as a regular feature of spiritual life. When repentance comes, according to Scripture, it is a turning from an attitude and a state of life that is an abomination to the Lord, and it is so unthinkable to revert to that again that God's people should react in revulsion against the very possibility, it is life-long renewal that Scripture has in mind. We should therefore raise our sights in this matter, and refuse to give countenance to the dreary and unedifying spectacle of repeated backsliding that seems to mark so many Christian lives, as if it were a natural and even inevitable experience for the believer. Not so, not so, says Scripture.

38) 7:12-22

Examples of what was said in the previous Note about maintaining a life-long renewal are not far to seek in Scripture. It is true that the history unfolded in the book of Judges (our present Midweek study) was a very chequered one. There were times when God raised up a deliverer, when the people cried to Him in penitence; but then they slipped back again. But it was not in the course of a year or two that they slipped back, but more in the course of an epoch. We tend to forget the considerable span of years, even generations, that is involved. This is seen clearly in the story of Samuel, whom God raised up at the end of the Judges period, and whose ministry over quarter of a century, traversed the length and breadth of the land, led to a deliverance from the Philistines and a national regeneration (1 Sam 7) which lasted 'all the days of Samuel'. It was a lasting deliverance, a whole epoch in which the people of God were close to him - not a few months or a year or two, but a lifetime. In more modern history we may instance the remarkable movement known as the 1859 revival, which is a good example of the lasting effect of spiritual renewal, for that movement had a 50-year 'spread' in its work and influence, with three main movements within it, 1859-65, 1870-1890, and 1895-1904, embracing in turn the initial impetus of the revival, the Moody and Sankey campaigns, the Torrey, Chapman and Alexander work, and finally the Welsh revival. But it was all one movement, in which the Church of God was continuously vitalised and renewed. Nor is it without significance that this was the era of the great worldwide missionary expansion. That is how big the possibilities are, in relation to these words in 14, 'If My people....'

39) 7:12-22

In 17-22 God gives Solomon the conditions on which continued blessing and wellbeing for him and his family would depend. The alternatives are prosperity or adversity, the latter leading to exile. In the previous verses (12-15) the adversity was real but interim - blasting, mildew, famine, locusts, pestilence, - with renewal possible upon repentance. But failing renewal, not only would there be a continuing of these visitations, but the still more extreme expedient of being plucked up out of their land and taken into exile. The history of the years following Solomon's reign bears out the truth of this grim warning. The principle works both ways: "If My people...do this, I will hear from heaven....but if they do not, this is ultimately what will happen". Here, we must again underline, the analogy is not so much the state of the nation at the present time, as the state of the Church. And how relevant it is! We hear, increasingly, comments in the courts of the Church with regard to dramatically falling statistics, membership decreasing, less and less young people in our organisations - and so on. Ah yes, it works both ways: either repentance and renewal, or further and increased declension. There is no static ground: it is either forward or back.

40) 7:12-22

One final word about this vision: In the earlier vision in chapter 1 everything was promise and encouragement, but now, as the Gilcomston Notes point out, "not only is warning mingled with promise, but the sadder alternative seen in prophetic anticipation to overpower the brighter". There is an important lesson for us to learn here, and it is this: the first vision was given at the inception of the work. Before the work of building began, there were years of battling through, with the vision of the future still to be accomplished and fulfilled; but the second vision came when the work was completed, and that explains the presence of the warnings. Men are generally in a far healthier state spiritually when they are busy at work on an unfinished project, straining every nerve to reach their goal, than when, having finished it, they sit back in relaxation. Israel in process of possessing the land under the leadership of Joshua was a far more spiritual and obedient people than Israel fully established in her inheritance, years later; David, in his trials and tribulations before he reached the throne was a far better man than David the king; the Church under persecution is infinitely stronger and more steadfast than the Church at ease in Zion. Well might the prophet pray, "O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years" - not at the beginning when all is bright with hope, and hope acts as an anchor to the soul, but much later on, when earlier inspiration has faded. Then is the real danger point. It was this Paul had in mind when in Eph 6 he urges us to be girt with the armour of God, to enable us to "withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand". Having done all. That is the force of the warning note in this later vision given to Solomon.

41) 8:1-18

A preliminary reading of this chapter disposes one to think that it is meant to display the essential dynamic of Solomon's reign, and that its secret and inspiration lay in what is recorded in the previous chapters. This is, in the main, true, although there are some rather disquieting notes discernible in it on closer examination. For what we see is a round of purposeful activity (e.g. 2-6), building up cities, establishing them, and generally prospering the country. It has all the evidences of a boon economy, as we would put it today. And in 12-16, we see the heart of it all - for all its faults, it was a God-centred reign. Solomon recognised the truth that "except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it". Everything was related to the worship of God (13) and derived and was controlled by it. All the same, there are some things that give cause for misgiving, as a glance at the parallel passage in 1 Kings 9:1.0 ff will show (the Chronicler omits to mention this). According to this other record, Solomon gave Hiram twenty cities in payment for the timber and gold that he had provided for the Temple. But Hiram was not at all satisfied with them and protested to Solomon, because they appear to have been broken-down, dilapidated townships on the Galilean border. It was a niggardly action on Solomon's part, and God would not have been well-pleased with such a churlish attitude. In the Kings account, Hiram stands out as the courteous figure in the story. What, however, must have displeased God even more was the cession of so many cities belonging to the covenant land to someone who, however friendly, was outside the covenant people, for this was entirely against the known purposes of God. The cities were not Solomon's to give away. It is all too easy for us to forget that all we have is a stewardship from God, not a possession.

42) **8:1-18**

The Chronicler, as we have pointed out, does not mention the details of this incident, merely indicating that the cities were returned and restored to Solomon. But when he got them back, it seems clear that he had 'got the message', because he proceeded to refurbish and repair them, and establish them afresh for habitation. Had there been clearances, then, before they were handed over to Hiram? At all events, the hinterland of northern Galilee was no more a neglected area, but given the attention it was due, and sufficient funds allocated to get it into proper order.

In 7-10 (cf 1 Kings 9:20-22), there is an interesting and significant reference to the remnants of the Canaanites left in the land. The Kings' phrase is 'whom the children of Israel were not able utterly to destroy' (cf. Judges 1/2). This was clearly a failure on Israel's part, which led to problems and complications in their later history, as we may gather from these verses before us. Solomon seeks to mitigate these problems by segregating the chosen people from them and putting them in a different category. If we did not understand this aright, we might be disposed to accuse Solomon of racial discrimination, but that is not really the question at issue, it is rather one of the theology of separation. The people of God were called to be a separate people. The real parallel today is not the race question, but the question whether, for example, Hindu or Muslim doctors or teachers should be employed in Christian hospitals or schools. It is, of course, true that doctors or teachers of integrity are well able to exercise medical or teaching skills; but if the medical or teaching work is simply the handmaid of the gospel, then far deeper issues are involved, and it does make an enormous difference whether a man is a Christian or a Hindu or Muslim. If the purpose of Christian mission is to communicate Christ, how can a Hindu or Muslim share in it? This is the kind of area where distinctions are terribly blurred in the Church's mind in our day; and whatever one might say about the faults and failings of Solomon's reign, this much can be said: there was a clear-cut distinction between those who were within the covenant and those who were not.

43) 8:1-18

We must pause now to consider the surprising and startling statement in 11. It obviously indicates some real confusion of thought in Solomon's mind. He has an almost quixotic idea that the Temple and David's house must not be defiled by the presence of a wife who is outwith the covenant. This is certainly in line with the doctrine of separation mentioned at the end of yesterday's Note. But what are we to say about the fact that Solomon had apparently no scruple or conscience about defiling his own body - which the Apostle Paul says is the temple of the Holy Ghost, and may not be defiled with impunity - by taking to himself a strange wife, in the person of Pharaoh's daughter. Indeed, he took many strange wives, as we see from 1 Kings 11:1, 2, and we are left in no doubt (although the Chronicler does not mention it here) that this was the real cause of his downfall. Ah, it is not enough to obey the letter of the law, when you are breaking its spirit in the things you do. It is not enough to make an ostentatious fuss about not making David's house ceremonially impure with the presence of a strange woman, if the house of the heart is being made morally impure by such an association.

The Chronicler does not underline these things, not so much in terms of turning a blind eye to them, as that he is concerned to present an ideal kingdom picture. From his point of view, it does not come into the story. It is the God centredness of the reign that he is intent on underlining, as 12-16 indicate.

44) 8:1-18

We need to look at the parallel passage in 1 Kings 9:15-28 to understand the significance of 17, 18. In that passage explicit mention of the levy that Solomon raised for the work of building the Temple and the refurbishing of the cities of the north. The Chronicler does not mention this, but it is implied throughout the chapter and explains the reference to the gold from Ophir brought to Solomon. The king must have spent immense and prodigious sums of money on his vast undertakings, with tens of thousands of people press-ganged into his service, and as we have already observed, he has sometimes been criticised for the burdens he imposed upon his people in this way (cf 1 Kings 12:3). This is a fair point, but over against it we need to remember this: Solomon raised this great levy for peaceful purposes. It was not for war and conquest, but for the purposes of peaceful construction and expansion throughout the nation. One has only to think of the staggering sums that the great nations of the world spend today on stockpiling nuclear arms for destruction, and the enormous burden of taxation borne by nations for this purpose, to realise that Solomon apparently succeeded in doing what twentieth century man has signally failed to do - namely, to exploit the nation's wealth in the interests of peace and prosperity, so that Israel became a byword in the ancient world. And this was achieved because, for all its faults, his was a God-centred reign (this is the significance of what is described in 12-16). He recognized the truth expressed by the Psalmist that 'except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it'. This has all too clearly been forgotten today. So great is the contrast between the old and the new,

45) 9:1-12

This is the final chapter in the Chronicler's account of Solomon's reign (following this we have the final section of his work, in which he deals with the kings of Judah, from Rehoboam to Zedekiah and the Captivity). The words of our Lord "Solomon and all his glory" would be an apt title for what we read in these verses. The fact that the Queen of Sheba should visit Solomon at all bears witness to the amazing rise to fame and prosperity which Israel had experienced over the years. Israel had been known in the past as a despised people. Yet, in accordance with the promises, God had raised her to a position of eminence among the nations. To look back to the days of the Exodus, with a people beset, oppressed and low-spirited, and compare them with the glory that was Solomon's, is to gain some idea of what God can do in His sovereign grace with men. This must have been a tremendous witness to His faithfulness, and could not but have impressed neighbouring peoples, the more so when it had been so clear that Israel's leaders, particularly David and Solomon, has sought to live under the leadership of, and in submission to, God. Modern parallels can be seen in the earlier history of our land, and the undoubted influence Scotland as a people has had in the past. Scots character in older days was no fiction, and it was certainly derived from the strong and vital religious background of our covenanting forefathers in the 17th and 18th centuries, not only in religious life, but also in trade, commerce and industry. Sadly, Scotland like Israel of old made the mistake in subsequent generations of living on her moral and spiritual capital in such an improvident way that bankruptcy was inevitable. The lessons of history are often the most neglected of all.

46) 9:1-12

We should pause for a moment to consider once again the Chronicler's purpose in presenting this picture. We have repeatedly pointed out that what we read in Chronicles is not simply history (although it is, of course, historical). There has been a selective choice, because the writer has been intent on making a particular point, and showing the significance of this people whom God had taken up. Here we see, as it were, the full flowering of that purpose which he wishes to unfold. It is as if he were saying, "Look at Solomon's glory. This is what God all along intended when He chose His people, and covenanted and promised that He would make them this. Look now at this picture, and see that He did it." We should bear in mind the first readers of this Chronicle, the returned exiles of Ezra's and Nehemiah's day, low-spirited and apt to sit back in despondency, when things were difficult for them. The Chronicler is saying to them. "Look what our God did then. He can do it again, for you. Therefore be up and doing. Trust such a God." This is the point that is being made; and when we look thus 'behind the scenes' and see the purpose of the picture that is presented, it becomes wonderfully eloquent - and up-to-date also. As a nation, we are in much need of such a spur to our flagging fortunes.

47) 9:1-12

The Queen of Sheba, then, hears of the fame of Solomon, and came to prove him with hard questions. Sheba was the area of South Arabia, the Persian Gulf region (location of the rich oil-sheikdoms of modern times). Her coming, her being drawn by the fame of Solomon reminds us of part of the king's great prayer in 6:32,33, which speaks of the stranger coming from afar 'for Thy great name's sake'. Here is the 'magnetic power' of a reign in which God was pleased to dwell. People heard that the living God was with this king and people, and had made him great, and wanted to come and see. This must ever be an integral part of Christian witness, for fellowships and individuals alike. When God is in the midst, people will somehow get to know about it and will come. One recalls the wonderful words in Mark 2:1, 2, "And it was noised that He (Jesus) was in the house. And straightway many were gathered together". Why, of course: His presence cannot be hid, and where Jesus is, people will come to seek Him. This needs to be true, in measure, of our lives. If the indwelling Christ is a reality in our experience, people are going to sense that He is there. They may not know why it is they come, but they will know that there is something drawing and attracting them; and they will come to us, to our bench in the workshop, to our stool in the office, and make some pretext for speaking to us, even if only to ply us with 'hard questions' ('If God is a God of love, why does He allow suffering....?'), for they will sense something in us that poses a challenge to them.

48) 9:1-12

But in what spirit did the Queen of Sheba come? The I.V.F. Bible Dictionary suggests that perhaps one major purpose of her coming was to negotiate a trade agreement with Solomon, to protect her revenues and incomes gathered from the caravans that crossed her territory to and from various eastern countries with their rich wares. But this is hardly the point that the Chronicler is seeking to make, surely. Could there not have been something of the "I have heard that God is with you" in it, a seeking after something, perhaps undefinable, yet definite and decisive, a seeking after the living God? One recalls the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, a man of great authority under the Queen of the Ethiopians, who also came to Jerusalem with a hunger in his heart. Who shall say but that there was a similar spiritual need in the Queen of Sheba's heart? If 6 ff are any indication, there surely was a spiritual need, and the impact of Solomon's witness was such that she was blessed and influenced to confess the name of God: 'Blessed be the Lord thy God....' The Chronicler's purpose is surely to show the fulfilment of God's purposes in Solomon, to make him - and Israel - a light to lighten the Gentiles. This, after all, was the point of their having been called as His peculiar people. The promise of Abraham was "In thee and in thy seed shall all families of the earth be blessed". We have already pointed out what a wide and generous attitude Solomon had in this thinking, so different to the narrow, hidebound, bigoted and prejudiced spirit of later Jewry, for whom even the thought of the Gentiles sharing in the blessings of the kingdom of God was anathema. This, it seems, is what the Chronicler is trying to indicate.

49) 9:1-12

One almost detects a note of astonishment and surprise in the Queen's words in 5, 6, and it is clear that her resultant experience was far greater than she could ever have anticipated. But the content of what follows in 8 is even more astonishing. Is it not remarkable how true and profound are the insights into the real meaning of the situation expressed by outsiders. It would be fair comment to say that for long periods of Israel's history, and even down to our Lord's Day, there were multitudes of Jews who never understood aright what the Queen of Sheba had clearly grasped through Solomon's testimony. They misunderstood their election all along the line. They were spiritually obtuse, but here was a woman, a Gentile, a heathen, who discerned its reality: "God delighted in thee to set thee on thy throne to be king for the Lord thy God". We pointed out in an earlier note that Solomon when speaking about his being king, recognized that the kingdom was a stewardship: it was not his kingdom, But God's, and he was simply the one to whom God had committed this responsibility. This is what the Queen saw. If we ask how or where she could have learned this, we can only say that she learned it from Solomon's instruction, as she communed with him (1) concerning all that was in her heart. It is surely not unlikely that Solomon simply rehearsed all his memorable experiences of God with her - the vision, the gift of wisdom, the long history of the preparation for the building of the Temple. Nor should we under-estimate the importance and significance of this tremendous encounter. Who shall say what happened or did not happen, in terms of spiritual impact? We must not forget what Jesus Himself said of her (Matt 12:42) as He rebuked the people of his own generation for not responding to Him: she came, while they failed to do so. The implication of His words is very striking, is it not?

50) 9:1-12

The whole incident can, of course, and has been spiritualised to give a wonderful picture of the coming of the soul to the Saviour, and it is certainly true that the progression unfolded here gives a dramatic and graphic illustration of that mysterious operation. It begins with a true report that we hear 'in the far country', when we are dead in trespasses and sins, a report which commands our interest and attention, encouraging us to make further enquiry. When men hear, through the preaching of the gospel, of the glory and wisdom of Christ, their hearts are inclined towards Him, and they come; and having come they testify, like the Queen, that it was a true report that they had heard. One is reminded of the incident of the Woman of Samaria in John 4, when the men of Samaria said that they believed not because of the woman's saying but because they had heard Christ themselves. So it was with the Queen and so it is with all who come to Christ. First, the message is heard with the hearing of faith, then we come, and we taste and see that the Lord is good; then we realise, as she did, that the half had not been told us. The reality proves so much greater than the report of it. We can never hope to plumb the depths of Christ's love and grace when first we come to Him - all eternity will be too short in which to do that!

51) 9:1-12

Two further 'typical' applications of the story may be made. The Queen came 'to prove Solomon with hard questions', questions about life that had baffled and perplexed her, and she found that Solomon could answer them all. And then we in our frailty, burdened with many things, come to Christ, we find that He answers all our need, and bears all our burdens. There is no problem which He cannot solve for us. He is made unto us wisdom (1 Cor 1:30). It is a wonderful thing - and this is something one has seen over the years - to see mixed-up, confused and even disturbed people coming among us, and being willing to sit under the ministry, and seeing them, over a period of time, getting sorted out, straightened out, and made into new creatures in Christ. We should bless God for the lives that have been rehabilitated and healed in this way. Then, we are also told, in 12, that Solomon gave the Queen all her desire; and in like fashion, when the soul comes to Christ, it finds its deepest yearnings fulfilled out of the King's royal bounty. There is nothing - nothing - that Christ will withhold from those He elects to bless. As Solomon himself was to point out in Eccles 3:11 God has set eternity in man's heart, and only the eternal, infinite love of Christ can answer the deeps in our soul. The words spoken by the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son have a real application in this connection: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine". That is what God says to us, in Christ.

52) 9:13-31

As we read through the remainder of the chapter, we begin to appreciate what our Lord meant when He spoke of 'Solomon in all his glory'. It is an astounding, even fabulous, picture of prosperity and wellbeing. Never before, not even in David's time, had Israel achieved such eminence as a nation, and since this is directly attributed in the Scriptures to the faithfulness of God's promise to His people and to Solomon's dedication to His purposes, it enshrines a spiritual principle which we can apply in two ways. First of all, the message for us today is that righteousness exalteth a nation. True prosperity flows from God-fearing and from submission to the Divine will. If ever a lesson needed to be learned, that is our need today. "Where there is no vision, the people perish". In the chapters which follow this, we witness the steady decline of Israel from the pinnacle of greatness to the very dregs of shame; and doubtless, if people had been told about it in Solomon's day, they would not have believed that such a magnificence could possibly crumble away. But it did in much the same way, and for the same kind of reasons, as our own nation has fallen from its pinnacle of moral and material greatness to the woeful and pathetic situation in which we find ourselves today. There are those who deride such an analysis as simplistic; but it happens to be the biblical testimony as to the reason for national decline. So we come back once more to the prior necessity for moral and spiritual regeneration on the national level. This is the need of our time, and it can come only through moral and spiritual agencies, not political and economic measures. Without a spiritual awakening on a national level, we shall not only not recover economic and industrial strength, we shall sink even lower. That is the prospect before us.

53) 9:13-31

The second point is this: the glory that was Solomon's is an illustration of the spiritual wealth that is ours in the promise of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and it may be tapped through obedience and submission to His good and perfect will. After all, God chose to bless Solomon in this particular, material way because it was in His sovereign purpose so to do, for a testimony to the nations. That He chooses in general to bless the saints with spiritual riches is likewise in His will, nay, indeed, it is the fruition of His will in them and for them. The principle is the same in both cases, which stand in relation to one another as shadow and substance, and the condition is always the same too (it is unfortunately true that some believers confuse the one with the other, and would prefer the shadowy material riches to the substantial spiritual wealth God delights to give). But if a man is prepared to stand where Solomon stood -and we have seen in these past chapters just where he was prepared to stand in submission to the will of God and in obedience to His word -he will surely inherit the spiritual riches of Christ. This is an unalterable rule of spiritual life. Righteousness exalting a nation, and obedience as the touchstone of true spiritual wealth - these are the lessons writ large across the pages of the Old Testament by the Chronicler for us to learn, in the nation, in the Church, and in individual life.

54) 10:1-19

With this chapter we come to the fourth and final section of the Chronicler's survey of Old Testament history. From this point to the end of the book he covers the entire remaining history of the monarchy, from the death of Solomon and the accession of his son Rehoboam, to the captivity in Babylon in 586 BC, and the death of Zedekiah. Since we are at a new point of departure in this section, it will be useful to make some introductory comments about it. First of all, this section of Old Testament history is certainly a very complex one, and it is often difficult to keep track of all the various reigns. But at least it is not so difficult in 2 Chronicles as it is in 1 and 2 Kings, and for this reason: 1 and 2 Kings deal with both the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern, Judah, whereas 2 Chronicles deals exclusively with the southern kingdom. The Chronicler is not interested in the northern kingdom: to him it was the break-away, apostate kingdom that should never have been, and he concentrates on the Davidic line, and on Judah. This makes for simplicity. He is concerned with the religious history of the line and dynasty of David. Even so, however, it is a complicated picture, and hard and persistent study is necessary in order to get a clear and coherent picture of this particular period of the history of God's people.

55) 10:1-19

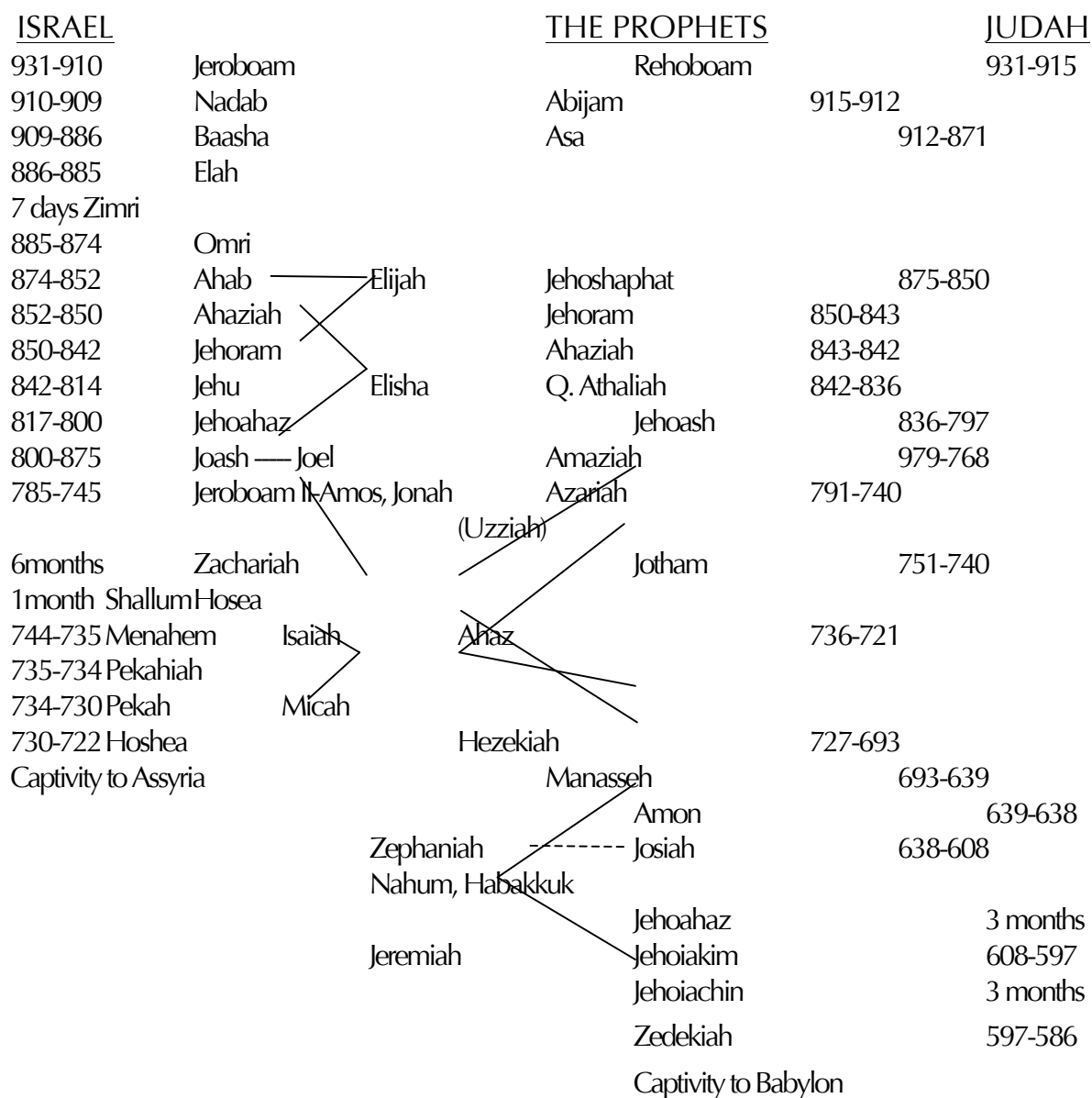
It is hardly possible to understand the message of the Old Testament adequately without having a real grasp of what went on from the death of Solomon to the time of the Captivity, a period of some 350 years, for it was a period of immense and fateful importance and significance, and withal, the period in which most of the prophets exercised their ministry. It is very wonderful - and significant - that this should be the time when the prophetic witness should have arisen. It almost seems as though the prophetic activity was accentuated and intensified, the worse the nation got. Surely it was a case of "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against them" (Isa 59:19). This is surely some indication of the concern of God for His people; it was also - just as surely - an urgent warning. When God was speaking so loudly and clearly, was it not a time of danger, and was there not much need for the people to listen and pay heed?

It is a great help in the understanding of the Old Testament to be able to 'slot in' the various prophetic ministries into the various reigns; and the Table that appears in tomorrow's Note will serve this purpose. The dates are only approximate, but they are reasonably accurate, and sufficient for our study.

56) 10:1-19

THE KINGS OF THE DIVIDED KINGDOM

(after the death of Solomon)



57) 10:1-19

Another point of considerable importance is this: there were no good kings in the northern kingdom at all. Without exception we read in 1 and 2 Kings that they did evil in the sight of the Lord. In the southern kingdom, however, there were several.: Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah all exercised good and wholesome reigns, and we shall see that they clearly acted as a brake upon the downward rush of the kingdom to ruin and disaster, and again and again turned away the Divine anger and delayed the final judgment of captivity upon God's people. The fact that there were no good kings in the north is one direct reason why they were taken into captivity by Assyria 150 years or more before the southern kingdom. In the perspective of history, it is something that good reigns can postpone judgment for one and a half centuries. That is not a little thing.

In this connection, it may be of interest to know that the Earl of Shaftesbury, the great reformer and philanthropist of the 19th century, in the words of his most recent biographer, G. Battiscombe, "cherished a particular attachment to the second book of Chronicles.'The older I grow, the more I love that book', he had written as far back as 1854; 'it should be studied, weighed and prayed over hour by hour by every man in public life'. Now, twenty years later, he expressed a wish that 'England would read our current history in the light of the second book of Chronicles', presumably so that the English people might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the fate of those rulers who did evil in the sight of the Lord". And how much more pertinent and relevant for the twentieth century!

58) 10:1-19

Now to the text itself! The Chronicler gives a briefer description of the division of the kingdom than does the parallel account in 1 Kings 11, to which we need to turn in order to understand the reference to Jeroboam in 2 and to the word of the Lord spoken by Ahijah to Jeroboam in 15. The Chronicler assumes knowledge of the fact that Ahijah (1 Kings 11:26-40) had made a remarkable prophecy and given a remarkable promise from God to Jeroboam, about establishing a new dynasty in his family, and that this led Solomon to try to kill him, necessitating Jeroboam's flight to Egypt for safety. The subsequent history of the situation shows how lamentably Jeroboam failed in the conditions attached to God's promise, and how he became notorious as the man 'who made Israel to sin'.

It is significant to see that when the glory departed from Solomon's life, he became just as bad as Saul had become, when he developed a murderous hatred against David. Solomon did precisely the same, with Jeroboam, seeking to kill him, to nullify the prophecy. But when God speaks, His Word is always fulfilled, and not all the scheming and plotting in the hearts of men will be of any avail. Solomon's intention to dispose of Jeroboam came to precisely nothing. The division of the kingdom, then, was a judgment of God on the sin and declension of Solomon. Significantly, Solomon's declension is attributed in 1 Kings 11:1 ff to his involvement with 'many strange women', and this can surely be traced back to David's indiscipline with his wives. Like father, like son. But what was 'contained' in one generation ran riot in the next, and in the next again it reaped a bitter and terrible harvest. The kingdom was divided and permanently fractured.

59) 10:1-19

The immediate circumstances of this rupture are recorded in this chapter. And the immediate issue was what Rehoboam's attitude was going to be to the approach of the people to him (3 ff). Reading between the lines it becomes fairly clear that the immense programme of levies and taxation imposed by Solomon on the nation in order to extend its boundaries and make his empire magnificent, had become an intolerable burden to the people, who were no longer prepared to stand for the injustice of it. We have seen in our earlier studies that Solomon used his wealth constructively and positively for peaceful purposes, and there is no doubt that there was a very great deal that was good and commendable in his reign. But there is a narrow line between justice and oppression, and when things go wrong spiritually, that line can very easily be crossed. People will bear burdens gladly (or resignedly) when things are right, but when things go wrong, they become impatient of the burdens they bear, and want to shrug them off. This is exactly what happened. What they put up with in Solomon's time they were simply not prepared to tolerate in Rehoboam's.

But Rehoboam did not seem to be aware that a time of crisis was upon him: he was insensitive to the point of obtuseness so far as the older men's advice given him - they saw how the wind was blowing and sought to warn him of the consequences of continuing in his father's ways. But Rehoboam contemptuously brushed their counsel aside, and opted for his young courtiers' suggestions - with consequences that were entirely predictable. The rupture took place, and the unity of the people of God was permanently fractured.

60) 10:1-19

There is a sense in which Rehoboam's decision was 'fated' to be the wrong one. The scholars tell us he was about forty years old at this time. His early manhood had been lived in the decadent period of Solomon's reign, during the 'downward movement'. It was in the earlier years that the upward, spiritual thrust took place, and it was when that had already begun to decline that Rehoboam would have been most open to critical influences. He breathed the atmosphere of his father's immoralities, his wild excesses, his strange women; and it was surely predictable that the young prince's moral fibre would be sapped and broken down until there was nothing of moral integrity left on which to stand. He was the hapless victim of his father's moral and spiritual declension. Not that that absolved him from all responsibility for what he proceeded to do, but it serves to explain why he found his young courtiers' advice so attractive. It was a 'couldn't care less' attitude, the kind of irresponsibility that is the hallmark of national decadence - a frightening thought for us today, who see so much of it in our contemporary society!

In another sense also, however, this rupture had to come. As 15 says 'the cause was of God'. The monarchy as such had in its very constitution the seeds of disintegration within itself, because it is something that ought never to have been, as the solemn passage in 1 Samuel 8:4-22 makes plain. The people were determined to have a king. And they had their kings, and the kings finally brought them down into the captivity of Assyria and Babylon. In spite of all the glory and magnificence of the reigns of David and Solomon (and God did bless them wondrously, within the limits that they placed upon Him by demanding a king), how could it be otherwise'

61) 11:1-4

Rehoboam's instinctive reaction to Jeroboam's coronation in the north was to prepare to contest the secession of the northern tribes, but Shemaiah the prophet's warning stayed his hand, and he was dissuaded from attacking the rebel king. The wonder is that Rehoboam should have heeded him, when earlier he had been so insensitive to the counsel of his elders (10:13ff). Now, it seems, he had learned some sense. It may be that his confidence and easy-going complacency had been so rudely shattered by the startling events that had followed his own brash and ill-advised words to the people (1:14) that he was now prepared to accept a spiritual reading of the situation. For all his weakness and waywardness, Rehoboam has imparted a great and crucially important lesson to posterity, and one that we are so often unwilling to learn, either in individual or in national life. The truth is that we often rebel furiously and stubbornly against adverse circumstances that buffet us, determined to thwart what seems to us to be the cruel fate that dogs our footsteps. But in so doing, we may be rebelling against God's purposes. It is a dangerous thing to attempt to twist events to suit our own will when God has decreed otherwise. It is possible to spend most of our days - and some do! - fruitlessly kicking against circumstances which, if accepted as gracious limitations imposed by God, would be the making of us. God had said, through the prophet. 'This thing is done of Me'; and what this meant for Rehoboam was that he must accept the limitations that his sin - and his people's sin. - had placed upon him, and learn to live within them, until better days should come. That is the message: is God speaking it to us today, as a nation, as individuals?

62) 11:5-17

Two kinds of fortifications are spoken of in these verses. On the one hand, in 5-12, we see Rehoboam building up his defences to safeguard his people from incursion both from the north and from the south - for Egypt was an ever present threat to his security. It was a necessary exercise indeed, and a common-sense precaution, but one cannot help remarking that it was now a kingdom very much 'cut down to size', and shrunken from its former glory under Solomon. But there was also another kind of fortification, and this was accomplished by God. In 13ff we are told how the priesthood in the northern parts had suffered pressure and persecution at the hands of Jeroboam the rebel king, and were forced to leave the country for the southern kingdom. This large-scale emigration of the priests and Levites was rather like the movement of the Pilgrim Fathers from England to America in the 17th century, or - to take a biblical illustration - the scattering of the Jerusalem believers in Acts 8, following the persecution at the time of Stephen's martyrdom, and with the same attendant spiritual thrust (16,1.7). This spiritual vitality seems to be connected with the submission to the Divine will referred to in. 4, and Rehoboam's acceptance of the limitations God had placed on him. It is always very significant, is it not, when God brings His priests and Levites into a situation, for it shows where the real spiritual power lies - in the presence of the godly. They, for their part, saw where they ought to be (16), because they realised there was something terribly wrong in the north, and their presence was a source of strength and encouragement to Rehoboam for three whole years, and things went well in the kingdom. It was a time of hope, but alas, not destined to continue for very long, as we shall see in the next Note.

63) 11:18-23

These verses make a fateful, sad reading, for they describe the declension of the royal family from a state of spiritual ascendancy to one of moral and spiritual backsliding and decay. The first verse of the next chapter really belongs to this passage, for it simply articulates what is implicit in 18-23. One is prompted to use some such phrase as 'Like father, like son, like grandson', for the same fatal weakness which began with David, and laid such a hold on Solomon comes to its fruition in Rehoboam. The lesson here is solemnly clear: we do not live unto ourselves, and uncorrected indiscipline in us may spell something tragically disastrous in the generations that follow us. The reference in 23 to his 'wise dealing' is simply to the dispersion of his family among the fenced cities of Benjamin and Judah, a precaution he took against the possibility of any of his sons rebelling against their brother Abijah, whom he had designated as his successor to the throne. In those turbulent days, it was by no means unknown for brothers to rise against brothers in dark intrigue, to do them despite. How much better it would have been if the sound practical wisdom displayed by Rehoboam in this chapter, in 5ff, and in 23, had been allied to a consistently dedicated life! For the one is not a substitute for the other.

64) 12:1-12

We should notice the pattern that is unfolded for us. God in judgment (11:1-4) had limited Rehoboam and said, 'Live within these limitations, and I will bless you.' And for three years God honoured His promise and blessed him. Rehoboam was established and made strong - not in anywise like Solomon in all his glory (that was now a thing in the past) - but in a limited way. Then the same fatal, tragedy happened once more: he forsook the law of the Lord and all Israel with him (1). The 'because' in 2 is significant: this is the real reason for the crisis. Doubtless there were other reasons, political or economic, but the incursion of the Egyptian army took place 'because they had transgressed against the Lord'. But Rehoboam is not left alone in his declension, for Shemaiah the prophet once again has a word for him. One cannot but be impressed with the courage of this man who dared to confront the king and his nobles with the blunt truth about the situation, confront them, moreover with very considerable impact, as we see in 6, for they humbled themselves and confessed themselves in the wrong. And when the Lord saw the humbling, a word of respite was given them (7). There is something immensely hopeful about all this. If, in such a situation, a response of this nature was possible, ought it not to encourage us to believe in the power of prayer for our own land and its leaders, that they might become amenable to spiritual challenge, and have their hearts opened and made sensitive to the word of the Lord? And should we not likewise pray that God will enable His Church to speak such a word of power in dark and critical days?

65) 12:1-12

We should note, however, the significance of the words 'some deliverance' in 7, and 'nevertheless' in 8. It was not to be a complete reversal of their misfortune, but only partial, and they were to learn the hard way the difference between God's service and the service of the oppressor. The reduction, and the devaluation, of the glory of Solomon's kingdom in 9ff makes grim and sad reading, and we see in this picture a parable whose message had been repeated again and again in Israel's history. Their glory departed from them because they had departed from God, and the replacement of gold shields by brass is an eloquent indication of the devaluation that took place. This is always what happens when men turn from God. The enemy of souls steals all that is precious and fine in individual and national character, and base metal has to do duty in its place. One has only to think of the lives of those who used to, but now no longer, give the things of God highest place to realise the truth of this. Mention was made in an earlier Note of the Earl of Shaftesbury, concerning whom it could truly be said that, whatever his merits or demerits, he was a man of God, a man of deep personal piety and integrity, who stood for something precious in terms of national character in the 19th century. When one thinks of this, and then considers what we as a nation have now exchanged for the moral leadership of the free world, the message of these verses stands out only too plainly. There is a price to be paid, even in the context of forgiveness and restoration, for unfaithfulness.

66) 12:13-16

These verses give us a final word about the rather inglorious reign of Rehoboam. The word 'strengthened' in 13 refers to his recovery after the invasion of Shishak referred to in the previous passage. When we bear in mind that that invasion took place in the fifth year of his reign, we realise that, having re-established himself -in however reduced circumstances in a devalued kingdom - he did not really come to terms with his new situation in any realistic manner during the remaining twelve years of his reign. The reason for this is given in 14 - he did evil 'because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord' - that is to say, he was only desultory and half-hearted in maintaining the spirit of humbling mentioned in 6ff. He was lacking in a basic determination to be wholehearted in cleaving to the Lord. This is the crunch-point. It is not enough to be sincere and well-meaning in our desire to be right with God: a sincere and well-meaning man may compromise himself by being less than wholly committed. Scripture says "If with all your hearts ye truly seek Him, ye shall ever truly find Him", but the emphasis must be placed on the words 'with all your hearts'. It was here that Rehoboam failed, and it is here that we also may fail. Does 14 describe our lives?

67) 13:1-22

We come in this chapter to the reign of Abijah, Rehoboam's son, the second king of the fragmented kingdom of Judah, and it should be read through in its entirety in the first instance, since it records one episode in particular of his reign. We shall look at various aspects of it in the Notes that follow. This Abijah is called Abijam in 1 Kings 15. When we look at this parallel passage, we see two things: one, that the writer of 1 Kings seems to have seen nothing of interest in his reign to record, for he dismisses it in a few brief verses; the other, that it says that Abijam 'walked in all the sins of his father which he had done before him: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father' (1 Kings 15:1-8). But here, in 2 Chronicles 13, we have a different picture. The record is longer, for one thing; and for another, the story recounted here shows Abijah in a different, and more favourable, light. How, then, to reconcile these two different accounts? In fact, we can say a good deal. For one thing, we should remember that the Chronicler is concerned to present the kingdom of Judah in the most favourable light possible, and this, in measure, explains his particular record of Abijah's reign. He looks on it in the most hopeful kind of way. He wants it to be good. By this we do not mean that he falsifies or misrepresents the truth of the matter. Rather, he emphasises anything that was good in it. This is important, as a spiritual attitude. We ought to be generous in our estimates of people. One thinks, in this connection, of David's generous praise of Saul at his death (2 Sam 1:23) in spite of all that that deranged and embittered monarch had done to him. Clearly, he could have said some very different things, if he had been so disposed. This serves to explain the different emphases in the two accounts given of Abijah's reign. More than this in the next Note.

68) 13:1-22

If what was said in yesterday's Note does not seem to answer the question about the seeming discrepancy in the two accounts, it can be pointed out that the discrepancy is not necessarily a contradiction. All that has happened is that the Chronicler has recounted one period of Abijah's life, perhaps in the early part of his reign, when he did in fact walk with God. This is perfectly feasible, even in the context of saying that taken as a whole, his was one of the evil reigns in Judah. Let us consider an illustration that may make this point clear: we hear of a minister who preaches an unbiblical, heretical message, and who is branded as a modernist. We all know the strictures that can be passed on such an one - sometimes very uncharitable strictures indeed. But we do not know if he has always been like that; indeed, someone may say to us: 'I knew that man years ago, and he preached an evangelical message, and led souls to Christ'. Now, dependant on one's point of view, and the standpoint from which we were to record such a man's life and ministry, we might be like 1 Kings, and record - truly - that his life had failed. But we could also, and with truth, record something very different. And we might not be in a position to know all the circumstances in such a case. We would not know, for example, whether his zeal and enthusiasm had been dampened and destroyed, and his heart broken, by devilish opposition to his ministry by people in his congregation. It may be a pity, even a tragedy, that he should have so changed, but is this a matter for criticism and harsh judgment, or compassion and understanding and prayer?

69) 13:1-22

If we had only the 1 Kings record, what could we say of Abijah's reign? Here is a comment from the Notes on 1 Kings 15:1-8: "The significance of the passage lies in 4, where the 'lamp in Jerusalem' refers to his son Asa, who became one of the few really good kings in the southern kingdom. This was an act of God's grace, to raise up such an one, and it had no relation to Abijah's achievements, but was for David's sake. This is important, and it is necessary for this fact to be recorded. What we have here is that the judgment of God was stayed, at least temporarily, for the sake of someone now long dead! It may be far truer than we realise that God's chastisements are turned away from us because of the prayers and faithfulness of our forefathers, and that when in times of crisis danger finally passes, it does so not because He favours us or regards our behaviour with any equanimity, but because He has respect for the prayers and tears of those who in the past honoured Him in individual and national life. In our blindness however, we assume that all is well, not realising that the goodness of God is meant to lead us to repentance. We should carry such principles from God's Word into contemporary life far more than we do. We look for relaxation of the cold war and the deadly armaments race; if it should come, let us not presume to see in this the favour of God upon us, but look rather in another direction for the explanation. There is little in our national life at the present moment that could encourage a holy God to side with us!"

70) 13:1-12

We may, then, take what is recorded here as having reference to the earlier part of Abijah's reign, before his life was marked by declension. The scene is the state of war between Judah and Israel under Jeroboam's rule in the north. The disposition of the two armies, as we see in 3, was very different: Judah was outnumbered by two to one. But it was no ordinary battle, but the Lord's, and this makes everything different. Abijah's address in 4-12 was a testimony to where he stood, and where Judah stood in the matter, on God's side, and in the declared and revealed will and purpose of God. What is stressed is the rightness of the divine order and pattern in Judah - hence the reference in 10, 11 to the Aaronic priesthood and the ceremonial service according to the Levitical law. Quite clearly, this is held up as the source of divine favour upon Judah, and the explanation of the victory that came to them. It was because they were living by the Book, just as David, and Solomon after him, had done. This is the point the Chronicler is underlining.

Though it says in 4 that Abijah addressed Jeroboam and all Israel, he was really speaking to the people, distinguishing between the leader and the led - an important distinction in a situation where disaffection and rebellion have taken place. And he is very plain: he points out first of all the true situation as to the house of Judah. The Lord's purposes, he says, are that Judah should have the line of succession, and it is in face of Judah's calling to be the Lord's people that the action of Jeroboam has taken place. Therefore it is doomed to failure from the outset. It is as if Abijah had said, "What do you take God for? Do you think He is going to let His work be jeopardised?" Also, since this is so, Abijah indicates the true nature of what they are doing. They are not fighting against Judah: they are fighting against God and His kingdom (8, 12). He is, in fact, arguing from a biblical standpoint.

71) 13:13-22

While Abijah was addressing these words to the people of the northern kingdom, and declaiming from the mountain top, the wily Jeroboam, who was a very astute soldier (13), was busy compromising Judah's position, and by the time Abijah had finished, he found himself surrounded. This could be interpreted variously. On the one hand, Jeroboam may have been saying contemptuously to his chiefs of staff, "Let this 'bible-thumper' get on with his sermon, and when he is finished he will find he has sermonised himself into a disaster". Perhaps it may be thought that Abijah was a bit fulsome and self-conscious in his preaching, and that the battle-field was hardly a place to be preaching sermons. Would he not have been wiser looking to any possible ambush? But the fact of the matter is that God vindicated him (14-20). This is surely an illustration of the spiritual principle that 'the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds'. From a human point of view, Jeroboam may have been the really practical one, but without question Abijah stood in the true spiritual succession. One has only to think of the conquest of Jericho, for example, to see the parallel. One of the lessons we learn here is that though it may seem on occasion to be foolish and ill-advised to lean so heavily upon spiritual categories, nevertheless in the Lord's battles and in His warfare, we are always best when we fight His way, when we are taking a stand on His truth, as Abijah did here.

72) 13:13-22

Judah was momentarily dismayed and discomfited when they discovered that they were well and truly ambushed; but this is where faith began to operate in practical terms. The operative word comes in 18, 'They relied on the Lord God of their fathers', and the nature of that reliance is described in 14, 15, the cry to the Lord, the sounding of the trumpets by the priests, and the shouting of the men of Judah. Such was the pattern - one, we may note, having real similarities to that at the walls of Jericho, with the same drill, and the same reliance on God. The word 'rely' in 18 is elsewhere translated as 'trust'. To trust in God in this sense is to lean on Him, and their leaning is expressed in the cry of 14. The nature of their cry is not described, and this is surely significant, for it put the emphasis not on the cry but on the One to Whom that cry was raised. And any cry can be an expression of reliance on Him. It does not have to be of a certain calibre, just as faith, in this sense, does not have to be of a certain calibre. It is not the strength of our faith that brings us victory, but faith in His strength. Weak faith in a strong God is sufficient, and even a despairing cry to a mighty, omnipotent Redeemer will be heard.

Another point should be noted: it almost seems as if some sort of 'drill' is indicated in 14, 15 -the cry, the trumpets, the shout, as if the one triggered off the other. There is certainly great value in a 'spiritual drill' in times of crisis, things that one does almost automatically, and without having to think much, as being the right course to follow - this is what sets faith going, so to speak, enabling us to overcome. Not that we should ever think of this as a technique - God forbid! - but rather, when we are in His will (cf 10, 'we have not forsaken Him') then faith, undergirt by obedience, begins to wax mighty and prevail. The tragedy is that Abijah did not keep to that happy and blessed road, He started well - this is what the Chronicler is pointing out - but he fell away, as 1 Kings 15 sadly records.

73) 14:1-2

Asa, the son of Abijah, was one of the good kings of Judah. Indeed, his was one of the outstandingly good reigns in the southern kingdom, and as might be expected from the Chronicler's viewpoint - one to which a considerable amount of detailed attention is given (three chapters are devoted to it). The first two verses constitute a summary of the reign, and what follows them expands and elaborates it. We should note first of all what is said in 1b about the land having quiet for ten years. This is directly associated in the Chronicler's mind with the fact that Asa did what was good and right in the sight of the Lord. This is the essential and fundamental simplicity of his viewpoint. There are those, of course, who would regard this as simplistic and facile, and maintain that this is much too naive a way to interpret history, but we need to remember that this is the inspired Word of God, and therefore God's view of the situation. If ever a lesson was writ large on the pages of Old Testament history, it is that it pays to be good and righteous; and when monarchs are neither, they tend to suffer for it, and the nation suffers likewise. This being so, we need to ask why there seems to be such a blindness and insensitiveness to this truth in modern days. The one thing that politicians are apparently not prepared to countenance is that there is a necessary connection between integrity of life and true national prosperity, whether economic or industrial. The Earl of Shaftesbury saw it, in the 19th century, as we have already seen (cf Note on 10:1-19), but who among our statesmen in the 20th has shown any sign of awareness that this is so?

74) 14:3-5

From what is said in 3ff it is clear that a widespread work of reformation took place, as Asa swept away so many offensive things from the society of his day (the kind of parallel today would be the clearing of Soho-type sex-shops and brothels, the sleazy X-certificate film industry, black magic and occultism, and so on). If we look further on to 15:17, we see that a qualification is added to the programme of reform - 'the high places were not removed' (cf also 1 Kings 15:14). There is no real discrepancy here; rather, it is expressive and indicative on the one hand of the king's desire and intention to sweep away everything unworthy, and the only partial fulfilment of it, on the other hand, by his people. Doubtless his commands would be obeyed to the letter in Jerusalem and its environs, but perhaps in the more remote areas of the land the old order might still persist; and in this sense it would be only a partial reform. As one commentator points out, this is the basic difference between reform and revival: ultimately it is not possible to legislate for spiritual renewal, since renewal can come only from within. This is not, of course, to say that all legislation is in vain, but it has its limitations. Some African countries, for example, take a far stricter view of the evil of permissiveness than we do in this country, and have legislated accordingly at government level against such things. But when the last word is spoken, one has to recognize that legislation has its limitations. By contrast, what we will read in the next chapter represents a more spontaneous inward movement, and therefore something on a deeper level, which took place later in Asa's reign.

75) 14:6-8

We should notice the association of ideas in 6, 7 between the thought of rest and quiet in the land and the building of fenced cities. Here is a lesson about the right and proper use of quiet and peace. There is a parable here of very practical import. One recalls the remarkable words in Eccles. 12:1, 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not...' - that is to say, when everything is peace and quiet and free from troubling. That is the time to be doing positive, constructive things. Rest from war should give leisure for building defences, redeeming the time, buying up the opportunity. It is not difficult to apply this in spiritual terms. For example, if we are within reach of a biblical ministry, we ought to make the most of it while we can, for times may come when it is no longer available. Asa did not fritter away his days of peace, but used them wisely, building up defences against a possible time of need; and we ought to be doing likewise, building up defences in the spiritual life against a day when it may be very different with us. One has only to think, in this connection, of how it is with a man called to the service of the gospel. With such a man, the time comes all too quickly when he is no longer able, and no longer has the opportunity, to sit under the ministry of the Word. How sad, then, if during his time of training, he becomes so involved in all manner of activist projects - all good and worthy and necessary in themselves - that he spends all available time on them because there seems to be so much needing to be done, instead of attending to the one thing needful for him, namely the building of defences, and the taking in and absorbing of the teaching of the Word that alone will make him an effective and fruitful servant of God. The words in 7, 'We have sought....He hath given' are very eloquent here. Where the seeking is right and wholehearted, the giving will be bountiful. The tragedy is that the seeking should often be so fitful, and so desultory.

76) 14:9-15

We come in these verses to a situation of war, and we should note the link between the lessons of 1-8 and Asa's reaction here. When peace time is not utilised wisely, the attitude in wartime is inevitably conditioned by this unwisdom. It was because of his right reaction to the time of peace that his attitude in 9ff was so positive and fruitful. The one tells on the other. Asa's approach to the situation is impressive: on the one hand, he cried his concern to God, and on the other, he came right out in an attitude of faith and trust which breathed a holy confidence in the God of battles (11-13) - we shall look at these verses in more detail presently - and which has a great deal to teach us. We are not always, as Christians, under pressure: there are times when the waters are reasonably smooth and still, but this is just as much a test as times of storm, since how we behave and react when the waters are calm and peaceful will ultimately condition our reactions when the storms do blow up. One reason why people tend to go under in time of pressure is that in the days of calm they have failed to 'stock up' and build defences; they have failed to do what they ought to have been doing. They were slacking spiritually, and did not redeem the time. To show the kind of reaction Asa displayed here one has to be a certain kind of person. Cause and effect are inexorable in the spiritual life.

77) 14:9-15

The A.V. rendering of 11 is somewhat uncertain and confusing, and the modern translations are particularly helpful. The NIV reads, 'Lord, there is no-one like you to help the powerless against the mighty', and this makes good sense, although it is more a paraphrase than a literal translation. The sense is surely that no other than God can help in an unequal battle, that is, help the weaker side. Only God can adjust the difference between the mighty and the weak. The army of the Ethiopians was twice the size of Asa's, and the scales were tipped heavily against him, from every human consideration. But Asa knew his God, and his prayer breathes a confidence that could hardly be denied the answer he sought. The words 'we rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go' are amongst the most stirring and moving in all the Old Testament, and are an encouragement to God's people everywhere as they 'have to right unpopular causes in the world, who are accustomed to be in minorities all their days, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation' (Maclaren). The word 'rest' is a graphic one, meaning 'to lean upon'. It is the same word as in 13:18, where it speaks of relying on the God of their fathers'. It has the force of leaning all one's weakness on God. One commentator points out that the word is used of King Saul after the battle of Mt Gilboa when, wearied and broken and brokenhearted, and about to die, he leaned himself in exhaustion on his spear (2 Sam 1:6). Asa is in effect saying, 'Lord, I am weak like that, and I lean upon Thee'. But resting on God in this way does not make a man immobile. Courageous advance follows real leaning upon God; it galvanises a man to action: We should note Asa's final word in 11: 'Let not man prevail against Thee'. He could have said, as doubtless he meant, 'let not man prevail against me', but what he said was 'against Thee'. There was an identification of his cause with God's. He recognized that this was not really his battle, but the Lord's. This is so important. If we have made God's cause ours, we may count upon it that He will make our cause His; and given this, victory is always sure. So the Lord smote the Ethiopians before Asa (12-15).

78) 15:1-8

The incident referred to in these verses can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it may be taken to refer to the time immediately following the victory of chapter 14, taking 'he went out to meet Asa' (2) to mean after the battle was won, and Asa was returning victoriously to the city. On the other hand, it may be taken as a commentary, explaining the events of chapter 14 - that is to say, we would need to insert it somewhere in 14:1-8, as the underlying explanation of all that happened there. Either way, it is a wonderful passage, rich in spiritual instruction for us. If, as seems likely, we are meant to take it in the first sense, it represents a deeper development than the reformation spoken of in 14:1ff. The prophet Azariah's statement in 2, then, may be taken in this way: 'The Lord was with you, Asa, in the battle because you were with Him; and if you continue to be with him, seeking Him in the way you have been doing, He will continue to be found of you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you'. What follows in 3-6 is an historical retrospect, so to speak, of the law of providence stated in 2. It is certainly true of different periods of Israel's history that these conditions obtained and these words were true, particularly perhaps in the time of the Judges. One thinks of the time when Samuel, the last of the judges, was raised up, when it was said that 'the word of the Lord was precious (a scarce commodity) in those days; there was no open vision' - this exactly matches what is said in 3. Without God, without teaching, without law - what a disastrous combination! And, of course, these things always go together. When teaching is at a discount, law tends to lose out and become discredited. It was precisely because the teaching of the Word of the Lord vanished in Israel that a situation arose of which it could be said (Judg. 21:25) that 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes'. It is only the teaching of the word of the Lord that can undergird law and order.

79) 15:1-1.5

The picture painted by Azariah the prophet in 5, 6 is a grim one indeed. It is these lessons of history that he makes the basis of his exhortation to the king in 7, as if to say, "Do not let the warning I am giving you demoralise you: take a good look at what history teaches, and let this galvanise you into the right kind of action." And Asa took it as an encouragement to press on with his work of reformation (8 ff). That something of a deeper order followed (as has already been suggested) is substantiated by what is said in 9. It could not be hidden that the Lord was in the midst of Judah, and His unmistakeable presence drew people to Him. The feast mentioned in 10 was the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, which significantly commemorated the giving of the law, and hence the entrance of Israel into a covenant relationship with God. So here they renewed the covenant, and bound themselves by a solemn obligation to serve the Lord with all their hearts.

That being said, however, something else needs to be noted: in the passage there is some considerable indefiniteness as to the 'teaching' that was supposed to have been re-introduced, and we need to ask ourselves whether there was, in the event, less emphasis on the teaching of the law than there should have been. The feasts were reinstituted, the priesthood re-established, the altar of God renewed - all this is true, but the renewal tended to centre upon worship and liturgy (all very necessary and proper) but where is the evidence that the people had the law taught to them? This was a significant and fateful under-emphasis.

80) 15:1-15

The covenant into which Asa and his people entered (12) was certainly not lacking in seriousness however, whatever it may have lacked in an emphasis on the teaching of the law. There was a rigour about it, as we see in 13, and a determination, and the measure of that determination was that they felt the covenant to be so important for the good of the land that those who failed of it could not be allowed even to live. In 15 (which should be compared with 4) the people put the prophet's word to the test, and did what he had exhorted them to do: they sought the Lord with their whole desire, and He was found of them, and He gave them rest round about. The totality of that desire is seen in the incident recorded in the final verses of the chapter (16ff). One has only to think of the reverence in which parents were held, and particularly royal parents, in those days to realise how big a thing this was, and how costly, for Asa to have done. Not even his own mother was exempt from the terms of the covenant expressed in 13 - not that she was put to death, but her idolatry, and her unwillingness to have done with it, was summarily and decisively dealt with. There was no respect of persons with Asa. Jesus said, 'If any man hate not his father or his mother, he cannot be My disciple'. Here, in principle, is an instance of Jesus' words. God and His kingdom were put first.

81) 16:1-6

This chapter continues and completes the record of Asa's reign. What is unfolded here follows upon the statement in 15:19. After a considerable time of peace and rest, war came once again to Judah, and Basha, king of Israel besieged Asa, and cut him off from all contact with the outside world (1). The significance of this brief description of what Asa did to extricate himself from his predicament lies in the fact that it is set against the warning and encouragement given by the prophet Azariah in 15:7. It was in face of this exhortation to trust in the living God that Asa did what he did here, showing a complete abandonment of trust in God in favour of scheming and plotting with the heathen king of Syria, Benhadad. This faithless alliance, involving the paying out to Syria of the silver and gold of the sanctuary of the Lord (how could he have thought that that was what it was for?) proved in the event remarkably successful. Basha's threat was dealt with, and the fortification at Ramah was dismantled. This, to some, is all that matters: 'If it works, it is all right'. The end, then, justifies the means. But it was very much not all right. Nothing that represents a failure of faith, and a departure from the principle of trust in God, can ever be all right, however successful it may seem, as Asa was to prove to his cost. This we shall see in the next note.

82) 16:7-14

A very different interpretation is now placed on the 'success' recorded in 1-6. It only needed one sentence from the seer to expose Asa's failure of faith (7) - trust in Syria instead of trust in God was his fault. Put like this it seems all so clear and uncomplicated, and it prompts us to ask why it was that Asa did not see what he was doing. But, of course, when we are immersed in doing what is wrong, we precisely do not see clearly, since sin has a blinding power. It is only later - sometimes much, much later - that we see the fateful error of our way. The seer not only contrasted Asa's loss of faith with his earlier triumph of faith in the war with the Ethiopians (14:9ff), but - even more critical - pointed out that by his approach to Benhadad, apparently so successful in lifting the pressure of Basha from Judah, he had lost what God had really wanted to give him, namely the double victory over Basha and Benhadad of Syria. He gained a tentative and limited victory, but lost what would have been a major triumph of far-reaching significance; and having lost it, he brought a continuance of war upon the land. That is how wrong this apparently right ploy proved to be.

83) 16:7-14

When we fail to trust the Lord, as Asa failed here, we lose what God really wants to give us. The fact is, our sights and our horizons are much too low when we lose faith in God. We are much too easily satisfied. We opt for limited objectives, by questionable means, and think that by achieving them we have justified the means, when all the time by so doing we have effectively prevented God's real will for our lives. This has many and varied lessons for us. When we set our hearts on a particular thing, and try to engineer the means whereby it may become ours, we are in big trouble, because we are acting in unfaith, and we thereby effectively prevent God's good and acceptable will being fulfilled in our lives. It may be said that if Asa had known in advance that God intended to give him victory over Syria he would have acted differently. To be sure: but then, where would faith come in? God does not tell us all His plans for the future, He invites us, nay, commands us - to trust Him. The private in the army is not ordinarily told of his commander-in-chief's strategy and tactics; his job is not to know the plans, but to obey the orders when they come. Asa had had his orders (15:7); and he failed to implement them. That was his tragedy. And all that follows from it in the remainder of the chapter serves to show how considerable that tragedy was.

84) 16:7-14

Spiritual life is often like this, and alas, sometimes irreversibly so. There may come to our lives a major crisis of opportunity which, if we miss, will never come again. This is not, of course, true in every case, because God is gracious and merciful, and if we fail in one regard, He will patiently put us to the test another time; but there are some issues in life in which, if we miss the opportunity, we lose out permanently. One obvious illustration of this irreversible step is seen when a Christian becomes involved with and is determined to marry an unbeliever, in spite of earnest counsel against it and the clear teaching of Scripture - having, doubtless rationalised the whole situation and convinced himself that his case will prove the exception and that God really means the marriage to go on. It is not that the marriage will prove unhappy, for he could well know a great deal of human happiness, which would serve to prove to him that it was of God. But it is in fact very different in reality, for the real, purposive will for that man's life may forever have been frustrated, the Divine plan and directive for him set at naught. He may have gained a limited objective, the satisfaction and desire of his love and, it may be, a happy home and family. But something else will have been lost - God's real, original intention for his life. That will have gone forever. What is done, in this sense, cannot be undone.

85) 16:7-14

The prophet's words to Asa in 9, 'Thou hast done foolishly; therefore from henceforth thou shalt have wars' prompts the question whether, from a spiritual point of view, one reason for the continuing wars and battles in some departments of life might not be avoided, if only truer attitudes of faith were adopted by us. Could this explain some of the conflicts that we pass through as Christians, that God did not intend us to pass through, but were brought about by our own attitudes of faithlessness?

At all events, the king's subsequent reactions were very significant. The prophet's word cut him to the quick, and he resented it as well as refused it. Hanani got the brunt of his anger, and paid dearly for his courage in rebuking the king. But to refuse the Lord's rebuke and chastening leads to further trouble. We see this not only in the change that came over Asa (10) but also, and even more importantly, in the judgment that came upon him later (11, 12). The suggestion seems inescapable that the disease in 12 was a direct consequence, if not of his sin and lack of faith, then certainly of his refusal to acknowledge it and accept the Lord's rebuke. One wrong thing leads to another: sinning starts a chain reaction, and we are obliged to go on sinning, and we may land in all sorts of complicated and tragic situations before we see an end of it. If we read 12 and 13 aright, Asa was 'out of joint' spiritually for the last two years of his life, dying ingloriously, and - one fears - at odds with his God. A sad, sad end to a noble monarch, to a life that wrought so graciously and so ably in the things of God. Does it not make us want to pray, 'O for grace to end well!', and give a new dimension to Paul's words in Eph 6: 13, 'and having done all, to stand'?

86) 17:1-9

This chapter brings us to Jehoshaphat, and one of the outstandingly good reigns of the southern kingdom. For twenty five years he presided wisely and well over the fortunes of Judah. We are told that God prospered him because he walked in the earlier ways of his father David - that is, in the way David walked when he was a man after God's own heart. The original ideal of kingship embodied in all that was good in David's reign was the pattern and inspiration of Jehoshaphat's life - such is the significance of this statement in 3, 4. We should not miss the force of the words at the end of 4, 'and not after the doings of Israel', for they mean that Jehoshaphat made a conscious choice to follow in David's footsteps in face of what went on in the northern kingdom. He stood out for a certain code of conduct when it would have doubtless been easy for him to comply with the prevailing falling standards around him. He was, essentially, a non-conformist, who refused to subscribe to the 'everybody's doing it' attitude around him. It is this that made him great and led to the Lord's establishing the kingdom. We should observe the cause and effect in this - this is the force of the 'therefore' in 5: it was because of the one thing that the other obtained.

We should also note that it is made clear in 1,2, that Jehoshaphat was a military commander of great skill and astuteness, and that his trust in the Lord did not in the least prevent him from exercising that skill - indeed, it was the expression of his faith and trust so to do. He was not of the sort of whom it could be said that he was so heavenly minded that he was of no earthly use, indeed the opposite. The real problem is, so often, that a man is so earthly minded that he is of no heavenly use.

87) 17:1-9

The phrase in 6, 'his heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord' is a striking one. It is frequently used in Old Testament history in a bad sense - hearts lifted up in pride and arrogance, in the ways of wickedness and against God – expressive of an extensive commitment to evil. Here, it speaks of the king's thorough commitment to God, with an enthusiasm and dedication God-ward that was so often given to evil. This enthusiasm expressed itself in two ways, the taking away of the high places and groves out of Judah (6b), and the institution of a teaching ministry throughout the land (7b). The fact that the removal of high places and groves is mentioned first, before the institution of the teaching ministry does not necessarily mean that the one led to the other; indeed, in the deepest sense, it is much more likely to have been the other way round, for it is the teaching of the Word that creates the climate in which meaningful reforms can be promoted. This is a point of considerable importance and relevance, to which we must give some further attention. We have already made reference to it (see Note for 15:1-15) in connection with Asa's reforms, but we now see its full significance in the contrast between the two reigns, and we devote the next note to the subject.

88) 17:1-9

What we said about Asa's reforms was that there was little emphasis on the teaching of the law, and that this in the main is true of all the pre-exilic reforms (in contrast to the post-exilic pattern under Ezra and Nehemiah, when teaching the people the law of God was given absolute priority). It would seem that Jehoshaphat, almost alone amongst the good kings, saw the significance of this. It may well be that he discerned what was lacking in his father's programme, and that he took steps to remedy the lack. Is it reading too much into the situation to suggest that if Asa had been more deeply taught in the Word, and had allowed its ploughshare to go more deeply into his heart and experience, he would not have reacted as he did against the prophet Hanani's challenge and rebuke, or have had the resistance and rebellion in his heart against the Lord that brought him to such an inglorious end. The Psalmist says, 'Great peace have they that love Thy law; and nothing shall offend them' (Ps 119:165). What is said in 9, 10 almost seems to suggest that the ascendancy of the living Word of God proved to be a garrison of protection round about the nation. 'Surely that is a parable. We should note the contrast between 14:4, where we read of Asa and his earlier reforms, and 7-9 here. This is the real remedy against idolatry and corrupt practice. You cannot command idolatry out of men's hearts. What you do is to teach the Word. That creates a climate in which reform becomes possible and practical. Where Asa commanded, his son Jehoshaphat taught; that is what made all the difference.

89) 17:1-9

What was said in the previous note has a good deal to say to us about our present day situation. There is, of course, a place for the prophetic proclamation of the truth of God and a fearless challenging of the corruptions of our times; but even as we do these things and utter these proclamations, we know that this is simply bearing testimony against them, and of itself does not deal with them. The real way to eradicate them is to create a climate in which it will become increasingly difficult for them to exist. During the widespread spiritual awakening in 1859, for example, so many people in some communities were converted that public houses had to shut down because of lack of customers: a social atmosphere was created in which liquor just did not have a chance. We deplore the corruption in morals, in the cinema, on television, and it is right and necessary for us to speak out against these evils; but what is going to change the situation is not so much our speaking out against them as the teaching of the Word that will act as a leaven in society and create a climate that will make it difficult for such evils to survive, let alone flourish. That is the measure of the significance of a movement that emphasises the necessity of spreading the Word of God.

90) 17:10-19

The remaining verses of the chapter underline a lesson the Chronicler's never tired of teaching: where God's smile is upon a man through his obedience and dedication to His holy laws, prosperity is always the result. What we have here is a picture of affluence and well-being, a boom economy indeed! Let us gather a simple message from what is said of Amasiah in 16. Here is a man of whom the only thing recorded of him is that he 'willingly offered himself to the Lord'. What an epitaph! To go down in history in such a way is wonderful indeed! But then, where there is a true teaching of the Word, this is something that will always tend to happen, for this is something that the Word does. It produces men of calibre and dedication for the service of God. Think of the need for men for the ministry today. The way to produce them is not to make endless appeals, but rather to create a climate in the Church in which Christ's voice will be able to be heard saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?', and responded to by dedicated lives saying, 'Here am I, send me', Where the Word is taught, in the way described in this chapter, there will always be those who will offer themselves willingly to the Lord for His service.

91) 18:1-3

Chapter 18 continues the story of Jehoshaphat's reign. It will be noticed that this long and deeply interesting chapter forms a kind of interlude which disturbs the main account of his reign and life's work, which is taken up again in chapters 19 and 20. But, interlude though it be, it is a very important one, for it records Jehoshaphat's ill-omened alliance with Ahab, king of Israel. The first three verses record this association between this good and godly king of Judah with one who was one of the worst, if not the worst, of the kings of the northern kingdom. It can hardly be doubted that what is recorded here is a very serious lapse on the part of Jehoshaphat. But the significance of it in its context is that a lapse, and even a serious lapse, does not necessarily mean doom and disaster. There is always the possibility of spiritual recovery when heed is again paid to the word of the Lord (cf 19:1-4). The very phrase the Chronicler uses in 1 - 'joined affinity with Ahab' - seems to strike an ominous and sinister note, and the unwisdom of his action becomes only too plain in all that follows. Jehoshaphat would have been better to have given him a wide berth. Paul's word 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers' is very apposite here. To enter into an alliance with someone so estranged from the Lord as Ahab was generally leads to taking sides against Him also. And who knows what harm may be done before we get right with Him again?

92) 18:4-6

So Jehoshaphat had already begun to be uneasy about the situation! As well he might. But it is rather late in the day to be seeking the Lord's will after you have committed yourself to a course of action. That should have been done before entering into the affinity with Ahab. If only he had thought, if only he had exercised spiritual discernment, he might never have become involved. This is where the story has such a thrust for us today, it is so relevant and true to human psychology. Here, then, is an expression of his disquiet and concern, and he wants to refer it to the Lord. He might have saved his breath, however, because Ahab was not disposed to listen to the word of the Lord on this matter, as we well know from the history of Ahab in 1 Kings. And, of course, Jehoshaphat is going to find out that things have a habit of getting out of control, once one takes a wrong step at the beginning. But - and this is of great importance - there was still time for him to have backed out. It is here that we begin to see that there may well have been a real weakness in his character, and that if he had been a stronger man, a more positive man, he would have recognized the danger signals, and backed out, saying, "Ahab, I am sorry, I have made a mistake, I am not going a step further", and would have risked the wrath of the northern king, because he would have then been right with God. We may gather from this that when we have genuine misgivings about a course of action, it is much safer to back down and back out, however embarrassing it may be for us, and however much loss of face it may cause. Better that - infinitely better, indeed, than to get out of the will of God.

93) 18:7-13

It does not take much discernment to realise that Jehoshaphat must have seen through these four hundred hireling prophets (5, 6), whose only concern was to prophesy smooth things to Ahab. He more than sensed something that did not ring true, and was still very uneasy and little disposed to accept the hireling prophets' assurance that God would prosper the expedition and deliver Ramoth-gilead into their hands. Hence his question in 6 about 'a prophet of the Lord besides'. Who is he thinking about? In all probability, Elijah; he has heard all about the mighty man of God, for that kind of news tends to get around. It must have been common knowledge in Judah that there was a man of God stirring things up in the northern kingdom, fearlessly proclaiming God's truth to the apostate Ahab. It is as if he had said, "Yes, yes, I hear what all these others say, but is there not somebody who really speaks for God?" It must have been gall for Ahab to have heard Jehoshaphat's request as he grudgingly said, "There is yet one man..." Micaiah was mentioned by Ahab, but with manifest disfavour and disapproval. There is, in fact, a transparent ingenuousness about the king's comment on the prophet that speaks volumes, and which made him say what most men hide in the secret of their hearts - "I hate him, for he never prophesied good unto me, but always bad". There are many who would never face up to the real reason why they hate the servants of God - they must need concoct excuses in real or imagined faults in their character or conduct. We should certainly realise that these are but excuses; the reason for their hatred is that the prophetic word has condemned them. And that, it seems, can never be tolerated or forgiven.

94) 18:7-13

The false prophets, as represented in 10 by Zedekiah, were impressive and plausible to a degree, and we should not underestimate them, or their influence in the northern kingdom. The 'horns for iron' and the 'thus saith the Lord' differed little from what other (and genuine) prophets frequently did, as they acted out in parabolic form the word of the Lord (Jeremiah acted out the word of the Lord in just this way). These men were going through all the form, saying and doing the right thing. It is just that their message happened to be false and wrong. We need not suppose that the messenger sent to summon Micaiah was necessarily antagonistic towards the prophet, or threatening in what he said to him in 12. He may have been genuinely desirous of avoiding strife and tension with the king, as if to say, "Micaiah, if you speak a hard word to the king, when all of us are uttering soothing words, you will land in big trouble. Just say with the rest of us, and keep the peace". There are those who are prepared to go to almost any lengths to keep the peace. Truth - and honour too - can go by the board, so long as we are 'nice' to one another. One can almost see the pleading look in the messenger's eye! But peace at any price is not a doctrine that a man of God can ever acquiesce to. God is not concerned to preserve peace and harmony when truth and integrity are the issues. The Lord is a man of war, and when He became incarnate in His Son, He said, "I came not to send peace, but a sword". Where there is evil and men are at cross purposes with the will of God, the coming of His Word always causes disturbance and upheaval.

95) 18:14-17

Micaiah was, clearly, of the school of prophets founded by Elijah, as we see from the characteristic phrase 'as the Lord liveth', which is a clear echo from 1 Kings 18. Moreover, like Elijah, he is so fearless that he can afford to employ heavy irony with Ahab. It would almost seem at first, from 14, that he had paid heed to what the messenger had said, and was prophesying good for the king; but the next verse makes clear that he had, in fact, mimicked the false prophets and spoke in the same mincing terms as they did, in such a way that the king saw clearly that he was mocking him. Then, this having drawn the king in anger and fury, he utters the real word of the Lord concerning Ahab's coming doom, in the vision of the sheep without a shepherd. One can well visualise the scene, with the dismay and pique on Ahab's face as he turned petulantly to Jehoshaphat, as if to say, "It is all your fault. Didn't I tell you what he would say? He never prophesies good for me". It is some measure of Elijah's influence that such a fearless spirit should confront the wicked king, regardless of the certain consequences that would follow. How proud the prophet of Israel would have been to have heard Micaiah that day!

96) 18:18-22

The remarkable, even weird, vision related by Micaiah to the king makes disturbing reading. What are we to make of it? It will be remembered that in 10 Zedekiah used the words 'Thus saith the Lord' in making his prophecy of Ahab's success. This, as we now see from these verses, was not merely a false prophecy: in a strange, frightening way, it was, in fact, a word from the Lord. A lying word, for as Micaiah's vision makes clear, the Lord had put a lying spirit in the mouth of these false prophets. But before we react instinctively against the idea of God being responsible for the lying spirit that deceived Ahab into going to his doom at Ramoth-Gilead, we should turn to Romans 1:24, 26, 28 where Paul teaches - as an integral part of the Christian revelation - that God sometimes gives evil men over to a reprobate mind. This is the real key to the understanding of the passage. It is also true that evil, lying spirits are the minions of Satan, but even Satan is in the control of God, and his demons must work in obedience to the Divine will. If Ahab is determined to refuse the real word of the Lord, then God will put a lying spirit in the mouth of the false prophets, and they will succeed in deceiving the apostate king. It is this that Micaiah is teaching in this strange and horrific utterance. Ahab had passed the point of no return, and God had vowed destruction upon him. The story of Naboth's murder (1 Kings 2:17-24) seems to have marked the fateful crisis point for the wicked king. We see in 2 Thess 2:8-12 an even more graphic comment on all this. This is Ahab's story, and when men come to such an extreme state of evil, what happens to them is that God sends them a strong delusion that they should believe a lie. Ahab had repeatedly gone against God and in the passage of the years had steadily hardened his heart against the good until God judicially and in righteous anger hardened his heart, and confirmed it in the tragic course of evil which he had chosen for himself.

97) 18:23-27

Micaiah could not be expected to get off with speaking so boldly and bluntly to the king. He is submitted to gross indignity, with Zedekiah insolently and blasphemously smiting him on the cheek, uttering words so frightening in their arrogance that we almost expect to see him struck down summarily by the judgment of the Spirit he had blasphemed. Micaiah's quiet dignity in 24 is all the more impressive when one thinks of the circumstances Ahab's furious sentence upon the prophet for his courage in so speaking the word of the Lord - imprisonment and the bread and water of affliction - only serves to prompt another and final word from the prophet. The implication in 27 is quite clear: "Ahab, God has spoken by me. There will be no returning for you this day". And he called the people to witness, as if to say, "Mark my words, and when it happens, remember what I said. Then you will know that I am the mouthpiece of the living God." What majesty there is in his testimony, and what authority! But what of Jehoshaphat? He has been listening to all this, yet in 28 we are told that he nevertheless went with Ahab to Ramoth-gilead. This remarkable fact merits further consideration, and we shall look at it further in the next note.

98) 18:23-27

We would not be misinterpreting the situation if we described Jehoshaphat as looking on during this whole confrontation with his face set and grim with dismay, recognizing that he had got involved in something he should have had nothing to do with in the first place. Why did he not say, "Ahab, I am having no more of it"? But he did not; which seems to bear out the truth that when we get embroiled in something that is unhallowed and wrong it is very difficult to extricate ourselves, even when we desperately want to. We can hardly doubt that Jehoshaphat wanted to get out of it, and that he was longing with all his heart for the security and peace of Jerusalem. But he could not, and he did not. It may even be that he felt, in a fatalistic sort of way, resigned to his fate, as if to say, "I've got myself into this, and I will have to go through with it now". But he did not have to go through with it. None of us has to go through with it. It is always open to us to withdraw if we see that we are on the wrong track. It is never too late. Yet, strangely, tragically, so often it is the case that we get carried along with the momentum of the evil thing. It is all very frightening, and very solemnising. There were several points at which he could have shrugged off the fascination and mesmerism of the thing and said 'No'. We often have experiences like this, when we have felt the hypnotic power of evil upon us, and if by God's grace we pull ourselves back in time, we breathe a sigh of relief and say, "That was a near thing, a moment or two more and I would have been over the brink". How near to the brink Jehoshaphat came, we shall see in the next reading.

99) 18:29-34

Ahab is set on his own wilful course, determined to thwart God's purposes and the warnings of Micaiah. He thinks to deceive the Syrians by disguising himself in the battle line (29). Poor Jehoshaphat is in such a bemused state that he does not see that Ahab is 'having him on'. Anyone in royal robes would be a target for the archers, and Ahab was making very sure that if any kings were to be shot at that day it would be Jehoshaphat, not himself who would be at the receiving end of the Syrian arrows. But though Jehoshaphat failed to see through Ahab's treacherous duplicity, God did not, and He preserved His servant, even in the extremity of danger, when he called upon Him to help him (30, 31). But it was a near thing; and sometimes God allows us to go to the very extremity, when it almost seems as if all is going to be lost, before He finally intervenes to save us, to teach us that when we take things into our own hands, this is the kind of danger that besets us. Jehoshaphat must have returned to Jerusalem sorely chastened, a sadder and wiser man. From what we shall presently read of him in 19:1ff, it is clear that he learned his lesson. This is the great and important matter: do we learn from the misfortunes that overtake us because of our wrong choices?

100) 18:29-34

As for Ahab, more penetrating eyes were upon him on the day of battle than those of the Syrian hosts - the hosts of the Lord were watching him, and they are not deceived by human disguises. He learned, too late, that all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do. A chance arrow - if there is any such thing in the battles of the Lord - sought out the hapless king and slew him. God had control of every haphazard arrow in that campaign, and guided His appointed one between the joints of Ahab's armour; and, in fulfilment of Elijah's prophecy in 1 Kings 21:19, the dogs licked his blood from his chariot as it was washed at the pool of Samaria. It was an ignominious end to an inglorious career of sin and shame. We should not miss the sense of final precipitation in Ahab's doom: in the end he hastened his own death by his unholy determination to have his own way in spite of all the warnings around him. All of which bears witness to the self-destroying element in sin. The seeds of disintegration and moral anarchy are hidden within every sin, and they need only the opportunity to fructify and become rampant. In its further expressions sin then gains momentum until, like the Gadarene swine careering down the slope into the sea, it rushes to its ultimate doom. When it comes to this, everything contributes to the final disaster, and archers drawing bows at a venture are pressed into service, and no kind of disguise or shield will protect. How truly fearful are the wages of sin!

101) 19:1-4

These verses give us the 'last word' on Jehoshaphat's unfortunate and ill-advised association with Ahab and the attack on Ramoth-gilead. We may gather from them that, when we get out of step, the Lord will surely rebuke us. He does not let us off with our sin. But we should note one or two things in particular here. First of all, the 'fairness' of the rebuke and the recognition that, even in the context of the rebuking, there was much that was good in the king. This surely indicates that his lapse was not 'in character', and that his failure was not a failure 'in toto' so much as a failure in only one particular aspect of his life. This is a valid distinction to make. There is a difference between a condemnation of us and a condemnation of one aspect of our behaviour. The really sinister and dangerous situation occurs when, God's condemnation is of all that there is of us, when we are all wrong, and, all out of joint. In Jehoshaphat's case it was not he, so much as a particular aspect of his behaviour, that was being challenged. This is something that we need to learn to distinguish in the Christian life, both for ourselves and in our dealings with others.

But there is something else to note here also: the graphic difference between Jehoshaphat's attitude to rebuke and his father Asa's, in somewhat similar circumstances (cf 16:7 ff). Asa, when rebuked by a prophet for getting out of step, was enraged and flung him into jail; Jehoshaphat however reacted by committing himself to a programme of endeavour for the Lord, in leading the people back to the God of their fathers (4). We shall look at this interesting contrast further in the next note.

102) 19:1-4

One recalls the words in Hebrews 13:22, 'Suffer the word of exhortation', and, a little earlier, in 12:25, 'See that ye refuse not him that speaketh'. In Asa's case, we see how the king let injured pride, and stubborn unwillingness to yield to God's dealings with him, colour all the rest of his experience, and allowed his 'out-of-jointness' to persist for a matter of years. He died in that stubborn attitude - a solemn and frightening thought! Jehoshaphat, on the other hand, took his medicine like a man, and got down to spiritual rehabilitation without delay. It is not unknown for us as Christians to harbour resentment when the Lord speaks a word of rebuke to us, and when we do, we get out of sorts, and lots of things will begin to go wrong in our lives. The New Testament itself affords examples of these contrasting attitudes. In Gal 4:16, Paul's words, 'Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?' indicate that the Galatians were not suffering the word of exhortation, and were resentful against the Apostle because his challenge had got under their skin. In contrast to this, we may also recall the Corinthians' reaction to the very stinging rebuke given them in his first epistle. His words in 2 Cor 7:8-11, which speak of their sorrowing 'after a godly sort', show that they took the rebuke in a proper way, and that it worked a true repentance in them that enabled them to make a new beginning with God, just as was the case here with Jehoshaphat. It is surely a sad and serious matter when pride, or any other consideration, is allowed to hinder a true restoration to fellowship with God.

103) 19:5-11

The remaining verses of the chapter are devoted to an account of Jehoshaphat's activities in the moral and spiritual rehabilitation that took place after the fiasco of Ramoth-gilead. Here, the institution and appointment of judges stands as a parallel to the institution of teachers of the law in chapter 17, and in a sense belong to it. For the unfolding of the law of the Lord would include the exposition of the various legal and social enactments in Exodus and Leviticus. It is the working out of the implications of the Word of God, because it has a message for the whole of life. It was not merely a religious matter, but had to do with social and family issues also; and if there were problems that needed to be dealt with by law, then God's law was the standard by which they must be dealt with. As to the appointment of the judges, we see from Deut 16:18-20 how similar Jehoshaphat's enactments are: obviously they are based upon the law of the Lord. The king was doing it 'by the book', as David and Solomon had done before him. As to detail, judges were to be appointed in every city (5), then a supreme court in Jerusalem (8) which was in two divisions, ecclesiastical and civil, the former presided over by the chief priest, the latter by the ruler of the house of Judah (11). It is an impressive 'set-up', with a number of important lessons for us, as we shall see in the next note.

104) 19:5-11

We need to note particularly Jehoshaphat's exhortations to the judges and officials (6, 7, 9-11), and the important interaction of religion and justice in a national situation. We are too accustomed to this, and to the integrity of our own courts of law, to realise that it is often a very different story in other lands, where corruption is rife. It would be inconceivable, for example, for us to think of any high court judge taking a bribe to pervert the course of justice; but there are lands where this is by no means unknown. One result of the establishment of true religion is the institution of principles of justice and fair dealing in courts of law. This is the direct fruit of the Christian tradition, and it should not be forgotten as it sometimes seems to be, by those who sit light to the Christian Faith and wish to jettison it. We need also to note the Godward reference in Jehoshaphat's exhortations: 'Ye judge not for men, but for the Lord'. This is the direct antecedent of Paul's teaching in Romans 13 about the powers that be being ordained of God. The judges that were appointed were not appointed with a horizontal reference only, dealing out justice to their fellow-men, but with a vertical reference also. Heaven was the source of the justice they were to administer and dispense, hence the exhortation to 'take heed' in 6. What a challenge this must be for those in authority in public places: How many members of Parliament think like this? If a considerable number of them of whatever party did so, would it not mean that some parliamentary enactments would be very different than they are? To concentrate on 'horizontal' justice is to submit to a process that is subject to the law of diminishing returns, in which there is less and less possibility of true justice as time goes on. More on this in the next note.

105) 19:5-11

What was said at the end of the previous note explains why in our day, when the real attachments of justice and government to Divine standards have been so substantially loosened, we get enactments that sit light to the principles of law and order, and indeed, principles of right and wrong: It does not seem to matter much, any more, and the distinction between right and wrong is becoming progressively blurred. This is a direct result of 'horizontal' justice. It is the tragedy of modern political systems that they are basically leaving God out of consideration. If only Jehoshaphat's standards were taken seriously today, how different everything would be! We bear witness to this, of course, in services like the Kirking of the Council, and prayers in the houses of Parliament at the beginning of business, but we need more than lip-service, and more than a mere gesture to the Almighty! The final words in 11, 'Deal courageously...' indicate that the promise of divine favour and help and approbation rests on those who take a stand honourably for righteousness' sake. This is why a man of integrity, a man of faith, is worth his weight in gold, whatever colour his politics are. If we know of them we should pray for them. What a passage this is for all who are set in authority over men (cf also 2 Sam 23:1-5) - councillors, district or regional, members of Parliament or of government, and what need for this abiding consciousness in all they do: "Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord".

106) 20:1-4

Here is the climactic chapter of Jehoshaphat's reign, and a wonderful and marvellous chapter it is! Once again it would seem that the Chronicler is contrasting Jehoshaphat with his father Asa who, in similar circumstances, under pressure from foreign armies, did very differently, allying himself with Ben-hadad of Syria (16:3). Jehoshaphat did what Asa should have done, but did not: he feared and set himself to seek the Lord. Asa feared also, but leaned on the arm of the flesh, to his cost and hurt. The Chronicler presents a marked and deliberate contrast, as if to say, "Do you remember what we said in chapter 16? This is how it should have been done, and this is what happens when a man does right and trusts the Lord". This is one of the high points in the books of Chronicles. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble", says the Lord, "I will deliver thee". This is what Jehoshaphat did, and the chapter relates how wonderfully and sufficiently God answered him. We should note particularly what is said in 4: the whole country was with the king in seeking the Lord, and this is surely of great significance, and prompts the reflection whether this could ever have been possible but for the widespread movement of reform that had taken place during his reign. Indeed, it is hardly possible to envisage it, even without the kind of preparation that such reform provided. This, in fact, may be part of the point of the comparison between Jehoshaphat's reign and Asa's, for the latter's had not gone deep enough in reform, nor had there been an adequate emphasis on the teaching of the law that could have produced such an attitude as is seen here on the part of the people. We could hardly have a more eloquent or impressive testimony to the value, from a national point of view, of a deeply taught people. This is what is likely to stand in good stead in time of national crisis, and it may be a pointer to the significance of the recovery of the Word in our own time. Are we being prepared for revival - or for unprecedented national crisis and calamity?

107) 20:5-13

Jehoshaphat's prayer to the Lord is recorded in these verses. It is a tremendous utterance. First of all, the king rehearsed the facts of revelation, on which faith was based, and appealed in the first instance to the divine omnipotence (6). This is how the Apostles prayed in Acts 4:24 ff, when they were under pressure and facing persecution. They reminded themselves in their weakness and trembling - as Jehoshaphat did, and as we must - Who God was, and how great He was. Then, in the second place, he recalled the facts of their history (7), and appealed to God's choice of them as His people, and to the historical fact that His hand was upon them. It is as if he were reminding God, "Lord, don't forget who we are, we are Your people, and You called us from Abraham's loins". The king was putting God in remembrance, in line with the great word in Isaiah 43:25, 26. The Lord loves to be reminded about these things, and it must surely have gladdened his heart to hear the king's prayer. Furthermore, Jehoshaphat reminded God of the promises He had made to His people (9). This is simply an echo from Solomon's great prayer in 6:22 ff and the Divine assurance of answer to it in 7:12ff. One thinks of the patriarch Jacob's prayer in Gen 32:9, 12, and his words, "Lord, Thou saidst" That is the way to pray! God cannot be unfaithful to what He has said. Finally, in 12, there is the appeal, and the confidence, of despair: "We know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee". Alexander Maclaren says, "Blessed is the desperation that catches at God's hand; firm is the trust that leaps from despair", And in that attitude, and to that attitude, there came word from the Lord, just at the right moment, as we see in the next note.

108) 20:14-17

The word from the Lord came through a Levite. (14) That is to say, through the established and appointed instrument of the things of God in the congregation. It was all done 'according to the book', so to speak. - we have repeatedly seen this to be one of the Chronicler's emphases -and this is the kind of man one would expect God to lay hold upon, one of His religiously set-apart servants, through whom to communicate His Word. It was an unqualified assurance that came, moreover: however great the multitude it did not matter, for this battle was God's, not theirs. In such a situation, one with God is a majority, and two will put ten thousand to flight. In 16 the divine instruction seems to have been a supernatural intimation as to what to do and where to go. The Spirit of God was obviously taking everything into His own control. In 17, the wonderful assurance from on high is, significantly, an echo from Exo 14:13 ff: this is just what Moses said, to the terrified children standing on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea. It is significant, is it not, that when the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel (14), the Spirit spoke through him in the words of Scripture. What is more, the Spirit took him, as it were, back to that situation, as if to say, "Today, it is just as it was in the time of Moses. Think of it! Do you remember what happened then, Jehoshaphat? They got through the Red Sea dryshod, and the Egyptians were drowned. And God is still the same today." Such was the message of the Spirit, through the Word. This is the right use of Scripture, in times of need, and shows the unspeakable value of knowing the Scriptures and hiding them in our hearts. When crisis comes, it will mean much to us that the Spirit of God will have a memory-bank in our inmost spirits on which to draw at a crucial moment, to remind us of these things, and give us comfort, assurance and courage, as He did to Jehoshaphat on this occasion.

109) 20:18-30

Jehoshaphat's reaction and response to the word from God is characteristic of him: he believed it, had confidence in it, and he and the people bowed and worshipped before the Lord. It is an impressive and remarkable spectacle in such a time of crisis as then faced them (in 19 we see once again the Chronicler's concern with 'playing it by the book', for not even the crisis was allowed to interfere with the due and ordered pattern laid down for worship and praise). One can well imagine the enormous boost this gave to their confidence as they went to face the foe. It may, indeed, be that as they drew nearer the advancing armies of Moab and Ammon next morning they began to be nervous and afraid, but Jehoshaphat with magnificent faith and confidence (what a lead he gave to his people!) rallied them, reminding them of the divine promise: "Believe....so shall ye be established" (20). One commentator points out that there is a play on words here, which could well be rendered, "Hold fast and you will be held fast", or "Stay yourselves on Him and you will be stable". And what are we to say about the 'singing warriors' in 21, 22? This is what triggered off the divine visitation and vindication. Clearly it was a visitation of supernatural power - and it may well be that the singing was supernatural too! One does not simply 'work up' such a phenomenon, saying "Let us sing together, and the Lord will give us the victory". It is altogether more subtle and profound than that. The singing was the fruit of the mighty confidence that was wrought in them by the promise of God, and it came from the inside, in a glad, spontaneous outpouring that unnerved and discomfited the enemy, and demoralised them. Does not this give us a new understanding of, and lend a new dimension to, the phrase 'terrible as an army with banners'?

110) 20:18-30

The demoralization and discomfiture of the enemy was complete: the Lord spread utter confusion among them so that they turned on one another and destroyed themselves. He set the enemies of righteousness fighting amongst themselves. One thinks of the testimony of the book of Revelation in this connection (Rev 17:17) with the fighting between the dragon, the beast and the false prophet bearing witness to the self-destructiveness of evil. There is a sense in which we need only to leave evil to itself and it will destroy itself. "Stand still", says God, "and see the salvation of the Lord. Ye shall not need to fight in this battle". How effortlessly God wrought on their behalf! Not, only so: much good came out of the battle, and much spoil, for the people of God. God not only turned the wrath of man to praise him, He enriched His people. Once again there is a contrast indicated with what happened to Asa. Asa wrought a limited victory against Baasha (ch.16) but at a price, for he denuded the Temple of all its treasures in order to buy off Ben-hadad of Syria. When, however, we let the Lord fight our battles, we not only do not lose our treasures, but we also gather a great deal more. It is a wonderful story, full of encouragement for the Christian life, as we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against spiritual wickedness in high places. If our eyes are upon God, He will come to us, as he did to Jehoshaphat, and say, "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord,"

iii) 20:31-37

The last few verses of the chapter conclude the record of Jehoshaphat's reign, and there is something of interest and significance to learn from them. The 'howbeit' in 33, and the rather inglorious alliance with Ahaziah of Israel (35 ff) introduce a reservation into one of the best of the good reigns in the kingdom of Judah; none of them really matched the standard set by king David, the man after God's own heart. The parallel passage to the episode recorded in 35 ff is in 1 Kings 22:48, 49, but there is a certain amount of confusion between the two sets of verses that needs to be looked at. The Chronicler explains Jehoshaphat's loss of his vessels by relating it to his sin of allying himself with Ahaziah. This, doubtless, is the meaning of 37, and if so, it raises the question: had Jehoshaphat not learned any wisdom from the fateful earlier incident of his alliance with Ahab, Ahaziah's father, in which he escaped only with his life? Doubtless he had learned the lesson - the verses in 1 Kings 22 makes it clear that he 'got the message' in time on the second occasion; but this further episode shows that lessons of this nature are not all that easy to learn, and that we learn them both slowly and very partially. It bears out the truth of the adage that the price of continuing victory is continual and constant vigilance. If we are slack here, we will fall into the same mistakes again and again - and again! There is no position of spiritual attainment we can reach in spiritual life from which it is not possible to fall away, if we are not careful.

112) 21:1-11

Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram next succeeded to the throne, and reigned for eight years. His, alas, was an evil reign, very unlike his father's, and what is said of his end, that he 'departed without being desired' (20) makes a sad and tragic epitaph for an inglorious reign. How are we to explain this? Why, when Jehoshaphat was such a good king, did his son go so wrong? The opening verses of this chapter go some way at least towards giving the reason. Look at 6: 'he had the daughter of Ahab to wife'. An alliance with that depraved and abandoned house was surely enough to corrupt any man! But how on earth did such a marriage ever take place? Well, Jehoshaphat had joined affinity with Ahab in the ill-fated affair of Ramoth-gilead and had visited Ahab's court in Samaria. It looks very much as if Jehoram had accompanied him on these state visits, and had met the royal princess there. This is quite sufficient to explain a great deal of the tragedy of Jehoram's reign. Jehoshaphat's association with Ahab, as well as jeopardising his own life, must have also done immense harm to his son's, by introducing him to such an atmosphere. And how awful that this alliance should have come about through his father's being out of joint spiritually! We need not suppose or impute any deliberate evil to Jehoram in contracting this marriage. It may even have been a love match, and Jezebel's daughter may have been very attractive. But it still was a 'forbidden area' (cf 19:2, 'Shouldest thou ... love them that hate the Lord?') And the result of complicity with evil is always to be dragged down to the lower level, never the other way round. This is a principle that needs to be ingrained into young people before they become involved personally, for when they are involved, everything weighs against a true, objective look at the situation, and they will only too easily convince themselves that their case will prove the exception to the rule. It will not. It never does.

113) 21:1-11

It seems clear that Jehoram's marriage took place before he succeeded to the throne, while his father was still alive, and this being so, he was already infected by the terrible spirit of the northern kingdom. The ruthlessness of his attitude to his own brothers (4) is a case in point. We may recall, in this connection, what is said in 2 Chron 11: 22,23 of Rehoboam's dispersal of his sons throughout Judah, to avoid a situation arising in which the oldest son, destined to be king, might rise up against his brethren and kill them to secure the succession. Rehoboam evidently saw the possibilities; but Jehoshaphat did not: And what the former feared actually took place with the latter's sons. Making every possible allowance for the ruthlessness of the times, we can surely still say unhesitatingly that no man need ever have gone to this length to ensure a succession that was always God's will and purpose to bring about anyway. How easily God could have accomplished it without such fratricidal bloodshed! But when men are out of joint spiritually, they do all sorts of things that are wrong. That is the tragedy of the situation.

In the light of this, what is said in 7 is all the more striking and impressive (cf a similar reference in 1 Kings 15:4, in Abijah's reign). It is a declaration that what Jehoram deserved did not come upon him, and he was less punished than he might have been, because God had regard to His promise to David, and his covenant. The judgments of God are often stayed, at least temporarily, not for our sakes, but for the sake of some who may long be dead, and punishment can often be turned away from us because of the prayers and faithfulness of our forefathers. We need to remember that when in times of crisis danger finally passes, it may do so not because God is well pleased with us, but because He has respect for the prayers and tears of those who in the past have honoured Him, in individual and national life. There is comfort in this, to be sure, but it leaves us no kind of room for any complacency.

114) 21:1-11

Such, then, was Jehoram's reign, and it was a foregone conclusion that trouble would break out. In 10 the Chronicler gives the moral and spiritual reason for these reverses and for the whittling away of the kingdom: the Edomites and Libnah revolted from under the hand of Judah because Jehoram had forsaken the Lord. There is an interesting point here, Jehoshaphat also was attacked by enemies in his day (Moab and Ammon, ch. 20), but these attacks were different from those here, because they had a gracious issue, and became opportunities for the glory of God. Here it was very much otherwise: the glory of the kingdom faded increasingly under Jehoram (8-10, 16, 17). Thus, from the days of Jehoshaphat, a reign in which - by and large - the smile of God was upon the land for twenty five years, and prosperity was the order of the day and the borders were secure, to the end of Jehoram's reign a period of little over thirty years in all - the country was not only reduced, but reduced to moral and spiritual shambles. One thinks of the disquieting parallel with our own time. From the end of the second world war, when the words "This was her finest hour" were spoken of our nation, to the present time - thirty five years later -and what a whittling away of economic and industrial resources, and erosion of moral fibre! Has the Chronicler's word something to say to us in our national situation?

115) 21:12-20

A problem arises in 12-15. The chronology of the period makes it clear that Elijah, the mighty prophet of the northern kingdom, was already dead. The question arises therefore as to how we are to explain this reference to him. To say, as some critics do, that this is a fabrication invented by the Chronicler raises impossible problems for those who hold to the authority of Scripture, and such an explanation must be discarded out of hand. There are two possibilities: one is to suppose that the reference is to another Elijah, not the Tishbite - but it is surely unlikely that the great Elijah should have had a 'double', so to speak, of whom nothing else is heard in the Old Testament. The simplest explanation is that the reference is to some writing from Elijah before he died, that came to Jehoram sometime after the prophet had been gathered home to God. Ellicott puts it thus: "Elijah, though a very old man, may still have been alive. His extreme age would account for him sending a written prophecy rather than going in person to warn Jehoram. If, however, it be supposed that the author of Kings has told the story of Elijah's translation chronologically in its right place (2 Kings 2), and that the campaign in the following chapter, in which Jehoshaphat took part, was really subsequent to that event, we may say that this 'writing from Elijah the prophet', containing the substance of some last utterance of his directed against Jehoram and Athaliah, was now put into written shape, and forwarded to Jehoram by one of the prophet's pupils, perhaps by his great successor Elisha." Interestingly, the Syriac version reads, "And there was brought to him one of the discourses of Elijah the prophet, which said unto him...." This is surely an altogether probable interpretation.

116) 21:12-20

The message that came to the king was certainly Elijah-like in its thrust and its pungency, and in spirit very similar to the thunderings against Ahab and Jezebel in the north. The king's notorious crime of slaying his own brothers was clearly considered a terrible matter even in such ugly and barbarous times (13). We see in 18, 19 that Elijah's grim prophecy of judgment in 14, 15 was fulfilled to the letter, and the king suffered from a terrible, incurable disease for two years, before he finally died. The judgment of God caught up with this man, and what a judgment it was! - not only the sickness, but the devastation of his kingdom, and the spoiling of his family. 'Horrifying' is the word to describe it all. Having forsaken the God of his fathers, he himself was forsaken utterly, and he 'departed without being desired'. What an awful end for the son of so good a monarch, Jehoshaphat, Yet who shall say where the ultimate responsibility lay, for it was Jehoshaphat who took him into the court of Ahab in the first instance, How careful we need to be where we take our children! The father was strong enough to survive the onslaught and impact of that unhallowed atmosphere, but his son did not have that strength, and he went down. Solemn, terrifying thought!

117) 22:1-9

This chapter records the reign of Jehoram's son, Ahaziah (called Jehoahaz in 21:17, a name with the same components, but in the inverse order - Jah and Ahaz). The parallel passage in 2 Kings 8:26 says that he was 22 years old when he began to reign, and the 42 here in 2 is clearly a scribal error, since Jehoram his father was only forty when he died (cf 21:5). If he was 22 when he came to the throne, then Jehoram must have been only 18 when he was born. If, moreover, he was the youngest son even then, Jehoram must have married Ahab's daughter as a young teen-ager. This says a good deal about the state of the court life in Israel at that time, Athaliah, his mother (2) is called the daughter of Omri, but was in fact Omri's grand-daughter, Omri being named as the founder of the family dynasty. Athaliah, infamous daughter of the infamous Jezebel, exercised a baneful and fatal influence on her son, as 3 and 4 make clear. The phrase 'counsellor to do wickedly' and 'counsellors to his destruction' almost suggest an acceleration in evil, as if a momentum was inexorably carrying him on to his doom. Indeed, the description of the warfare in which he met his end has a note of the inevitable about it. The destruction, we are told in 7, 'was of God', and the account given in 7-9 makes grim and sad reading (the parallel account in 2 Kings 9:27 should be looked at). The Chronicler adds, characteristically, that what decent burial he received was not on his own account, but because he was descended from the godly Jehoshaphat. The last phrase in 9 simply means that on his death there was no one left of his house who could assume responsibility for the kingdom - a statement which forms the transition to the account of Athaliah's usurpation of power in 10 ff.

118) 22:10-12

The king's mother, who has come to be known in history as 'the bloody Athaliah' because of the ruthlessness and savagery of her action in usurping power after her son's death, was a truly atrocious woman, standing in the awful tradition of her parents, Ahab and Jezebel of Israel. If we thought that Jehoram's action in slaying his brethren was a terrible one, what are we to say of Athaliah's, in destroying 'all the seed royal' of the house of Judah, her own grandchildren, in fulfilment of her lust for power. She seems almost worse than her abandoned mother Jezebel, if that were possible, and once again we are reminded of the solemn truth that evil is not a static thing, it develops and intensifies with a horrible momentum when unchecked. Athaliah's depravity is mentioned, however, by the Chronicler only as a backcloth to the divine intervention to preserve that royal seed she was so intent on destroying. For the good seed was to persist, two generations of evildoers notwithstanding (Jehoram and Ahaziah), and not even their outrageous careers of evil and shame could suffice to set at nought the purposes of grace God had for this people. Ahaziah's sister, daughter of bloody Athaliah, was out of character with her mother and her brother (having married into the priesthood, lib) and became the instrument of a wonderful rescue operation which must be one of the most thrilling and exciting stories in all the Old Testament.

119) 22:10-12

Here is a further comment on Athaliah, from earlier Notes on 2 Kings 11:1-3: "Athaliah 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 Rev 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.

120) 23:1-11

It is a wonderfully heartening and encouraging thought that in such a time of bloodshed and lawlessness (and Athaliah's reign lasted six years and more) there should have been a godly remnant who held on to the hope of a better day dawning, and who worked quietly in the hidden places to preserve the infant king. Surely this should tell us that no matter how dark and ominous may be the clouds that surround there is always hope, and God will always hear. If we take God's word seriously, what we must learn in these studies is that by far the most important thing we can be doing at such a time is praying to the living God. This is the great task laid upon the Church. Another thing we should learn, is that God's plans for overcoming evil are often very unobtrusive, and very unostentatious. On the face of it, this situation almost seemed to suggest that evil had triumphed and that Athaliah was undisputed ruler; but all the time God was working silently behind the scenes, hiddenly and secretly preserving the royal seed, and preparing for the furtherance of His sovereign purposes. One recalls in this connection the story of Israel's plight in Egypt, under pressure from their heartless taskmasters. How often they must have felt that the heavens were as brass, while all the time God had already answered their prayers in the birth of the infant Moses, who was being nurtured secretly and unobtrusively in the very court of Egypt. This is an enormously encouraging reality: if we believe that God is the Hearer of prayer, we must do Him the honour and dignity of trusting Him, even if we do not see, at any particular time, anything on which to base our trust. He is faithful to His word and His promise. The question is, how many years are we prepared to wait for the evidence that our prayers have been answered?

121) 23:1-11

In 3 ff we see Jehoiada the priest taking a stand on the word and promise of God: he was a man of faith and vision and this stood him in good stead in the dark days through which he lived. He saw what God was intent on doing, and had confidence in what the Lord had said of the sons of David. Presumably he was prompted by the Spirit of God and made to realise that now was the time for action. The meeting referred to in 3 was obviously a secret conclave, and a 'coup d'état' was arranged and brought into effect. We might be tempted to think of all this as somewhat of a 'cloak and dagger' pattern, full of melodrama, but it would be a truer estimate to see it more in terms of what happened in the days of the Scottish Reformation. This was no ordinary overthrow, but a demonstration of the Divine sovereignty. Again, we see the Chronicler's interest in doing things in accordance with the law, so far as the Temple worship was concerned (6) - it is this, as he is ever at pains to point out, that God honours and blesses, and it is a measure of the seriousness and the responsible nature of Jehoiada's undertaking that he should have been so concerned about this. How easy it would have been, in the thrill of such a dramatic moment, to have cast discretion to the winds, as if the good end in view justified any kind of means to accomplish it. Not so: even in the plenitude of the Spirit's working there is a right way of doing things; and there is an attitude of carelessness and impatience with the established order of things that God simply will not own - a point which apparently often escapes the notice of enthusiastic but misguided zealots. As Paul says in 1 Cor 14:32, 'the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets'.

122) 23:1-11

We should notice the remarkable and suggestive word at the end of 7. It does not require much spiritual imagination to take this right into the heart of the New Testament, and in devotional terms refer it to the believer's attitude to Christ: 'Be ye with the king when he cometh in and when he goeth out'. This is not so fanciful as we might at first think (it is, of course, spiritualising), for after all it is the seed royal that is being spoken of, and Christ was the Promised Seed. It would be surprising if there were no reflections of the ultimate spiritual reality in these historical incidents. This is the explanation of many instances in the Old Testament where a word having a clear reference to local circumstances has an undeniable and inevitable suggestion of deeper things. May we not say that this - being with the King - is the most important thing in spiritual life? The wonderful jubilation at the coronation in 11 must have been a most moving moment for Jehoiada, as he saw the fruition of the years of waiting and praying and working and watching for God's time to come. This is surely a 'typical' picture - typical of every time of refreshing that comes from the hand of the Lord, and just as surely an incentive to us to work on, however long and patiently, till we see our heart's desire, and God's purposes, fulfilled in our day.

123) 23:12-21

Athaliah was forthwith toppled from her position of power, and was brought to her deserved doom and downfall. We need not spend time contemplating that ugly scene (12-15). What is more important for us - as for the Chronicler - is to understand the significance of 16. The covenant that was made, 'that they should be the Lord's people' indicates that this was not simply an ethical reformation, less a mere coup d'état, but a spiritual awakening. It was God establishing something. It was a recall to spiritual realities, a recall to consecration; and shining through we can see something of Jehoiada's gracious ruthlessness as he determined that they would go all the way with God. He was not simply concerned for a change of monarch, or for better economic or political stability, although these things were involved and important in their way, but for spiritual and ultimate realities,. There is a lesson of great importance for Christian people in this. We do, in fact, tend all too easily to lose sight of ultimate considerations. Men look for better patterns of justice for mankind, for equity, fair distribution of wealth, and all these things are important; but for the Church there should be something not only more important but infinitely more important, that the establishment of a just and fair society, and it is the establishment of the kingdom of God. Without this, the breaking down of the house and altars of Baal becomes one great and costly distraction and sidetrack. With Jehoiada, everything was centred on the words 'as it is written in the law of Moses'. His concern was the establishment of a biblical way of life. It is that that makes a land rejoice, and gives its cities peace and quiet (21).

124) 24:1-14

The parallel passage in 2 Kings 12:4-15 should be consulted for some additional details in this interesting story which reveals a difference of opinion between the priests and the Levites on the one hand and king Joash on the other. The king's instructions about the temple dues and freewill offerings for the repair of the Temple have been left unheeded (6); and comparing the two accounts together, it does seem as if the priests almost had a 'vested interest' in the money and were unwilling to yield their claims to it. Some have suggested that there was some irregularity among them with regard to the Lord's money, but this can only be conjecture. We wonder what Jehoiada was to all this. Did he condone the priests' position? Was he aware of what was going on? He was an old man by this time (the 23rd year of the king's reign), and he may have weakly acquiesced in this evident neglect of the king's commandment. We do not know; but something was wrong, and it was brought to a head in this way, and happily the matter was cleared up and a new pattern of stewardship was instituted which stimulated such rejoicing and willingness of heart that they were hard put to it to clear the money day by day, so much came in. This tells us a great deal about 'church' finance. When there is something wrong spiritually, money tends not to come in as it ought and when things are right spiritually, money does come in as it ought and, furthermore, tends no longer to be an undue preoccupation. By the same token, we may say that a work of reformation and spiritual renewal that does not reach to profound financial adjustments must be held to be suspect, or only partial in its development. A true work of God touches the whole man, and the whole man includes his possessions.

125) 24:15-27

The last part of the chapter makes very sad reading. What an ignominious end to a notable and illustrious reign. The circumstances of the earlier part of the chapter took place in the twenty third year of his reign (2 Kings 12: 6), but a further seventeen years were left to him, and it was in the later stages of the reign that the events recorded in these verses took place. The fateful words are in 17 - 'the king hearkened unto' the princes of Judah who came to do obeisance to him, after the death of Jehoiada. It seems that the priest's influence was such that Joash was kept faithful to the ways of God, and that when the old man of God was gone other, much less creditable influences began to be exercised upon him. One would have thought that all the experience of the earlier years of his reign would have been sufficient to show him the folly - and the bad economics! - of spiritual declension (18,19), but no. There was a will to transgression, and transgress he did (20), and he became party to the princes' foul deed, and engineered the death of his faithful mentor's son Zechariah. This is how he requited the man who had humanly-speaking made him all he was, and to whom he owed his very life and existence. It was the heartlessness and the ugliness of that foul deed, and the terrible ingratitude it displayed, that made God lift his hand upon Joash in a recoil of horror and distaste. To sin against love and faithfulness is a terrible sin, and for that sin Joash himself was slain by his own servants (25). All of which teaches the frightening lesson that there is no depth to which even a good man will not sink, if God lift His restraining grace from him when he persists in sin, "The Lord look upon it and require it" said the dying Zechariah. (22); and the Lord did look upon it and did require it" (23-27).

126) 25:1-4

After the death of Joash, his son Amaziah came to the throne and reigned for twenty nine years. The operative and significant comment on his story is in 2 - 'he did right...but not with a perfect heart'. He was a half-and-half king, and in a sense neither one thing nor the other. The whole chapter is an eloquent commentary on this highly unsatisfactory state of affairs. So much trouble comes from it, because so often it involves compromise of one kind or another. This was true of so many of the 'good' kings of Judah - it was almost as if some kind of moral paralysis effectually stayed their progress in true consecration. Amaziah is first of all presented in a good light, in 3, 4. The natural thing (in those days) would have been to put the children of the assassins to the sword also, but it is significant that Amaziah is concerned to follow the law of Moses as it is plainly stated in Deut 24:16. It might be thought that there is a contradiction to this in Exodus 20:5, where it is stated that children do suffer for the sins of their fathers, but the conflict is only a seeming one, for the commandment in Exodus 20 refers to what God does; and what God does in judgment and what we are allowed to do are very different things: God has a right to visit judgment on families for the sins of the fathers, and, in His sovereign justice we are told that He sometimes does so; but it is quite another thing for men to take the law into their own hands and act the part of God. "Vengeance is Mine", says the Lord, "I will repay" (cf also Jer31:30 and Ezek. 18:20).

127) 25:5-13

If 3 and 4 show Amaziah in a good light, these verses show a different side of the king, and are parabolic of the patchwork quality of his life and its unsatisfactory nature. The expedition against Seir (Edom) highlights this very clearly, showing again the ambivalent character of his conduct of affairs, some of it good, and some of it bad. His error and wrong-doing consisted in hiring mercenaries from the northern kingdom, Israel for the furtherance of his campaign against Edom. When we bear in mind the history of the relationship between Judah and the northern kingdom, this kind of association was surely a foolhardy one on Amaziah's part, and fraught with peril. Asa had come to grief because of this, when he fraternised with Ahab; Jehoshaphat landed in terrible trouble through his association with the northern kingdom; and in the last chapter we saw the end of that association in Athaliah, the terrible queen who was the daughter of Jezebel. Yet here, once again, in spite of all that, we find a king of Judah becoming involved with the apostate kingdom. We are tempted to say, 'Will men never learn?' Observe the mixture of good and evil in all this: it was good to do battle against Edom, but the evil lay in complicity with Israel. And we are reminded of Paul's words, "Shall we do evil, that good may come?" (Rom 3:8). The answer to that is that it is never necessary so to do, to bring about God's good. He is more than able to fulfil His will and purposes in honourable ways, without recourse to any dubious or unhallowed alliances. It is never right to do wrong.

128) 25:5-13

The warning voice of God sounded out for the king, and it is something that he heard and heeded it. The AV rendering of 8 is unclear, and modern versions will help us to a better understanding. The RSV has "If you suppose that in this way you will be strong for war, God will cut you down before the enemy; for God has power to help or cast down". From what follows it is evident that the king took the prophet's advice, but his perplexed question in 9 about the hundred talents is very revealing. Amaziah had already paid the money for the mercenaries - a very large sum of money indeed, and to do the will of God now would involve a substantial loss for him. This was his dilemma; and he appears to have been more concerned about the financial loss than with whether or not he would now do the right thing. This is always where the complications come, when we step out of the good and acceptable and perfect will of God; and it is very dangerous to be more concerned about expediency (i.e., in this case, the possible recovery of the money) than with principle. It is all too possible to sacrifice the latter for the former. 'Never mind the money', said the prophet; 'do what is right and leave the rest to God'. Note also the ambiguousness of the result: there was victory over Edom, without the help of the mercenaries, but there was also a terrible 'backlash' as the frustrated mercenaries pillaged Judah's cities on their way home. Life is complicated when we do wrong, and it is naive to suppose that repentance and contrition necessarily simplify issues in the sense of making an easy way out of the problems our sin had created. The issues can sometimes remain incredibly complicated, even after we have repented and got right with God. The consequences of sin often linger for long enough after the sin has been dealt with, and we have to learn, sadly, to live with them. This is how it was with Amaziah. His involvement with the mercenaries cost him far more than a hundred talents!

129) 25:14-28

The problem, of course, of adopting a 'half-and-half' attitude, as Amaziah did, is that it is not a stable situation. Indeed, there is generally a downward movement of deterioration; and this is borne out by the much more serious lapse recorded in these verses. It makes one wonder whether in fact the whole expedition against the Edomites may not have been a sad and misguided one from the outset: Leastways, it was Amaziah's contact with Edom that led to the gross idolatry mentioned in 14, which kindled the anger of the Lord against him, bringing his prophet once more to confront him. The king's reply to the prophet (is he the same as in 7?) is not quite clear in the AV, and the RSV gets the sense better: "Have we made you a royal counsellor? Stop! Why should you be put to death?" The tone of this riposte makes it clear that the king is much less ready than he was previously to pay heed to the Lord's warning voice. Perhaps he is indicating his sense of fury at the news of the mercenaries' spoiling of his cities (13), and the prophet got the brunt of it. At all events, the king's moral and spiritual declension worsens, and the next episode is truly disastrous and fatal for him. He allows himself to be counselled by false advisers (this seems to be the force of what is said in 17) and insists on a confrontation with the king of Israel. There is almost a note of fatality in the account, as if what were being represented was a point of no return for the hapless king, because of his persistence in sin and his refusal to hearken to the voice of God. This explains a good deal in the remainder of the story.

130) 25:14-28

Amaziah's determination to have a confrontation with Israel may have been a piece of bravado to bolster up his sagging self-confidence, as if to compensate for his error in becoming involved with the northern kingdom on the earlier occasion. But this was simply to swing to the opposite extreme: fighting against Israel was as bad as asking her help against Edom in this respect, that any association with her, friendly or hostile, was inadvisable and wrong. And two wrongs do not make a right - not ever. He would have been so much better off giving Israel a wide berth. But the man was wrong at heart, and therefore everything he did was wrong. Joash of Israel's reaction shows the contempt in which he was held. (18, 19). Amaziah should certainly have got the message, but no; he was intoxicated by his success (limited as that was) against Edom, he aimed at nothing less than a victory over Israel also - such was his arrogant and quite unrealistic approach. And, of course, pride comes before a fall; and fall he did, to his humiliation and hurt and final destruction, although fifteen years were to elapse before his own men rose against him to assassinate him. His people clearly had had their fill of him during these years, years in which he apparently continued in his idolatrous ways.

Such was the story of Amaziah, the double-minded, who was neither the one thing nor the other for so much of his life, and ended up so very much 'the other'. If ever a chapter spoke a message clearly and plainly, it is this one, which tells us that in spiritual life it must be all or nothing. We must serve the Lord in all our ways.

131) 26:1-15

The next reign, Uzziah's, was one of the longest in Judah's history, fifty two years in all (3), although for the last ten or eleven years of his life his son Jotham was regent, Uzziah having been stricken with leprosy and forced to live in seclusion. There can be little doubt that it was one of the most illustrious and significant of all reigns. G. Adam Smith says of it: "There had been no king like this one since Solomon: never, since the son of David brought the Queen of Sheba to his feet, had the national pride stood so high, or the nation's dream of sovereignty touched such remote borders. The people's admiration invested Uzziah with all the graces of the ideal monarch". It is all the more intriguing, therefore, to realise the parallel passages in 2 Kings 14:21, 22, 15:1-7 spend so little time describing this long reign. One possible reason for this is that good news is often not news. And if the writers of Kings is concerned to show the pattern of moral deterioration in Judah (and that is his purpose and intention), then he would not be very interested in recording much of Uzziah's reign, which was little marked by any moral deterioration. Just as nowadays, newspapers are not much interested in recording the good things men do, but concentrate on the bad and the sensational as being of better new value, so then, in a document that was intent on charting the fateful moral declension that led to the Captivity, a reign such as Uzziah's would not occupy much attention. The Chronicler's viewpoint is different, and he devotes a whole chapter to his reign, with his own characteristic emphasis and interpretation, as we shall see.

132) 26:1-15

There is a sense in which there is not much comment needed by way of exact exposition of these verses. The general impression conveyed is that of a reign in which prosperity is the order of the day, and that everything Uzziah did seemed to go well. There was military prowess and success (6-8), the building of fortifications (9), with the whole country put on a proper footing, and defences made secure (11-13), industrial expertise and ingenuity (14), with creative and inventive genius (15). The general impression is certainly that of affluence and economic prosperity, with the land's and the king's reputation spreading far and wide. The explanation of all this is found in 4, 5: 'he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord'. This has been the Chronicler's uniform message throughout his record, and it has a timeless relevance for men and nations. But how, if the Chronicler's point is valid, are we to explain the parallel prosperity of the northern kingdom at this time, under Jeroboam II (cf 2 Kings 14:23 ff; cf also the prophecies of Amos and Hosea) for this was one of the most evil of reigns.

What we must say is that while godliness brings prosperity (righteousness exalteth a nation), prosperity is not necessarily the fruit of godliness. In Jeroboam's time, it was a 'never-had-it-so-good' sort of time materially, but it sapped the moral fibre of the nation, and historians of that period point out that the great wealth and luxury went hand in hand with moral corruption, and that it was a prelude to the judgments that were to come from God. This is the force of the opening words of Amos's prophecy, 'two years before the earthquake'.

133) 26:16-23

There is another part, however, to Uzziah's story, and sad reading it makes. It is introduced by the words in 15 - 'he was marvellously helped (by God), till he was strong'. And this was the danger point for him. His very strength, his state of prosperity became his downfall, because it seems to have given him delusions of grandeur and power that made him suppose that he was not subject to the same limitations as other men, and therefore able to do, with impunity, what other men could not, and would not dare to do. He intruded into the sacrosanct sphere of the priestly office, and went into the Temple to burn incense, to his cost, and the inevitable reaction and condemnation of the priesthood. This was a mortally dangerous position for the king to have taken. Paradoxically, the stronger we are spiritually, the safer it is in such a situation to have a lively sense of our weakness, Weakness in the strong is a position of safety, because then we lean on God. Uzziah did not do so, and was tripped by the evil one into this sad and unnecessary transgression. His reaction on being rebuked by the priests (18) shows just how high-handed and arrogant he had become; and the stroke of God came upon him in the moment of his arrogance (19). It is almost terrifying to see how after years of faithfulness in the things of God a man could be so disastrously seduced. And, let us note well, it was 'when he was strong' that the tragedy took place. This was not the sin of weaklings or failures, but of those who have got on spiritually, and there is much of the 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".

134) 27:1-9

This brief chapter records the reign of Jotham, Uzziah's son, another good king, and there are some points in it that are of deep significance for our ongoing understanding of the history of the times. One thinks, for example, of the words in Isaiah 6:1, 'In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord....' Jotham was in effect king for some years before his real succession, since his father's leprosy had secluded him (25:21) from any practical involvement in the affairs of the nation. Nevertheless, Isaiah's mighty ministry in Jerusalem was associated with Jotham's reign, and it is significant to note what is said in Isa 6:9-13 about the nature of the prophet's ministry, in his commission to preach a word of judgment, particularly in view of what is said here at the end of 2, 'And the people yet did corruptly'. It has been pointed out that this is the first intimation that the people were not influenced by a godly king. Up to this point, the moral condition of the people depended largely on the moral condition of the ruler: when he was godly, he led his people into godliness of life. But here is a significant change, and it may be that we are meant to see from this that this is the point that marks the beginning of the downward trend of Judah towards the tragedy of the Captivity. It is also significant to see, in the parallel passage, in 2 Kings 15:37, that it was at this point that 'the Lord began to send against Judah Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah the son Remaliah'. It may well be that this is the beginning of the fatal movement towards the point of 'no return' in Manasseh's time: after Jotham came Ahaz, a terrible king, then the good king Hezekiah, then Manasseh, the worst of them all. Evil was clearly beginning to build up a momentum, Such is the fateful message underlined in this chapter.

135) 27:1-9

The main lesson of the chapter, however, is still the Chronicler's characteristic lesson, as we see in 6: 'he prepared (ordered) his ways before the Lord his God'. The picture we have here is of a man living in the consciousness that the eyes of God were upon him, and with a holy and devout determination to live an ordered and disciplined life. That is a great way to live, and it was especially great in a situation in which there was a progressive deterioration in the moral standards of the nation as a whole. This is the way to spiritual stature: no one becomes big in stature, morally and spiritually, except in the context of the kind of discipline envisaged in 6 and applied so thoroughly by Jotham to his own personal life. This is what made him mighty: everything said about him in this chapter, though brief, is good, and there is no breath of criticism touching him. Moreover, he was determined not to fall into his father's fatal error; 'he entered not into the temple of the Lord (2). Some people never learn from the mistakes of others or of the past; Jotham did. And he became mighty (6). He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

136) 28:1-8

Ahaz's was an evil reign (1-4), and the verses at the beginning of the Chapter make grim reading. The question that arises is: how is it that ever a succession of relatively good kings did not seem to be able to prevent further declension in the kingdom? Two things may be said: on the one hand, these kings were not good enough. Repeatedly their 'goodness' is 'qualified' by such words as 'but not as their father David', or: 'but the high places were not broken down'. On the other hand, there is the fact of the solidarity of the race, and the growing momentum of evil involving succeeding generations almost in spite of themselves, and dragging them down. The idea of corporate solidarity and responsibility is a real one, and has a good deal to say to us today about our national situation. The 'stop the-world-I-want-to-get-off' attitude prevalent today is really not a practical possibility: no one can opt out of the things that are happening around us, and it is naive and futile to suppose otherwise. We are all of us involved in the sins of the age: we are twentieth-century man, and the responsibility for the state of the world is ours, inescapably ours. We are all alike involved in its agony and its guilt. This fact of solidarity does not, of course, excuse Ahaz in any way. Indeed, he had less excuse 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 grandfather, both of whom in their prime were men of God. Above all, his guilt was aggravated by the fact that he had the greatest of the prophets, Isaiah, to help and encourage him (cf Isa 7:4 ff). 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.

137) 28:1-8

In the light of what was said in the previous note, it is little wonder that Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel came up against Ahaz. 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". David once prayed, 'Keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins', and he 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. This is how it was with Ahaz, as we see clearly from the passage already referred to, Isaiah 7:4 ff: not all the pleadings of the man of God could divert him from the disastrous course he was determined to pursue. Indeed, God 'leaned over backwards' to encourage him to trust in His power and mercy, but to no avail. Ahaz was set on an evil way, and the disaster mentioned in 5-8 - the magnitude of which we should not under-estimate, brief though the record is - was the inevitable consequences of such wilful rebellion.

138) 28:9-15

This is a remarkable passage, full of interest and significance. It relates to a rebuke spoken by a prophet of the Lord against the victorious army of Israel (the northern kingdom) as they carried away the many captives from Judah (the southern kingdom). What is being said is this (in the words of the I.C.C. commentary): "This victory was not due to Israel's prowess or an evidence of the righteousness of their cause, and hence also Judah should have been treated with restraint instead of with rage 'which hath reached up to heaven', i.e. to God, and thus commanded His attention and rendered Israel liable to punishment. The purpose also of enslaving the people of Judah is most severely condemned". Two points may be made here. Firstly, it is significant that here in the northern kingdom there was a responsiveness to the word of the Lord through the prophet Oded, in spite of the declension and depravity of the kingdom at that time - a responsiveness that led them to change in a most radical fashion their attitude to their captives (15). Secondly, we see the Lord's care and concern for Judah, even in their sin, and His willingness at this late stage to be a God to Ahaz, if only the latter would let Him. What a testimony to the long suffering of God! And how often is this long suffering grace misunderstood and misinterpreted as condoning evil things (there was so much of evil in Ahaz's life), not knowing that the goodness of God is meant to lead men to repentance. It was as if God had brought His hand down heavily upon them, and yet was waiting to gather them in tenderness, if only they would turn to Him. It is no pleasure to Him when He has to smite nations and bring them under duress. He is longing to gather them to Himself; and this is why even a token turning in a nation would surely, be met by the Divine grace.

139) 28:16-21

But all to no avail. Ahaz's response in these verses convinces us that the appeal of the compassion and longsuffering of God fell on deaf ears, so far as he was concerned. He compounded his sin by appealing to Assyria for help (16) against the invasion of the Edomites and the Philistines - a predictably disastrous course for him to follow, as is underlined twice in 20 and 21. If we take 19 as it stands in the AV, the meaning is that Ahaz by his actions stripped Judah of all its resources and left the land totally vulnerable to the Assyrian menace. The marginal rendering, however, is 'he cast away restraint', and this is followed by modern translations as indicating that Ahaz was responsible for an irruption of wild and ungovernable behaviour in the land. Either way, the end product is much the same: the land reached a new 'low' in unfaithfulness to the Lord. Tiglath Pileser of Assyria came in answer to Ahaz's appeal for help, but his coming was very different from what Ahaz expected. Distress rather than help was the result, and distress that was not only not relieved by the costly payments mentioned in 21, but also compounded by the long-term implications of having become involved with Assyria. For Ahaz's fateful decision affected the course of politics for the next thirty years and brought the oppressor right to the borders of Judah itself, after the northern kingdom was taken into captivity, two years after this. In vain did the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7) try to make the hapless king see this: his heart was darkened against all true counsel, and set upon ways that would inevitably lead to destruction.

140) 28:22-27

One of the penalties of sin and sinning is that it compels a man to go on sinning, and this was certainly Ahaz's lot, as we see in these verses. The 'yet more' in 22 conveys the sinister sense of fateful inevitability in the downward movement towards ruin. Ahaz was caught up in it, and completely in its control (23). The full story of what lies behind 23 may be read in 2 Kings 16: 10ff - a story which exposes the extent of the king's spiritual declension. "Because the gods of the Syrians help them, therefore will I sacrifice unto thee, he argued (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 disasters 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 chosen people when they rebel against Him. It was not the gods of the Syrians, but the only true and living God, that 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' (23). Exactly!

141) 28:22-27

Alexander Maclaren, a prince of preachers of a former generation, makes some trenchant observations on this story. He speaks of the restlessness of the life of sin, as evidenced in Ahaz's experience - the reaching out to idol after idol, god after god, and none sufficient to meet his need. Having turned from God, all things turned from him. Maclaren also comments on the heavy cost of the help Ahaz hoped to get: the vast help of the Temple went to Assyria before Tiglath Pileser would lift a hand to help him; but more: the heathen gods got one of his sons (2 Kings 16:3) - the words 'passing through the fire' means human sacrifice. Does this shock us beyond measure, as something unspeakable? But let us consider that in our own city over a thousand abortions are performed every year in our hospitals, over a thousand unborn foetuses burned in the incinerator. Let us think of the slackening of restraints that this represents in our society before expressing our sense of outrage at the practices of Ahaz's day!

142) 28:22-27

Here is a further comment from Maclaren on the cost of the help Ahaz sought from the heathen: "Do you buy this world's helps any cheaper, my brother? You get nothing for nothing in that market. It is a big price that you have to pay before these mercenaries will come to fight on your side. Here is a man that succeeds in life, as we call it. What does it cost him? Well, it has cost him the suppression, the atrophy by disuse, of many capacities of his soul which were far higher and nobler than those that have been exercised in his success. It has cost him all his days. It has possibly cost him the dying out of generous sympathies and the stimulating of unwholesome selfishness. Ah, he has bought his prosperity very dear. Political economists have much to say about the appreciation of gold. I think if people would estimate what they pay for it, in an immense majority of cases, in treasure that cannot be weighed and stamped, they would find it to be about the dearest thing in God's universe; and there are few men who make worse bargains than the men who give themselves for worldly success, even when they receive what they give themselves for. There are some of you who know how much what you call enjoyment has cost you. Some of us have bought pleasure at the price of innocence or moral dignity or stained memories, of polluted imaginations, of an incapacity to rise above the flesh. And some of us have bought it at the price of health. The world has a way of getting more out of you than it gives to you. At the best.... you are giving heaven to get earth. Is that a good bargain?... You have been fooled out of the inheritance that God meant for you... you have got it for transient satisfaction, as partial as it is transient.... You have to buy this world's wealth and goods at the price of God and your souls, and I ask you if that is an investment which recommends itself to your common sense. Oh, my brother, what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Answer the question!"

143) 29:1-11

We come now to the reign of Hezekiah, the fourth of the kings mentioned in Isaiah's prophecy. Hezekiah was one of the outstanding monarchs in the kingdom of Judah, and the sacred records of his reign, both here, in chapters 29-32 and in 2 Kings 18,19, clearly attach a great deal of significance to it, by the amount of space they allocate to it. The chapters now before us stand in marked contrast to the previous one, and in this contrast there is a lesson at the outset: it is that, given leadership that is prepared for the will of God, then a whole nation can experience a marvellous recovery, however dark its immediate past. This is an insight that essentially only a Christian can have, and this is basically why, in the last analysis, as Christians, we cannot be despairing. There is nothing impossible with God, nothing too hard for Him; and although as a nation we seem to be seeing a gathering momentum of disorder, with each passing week bringing fresh evidence of breakdown, we should also bear in mind that this is what the situation was like in Ahaz's time; yet with the succession of this new monarch, and a new leadership in the nation, a totally different situation developed, and developed very swiftly. This is an immensely hopeful thought, and we must never discount its possibility. Here, then, is a guideline for us: we should pray for a leadership of moral and spiritual stature, for given this, anything could happen.

144) 29:1-11

Another lesson that may be gathered from this passage is that - as we may gather from the parallel account in 2 Kings 18:9-12 - this work of renewal is set against the background of the captivity of the northern kingdom and its subjugation by the Assyrian empire in 721 B.C. Here, then, so to speak, are the alternatives that face men and nations: to trust God as Judah did under Hezekiah is to know His presence and blessing in national life; to disobey Him, as Israel, the northern kingdom, did, is to bring disaster. One is reminded of Moses' famous words in Deut 13:19 to the people of Israel: "Behold I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life." One senses the urgency of Moses' words: perhaps he could see into the future, and realised how critical this choice would be for his people.

Another thing to note is the disposition of the chapters here. In chapters 29-31 we have the record of the internal renewal and reformation, while in chapter 32 we have Hezekiah's dealings with the external enemies, with Sennacherib and the Assyrians. This is a pattern of real significance: judgment must begin at the house of God, as Peter says in his epistle (1 Pet 4:1.7), and Hezekiah first set his own house in order, before dealing with outward and external enemies. Wrong loyalties and allegiances had to be set right within before he could expect the blessing of God on his efforts to throw off the Assyrian yoke. Nothing could point more clearly the road to blessing and victory in the Christian life. Read the words of Hymn 531 in the Church Hymnary as an apt commentary on all this.

145) 29:1-11

Looking now in more detail at the text, we should note at the outset the significant words in 2, 'according to all that David his father had done'. This is something that almost none of the other kings have recorded of them - they mostly fell short of the standard set by David. But with this man it was different, and it is this that conditions all that we read in the verses and chapters that follow. We note the contrast in 3 with 28:24: the Chronicler is underlining this deliberately. Hezekiah had seen the disaster of his father's reign, and was determined, as soon as he came to power, to reverse the sinister and disastrous trend. We sometimes use the phrase, 'Begin as you mean to continue', and this is certainly how Hezekiah went about things: in 4-9 we see that he began with the Temple and the priests and the Levites. In this specialised sense also, judgment began at the house of God, and things were put right there, but Hezekiah involved himself in this renewal also: for him also it was a personal consecration (10), and a turning back to the Lord in a renewal of the covenant. And what a challenge and what an appeal in 11! - a challenge to the priests and Levites to be faithful to their calling: 'The Lord hath chosen you...' What a word to ring out over the desolation of the years, when the levitical office and the priesthood had gone so seriously by default and the word of the Lord was a scarce commodity (cf 1 Sam 3:1). It is very moving and stirring to realise it was not so much a religious leader as the ruler of the realm that called the priests and Levites back to their true destiny and their proper task. It was through the king that there came the Lord's own grace and recommissioning.

146) 29:12-19

These verses indicate to us the response of the obedience of faith. The Levites rose to the challenge, and sanctified themselves (15), and set about the work of cleansing and renewing the house of God. And in sixteen short but wonderfully significant days the work was completed (17)! The last verse of the chapter, describing the whole process of renewal, says 'the thing was done suddenly': almost at a snap of the fingers, the whole situation was transformed. That is how great God is, when He begins to work! But, significantly, the cleansing of the Temple was preceded by a personal cleansing and consecration. Alexander Maclaren points out that one of the weaknesses of the Reformation in Europe was that the passions of princes and nobles were so soon and generally enlisted for it and marred it - mixed motives were involved, political motives and motives of personal aggrandisement. Maclaren adds: "He that enters into the holy place, especially if his errand be to cleanse it, must have 'clean hands and a pure heart'. The hands that wielded the whip of small cords and drove out the money changers were stainless, and therefore strong. Some of us are very fond of trying to set churches to rights. Let us begin with ourselves lest, like careless servants, we leave dirty finger marks where we have been 'cleaning'."

147) 29:20-36

These verses all belong together and we are not well able to divide them up. They record the ritual of the reconstituted worship in the Temple after its cleansing. The exact regulations about the offerings are in. one sense of small interest to us, in their literal application, but the point that is important is that the house of the Lord was now set in order, and this is a description of the 'rightness of order' that we have seen to be so important for the Chronicler. But we may note one or two points in particular, as for example, the pattern that was followed: first, the sin offering (23), then the burnt offering (27) , and then the thank offering (31). The significance of the order is that the people had been in a state of declension, hence the sin question had first of all to be dealt with and put right. Then there was the question of reconsecration of life - this is the function of the burnt offering. Then, when the Lord had met them with grace and forgiveness, there was the spirit of thankfulness and praise. This is always how it works in spiritual life. But there is something else also: the sin offering represents the fact of atonement, and when the gospel of sacrifice and atonement is recovered and renewed, men begin to sing. Here, "when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel." We shall continue this thought in the next note.

148) 29:20-36

What was said at the end of the previous note is reflected in the story of the Reformation in the 16th century. When Luther and Calvin recovered and restored the doctrine of atonement and the message of free grace in the gospel of the blood of the cross, all Europe was set a-singing. It is always so. It is so in personal life: when first the power of the gospel dawns upon our darkened souls, and we see the truth as it is in Jesus, we are made to sing with joy, and our hearts are filled with gladness and rejoicing. Every true revival of religion shows the same characteristics: the newspaper records of the 1859 revival in Scotland underline again and again that when people discovered for the first time the message of justification by faith, they entered into the joy of the Lord. This is what we see in this chapter, and we should not under-estimate or understate this glorious reality in Hezekiah's time, for it must have been a great time to be alive, especially after the darkness of his father's reign. Always when the true riches of grace are recovered, songs break out, and if this is generally true (as it is), it may well be that we are in for a great time of singing in days to come, when times of refreshing come from the presence of the Lord. Please God it may be so!

149) 29:20-36

All that having been said, however, something further needs to be added. Hezekiah's reformation was 'ritual-centred', as is clear from the Chronicler's account. It is the outward, external, visible order of things that represented to him the rightness with God. But this raises a question: Isaiah was prophesying in Jerusalem at this time, and it will be recalled that in the very first chapter of his prophecy he inveighs against the multitude of sacrifices that men were making, when their hearts were far from God, and lays his emphasis entirely on ethical considerations - inward, internal reality, not outward ritual. This is not to say that Hezekiah's reformation was false or futile - how could such a charge be laid against the manifest presence and blessing of God upon the people, recorded in this chapter? All the same, there may be a message here for us today. There are various movements afoot at the present time, of stirring and awakening, and a good deal of excitement and singing in various directions, many of them associated with young people. All these things are good, and may well be authentic evidences of the Spirit of God at work. But unless they are anchored to the teaching of the Word, they may well go by default, and run to seed. Now, there is little evidence of any emphasis on the teaching of the Word in Hezekiah's story, any more than we saw in Asa's reformation (2 Chron 14/16); and this may be one reason why Hezekiah's reign was followed by the most evil of all the kings of Judah, Manasseh, his son. One wonders whether the lack of basic emphasis on the teaching of the law was one reason why the people defected so tragically in Manasseh's time. If they had been a people taught in the Word, they surely would not have gone so absolutely with such an evil king as Manasseh proved to be.

150) 29:20-36

Another thing for us to note is what is said in 34 about the priests and the Levites. The priests, we are told, were too few. But why should this be? The law's provision for the priesthood surely guaranteed a sufficiency in numbers. One can therefore only assume that there were priests in the land who had not responded to Hezekiah's appeal to consecration, and who did not identify themselves with this movement of the Spirit. The same verses tell us that the Levites were 'more upright in heart to sanctify themselves than the priests'. What an indictment of men called of God to His service, that they should have been so sluggish and reluctant in a time of spiritual awakening! Clearly the Chronicler is underlining this sad situation, and, it stands as a solemn warning to us all. It has, alas, too often been so, in the history of the Church. The ordained ministers of God have often been content to sit on the sidelines when a work of revival has been going on in the land, sitting light to it, suspicious of the 'enthusiasm' it represents, and not slow to criticise on the least pretext. Our Lord's grief at His chosen people in Jerusalem was due to the fact that they 'knew not the time of their visitation', or 'the things that belonged to their peace', and God's appointed watchmen need to beware lest in times of awakening this should have to be said of them.

151) 29:20-36

One last word on this chapter before we leave it. In 36 we read that 'the thing was done suddenly'. One is reminded of Malachi's words (3:1), "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple". A sudden change then is possible. It can come very suddenly, but: that is not to say that it is without preparation - let us not forget that Isaiah had been ministering for many years in Jerusalem: is it not possible that what happened in Hezekiah's reign was the fruit of his costly faithfulness? The question, however, arises: Do we expect this? Do we expect God suddenly to break in some Sunday morning or evening? Do we come saying to ourselves, "Perhaps today God will break in"? Or do we come not expecting anything? Consider what an attitude of unexpectancy can do to the spiritual temperature of our worship. That is something that will bear thinking about. Here, the thing was done suddenly. Ah, let us expect great things from God. Let us expect our God to work!

152) 30:1-12

We have in these verses an appeal by letter from Hezekiah to the northern kingdom for reunion and, significantly, an appeal for the right reasons. We have in past chapters seen how Jehoshaphat had a fatal fascination for the northern kingdom, and entered into alliance with it to his great hurt; but here is Hezekiah looking for the northern kingdom, to welcome them back to the fold, and into fellowship with God. They are invited to come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep the Passover. Hezekiah was conscious of the blessing of God in his own land, and he wanted the rest of the tribes of Israel to share in that blessing. Do we see the pattern? The spiritual impetus created a generosity of spirit. It is easy to feel the pulse of compassion and grace beating in this good king's testimony (6-9), as he urged the northern kingdom to turn again to the Lord, and have done with their alienation and estrangement. But, alas, they laughed him to scorn (10). The point is that this appears to have been the last, final appeal from God to the northern kingdom. Some verses in the passage would seem to indicate that already the Assyrians had taken some of the northern peoples into captivity - this would have been in 732 BC - and that the final captivity in 721 was about to take place. If this be the setting of Hezekiah's appeal, it becomes a very urgent one indeed, with little time to lose. And it was at this late hour that they mocked him, and laughed him to scorn. But the appeal was not wholly without effect: some, of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem.

153) 30:13-20

However few the numbers coming from the Northern Kingdom there is no doubt that there was a wholehearted response to Hezekiah's appeal in Judah itself, as 12 makes very plain. It is deeply moving to think that this was happening 'cheek by jowl' with the contemptuous refusal of grace by the northern kingdom: the Lord was so near at hand, yet they were oblivious of it. The history of the Church in different ages, in times of awakening and revival, tells the same story, with some communities turned upside down and transformed by grace, and their neighbours remaining hardened in sin and contemptuous of all that was happening. There is an interesting circumstance recorded in 13 ff. We are told that they kept the feast on the second month and killed the Passover on the fourteenth day of that month. This meant that they were keeping the feast 'otherwise than it was written' (18). The reason for this is that many of the priests and Levites had not sanctified themselves sufficiently. There was provision for this in the Levitical legislation (cf Numbers 9), and when circumstances necessitated it, the feast could be kept in the second month. Hezekiah's words in 18b, 19 are very beautiful: he realised that the spirit of the law, if not the letter, was being honoured, and his prayer was wonderfully answered: the Lord healed the people!

154) 30:13-20

With reference to the honouring of the spirit, if not the letter, of the law, the following comment from the Gilcomston Notes of the Rev. William Still is very pertinent: "Here is a word for bigoted ritualists of all camps. It is not that right order is of no importance, but there are more important things, such as prepared hearts eager to worship and praise Jehovah and make confession, and offer sacrifice to Him. Perhaps if the denominations would all relax their exclusive rules, there would be such a response of backsliding people that would call for, not a restriction of the Lord's Day to a hurried and cursory morning service, a mere bow or a wink to the Almighty, but a demand for longer time to worship Him over seven days. We are sometimes sorry for holiday-makers who did not bargain for 90 minutes when they entered our church; but we had mixed feelings for the lady who having borne the evening service impatiently, made it loudly known to all around that it was 'far too long', and in her annoyance promptly fell out of the pew. A little less impatience would have made her more sure-footed! But what a crime to be longer than an hour! Where does it say in the Bible that a service will cease with the ping of the hour-bell? We know that the B.B.C. has accustomed us to meticulous timing, but there are times to forget the clock. Nor are we embarrassed when conscientious people perforce leave early. We can sometimes tell from the pulpit when they do so with apology, and when with resentment. Is it the Word that gets under their skin? We must bear patiently this irritation, for we do not pray for the Word to be released without something happening. It is the prayers of the people which make the Word sharp in our midst." Let us beware of the ritualism and the barrenness and deadness of 'the right thing'.

155) 30:21-27

Here is a situation in which the real 'right thing' burst through, because the Spirit was gloriously at work, and there was great joy in Jerusalem. This is the measure of what can come, when there is a will for the will of God. Should we not therefore take encouragement from this wonderful passage, which shows what may happen even amidst the gathering darkness of impending judgment. If anything should make us take heart, and pray on, crying to the Lord, it must surely be these words at the end of the chapter: 'Their voice was heard, and their prayer came up to his holy dwelling place, even unto heaven'. This is, so to speak, the 'positive' of which the Psalmist's words are the 'negative': 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me'. This good king refused to regard iniquity in his heart, but on the contrary put it all away, with the results we see here. May God Himself fill all our hearts with such a spirit!

156) 31:1

The important words in this verse are 'when all this was finished', for they bear witness to something of great significance in the work of the Lord. It speaks of the breaking down of the images and the groves throughout the land, but what we need to see is the order in which things were done: first, came the spiritual impetus and inspiration, and only then the breaking down of the idols. The whole of the previous two chapters was taken up with the record of Hezekiah's reforms and renewal and the keeping of the Passover, a record which is obviously one of a work of the Spirit of God of considerable magnitude. And it was when this had been established that the breaking down of idols took place. This is the proper context for the clearing away of things that offend, for it means that it would be done properly, and at the right time, and within divinely appointed limits. It is when breaking down things does not flow from such spiritual considerations that trouble so often comes. This has a good deal to say to us today, both in congregational situations and in wider issues. The beginning of a new ministry is not the right or best time to be breaking down idols: far better to let it flow from a new spiritual impetus and inspiration in the ministry - then it will have some chance of being effective, and being seen to be right and fitting. And what are we to say of some of the undignified and unedifying protests and attempts to overthrow, for example, some so-called Romanist tendencies in the Church - made by people who often seem to sit light to the gospel itself and to the habit of worship or church attendance? This kind of Protestant 'irreligion' does not cut any ice, and does nothing but discredit those who participate in it - for the very simple reason that it does not spring from genuine inspiration and spiritual renewal. This is the prior requisite to any effectiveness with idols.

157) 31:2-10

Hezekiah is clearly set forth in these verses as the restorer of the priestly organisation for the service of the Temple, just as David had been its founder. We note the Chronicler's well-loved phrase at the end of 3, 'as it is written in the law of the Lord'. All that was re-instituted and restored was in accordance with that standard. And what is the Chronicler's message in all this? It is this: for him, renewal comes through 'going back', and 'turning back', restoring old patterns, patterns ordained by God. In other words, there has to be a going back to where we 'lost the place', a repenting, and a new obedience. This is his recipe for spiritual renewal. This is all very significant in relation to the contemporary cry for the changing of structures as the way to bring in the kingdom of God. The Chronicler did not see it this way, but rather a reinvesting of old patterns with the lost spirit of penitence and obedience and dedication. And, indeed, it is a fallacy to suppose that simply by changing structures all will become right. This is not to say that there is never a need for structural change in the Church, and we must never be hidebound by a kind of tradition or assume that because it has been done in a certain way from time immemorial, it has to go on being done in the same way. But at the same time, we must beware of sweeping things away just because they are old: it is not age that invalidates them, but the loss of the Spirit's quickening power. And change will not of itself bring Him back!

158) 31:2-10

The other lesson of these verses concerns the stewardship of money and possessions. And what a lesson it is! For here is a story of an embarrassment of riches: they had so much that they did not know what to do with it. We need to notice the antecedents of this bounty: first of all there were the reforms, the renewal of Temple worship, the keeping of the Passover, and in all the restoration of the due biblical order in the life of the people; and then, all that was needed, apparently, was an announcement of the need for contributions. And "as soon as the commandment came abroad" (5), the gifts began to pour in, and kept on doing so, until there was more than sufficient for every possible need (10). Let us observe well the pattern: when things are put right in God's people, the tithes and offerings begin to roll in, as the expression of the people's consecration. And - apart from this consecration - it is useless to keep on appealing to people to give; they have no heart to give, and no interest in doing so.

That way is subject to the law of diminishing returns: when the squeeze is applied, it becomes more and more difficult to extract more. This is surely the lesson for the Church of Scotland today. Once a great inspiration comes and grips the hearts of the people, there will be no more financial problems. The words in 10, 'for the Lord hath blessed His people' say it all! Nor should we miss the fact that this all happened shortly after the nation had been brought to the verge of bankruptcy by the previous monarch, Ahaz. Fifteen short years were all that were needed to effect the transformation!

159) 31:11-21

The remaining verses of the chapter simply detail the members of the Levites and priesthood involved in Hezekiah's work of restoration. The last two verses sum up the spirit in which all was done:'good and right' every word....with all his heart'....Given that, what work could fail to prosper? This is perhaps as good a point as any at which to bear our own testimony to the faithfulness of God in our own work, and to our experience of God's bountiful provision in the financial realm. We have no special claims as a company of His people, but are ordinary folk who have come together to study the Word, and have sought to do so systematically, to see what God is saying to His Church. And when we seek to regulate our living by the principles of that Word, then the most obvious thing in the world that should happen is that a sufficiency of money should come in, week by week, year by year - not that we are concerned to make claims for ourselves, but rather that there are those - and, we trust, a steadily increasing number - who choose to regulate their financial circumstances in accordance with the Word of God, which means a responsible attitude to stewardship. It is a good thing to get to the stage of so recognizing that a certain proportion of our possessions are His, as of right, that to withhold it would make us feel we were cheating, and robbing God. That is a good way of thinking, and it is good when we come to such an attitude of living, because that is the Scriptural pattern. God grant that it may become so, more and more!

160) 32:1-8

The opening statement of this new chapter is full of significance. The RSV renders it, 'After these things, and these acts of faithfulness', the reference being to 31:20, 21. After Hezekiah's faithfulness came - not blessings or prosperity, but Sennacherib of Assyria. Alexander Maclaren comments, "There is a tone of perplexity and wonder in the Chronicler's voice as he records that this was what followed the faithful righteousness and heart devotion of the best king that ever sat on the throne of Judah". Indeed, we might well be perplexed and wonder, if we did not remember that such a man, and such faithfulness becomes a prime target for Satan. This new crisis came upon Hezekiah not because he had lost his consecration, but because he had not. Satan's purpose in attacking him through Sennacherib was to drag him down; God's purpose in allowing it was to purify and discipline his faith, and make it all the stronger. The development of the crisis makes very interesting reading. Hezekiah's reaction was a very astute one, and it shows a man whose head, as we say, was screwed on the right way. He did not panic, but took what was a most sensible precaution, depriving the enemy of water supplies by diverting the waters of the Gihon spring by a tunnel into the Pool of Silom (see 30). Those who have seen Hezekiah's tunnel or, like the writer, travelled through it, will know the extent of the king's ingenuity and enterprise! His words in 7, 8 echo those of his forebearer, Jehoshaphat (2 Chron 20): doubtless Jehoshaphat's words had come down in the family tradition, and Hezekiah certainly made good use of their spirit in what he said to his people. Comfortable words indeed (6).

161) 32:9-23

The parallel passages in 2 Kings 18-20 and Isaiah 36-39 are useful background material for this chapter, and serve to fill in the details. We should be able to recognize in Sennacherib's contemptuous taunts against the people of God (10 ff) the voice of Satan, in his incitement to doubt God, just as he did in the Garden of Eden temptation, 'Yea, hath God said?' The 'yet more' in 16, and the 'letters' in 17 are given full expression in 2 Kings 18/19. It is interesting that the Chronicler condenses the entire narrative into such a brief space. Perhaps the reason why he does not dwell on the details is that these are not so important to him as the reality of the deliverance wrought on Hezekiah's behalf by the Lord. His real point is given in 21 - it was the fact of the Lord's intervention on behalf of His people, rather than the details as to how that intervention was accomplished, or the events leading up to it, that constituted the Chronicler's message. Not only so: he is also intent on showing the prospering of a godly monarch, in 22, 23. It is almost as if he were saying, 'Even a crisis-situation is turned to good, when a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord.' Enlargement and well-being on all sides - this, so often, is the issue of victory over the wiles of the devil.

It is useful to compare the differing emphases in these verses and in 2 Kings: the latter gives the historical account in considerable detail; Chronicles gives the spiritual interpretation, and shows the lessons to be learned from that account.

162) 32:24-26

Again, there is considerable condensation here, and 2 Kings 20:1-11 should be consulted for the full story (also Isaiah 38:1-8). 2 Kings 20:6 shows that the king's sickness came before the deliverance from Sennacherib was accomplished, and there is therefore a clear association between Hezekiah's straits and the straits of Jerusalem itself, just as Isaiah implies there was a parallel between the national deliverance (chs 36/ 37) and the king's personal deliverance (ch 38). Both were effected in the most hopeless of circumstances, apparently with supernatural intervention. The 'sign' spoken of here in 24 is described fully in Isaiah 38:1-8, and whatever view we may take of it, it is clear, from what the Chronicler says of it in 31 - a 'wonder' that the princes of Babylon sent to enquire about - that it was a notable phenomenon that had all the properties of a supernatural and miraculous happening. The reference in 25 is to what is recorded in 2 Kings 20:12 ff and Isaiah 39:1 ff. It seems clear that Hezekiah was beguiled, against the better judgment and advice of the prophet Isaiah, into an alliance of sorts with Babylon, a power that had scarcely at that time begun to emerge on the world scene, and which Hezekiah apparently did not reckon as a potential danger for the future. Again, the Chronicler goes behind the historical events to their significance - he could see that the king's heart had become lifted up, perhaps through pride, perhaps through complacency, and he fell into error. The Chronicler has another comment to make on this matter, as we shall see in 31, and we shall turn our attention to it in tomorrow's Note.

163) 32:27-33

The Chronicler says of the matter of the ambassadors and princes of Babylon (cf. Isa 39:1 ff) that 'God left' Hezekiah, 'to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart'. If this be so, then Hezekiah was found wanting in this testing time. And one cannot help but wonder whether there is a fateful significance in the fact that this failure under test took place during the further fifteen years that God granted to the king in answer to his request (Isa 38:5). Not only so: another, still more fateful thing happened during these further fifteen years - the birth of his son Manasseh (who was twelve years old when his father died). And Manasseh was the worst of all the kings of Judah who hastened Judah's final captivity more than all the others put together. This prompts the question whether it is wise to ask for longer life, if the extra years are going to bring discredit and dishonour, even disaster upon us. If the hymn writer is right when he sings 'He liveth long who liveth well', then it had been better for Hezekiah never to have uttered such a prayer. It is striking and impressive to realise that all the bad things recorded about this good and godly king took place during this fateful, fifteen-year period. It is possible, then, to have prayer answered to our hurt. This does not mean that we are not to ask, for healing or for any other blessing, if it is in God's will to bestow it - how could it be? - But it should teach us to seek discernment as to the Divine will, before bringing our insistent entreaties to His throne.

164) 33:1-10

We come in this chapter to one of the darkest and most fateful periods of Old Testament history. Manasseh's reign was one of the longest in Judah's existence as a separate kingdom (the parallel section in 2 Kings 21:1-9 corresponds substantially to these verses). On any estimate it makes very ugly reading, and one's instinctive reaction is to exclaim, "What an appalling change from the previous reign, and what a moral and spiritual collapse it represents!" The startling thing is that Manasseh was only twelve when he began to reign -which means that from the outset the boy-king was under evil and malign influence. One commentary says, "When Manasseh, at the early age of twelve, came to the throne, the idolatrous and anti-prophetic party of Judah seems to have obtained control of affairs, and the young king became thoroughly identified with it during his long reign." Here, then, is a lesson at the outset: we do not see these evil influences upon the king, but they were there, and if anything was true, this is true, that there were what could very well be called a group of faceless men behind the scenes, exercising a baleful, fateful influence upon society and upon individuals, just as they have stood so often down the course of history and in our own day behind the corruption and disintegration of society, manipulating men's minds, and especially the minds of the young, for the basest of purposes. It is difficult to see how what is said in 3-6 could possibly have taken place without some major – and demonic - deception being wrought in the mind of the young king. This is the measure of the indoctrination that brought the kingdom down beyond anything it had known in wickedness and abandoned practices.

165) 33:1-10

We should compare what is said in 6 with Deut. 18:10-12. How could such unlawful dabbling with forbidden things have taken place, and such flouting of the Divine Word? It could only be because the authority of that Word had been challenged and undermined. And this has its own lesson for us today. We have seen - and even now are seeing at the present time - an undermining of the authority of law that looks like destroying society as we know it, and preparing the way for complete anarchy. How have we got to a situation in which our nation seems to become increasingly ungovernable, when dislike of particular policies becomes a sufficient pretext for flouting and ignoring them, and causing untold disruption and disorder, when responsible (!) bodies and authorities aid and abet the violation of law? This is the end-product of the forces that are at work in our society to undermine and destroy all that is good and wholesome. This is the road to anarchy, and we are already far further along that road than most people realise. In 9, the whole situation is summed up. To sink lower than the heathen nations, who were punished and destroyed by God for their sins, is to sink surely to unspeakable depths of depravity. But then, 'when an Apostate worshipper does like the heathen, he always does worse than they. We cannot do what the world does without being more guilty than they' (Maclaren). Light sinned against results in greater darkness. It is this that explains why those who used to be keen for the things of God are far more dangerous than those who have never been. It is the renegade evangelical who becomes most contemptuous of the position he once held!

166) 33:1-10

In connection with what was said about the breakdown in law and order in the previous note, here is a pertinent comment from an article by Sir Fred Catherwood: "(Recently) I talked to a group of students from twenty countries, ranging from communist to capitalist, on Christianity and the social order, and I was interested to find that those who were most revolutionary came from the most affluent and politically stable countries.

On thinking over the reasons for this I came to the conclusion that if you were brought up in a very prosperous and stable society you assumed, if you thought about it at all, that society could take an awful lot of beating without much ill effect, that if you turned parts of it upside down because you didn't like them, the parts you did like would stay the right way up.

On the other hand, if you came from an unstable country you realised that this was not so, that authoritarianism of the right could be replaced by authoritarianism of the left and vice versa, that civil war might wipe out some old inequalities, but would produce a whole crop of new ones."

Food for thought, indeed! Put thus, it all seems so obvious, and right. Why, then, is it that men do not see it? Ah, this is where the 'manipulation', the deception, has done its work so well. There has been a blinding of men's minds to what should be glaringly obvious. And unless eyes are opened very soon, it is going to be too late for us, as it was too late for Manasseh's time.

167) 33:11-20

Obviously the next word has to be 'wherefore', since it is the Chronicler who is writing: and he gives his characteristic and inspired interpretation of the national crisis. But there are problems here, and a substantial difference is seen between what now follows (11 ff) and the parallel passage in 2 Kings 21. In 2 Kings, a threat is recorded (2 Kings 21:10-16). Here, the fulfilment is described, but no mention of the threat. In 2 Kings 21 the threat is very decisive and climactic; while here, God's hand is recognized behind all the political and other influences that brought the Assyrians to Jerusalem. The Chronicler records a captivity for Manasseh (11), followed by repentance and conversion, but 2 Kings records nothing of this, and the Chronicler's account is regarded by some as contradicting 2 Kings; and Jeremiah 15:4 is quoted as substantiating this. But it is not necessary to suppose a contradiction. Where the confusion lies is to fail to differentiate between repentance for sin and the consequences of sin nevertheless remaining. The two are not the same (cf Ps 99:8, 'Thou forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions'). There is nothing inherently unlikely in saying both that Manasseh underwent a genuine conversion (all the evidences in the verses that follow would indicate just how genuine it was) and that the consequences of his sin nevertheless remained. And we shall look at this thought again in tomorrow's Note.

168) 33:11-20

The facts of the situation are these: God brought judgment on Manasseh: Manasseh repented and turned to the Lord, and was forgiven (12 ff). Nevertheless, the fateful consequences of his life of sin were not taken away; and these continued to take their toll, and worked out to a terrible nemesis (cf David's sin Bathsheba, which was forgiven, but which dogged him in its bitter consequences to his dying day). It is this solemn reality that explains such verses as 2 Kings 23:26, 24:3, Jeremiah 15:4 - 'because of what Manasseh did'. There was, clearly, a point of 'no return', beyond which judgment was unalterably fixed and appointed. And not even Josiah's great reformation could alter this. The die was cast, and nothing that happened after this point could serve to alter the divine judicial pronouncement. Within this, however, forgiveness was possible, and reinstatement too, for both Judah and Manasseh. But in the solidarity of the guilt of the nation, their doom was fixed, The consequences of sin were decreed to be fulfilled, and these consequences were captivity. Nevertheless, Manasseh's turning to the Lord, under the pressure of Divine displeasure, was genuine and extensive in its implications, as we see in 14-16. From which we may learn that there is hope even for the worst of men. Even a Manasseh may find mercy. Yet the 'reversal' affects of Manasseh's turning were limited (17), and - the evil results of his reign having devastated, the moral standards of the people - they were not brought back substantially to the former days (of Hezekiah's reign).

169) 33:21-25

The record of Amon's reign is very brief. We see from 34:1 that Josiah, his son, was eight years old when he acceded to the throne, and Amon was only twenty four when he died; which means that he must have married when he was fifteen. That is its own commentary! It seems clear that it was the earlier life that Manasseh lived, even though he later repented and was converted, that decisively influenced his son. The repentance at the end of a long reign was not sufficient to influence Amon, who followed the mainstream, rather than the final episode, of his father's career. From which we may learn that it is the long-term influence of parents' lives that will prevail in the training of children in godliness. Some parents, it may be, are just too late in getting right with God to have any lasting influence on their families; and even if their lives become faithful and godly, they may still have heartbreaks with their children. The rot will have already set in. That is a solemn and frightening thought. At all events, Amon lived in as ugly and depraved a way as his father had done in his earlier days - with the inevitable consequences. The court intrigue, leading to his assassination (24, 25) makes sad and terrible reading. What a legacy sin leaves to men!

170) 34:1-7

After the dark and grim story of Manasseh's reign, it is a relief to come to this chapter. We should, however, bear in mind what we have already said about a point of no return having been reached with Manasseh's excesses, and nothing that we read of here can serve to change this in any way. Not even the widespread and far-reaching reformation initiated by Josiah sufficed to stop the inevitable judgment that was appointed for the hapless kingdom. That being said, however, there can be no question that the movement of renewal during this good king's reign was one of the most wonderful in all Judah's history. The contrast between 2 and 33:2 is total, and we may well insist that there must have been an influence of another kind at work in Josiah's life than that in Manasseh's. And that influence was surely the ministry of Jeremiah the prophet, with Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk. It can hardly be doubted that their ministries must have conditioned Josiah's entire reign. It is very significant that scarcely any other period in the history of God's people had such a concentration of prophetic activity associated with it, and therefore such attention from God. It is a measure of the urgent and tender concern God felt for His people, as He saw the inevitable doom approaching. The association of the raising up of prophetic ministry with impending judgment raises an interesting question: we have often said that one of the hopeful signs of our time is the fact that God has seemed to be raising up more and more men of the Word to minister in the land, and we have hoped and prayed that this might be a harbinger of awakening and revival. But what if, as well, it may have something to do with a darker thing that may yet be coming, as if God were raising up men to speak His Word to warn the nation of an approaching doom? Is not this something to think about, in all solemnity?

171) 34:8-13

The fact that the reformation that took place in Josiah's time was the most noteworthy and thorough of all the times of awakening in the history of Judah indicates that the ministry of the prophets (mentioned in the previous note) was not in vain, but accomplished things in the life of the nation. And it is rather wonderful that in the gathering darkness of the age there should be such utter devotion to the things of God as we see in Josiah. The good kings seemed to get better and better (cf 14:2, 27:2, 29:2) the worse the situation became. This is surely an encouragement, to offset the thought we sometimes reserve to ourselves that, since the days are so evil, Christians cannot really be expected to be as dedicated, in view of all the pressures around them, as they might otherwise be. That is not how it was here in the darkest of times, here was a man whose light shone brightly and steadily all his days. He began to seek after the Lord when he was sixteen, and ten years later (8), he was still forging ahead with major works of rehabilitation. The actual operation of repairing the Temple prompts two comments: first of all, it seems that Josiah chose laymen to carry out the restoration. Maclaren suggests that 'perhaps he knew how Joash (ch 24) had been baulked by the knavery of the priests who were diligent in collecting the money but slow in spending it on the Temple'. The second comment is that these workmen 'did the work faithfully'. It is some evidence of the moral power and integrity of the prophets' ministry that it could create this kind of attitude in the work force. At the heart of the nation's life, even after the ravages of many years under Manasseh, there were men who were utterly trustworthy. This is the real test of any spiritual work that it should produce, in the midst of national declension, the possibility of standards of probity and integrity in character and conduct.

172) 34:14-28

Beyond question, these verses record one of the most thrilling and exciting happenings in all Old Testament history, the discovery of the book of the law in the Temple. It may seem extraordinary to us that the passage should speak of such a discovery, but we should bear in mind what has been said several times in our studies of past chapters about the work of reformation being often confined to the restoration of ceremonial worship, and little emphasis on the law of the Lord as such. When we add to this the terrible time of declension under Manasseh, it does not seem so surprising that the law of the Lord should have been at such a discount in Josiah's time. This discovery, at all events, had profound and far-reaching consequences. It is not too much to say that it turned the land upside down. Josiah was brought under immediate and instantaneous conviction of sin, and his reaction was to send to the Lord to get a word from him as to what he must do. It was as if the king had taken hold of a living thing - as indeed he had - which galvanised his whole experience and brought upon him such a spirit of anxious enquiry that he had no rest until he received the assurance of the Lord concerning himself and his people. This is always what happens in time of spiritual awakening, and the account given here could be matched many times from the history of God's people down the ages. 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? 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 seashore as expect to hear the Word of the Lord without being revolutionised.

173) 34:14-28

A problem of interpretation arises when we compare the Chronicler's account with that of 2 Kings 22. The latter indicates that it was the discovery of the law that led to the reformation in the land; whereas here, that discovery follows the reformation. Which account is right? It may well be that this problem can be solved by saying that 2 Kings describes the consummation of the reform begun at an earlier period, while the Chronicler describes the entire reform without reference to chronology. But we need not decide this question, for both accounts have significant lessons to teach. If we follow 2 Kings, then the lesson is clear and plain: this is the divine pattern for renewal; the recovery and discovery of the Word of God, and its reinstatement in the life of the Church. If we follow the Chronicler, the lesson is still highly relevant. For here, it is the introduction of the Word of God into a situation of spiritual renewal and reformation, to give that work a true and substantial foundation, to give it character and substance. It is hardly possible to over-estimate the importance of this, for without the Word any spiritual movement is likely to run to seed and go bad. Historians of the great Welsh Revival of 1904/05 make it very plain that this is what brought that wonderful movement to a premature end, bringing a whole host of problems in its train. It is always a fateful circumstance when, as we so often read in accounts of awakenings, 'the preaching was set aside'. The separation of Word and Spirit is not a biblical pattern, and we should beware of any attempts to drive a wedge, however inadvertently, between them.

174) 34:14-28

The record of the consultation with Huldah the prophetess is paralleled in 2 Kings 22:14-20. Huldah's message to the king is in two parts, one the conformation of the threatenings of the law which Josiah had just read, and the other the assurance to the king of the acceptance of his repentance, and the promise of personal escape from the coming storm (27, 28). The confirmation of the threatenings of the law was also the confirmation of an earlier word spoken to Manasseh in 2 Kings 21:11, 12, and its significance is that the over-all purpose of God in judgment had by this time become fixed and unalterable, even though there might be temporary delays in its final execution through the repentance and renewal of the people. This coincides with Jeremiah's general message in his prophecy, that Josiah's reformation was too little, and too late (cf Jer 7), however much he may have welcomed the signs of renewal in the land. If there is any 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 by the communist bloc that our thinking and praying about revival should be done. It is not too late for revival - although there is 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.

175) 34:29-33

The second part of Huldah's message to Josiah, the assurance of his personal escape from the coming storm of judgment, did not in any wise make the king complacent (as a similar assurance appears to have made Hezekiah, Isaiah 39:8); on the contrary, it formed his resolution to lead his people back to the things of God in as complete a manner as possible (29 ff). We are told in 30 that he 'read in their ears' all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. If the book that was found was the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), then this must have been a very long session (some, however, think that the book referred to is Deuteronomy). The statement at the end of 33 is a very impressive one - 'all his days they departed not from following the Lord.' We need to take this alongside Jeremiah's rather different estimate. Ultimately there is no contradiction between the two. Obviously, Jeremiah is concerned (7:1-7) and uneasy about the people's trust in 'the temple of the Lord', and this seems to indicate that, great and extensive, genuine and authentic as Josiah's reformation was, it has still a great deal of the 'external' about it, in terms of getting people back to church, and to regular worship. It was in this sense that they departed not from following the Lord. But Jeremiah saw that more was needed hence his proclamation, later in his prophecy, of the new covenant and the law of God being written in their hearts (31:31 ff).

176) 35:1-19

With the reservations mentioned in the previous note, the reign of Josiah was nevertheless a most notable one, and its culmination may well be said to be described in the verses now before us. We need not doubt but that there was a great symbolic significance in Josiah's ordering the Passover to be kept, for the Passover commemorated the beginning of God's dealings with Israel as a nation, and in celebrating it now, the nation was 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 out of 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 probed and challenged by the Word, confess our sins, renew the covenant, and 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 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. This was a high day for the people of God; and it is always a high day for those who allow the message of this passage to touch their deepest hearts.

177) 35:1-19

Two further points may be noted about this tremendous account. The first is the manifest emphasis, in 1-5, on the Word of God in all that was being done. It was all to be 'according to the Word of the Lord by the hand of Moses'. This, as we have seen so often throughout the book, has been the Chronicler's emphasis and concern. To him, this was the secret of all true renewal. It was this, as the Rev. W. Still says in his Notes, that "inspired a spirit of obedience amongst priests, princes, and people which, far from restricting, rather canalised their activity Godwards, and tended towards a sane, spontaneous and abundant generosity. The whole community was involved in this, not in a romantic attempt at equality, but each in his hereditary office, appointed place or menial station. Withal, there was a happy carefulness to 'keep to the book' and glorify Jehovah." The other point is not evident in the Chronicler's account, but plain in 2 Kings 23:26 ff: notwithstanding the great spiritual impetus of that time, the Lord 'turned not from the fierceness of his great wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah'. Here is the extraordinary thing: grace and wrath operating at the same time in the situation, and the one not qualifying or contradicting the other. We said in an earlier Note that Josiah's reformation did not go deep enough, and this may be true; but what we need to realise is that no kind of renewal, however radical, 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. Paul says (Rom 1:18-32), 'God gave them up...' and this is the plain truth that is unfolded in this passage in 2 Kings 23:26, 27.

178) 35:20-27

To read these verses makes us exclaim in deep distress, 'What a tragic end to a fine and noble reign!' Tragic indeed, and so unnecessary. It was rash and foolhardy of Josiah to go out against Neco of Egypt. How are we to explain it? G. Adam Smith has a useful comment: "Having fulfilled by thirteen years of honest reforms his own part of the terms of the covenant, Josiah believed that he could surely count on the Divine fulfilment of the rest, and that some miracle would bring to a righteous king and people a victory over the heathen, however more powerful the heathen might be." If this be fair comment and it surely is then we see that Josiah was not merely being foolhardy he assumed too much about the spiritual situation, unwarrantably supposing that because the Lord had enabled him to do so much in the country, He would therefore also enable him to defeat this enemy. But if he had been sufficiently sensitive to the mind of God, he would have recognized the Divine voice in what Neco said to him (21). Neco was not interested in Judah at that time; his eyes were on the northern invader, and it would have been Josiah's wisdom to give him free and unimpeded passage. But no; Josiah had, if not grandiose, then unrealistically exalted ideas that Judah ought to be a great power and assumed that because God had so blessed them, He would do this for them also. Had he forgotten the other part of Huldah's prophecy, then? He should have gone much more carefully,

179) 35:20-27

But there is something else that can be said about Josiah's untimely death. Consider Neco's words to him in 21: 'Forbear from meddling with God, who is with me'. Surely it was a device of the devil that Josiah was so blind to the truth of these words. Ah, yes that is the deepest truth of the matter. He had succeeded in effecting the most widespread spiritual renewal that had been known for many generations, and in his success he 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 Eph 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 (cf 2 Sam 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! How we need to cultivate wisdom and patience and discernment in the things of God.

180) 36:1-10

After Josiah's death at the battle of Megiddo in 608 BC, his son Jehoahaz came to the throne, reigning only three short months. It is significant that in this short, final chapter no less than four kings flit rapidly across the stage of history - an indication of the nation's rapid and headlong downward rush to doom, like the Gadarene swine. The Chronicler says little about Jehoahaz, but the parallel account in 2 Kings 23:31-33 is more specific, showing that after his father's death both he and the nation turned aside quickly into the evil ways that had brought ruin to the nation in the past, Josiah's untimely death cut short a programme of renewal which, if it had been allowed to continue, might well have 'secured the succession'. As it was, his reign was not long enough to do this, and there came a fateful and disastrous reversion to the former pattern of evil. And now (3) the king of Egypt was not so accommodating as he had been to Josiah, and moved in to depose the young king, and take him off to captivity in Egypt, where he died. In his place Neco put Jehoiakim on the throne, and he reigned eleven years, in the same evil way, until Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came and took him captive, in 597 BC. His son Jehoiachin succeeded him, reigning only three months and ten days (9), and he speedily followed his father to Babylon, and Zedekiah was appointed a puppet king by Nebuchadnezzar. The fateful consequences of Josiah's rashness at Megiddo are now more clearly seen. If only he had kept out of Neco of Egypt's way, Babylon would not have noticed Judah, and she would have been left in peace.

181) 36:10-23

The captivity of Judah in Babylon took place, then, in two stages, the first in 597 BC, when Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin were taken in chains, along with many of the princes and chief men of Judah, and much of the Temple treasure (2 Kings 24:12 ff); and the second eleven years later, in 586 BC, when Zedekiah finally rebelled against the Babylonian yoke and brought the swift retribution of Nebuchadnezzar upon Judah. The 'inside story' lying behind the Chronicler's brief summary in 11-13 may be found in the pages of Jeremiah's prophecy, and the following references should be consulted: Jeremiah 27:12-22; Jeremiah 21:1-7; Jeremiah 37:17-21; Jeremiah 38:14-28; also Ezekiel 17:11 ff. It is striking to see from these references what a tremendous debate was going on within the city, even when Nebuchadnezzar and his army were thundering at its gates. But the prophet's pleadings were all, alas, in vain; Zedekiah was not at all disposed to pay heed to the counsel Jeremiah was holding out to him, but stiffened his neck (13) against Nebuchadnezzar, with entirely predictable consequences (17). The promised nemesis came, and Jerusalem was razed to the ground and left a smoking heap.

182) 36:10-23

The last passage of the chapter (15 ff) makes grim and sad reading. The word in 15 is a comprehensive one, applying not only to Zedekiah's day but to the whole downward sweep of the later kings of Judah. As has already been pointed out, it is significant that the nearer the nation came to the doom of captivity, the greater was the concentration of prophetic ministry - and this is attributed in 15 to the compassion of God for His people! How wonderful and moving to have this word in the midst of all the darkness and disaster: right to the end, they could have turned! But they would not, and finally there was 'no remedy' (16). The 'therefore' in 17 thus became inevitable, and the judgment was merciless and awful (17-20). Just how awful and tremendous may be seen from the pages of the book of Lamentations. Well might the Psalmist cry out, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion". Two things remain to be said: the first is that the focal point of the indictment of these verses is something worse than the evil that was done in the sight of the Lord; it was their refusal to humble themselves under the word of the prophet (12) and their mocking of the Lord's messenger. Their obstinacy made the Divine judgment inevitable; and God was strong enough to resist pity for them until the grief of their captivity had done its appointed work in their hearts. The second thing is this: the final two verses of the book (22, 23) indicate that the Chronicler refuses to close his book on the note of judgment. Judgment, yes; but judgment is not God's last word. Judgment is His 'strange work' (Isaiah 28:21); and in wrath He remembers mercy. And the last words of the Chronicler become the first words in the account of the return from exile in the first chapter of Ezra!