

1 Kings Devotionals - Today in the Word

1 KINGS DEVOTIONALS

Today in the Word - Moody Bible Institute

1 Kings 1

1 Kings 1:1-53

I will raise up your offspring to succeed you . . . and I will establish his kingdom. - 2 Samuel 7:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Nearly a year ago, the United States had a presidential election. Like so many before it, the months leading up to Election Day were filled with emotional words and strong opinions from all sides around the nation. Yet, as the election and then inauguration came and went, a remarkably peaceful exchange of power happened. No mass riots, no violent subterfuge, no civil war. Such peaceful transitions of power were not always the norm in the nations' histories.

The opening chapter of 1 Kings presents us with a kingdom in transitional crisis. King David was old and feeble, yet as he neared death he was remarkably unconcerned about the future of his kingdom. Seizing the moment, David's son Adonijah took matters into his own hands and declared himself the new king. Scripture gives an ironic description of Adonijah's qualifications—he was “very handsome” (v. 6)—and details the growing division in the priestly and military ranks (vv. 7-8). The kingdom was experiencing a crisis of leadership.

It stepped the prophet Nathan. While the kingdom teetered on the edge of disaster, Nathan informed Bathsheba of the situation and devised a plan to rouse David from his indifference. Informing David of the breaking news and reminding him of his promise to Solomon, Nathan and Bathsheba called David to action. The weak and silent David depicted in the first half of the chapter now issued a cascade of commands (vv. 28-37). Solomon was anointed king, the city rejoiced, and Adonijah and his cohort submitted to Solomon's reign. Disaster averted.

From one perspective, the fate of the Davidic kingdom hinged on Nathan; God seemed out of sight. But as we often find in Scripture, when God is not out in the open, He is often working behind the scenes. Recall that 1 Kings follows directly the events of 2 Samuel, and there God had promised that He would establish David's kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13). In 1 Kings 1, Nathan acted, but the broader context of Scripture tells us that God was at work fulfilling His promises.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Perhaps you are tempted to look at the world around you and despair that all seems moving toward godlessness. Let the message of today's passage remind you that God is still in control, and that no act of prayerful and godly faithfulness goes unused in the promise of God's kingdom. Pray the Lord's Prayer today, focusing especially upon the first three petitions that God would be honored, that His kingdom would come, and that His will would be done in your life and in the world.

1 Kings 2

1 Kings 2:1-12

Observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands. - 1 Kings 2:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many universities have a tradition called the “Last Lecture.” A professor, usually near retirement, is asked to prepare a lecture guided by the question: “If it were your last chance to give a talk to your students, what would you say?” Naturally, the topics vary, but typically professors focus on those themes from their life and work that they find most important and enduring, and which they want others to embrace as well.

David's parting words to Solomon are a kind of “Last Lecture.” Scripture tells us, “When the time drew near for David to die, he gave a charge to Solomon his son” (v. 1). What can we learn from David's last words to his son? Notice first the point of emphasis: “Observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in his ways” (v. 3). Above all, David instructed Solomon in obedience to God and His Word. Next, note the implicit assumption that Solomon was already a man of faith; David personalized things by saying, “the Lord your God.” Since Solomon was a man of faith, David called him to act upon that faith in obedience.

Moreover, today's passage teaches us two important lessons about God's “way.” First, God's way is clear. David referred Solomon

to God's commands "as written in the Law of Moses" (v. 3). We do not have to guess how God wants us to live; He has already given us instructions in His Word. How important it is, then, to study and know God's Scripture to us!

Second, we see that God's Word is beneficial. After exhorting Solomon to obedience, David explained: "So that you may prosper . . . and that the Lord may keep his promise to me" (vv. 3-4). God's commands are for our own good. Obedience is part of finding enjoyment and blessing in God. David's instructions do not neglect the nitty-gritty of kingdom politics (vv. 5-12), but the emphasis is clear: faithful obedience to God's Word is central to Solomon's security and blessing.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Perhaps today's emphasis upon obedience seems unusual. Does not God grant His favor unconditionally? Indeed, He does. But Jesus reminds us that the Christian life must include obedience. The wise man not only hears His words, but "puts them into practice" (Matt. 7:24). Only then will one enjoy the security and blessing of a sure foundation in times of trouble. Ask God today for a renewed heart of obedience to His Word, that you may know the joy and blessing of walking in the way of your God.

1 Kings 2:1-12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Toward the end of 1950, some 18 Allied soldiers and Marines endured a week of sub-zero cold on the windblown mountains above North Korea's Chosin Reservoir. Now, more than four decades later, many of those Korean War veterans are experiencing painful delayed effects from frostbite and other injuries. The symptoms include infections, extreme sensitivity to cold, skin cancer and joint deterioration. In some cases, amputation has been necessary.

The hidden, long-term effects of these veterans' injuries are an accurate picture of the way David's life unfolded after his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah (2 Sam. 11).

At the height of his power, with his kingdom solidified, David sinned and brought God's judgment on his house. God said to David through the prophet Nathan, "The sword will never depart from your house" (2 Sam. 12:10).

David's sin was secret and undetected. Much like the delayed effects of exposure to sub-zero weather, the effects of sin may take years to appear. Because of the secrecy of David's sin, God said that David's judgment would be carried out in front of the entire nation.

God was true to His word. First, David and Bathsheba's baby died (2 Sam. 12:18). Then David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar and was murdered at the command of Absalom, another of David's sons (13:1-29). David then suffered the heartbreak of Absalom's rebellion and the humiliation of being forced to flee from him. Finally, David's troops killed Absalom (18:14-15). But a fourth son of David was yet to die: Adonijah, killed at Solomon's command (1 Kings 2:23-25).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sin has ongoing consequences, which can be devastating. But there's a difference between the consequences of sin and the ongoing guilt of sin. Even David's sin was forgiven (2 Sam. 12:13). Although our enemy loves to saddle us with a burden of guilt, God removes our sins "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12).

1 Kings 2:13-46

The kingdom was now firmly established in Solomon's hands. - 1 Kings 2:46

TODAY IN THE WORD

With the recent economic downturn, many people are worrying about their financial security. Americans are becoming careful about how they spend money, where they invest, and whom they trust with their resources. Even established institutions once thought to be pillars of security no longer appear impervious to financial tumult.

The topic of security is central in today's passage, not economic security but rather political stability for God's kingdom. Indeed, the Hebrew word for "establish/make secure" is used four separate times in 1 Kings 2 (vv. 12, 24, 45, 46). Underlying the seemingly ruthless reign of Solomon's first days in office lies the central theological concern: to "establish" Solomon's throne "securely" (v. 24).

Seen in the context of 1 Kings 2:5-9, today's passage also demonstrates the outworking of David's call for Solomon to use his wisdom in dealing with kingdom enemies. Adonijah's seemingly innocuous request for Abishag as his wife was, in the ancient world, tantamount to a play for the royal throne. Solomon's response explicitly referenced the establishment of his throne and his dynasty by God, and the subsequent need to protect them from usurpers (v. 24).

Likewise, in Solomon's dealings with Abiathar, Joab, and Shimei, either Solomon or the narrator of the passage mentioned fulfilling God's promise (v. 27), peace for the kingdom (v. 33), or the eternal "security" of David's throne before the Lord (v. 45). Scripture ends the chapter with a summary of the preceding violence: "The kingdom was now firmly established in Solomon's hands" (v. 46).

This chapter may seem bloodthirsty, and Solomon might appear ruthless and politically calculating. The theological indications in the text suggest something else. This was part of what it meant for God to secure His kingdom for Solomon: to eliminate all threats to its peace and security, using violent means if needed. God will go to great lengths to protect His people.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's text paints a picture, not just of Solomon's earthly kingdom, but also of God's eternal kingdom on the Judgment Day. In Matthew 13, for example, Jesus describes the end as a day when "everything that causes sin and all who do evil" will be uprooted and cast into the fire (Matt. 13:40-43). Only then will peace and security be established forever in God's kingdom. Given the description of God's zeal for establishing His kingdom, our only true security is to submit to the true King, Jesus. Will you do that today?

1 Kings 3

1 Kings 3:1-2

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all. - James 1:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Ever since the 1960s sitcom, "I Dream of Jeannie," countless kids in America have imagined an encounter with a magic genie who grants one wish to the lucky finder. Numerous hours have been spent discussing the best wish: to have lots of money! to be invisible! to live forever! to travel in time! to have as many wishes as I want! Whether discussed by children or adults, what we would wish for reveals a lot about our heart.

King Solomon was given something like a one-wish opportunity, not by an imaginary genie, but by God Himself. A man who "showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the statutes of his father David" (v. 3), God responded by appearing to Solomon in a dream and saying, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (v. 5). Here was the chance of a lifetime. But God's question was also a test that revealed Solomon's true character. Given that Scripture tells us that "the Lord was pleased" with Solomon's request (v. 10), today's passage can be read as biblical instructions in prayer.

First, notice where Solomon began: not with his request, but by recounting God's activity. He referenced God's faithfulness both to David (v. 6) and to Abraham (consider his description of a nation "too numerous to count" [v. 8]). Scripture calls us to begin our prayer to God by focusing less on our own needs and more on what God has already done for us.

Second, consider Solomon's humility. Admitting his own inability to govern such a large nation (vv. 7, 9), Solomon recognized his need for divine aid. He requested wisdom: "a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (v. 9). Solomon's request was for God's help in the task of leadership, not for glory or honor for himself.

Finally, notice Solomon's outward focus. His request was not a selfish one; rather, he wanted wisdom so he could rule his people rightly. How much of our prayer time is focused on ourselves rather than the needs of others?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

After Solomon's request for wisdom, Scripture recounts the famous story of two women bickering over a child (vv. 16-22). Solomon's incisive response brought forth the truth and rendered justice (vv. 23-27). Scripture summarizes it well: all Israel "saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice" (v. 28). In the words of our key verse, God's promise of wisdom is for more than just Solomon—He will give it to each of us. Today, approach God as the generous, giving God that He is.

1 Kings 3:4-15

Then the king and all Israel with him offered sacrifices before the Lord. - 1 Kings 8:62

TODAY IN THE WORD

After reading the first four chapters of Ecclesiastes, one might assume that Solomon didn't have much experience relating to God—he talks about God in somewhat impersonal terms. So it's important that we remind ourselves that God spoke directly to Solomon on a number of occasions. In tomorrow's reading, Ecclesiastes speaks rather candidly about the proper approach to God, so today we'll try to learn how someone with firsthand access to God could possibly come to the conclusions offered in Ecclesiastes 5.

Today's reading is the first account of the Lord appearing to Solomon, this time in a dream (vv. 5, 15). Solomon had just offered one thousand burnt offerings (offerings for an individual's sin) at Gibeon, the most important of the high places (v. 4). Even though the method he used was forbidden (see Deut. 12:1–6), God still graced Solomon with an offer to give him anything he wanted (v. 5).

Solomon pleased God with his request for wisdom and discernment to rule the Lord's people (vv. 9, 10), so God granted his request and added even more rewards to Solomon's blessing (v. 13). But there was one stipulation. God reminded Solomon to stay on course with His ways (v. 14). As we've learned in our earlier studies, and as Ecclesiastes seems to indicate, Solomon didn't live up to that command.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's reading is a lesson in quality over quantity and endurance over extravagance. Solomon's interaction with God tended to be dramatic, and his responses were splendid. But his commitment to God wavered.

1 Kings 4

1 Kings 4:1-34

God gave Solomon wisdom . . . as measureless as the sand on the seashore. - 1 Kings 4:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

One evening, a mother and child began preparing a recipe that called for a number of spices. Checking the pantry and finding none of them, the woman decided to use some substitutes, assuming the difference would not matter. After a painfully unappetizing dinner in which the flavors of the meal were all wrong, the precocious child noted: "I guess the details matter after all!"

The same can be said for today's reading. The previous chapter demonstrated God's gift of wisdom. Today's reading ends with an explicit return to the wisdom motif (vv. 29-34 mention wisdom seven times). These literary bookends suggest that the intervening verses are also about Solomon's practice of wisdom. From this perspective, the otherwise tedious details of the first part of this chapter become important lessons about both the practice of wisdom and about God's faithfulness to His promises.

Our text begins with a detailed list of "officials," "secretaries," and "governors" working under Solomon. Why? In short, such a list demonstrates Solomon's wisdom in managing a vast kingdom (note especially the daily provisions for Solomon's court in vv. 22-23). The results underscore that wisdom was exercised: the kingdom enjoyed a long period of peace and security, and the people found abundance and happiness. Biblical wisdom impacts not only morals and justice, but also the practical, administrative ordering of our world.

First Kings 4 also demonstrates the faithfulness of God to His promises. In the description of Solomon's kingdom, Scripture uses language that echoes the promises God made long ago. The people are "as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (v. 20), echoing God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17. The vast borders of the kingdom resonate with God's promise of land in Genesis 15:18-21. Finally, the abundance, peace, and exaltation of Israel recall God's promises to Israel in Deuteronomy 28:1-14. For readers keeping in mind God's earlier activity and promise, 1 Kings 4 shines as a banner of God's faithfulness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If 1 Kings 4:1-31 gives us a picture of wise administration, 1 Kings 4:32-34 gives us a picture of wise learning. In addition to his proverbs and songs, Solomon was also renowned for his knowledge of trees, animals, birds, reptiles and fish. Biblical wisdom can also entail a love for God's natural world. Spend time this Sunday enjoying God's creation. Perhaps take a walk in the woods, visit the zoo, or simply explore your backyard, thanking God for the ability to know His world and its magnificent order.

1 Kings 5

1 Kings 5:1-18

The Lord gave Solomon wisdom, just as he had promised him. - 1 Kings 5:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

The word fulcrum has two interestingly related meanings. Most basically, a fulcrum is a point on which a lever pivots. In anatomical references, however, the fulcrum is the connective tissue supporting the eye. Without a proper fulcrum, things either go out of balance, or one cannot see.

Without properly understanding the fulcrum in today's passage, we would be left with an imbalanced reading and an inability to see the theological point. Placed in the center of the chapter, verse 12 reads: "The Lord gave Solomon wisdom, just as he had promised

him." Everything else balances around that verse. Although some scholars question Solomon's alliance with Hiram (vv. 1-12) and his choice of labor acquisition (vv. 13-18), Scripture summarizes Solomon's activity with a focus on God's gift of wisdom.

What, then, does Scripture teach us through Solomon's wisdom concerning the temple preparations? First, Solomon's project was wisely grounded in the peace of God (vv. 4-5). He did not claim credit for himself, but recognized that building success was only possible in the context of peace from God.

Second, Solomon's idea for a temple was founded on God's promise to David. Earlier, God had promised that David's son would sit on the throne and "build a house for my Name" (2 Sam. 7:13). Solomon's construction project wasn't grounded in his own vision.

Finally, Solomon's project was directed to the purposes of God. Notice who was enlisted to help with the construction of God's holy house: the king of Tyre (v. 10), Sidonian loggers (v. 6), and Gebalite craftsmen (v. 18). In other words, Gentiles were an integral part of the building of God's house, foreshadowing the words of Jesus: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17; cf. Isa. 56:7). Though starting with Israel, God's kingdom would eventually include non-Jews as well. Today's passage hints at the expansive purpose of God for His people.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Solomon's preparations for building God's house were centered on God's peace, God's promise, and God's purpose. Without them, his project was doomed to failure. There's a lesson here for all Christian ministries trying to "build" programs and visions. The words of the psalmist echo this message: "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1). Spend time praying for your church and other ministries you support, that they would be grounded in God's peace and promise, and guided by God's purpose.

1 Kings 6

1 Kings 6:1-38

One thing I ask of the Lord . . . to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. - Psalm 27:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

A young married couple spent two hours being led through a home. All manner of details about the home's construction were pointed out to them: the style of house, the type of shingles on the roof, the kind of windows installed, and the way the appliances worked. Normally, the couple would be uninterested in such details, but this was different: they were preparing to buy this home.

It is tempting to pass over today's text with a yawn of indifference. Details about cubits, construction materials, and floor plans do not normally excite us. But consider for a moment whose house is being described! Although it's a dense chapter, we can learn two important lessons about our God from these verses.

First, Scripture's description of the temple reveals God's glory. Compared to the earlier Mosaic tabernacle, the temple was vast in design. Whereas the tabernacle was roughly 675 square feet (see Exodus 26), the temple was 2,700 square feet (v. 2): four times as big! And while the tabernacle was mostly curtains and dirt floor, the temple was covered in costly material. Scripture is careful to give us a full description of the beauty of the temple. The floors, walls, and ceilings were covered with cedar, pine, and gold; the temple was decorated with gold-covered cherubim, and the walls were carved with images of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers. In short, the description of the temple tells us that God loves beauty and design. He is a God of splendor and glory.

Second, God used the temple to reveal His purpose: "As for this temple you are building . . . I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel" (vv. 11-13). God intended to dwell with His people, foreshadowing that day when He would take up residence with us in the fullest way possible: "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:14). Although God cannot be contained by our finite space, that does not stop Him from drawing near with His radiant presence.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In light of God's splendor and glory, many psalms call for a response such as Psalm 96:9: "Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness." Psalm 27:4, in particular, reflects on the longing "to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." Keeping in mind today's reading about the temple, read one of these psalms in full, asking God that you might catch a glimpse of the worship-inspiring beauty of His majesty.

1 Kings 7

1 Kings 7:1-51

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name. - Psalm 29:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

A man was driving along a number of unfamiliar roads on a long trip one evening. Due to the lack of explicit signage and his wandering thoughts, the man suddenly realized that he was not on the right road. Somewhere along the way, he had missed a turn and now needed to backtrack to find the missed road.

Scripture does not always provide explicit signage for turns in the text either! Today's passage begins with a description of Solomon's house, but then moves into a fuller description of the temple furnishings. The switch in verse 13 is not wholly obvious, however, until verses 40 and 45, which indicate that the entire preceding description was really about "the temple of the Lord." What do we learn from these two sections of chapter 7?

First, note the emphasis of the chapter. Scripture allots the first twelve verses to Solomon's palace, but spends the next thirty-nine verses on the temple. Although starting with Solomon, it is as if the narrator could not help but shift our attention back to the splendor and glory of God in the temple. Solomon's palace was splendid indeed, but God's splendor is where the true focus lies in today's text.

Second, some scholars have suggested that this text presents a negative image of Solomon. He spends twice as long to build a palace twice as big as the temple (vv. 1-2). True—yet Scripture never comments on these facts in a negative way. The glory of Solomon's palace seems to suggest an even greater glory for Solomon's God. Moreover, notice the similarities between temple and palace, both in the three-part structure (vv. 3-8) and in the materials used for each (vv. 9-12). This similarity shows that Solomon's reign was connected with divine sanction. The king's house was like God's house, and the connection between kingly glory and divine splendor and approval is underscored. As is so often the case, God chooses to use His servant to reflect His own glory.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's reading teaches us about the centrality of God's glory, but also about the way our own "glory" can point others to God's majesty. Make a list of your own talents, abilities, and accomplishments in life, recalling some of the "glory" you may have experienced from others as a result. Now take time throughout the day either to thank God that He glorifies Himself through us, or to use those gifts and abilities to point others to the source of true Glory.

1 Kings 8

1 Kings 8:1-21

Praise be to the Lord . . . who with his own hand has fulfilled what he has promised with his own mouth. - 1 Kings 8:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

Whenever a public building project is begun, there is usually a ground-breaking ceremony to inaugurate the forthcoming labor. Likewise, once that building is completed—whether a library, a playground, or even a church building—another assembly is typically held: the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Speeches are made recognizing the financial donors and anticipating the benefits to the community. The ribbon is cut, and a celebratory party ensues.

The dedication of God's temple in 1 Kings 8 is something like a ribbon-cutting event, with one notable distinction: the occupant of the building shows up and steals the show! Scripture tells us that Solomon gathered the leaders of Israel at Jerusalem to bring the ark of the covenant into the temple (vv. 1-2). In fact, the ark's centrality is underscored by its eight references in just nine verses. This dedication party was ostensibly about the temple, but Scripture makes it clear that it was really about God's presence. Lest the reader wonder about this emphasis, the centerpiece of the passage describes the climax: the priests withdrew, the cloud descended, and "the glory of the Lord filled his temple" (vv. 10-11). So overwhelming was God's presence that "the priests could not perform their service" (v. 11). As promised, God had come in glory to dwell with His people.

If the first half of today's reading is about God's glorious presence with His people, the second half focuses on God's character. Solomon's speech to the assembly emphasized God's fulfillment of His promises to David. Just as God had said that it would not be David, but David's son, who would "build the temple for my Name" (v. 19), so it had happened. Solomon summarized it simply, but accurately: "The Lord has kept the promise he made" (v. 20). God does what He says He will do; that is the thrust of Solomon's speech to Israel.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What promises of God do you struggle to believe? That He cares for you more than the sparrows (Matt. 6:26) and will turn all things to your good (Rom. 8:28)? That He will not abandon you (Heb. 13:5)? That He will one day come again in glory to claim His own (1 Thess. 4:13-18)? Take a hard, honest look at your own heart today to see where you might not be trusting in God's word of promise.

Ask Him for forgiveness and for the grace to start living with trust in His faithfulness.

1 Kings 8:1-14; Revelation 4:6-11, 7:9-12

We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was. - Revelation 11:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's hard to imagine the excitement that the people must have felt when Solomon assembled them to dedicate the temple. Annual feasts reminded them of God's great act of deliverance from Egypt. This act was grounded in the promises to Abraham that God would give the land and that His presence would dwell with them. Some people recalled the years of preparation for this very event undertaken by Solomon's father, David. Although forbidden by God to build the temple, David had amassed money and supplies for this endeavor.

Now, finally, the day had arrived. It's nearly impossible to capture the thrill and immense joy that those standing before the temple must have felt. Maybe if we think about a royal wedding, a coronation, or an inauguration, and then multiply the celebration by a large number, we might come close to the worship and joy of this event.

Yesterday, we saw a glimpse of our final destination in the heavenly Jerusalem. In Revelation 4, we find a portrayal of the eternal worship offered before God's throne. Here the four living beasts and the twenty-four elders do not cease to praise and give thanks to God Almighty. Then in Revelation 7, we see a great multitude wearing white robes. They are drawn from every nation, tribe, people, and language, praising the Lord for their salvation. Next we see the angels joining in the worship and thanks offered by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders.

Some scholars debate how the martyrs in Revelation 6:9-11 and the 144,000 of Revelation 7:4 relate to this great multitude, but it seems likely that the multitude encompasses the earlier groups to offer a complete picture of redeemed humanity worshiping God before His throne. The scope of the worship and joy in front of Solomon's temple was extraordinary, but it was just a pale foreshadowing of the depth of worship and joy that will flow from God's people as we give thanks to our Lord in His holy presence.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Take a look at the list that you made of things for which you were thankful on the first day of our study this month. Now consider how your understanding of thanksgiving has changed in the course of the study. Were you aware of how dangerous ingratitude really is? Have you grown in the realization that gratitude is an essential aspect of our Christian life? Have you found new items for which you can give thanks to the Lord? Had you considered before that your future heavenly destiny included giving thanks before God's throne?

1 Kings 8:22-66

May your eyes be open to your servant's plea and to the plea of your people Israel. - 1 Kings 8:52

TODAY IN THE WORD

Eight years ago, on September 11, 2001, the nation was sent into shock and mourning with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It was a day of fear and confusion for all Americans, and a time of profound sadness for families who lost loved ones. Around the country and the world, news videos captured countless assemblies of people joined in prayer for the nation and its families. On that day, and the days to follow, this nation lifted up its pleading cry to God.

Today's reading brings us to another assembly of people pleading to God for their country, but it was a celebratory rather than mournful occasion. And although no one should equate America with "God's nation," we can learn lessons about praying for a nation. Notice the kinds of things Solomon raised in his prayer for the people.

First, as already seen earlier, Solomon highlighted the recurring theme of God's faithfulness to His promises (vv. 22-26). Next, Solomon confessed the unworthiness of any people or nation to contain the creator God (vv. 27-30), and then he pleaded for true justice in the land (vv. 31-32). His prayer also asked that God's glory might be known throughout the world (vv. 41-43, 60), even as he requested God's assistance in conflict (vv. 44-45). All of these petitions should inform everyone's prayers for the people of their nation.

Yet, the clear emphasis in Solomon's prayer was the need for God's forgiveness. Such petitions occupied sixteen verses, and two separate spaces in his dedication prayer (vv. 33-40, 46-53). Scripture has taken pains to highlight this important aspect of our need for forgiveness. Note especially Solomon's three-fold assumption. God's people will sin: "For there is no one who does not sin" (v. 46); God's forgiveness, truly sought, will never fail (vv. 34, 36, 46-53); and renewed obedience is essential to being a forgiven child of God (vv. 56-61). This is truly a model of how to pray on behalf of others and ourselves.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's dedication prayer has much theology, but the chapter ends with an important reminder about practice as well. The whole scene was set in the context of a joyful worship celebration! Confronted with the glory of God's presence and the promise of forgiveness, Solomon offered an immense display of sacrificial gratitude. Offer God your own sacrifice of thanksgiving for His promise of forgiveness this week, in giving your time serving your church, providing financially to a gospel-centered ministry, or in some other way.

1 Kings 8:41-42; 10:1-9

The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. - 1 Kings 10:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the middle of the seventeenth century, King Louis XIV of France began constructing a palace that would display his power and glory. Its vast rooms were filled with precious art pieces and gilded gold ceilings. Nobility throughout France and from all over Europe sought an audience with the king at Versailles. Its glorious splendors only confirmed Louis XIV's epithet, the "Sun King."

The glory of Versailles is undeniable, but 1 Kings tells us that kings from all over the world eagerly sought the splendor of Solomon's wisdom, his palace, and the temple. With Solomon we see even further fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham. By this time, Israel was a great nation with vast borders and wealth. Jerusalem had become a world center that attracted many visitors.

Perhaps the most famous of these visitors was the Queen of Sheba, an important South Arabian trade center. Her visit indicates the importance of Israel among the nations. But the Queen of Sheba didn't visit Solomon simply because of his wealth and fame. The account in 1 Kings 10 is quite clear that she was drawn to Solomon because of his relationship with the Lord (v. 1). When she saw all the glory of Solomon and the temple, she praised the Lord and "his eternal love for Israel" (v. 9).

As we have seen before, God's favor toward Israel was intended to be a blessing to all the nations. The Queen blessed Solomon and was in turn blessed by him. Her visit anticipates later prophecies concerning the time when the nations will stream in to Zion (Isa. 2:2-4; 60-66) and to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:24).

The rest of Solomon's story isn't so happy. After spending seven years building the temple (1 Kings 6:38), Solomon spent thirteen years building his own palace (1 Kings 7:1).

Then in 1 Kings 11 we read about Solomon's love for foreign women. Toward the end of his life, he witnessed the rebellion of one of his officials, Jeroboam, who would eventually bring about the division of the kingdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Universalism is the belief that all people, regardless of whether they confess Jesus Christ, will be saved. Some parts of the Old Testament, including the passage from 1 Kings 8, might seem like they teach universalism. But 1 Kings 8:42-43 records Solomon's prayer that all may know the Lord and fear Him, the same desire we find in 2 Peter 3:9. Scripture is clear that the way to know and fear the Lord is only by calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Only those who trust Christ to forgive their sins will be saved.

1 Kings 9

1 Kings 9:1-28

If you or your sons turn away from me . . . and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land. - 1 Kings 9:6-7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Author Steve Farrar tells of a boyhood memory when he and his father visited the Grand Canyon. As they stood looking over the impressive ravine, young Steve suddenly grabbed the railing and swung his feet over the precipice. His alarmed father quickly grabbed his son, drew him back, and scolded him for his impulsive action.

While Steve's boyhood folly might be innocent naïveté, King Solomon had no excuse, for God gave clear instructions about living a godly life and avoiding apostasy. Having consecrated the temple and promised His presence, God then offered blessing and security for Solomon if he lived a life like David. Notice that the exhortation here is not for a sinless life, but a life with "integrity of heart and uprightness" (v. 4). A life pleasing to God is a life oriented toward Him, humble before His commands, and repentant over sin (see 2 Samuel 12; Psalm 51).

But the crux of God's exhortation came when He warned against "turning" from worship of God toward idolatry. The command is clear: stay true to your God. The consequences of disobedience are dire: Israel will be "cut off" from the land, the temple will be ruined, and Israel will become a "byword and an object of ridicule" (v. 7). Notice that as the king goes, so go the people. Here is a clarion call for a faithful leader of God's people. The future well-being of the people will be determined by the wisdom or folly of their king.

These warnings must be kept in mind as we come to the rest of the chapter. We learn of Solomon's continued kingly duties: his diplomatic activity (vv. 10-14), defensive building preparations (vv. 15-24), religious observance (v. 25), and commercial trade activity (vv. 26-28). Some scholars see hints of Solomon's demise in these verses; others argue that these are normal kingly activities. Either way, the earlier warnings loom over the entire chapter. Will Solomon pursue his kingly activities with a God-ward orientation? We will see as we continue our study.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We are reminded today of the interconnectedness of godly leadership and blessing for the people. Although God's exhortations are directed toward Solomon, the consequences of blessing or curse affect the people as a whole. Who are the leaders of your church and your government? (You can find your federal and state elected officials by entering your zip code here: www.congress.org.) Spend time praying for all of these leaders today, asking God to fill them with a love of truth, righteousness, and the strength to do His will.

1 Kings 9:1-9; 11:9-13

Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the statutes of his father David. - 1 Kings 3:3a

TODAY IN THE WORD

Ecclesiastes begins with the identifying statement: "The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1) and ends with the wise admonition: "Fear God and keep his commandments. . . . For God will bring every deed into judgment" (12:13, 14). In between, we find repeated assertions that everything in life under the sun is meaningless. Scholars disagree over who wrote this book, but traditionally it has been attributed to Solomon. Even if he didn't write it, the author seems to have him in mind. Today, we'll try to understand how it would be possible for the world's richest and wisest man to look at life with such sadness.

Solomon showed as much promise as any king could ever want. The first half of today's verse reveals Solomon's brightest point: he genuinely had a heart for God. But the rest of the verse shows the beginning of what would prove to be Solomon's greatest weakness: he was careless with his worship.

Before building the temple, Solomon and the people of Israel worshiped in the high places, a pagan practice forbidden by God (see Deut. 12:1-6). In His grace, however, God provided an alternative. The first portion of our reading describes the fulfillment of God's promise of His temple, a permanent dwelling place for His Name (1 Kings 9:3).

At this point in Israel's history, they enjoyed the apparent fulfillment of God's promises for His chosen people. In addition to a glorious place of worship, Israel enjoyed peace (4:25), prosperity (10:27), and the greatest ruler in the world (10:23, 24). But chapter 9 also includes a stern warning from God: turn from Me, and I will make your nation "an object of ridicule among all peoples" (v. 7). Surely a leader of unrivaled wisdom like Solomon would not be foolish enough to disobey God so blatantly . . . but the second half of our reading proves otherwise.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Seeing Solomon as the example of Ecclesiastes' sorrowful description of life requires a thorough understanding of just where Solomon was coming from.

1 Kings 10

1 Kings 10:1-29

King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings. - 1 Kings 10:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France, is one of the most impressive examples of Gothic architecture. Taking over 180 years to complete, it boasts two large towers, three organs (one of which holds 8,000 pipes), and a number of paintings, statues, and bells. Its most famous feature is its circular stained-glass window displaying 84 panes of brilliantly colored glass; the Rose Window has a diameter of 42 feet. None who see it leaves unimpressed.

First Kings 10 presents a biblical version of impressive splendor. From the Queen of Sheba's visit to the description of Solomon's kingdom, Scripture highlights the glory of Solomon's kingdom. What can we take away from today's display of grandeur?

First, consider the source of blessing. Solomon's kingdom was filled with spices, precious stones, an impressive throne, happy servants, and lots of gold (mentioned ten separate times)! All of this is given a positive spin. The Queen of Sheba remarked that all she had seen was a demonstration of God's "delight" and "love" for Solomon and Israel (v. 9). Scripture then follows with its own summary: "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart" (vv. 23-24). Don't miss the emphasis here. Solomon's blessings come from God and the wisdom He gave. Even verse 1 implies that Solomon's fame was only in connection with "the name of the Lord." Any blessing we experience in life comes from our giving God.

Second, we are given a picture of God's eschatological kingdom. The present picture of Solomon's kingdom and the promised vision of God's eternal kingdom in Isaiah 60:1-7 overlap. Both portray a secure, joyful, and prosperous kingdom which will draw to it a multitude of nations praising the Lord. That kingdom has yet to be fully realized, but as Jesus Himself declared: "Now one greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:42). Solomon is only a shadow of the splendor of God's kingdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus referenced Solomon's splendor on another occasion as well. When exhorting His disciples to seek the kingdom of God rather than worry about life, He pointed to the beauty of the lilies and remarked: "Not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these" (Matt. 6:29). In a way, Solomon's impressive splendor reminds us that God cares for all our needs. Perhaps you struggle to trust God with your everyday needs. Make a commitment today to seek His kingdom, and let God take care of the rest.

1 Kings 10:1-12

Give your servant a discerning heart . . . to distinguish between right and wrong. - 1 Kings 3:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Giles Foden's novel, *The Last King of Scotland*, portrays the gruesome injustices of Uganda's former dictator, Idi Amin, infamous for political and economic atrocities and horrific ethnic persecution during his eight-year reign. Amin is only one among innumerable human rulers who epitomize the absolute opposite of God's will for a king.

We learned from Exodus and Deuteronomy that God's people were expected to reflect His righteousness, justice, and care for vulnerable people in society. After the generation of Israelites who entered the Promised Land died, God raised up judges to govern the people who had become increasingly disobedient and idolatrous (Judges 2:10-17). Yet, God's people did not maintain justice and righteousness as He commanded, nor did their leaders (21:25); the Israelites eventually requested a king to reign over them (1 Samuel 8). The Lord appointed Saul to be the first king, then David, and then David's son, Solomon. Solomon is Israel's king referenced in today's reading. When the Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's wisdom and fame, she visited him. Though a foreigner, she clearly understood God's purposes for Israel's king.

By the fruit she saw—Solomon's wisdom, wealth, and fame—the Queen of Sheba recognized that the God of Israel delighted in Solomon. Let's consider two things she said to King Solomon. First, she connected God's eternal love for Israel with Solomon's ascent to the throne. The reference to God's eternal love echoes back to Yahweh's original covenant with His people (cf. Deut. 7:9; 1 Chron. 17:22). God has not given up on His people. Because of His faithful love for them, He appointed a king who reflected His love. Second, the Queen noted God's purposes for anointing Solomon as king. The role of Israel's king was to demonstrate and administer God's justice and righteousness. In a way, God was renewing and reestablishing the role of Adam in the Garden as God's vice-regent on earth (Gen. 1:26-28); He was raising up a leader to lead His wayward people in His ways.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Idi Amin ruled in Uganda in the 1970s, and unjust rulers persist in the world today. The apostle Paul instructs us to intercede in prayer for kings and all those in authority (1 Tim. 2:2). In your prayer time today, pray for global leaders to maintain God's justice and righteousness. Pray particularly for those who work against God's will, that God would rescue the people under their harsh rule and that they themselves would come to know the light and life of Jesus Christ.

1 Kings 10:14-29

The king . . . must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself. - Deuteronomy 17:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

The advent of the nuclear arms race introduced problems for the powers involved—the United States and the Soviet Union—as well

as all the citizens of the world. In addition to pollution resulting from nuclear production, the threat of devastating damage from purposeful or accidental detonation looms even after the end of the Cold War. Disposing and disarming nuclear warheads is complex practically and politically. Now that they exist in such great numbers, nuclear powers rely on their terrifying weapons for their safety.

They didn't possess the destructive power of nuclear weapons, but in the time of ancient Israel, horses and chariots were a great equalizer for any nation—at least those nations that didn't have God as their great defender. But as Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land after their prolonged wilderness wandering, God wanted His people to trust in His strength, not that of horses. Long before the people asked for a king like the other nations had, Moses foretold a time of kings in Israel, and they were forbidden from stockpiling horses (specifically ones from Egypt) in large numbers (Deut. 17:16).

Solomon, however, was the king who did nothing in small doses. Today's passage catalogs his vast accumulation of material wealth, political success, and military strength. He had thriving revenue streams, a luxurious palace, and incomparable wisdom. Everything any ruler could possibly want, King Solomon had.

That was part of the problem. He reached a point when he no longer had to depend on his God for anything. A large reason for that: his 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses—imported from Egypt (vv. 28-29). Israel's old oppressor became a provider for Solomon's army. The majestic, powerful animals gave Israel a sense of security they should have received from God Himself. Perhaps this sense of self-sufficiency contributed to Solomon's willingness to intermarry with more than 700 women of foreign royal descent—and to surrender his heart to their false gods. With or without God's approval, Solomon confidently established peace using his own sordid methods. His submission to foreign gods was ultimately Solomon's downfall—he wasn't as secure as he believed.

APPLY THE WORD

Solomon should have heeded his father's words: "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God" (Ps. 20:7). We should do the same. We are tempted in this world to build up our own sense of security by amassing great wealth, possessions, and even information, but if we lack dependence on God, we're trusting things that are subject to decay, theft, and any number of threats. Put your trust in the eternal, infallible, omnipotent Lord.

1 Kings 11

1 Kings 11:1-13

Solomon held fast to [his foreign wives] in love. - 1 Kings 11:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

The great nineteenth-century British preacher C. H. Spurgeon once said: "A stony heart may be turned to flesh, but turn a divided heart into whatsoever you please, so long as it is divided, all is ill. . . . A united heart is life to a man, but if the heart be cut in twain, in the highest, deepest, and most spiritual sense, he dies."

No better words summarize Solomon's downward turn recorded in 1 Kings 11. After all the praise, admiration, and grandeur of the first ten chapters, today's reading begins with an ominous "however" (v. 1). By explicitly disobeying God's commands about taking wives from the surrounding pagan regions (see Deut. 7:3-4), a slow change occurs. Solomon was turned "after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God" (v. 4).

In fact, the language of Scripture is carefully chosen. Verse 1 tells us that Solomon "loved many foreign women," and goes on to record that "Solomon held fast [literally "clung"] to them in love" (v. 2). These are the same Hebrew words used in Deuteronomy to prescribe the loyalty a human should have toward God. Deuteronomy 11:22, for example, calls for us "to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, and to hold fast to him" (see Deut. 6:5; 10:20).

Solomon did not simply wake up and decide out of the blue to do "evil in the eyes of the Lord" and build high places for foreign gods (vv. 6-8). Rather, his singular love for God was slowly replaced with other loves. A heart once devoted to the Lord had become a divided heart.

God's response underscores this change in Solomon. His anger was precisely because Solomon's heart "had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel" (v. 9). Although there was an element of mercy in the judgment against Solomon (vv. 12-13), Solomon's failure to heed God's explicit commands resulted in a divided heart and, eventually, a divided kingdom (vv. 10-11).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Of course, God gives us many loves and delights in life, but today's passage reminds us that when an earthly love replaces our love for God, and we find ourselves "clinging" to other things for our full satisfaction, we have erected an idol in our life. Make a list of the things you may be "clinging" to above God in your life, such as a job, human praise, or a hobby. Now take this list before God and

ask Him to re-prioritize your life in a way that gives Him your entire heart.

1 Kings 11:14-43

I will humble David's descendants for this, but not forever. - 1 Kings 11:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

The opening chapters of the book of Job give a unique glimpse into the heavenly court where Satan (literally "the adversary") received God's permission to test Job. The rest of the book details all the suffering, loss, and misery Job experienced at the direction of Satan. And although Job never learned why he had to suffer, Scripture makes it clear that not even Satan can act without God's permission.

This theme of God's sovereignty (even in adversity) lies at the heart of today's reading as well. This time another set of "adversaries" came on the scene. First, Scripture tells us expressly that God Himself raised up "Hadad the Edomite" (vv. 14-22) and "Rezon son of Eliada" (vv. 23-25) as "adversaries" who troubled the king "as long as Solomon lived" (v. 24). In addition to this outside turmoil, next came the Israelite "Jeroboam son of Nebat" who posed a serious threat to Solomon's throne. Although never designated an "adversary," Jeroboam's conversation with the prophet Ahijah makes it clear that God's hand was behind this troublemaker as well (vv. 29-39).

From Solomon's perspective, Hadad, Rezon, and Jeroboam were each the proverbial thorn in the flesh. These men all posed a significant threat to Solomon's kingdom, and Solomon even tried to kill Jeroboam (v. 40). Yet from the perspective of Scripture, God was still in control, using these ostensibly human activities to further His own purposes. Even in adversity, God remains sovereign.

This leads to a second important lesson in today's reading: God's loving discipline. Second Samuel 7:14 stands as an important text behind our passage. There, God had promised to punish the king who turned from Him; 1 Kings 11 records this particular instance of God's faithfulness to His word. Yet in today's passage we also find God's offer of love and commitment that was promised in 2 Samuel 7:15-16. God will take away the kingdom, but not all of it (vv. 32-36), and not forever (v. 39). Don't miss the hidden promise: God's discipline of Solomon left room for the Davidic line to be restored one day. According to the royal genealogy of Matthew 1, that day has come.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes adversity stems from our own sin (as in today's passage), and sometimes not (as with Job). Either way, Scripture declares that God has not lost control. Perhaps you know someone who faces a life of difficulty and suffering. Without being glib or insensitive, comfort that person with today's lesson. Remind your loved one that even in difficult times, when God seems distant or removed, He has not forgotten us. His plan of love for us will still be completed, even through adversity. We can trust His faithfulness

1 Kings 11:4; 2 Chronicles 8

As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God. - 1 Kings 11:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to The Gallup Poll in July of this year, the American public had strong opinions about the most important issues facing elected leaders. Iraq remained at the top of the list, as it has since March 2004. Following that were terrorism and national security, the economy, energy, illegal immigration, health care, and education. Also included on the list was the notion of "fixing government": job approval ratings for Congress were in the mid-20 percent range, the lowest observed by Gallup in a decade. Certainly there is no shortage of important issues that people would like to see addressed by their elected leaders, a challenge that is increasingly relevant with the presidential election next year.

Solomon also dealt with various national policy issues. Some involved battles, but he was not primarily a warrior, as his father David had been. Instead, he focused on politics, diplomacy, and trade. He undertook building projects. He shored up national security by strengthening border posts and equipping his army with chariots and horses. He solidified relations with neighbors such as Egypt. To give his daughter in marriage to Solomon, Pharaoh must have regarded him as a worthy equal. Though such wives would later help lead him astray, Solomon was still faithful to the Lord at this time. He built his new wife her own palace in order to keep her away from Jewish holy places (v. 11). He also finished David's work of organizing the priests and Levites to carry out different worship-related tasks.

As the king expanded his trading projects, he partnered with Hiram and the Phoenicians, experts in shipbuilding and sailing. His ships would surely have docked at the kingdom of Saba, or Sheba (southwest Arabia), more than a thousand miles away. Their king may have worried that such voyages could disrupt his caravan trade, which may in turn have prompted him to send his queen on the

famous visit we'll read about tomorrow.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you know that map of the world in the lobby of your church? The one that you've walked by so many times you no longer really see it? The next time you're at church, we encourage you to stop there and spend some time praying. As we consider Solomon's national and international projects today and tomorrow, you may feel led to consider the church's national and international projects as well. Who are your church's "home missionaries"? What do they do? How can you help?

1 Kings 12

1 Kings 12:1-24

So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the Lord. - 1 Kings 12:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

Every student of U.S. history examines the catastrophic Civil War. Historians analyze the causes, battle strategies, and legacies—but no one denies the impact of the Civil War on our history. Today, we are the United States, but that unity came at the terrible price of more than half a million dead soldiers and countless more displaced and injured people.

In today's passage, we read about another civil war as a national consequence of folly. Rehoboam took the throne after his father's death, but was quickly threatened by the return of Jeroboam son of Nebat. Jeroboam gathered a group of malcontents and demanded that the new king lighten the yoke of their civic burdens. What followed was a series of foolish choices by Rehoboam. First, he rejected the wiser counsel of his father's elders and followed the guidance of his peers. This led to the northern tribes breaking away from his leadership. Next, he sent his official Adoniram on a mission to secure the people's will by force, which only resulted in the death of Adoniram and the near escape of Rehoboam himself. Finally, Rehoboam mustered his armies "to make war against the house of Israel" (v. 21). He quickly found himself opposed by God Himself.

The theme of folly is strong in today's text, but it is not the only theme. Notice carefully both the underlying commentary of Scripture and then the way the passage ends. Although Rehoboam's foolishness was apparent, twice Scripture echoes this refrain: "This turn of events was from the Lord" (vv. 15, 24). Poor leadership? Certainly. But a God no longer in control? Absolutely not! God was still at work with His people.

Finally, note the hopeful ending. After all the poor choices by Rehoboam, he was faced with God's command not to fight his own people. The response: "So they obeyed the word of the Lord and went home again, as the Lord had ordered" (v. 24). Our chapter is filled with folly, but underneath still lie flickers of encouragement. God is still in control, and glimmers of wisdom still remain in Judah.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Like Solomon's kingdom, Christ's church today is extremely divided. One set of data estimates over 33,000 different denominations! Much is at stake, theologically and practically, but we know Christ's will was for the unity of His body (see John 17). Spend time praying today first thanking God that He is still in control, and then asking Him to work in your life and the lives of church members around the world to submit to His Word, that Jesus' prayer for unity might be fulfilled.

1 Kings 12:1-24

A wise king winnows out the wicked - Proverbs 20:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

At the outbreak of the Civil War, northern newspapers were filled with advice to Abraham Lincoln on how to conduct the war. One day, a newspaper correspondent called on Lincoln to offer his own unsolicited war strategy. The president listened patiently, then told the man a story. The punch line of the story made it clear that all the unasked-for advice amounted to a lot of heat and very little insight.

Ignoring bad advice is pretty easy to do when it comes from outsiders. But what happens when not just bad, but truly evil, advice comes from a king's circle of trusted advisors? It can produce disastrous results if the king listens to his advisors.

Disaster is exactly what happened in Israel when Solomon's son, King Rehoboam, followed the evil counsel of his younger "cabinet members." Their decision to lay an even heavier load of taxation on the people caused a fault line to break open, splitting the nation into two kingdoms.

We are going to follow that split this month as we undertake a fascinating study of biblical kings and prophets in the divided nation.

We'll make stops from 1 Kings 12 to the end of 2 Kings--by which time both the northern kingdom (known as Israel) and the southern kingdom (called Judah) had been conquered and led away into captivity.

Along the way, we will meet some of the most godly, ungodly, and colorful people in Scripture: Jeroboam, Elijah, Manasseh, Elisha, and Isaiah.

Although Rehoboam's bad choice precipitated the split, David's dynasty was already starting to crack by the time of Solomon's death. God told Solomon He was going to tear the kingdom out of his hand after Solomon's death (1 Kings 11:11-13). The prophet Ahijah then relayed this prophecy to Jeroboam (11:29-40).

Rehoboam's rejection of his elders' advice was followed by another bad decision: to send Adoniram to the people (1 Kings 12:18). This man was stoned, and Rehoboam barely escaped with his life.

Rehoboam went back to Jerusalem and mustered 180 troops from Judah and Benjamin, the tribes that remained loyal to him and comprised the southern kingdom. But the prophet Shemaiah told the king to give it up, and Rehoboam wisely listened.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This month is filled with lessons for us to learn from the real-life world of Old Testament kings and prophets.

One way you can maximize the benefit of these lessons is to begin each day with this simple prayer: "Lord, show me what You want me to know, do, or say as a result of this lesson, and I will obey You." Why not write this prayer on a Post-it note and attach it to each day's study as a reminder?

1 Kings 12:25-33

You shall have no other gods before me. - Exodus 20:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

If we were to write an epitaph for the life of the Israelite leader, Jeroboam, an appropriate title might be "What Could Have Been." Outside of King David himself, there probably wasn't a ruler in Israel who was given the promises that God made to Jeroboam-but Jeroboam squandered them all, revealing an evil heart in the process.

In their rebellion against Rehoboam, the people named Jeroboam king of the northern kingdom of Israel.

God said He would allow David's house to retain "one tribe" (1 Kings 11:36). This tribe was actually Judah and Benjamin combined, because Benjamin's tribe was so small.

Now, look at what God told Jeroboam in the following verses. "You will rule over all that your heart desires" (v. 37). If Jeroboam would serve God and keep His "statutes and commands," God promised, "I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you" (v. 38).

What a future Jeroboam could have had! But he proved to be unworthy of God's promises. Instead of believing and obeying God, Jeroboam started worrying about how he could hold on to the people's loyalty. He reasoned that if the Israelites continued to worship in Jerusalem-the center of the southern kingdom-their hearts would be drawn back to David's dynasty and to Rehoboam.

Interestingly, Jeroboam also sought counsel (1 Kings 12:28) concerning the best course of action. Like Rehoboam, he got bad advice-and like Rehoboam, he followed it. Jeroboam built two golden calves and put them at Dan and Bethel, cities at the far north and far south of his kingdom. Then he established a substitute Day of Atonement, exactly one month after the God-ordained sacrifice in Jerusalem. Jeroboam completed his idolatry by randomly selecting people who were not Levites to become priests.

The system that Jeroboam thus set in motion in Israel was like a spiritual atom bomb detonating in the nation. The idolatry Jeroboam encouraged, primarily for political reasons, would plague Israel for generations to come. Things would get so bad that God would judge His people by removing them from the land of promise.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Convenience and compromise are the best words to describe the course of action Jeroboam took. Keeping power was a higher priority for him than spiritual purity and principle.

Jeroboam's sin was shocking-but then, sin is always shocking. Given the lavish grace and love God has showered on us, it's shocking whenever one of His children compromises. Today would be a good time to take a reading of your spiritual integrity. Is there anything that you're putting ahead of your relationship with God? Prayerfully search your heart and life, and plan to deal with any budding compromise or unfaithfulness He may reveal to you.

1 Kings 12:25-33

You shall have no other gods before me. - Exodus 20:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

The popular slogan declares, "The family that prays together stays together." In today's passage, Jeroboam seemed to think that the northern kingdom would stay together if they prayed together. He recognized one major threat: if the people continued to worship in Jerusalem, they would reunite with Rehoboam (v. 27). He needed the bonding glue of corporate worship. There was a big problem—his prescribed form of worship was fundamentally flawed.

First, Jeroboam violated the divinely commanded form of worship. Whereas God had specifically forbidden the worship of other gods in the form of idols (Ex. 20:3-5), Jeroboam created two golden calves for his people to worship. Notice how his call to worship echoes Israel's earlier sin of idolatry: "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (v. 28; cf. Ex. 32:4).

Next, Jeroboam violated the divinely prescribed place of worship. God had ordered the building of His tabernacle (Exodus 35-40) and later consecrated Solomon's temple in Jerusalem as the true place of worship. Dan and Bethel, Jeroboam's newly sanctioned places of worship, were far more accessible for the northern tribes, and even had a veneer of piety in their connection with the patriarchs Abraham, Jacob, and Moses (Gen. 12:8; 28:10-23; Judges 18:29-31), but they were not divinely sanctioned places of worship.

Finally, Jeroboam violated the divinely appointed leaders and times of worship. Rather than the explicitly chosen Levites (Ex. 32:27-29), Jeroboam chose his priests from "all sorts of people" (v. 31). And rather than following the prescribed worship calendar, Jeroboam created a new festival on "a month of his own choosing" (vv. 32-33).

Scripture's commentary is clear: "And this thing became a sin" (v. 30). God will only accept worship in the way He prescribes. A self-made religion such as Jeroboam's, however convenient or sensible in our own eyes, is only idolatry and false worship.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Examine your own life of worship today, both private and corporate, to see whether any idols lurk. Do you have any self-made ideas of what God should be like, perhaps preferring your own constructs of His character to Scripture's portrayal? Have you or your church slipped into worship practices that privilege convenience over principle? Take time to genuinely explore this question today, asking God for a restored desire to worship Him the way He commands to be worshiped.

1 Kings 13

1 Kings 13:1-10

What fellowship can light have with darkness? - 2 Corinthians 6:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

As we mentioned on Monday, we are studying an action-packed section of Scripture this month. The kings we will meet did some remarkable and horrible things. The prophets we'll study were fearless spokesmen for God who, in many cases, stared down the kings with a word from the Lord.

Today's story is a great example of that. The unnamed prophet who confronted King Jeroboam delivered his message with such directness that Jeroboam was immediately incensed and ordered the prophet's arrest. We can assume that if the order had been carried out, the prophet would have paid for his courage with his life.

Jeroboam's deliberate defiance of the true worship of God was an affront that God did not leave unchallenged. One writer has called this a prophecy of a coming Davidic king, named Josiah, one of the most remarkable prophecies in Scripture.

What makes it so remarkable is that Josiah's reign was prophesied by name, even though he would not arrive for almost 300 years! Notice that God did not use a prophet from Jeroboam's idolatrous territory, but one from Judah, where God's worship was still carried on according to His commandments.

God often gave His prophets a sign to verify the truth of their message. This prophet announced such a sign, and Jeroboam's illegitimate altar at Bethel split apart before his eyes. God even gave Jeroboam a personal object lesson by making his outstretched hand shrivel up.

With his own health at stake, Jeroboam was suddenly reduced from a raging king into a whimpering petitioner. He called the Lord

""your God"" (v. 6)-a real giveaway as to the attitude of his heart. But in spite of this, God chose to answer the prophet's prayer to heal Jeroboam's hand.

By offering the prophet a reward and a meal in his palace, Jeroboam was extending the protection of his kingdom to the man. But the age-old spiritual principle of today's verse was in effect then: God's prophet was in Bethel on business, not on a social call.

Jeroboam, unfortunately, had shown that he had no regard for God or for the purity of His worship.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It required obedience for that prophet to turn down the chance for dinner with a king and a reward from the royal treasury.

How many of us would be willing to obey God, even if this meant a financial or social disadvantage? That's a question each of us must answer, because God is still calling us as believers to come out from the world. This question makes a good follow-up to the spiritual inventory we suggested you take yesterday. Today, each of us should give this some prayerful thought.

1 Kings 13:33-14:20

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. - Deuteronomy 5:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

In recent months we have had plenty of reminders that the ability to look the other way in the face of truth is an all-too-common human trait. The life of King Jeroboam of Israel is Exhibit A of this tendency.

Jeroboam never got the picture, spiritually speaking. As we learned earlier, God brought the king face-to-face with some incredible promises. But evidently, Jeroboam did not consider God's promises worth the necessary obedience on his part. He looked the other way, plunging the northern kingdom into idolatry and false worship that would cling to them for several centuries.

Since Jeroboam rejected God's goodness, God confronted the king with the truth of His judgment through the prophecy of 1 Kings 13. But ""even after this, Jeroboam did not change his evil ways"" (13:33). He rejected God's word and warning. All that was left was for the sentence of judgment to be carried out.

That judgment fell first on Jeroboam's son, Abijah, who fell sick (interestingly, his enemy, Rehoboam, also had a son named Abijah, 1 Kings 15:1).

It's not hard to understand why Jeroboam sent his wife to the prophet, Ahijah. It was Ahijah who had delivered God's original promise of blessing to Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:29-39). This fact and the gift Jeroboam sent with his wife were designed to produce a good word concerning the fate of Abijah.

But why did Jeroboam tell his wife to disguise herself? Perhaps he didn't want it known that a member of his family went to visit a prophet of the Lord. If this is the reason, it would be typical of Jeroboam's unbelief.

But while Jeroboam looked the other way, God's gaze was steady. Although the king reigned for twenty-two years in Israel, nothing else he did is recorded. Jeroboam's apostasy, his departure from the truth, brought disaster on his entire family and even on the nation (1 Kings 14:15). His descendants would not even get a decent burial, and Israel itself would one day be uprooted from its land.

Jeroboam's demise, and the damage he left behind, is a graphic answer to the question of whether integrity matters in a nation's leaders.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We need continually to be reminded that praying for those in authority is, according to the apostle Paul, a top priority for God's people (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

Let's do that today, specifically praying that moral and ethical integrity, and spiritual sensitivity, will be restored to their proper place of importance in American public life. Pray also that God will raise up people at every level of leadership who will bring His righteous standards to bear on decisions that affect each of us.

1 Kings 14

1 Kings 14:1-20

You have made for yourself other gods . . . you have provoked me to anger and thrust me behind your back. - 1 Kings 14:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Two hikers walking in the woods came upon a fork in the path, but were unsure where to go. One path led home; the other took them far into the wilderness. Unfamiliar with the terrain, and without a map, the hikers chose the wrong path. Four hours later, darkness descended upon them as they huddled together, cold, tired, hungry, and without water. They eventually perished—their doom was sealed the moment they chose the wrong path.

Like the two hikers, Jeroboam's earlier choices led him to this dark point in the story. His son grew deathly ill, and he sent his wife to the prophet Ahijah to discover the boy's fate. The last two chapters have just detailed Jeroboam's wanton wickedness; yet, here he hoped to trick or bribe Ahijah into offering a good word (vv. 1-4). But Scripture shows us that God cannot be tricked. No disguise can cover the pretentious heart (v. 5). God is not swayed by superstition, nor is He some trinket that we rub when we are in trouble. He calls for a relationship of faithful obedience and repentance from sin, not gimmicks and quick fixes. Jeroboam learned that lesson all too well.

The thrust of our text, however, is on Ahijah's prophecy and God's word of judgment. And at the heart of that prophecy is the declaration against idolatry. Jeroboam's fate is disastrous: his child will die, all male descendants will be cut off, his dynasty will be destroyed, his house utterly burned, and all of Israel will be taken into exile (vv. 6-16). Although God had shown Jeroboam great grace in raising him up and giving him a kingdom, the stinging pronouncement is this: "You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods . . . you have provoked me to anger and thrust me behind your back" (v. 9). Jeroboam may have had lots of military and political accomplishments (v. 19), but Scripture's assessment is clear: Jeroboam was an utter failure where it counted most. His early choice of idolatry ruined everything.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Consider Scripture's evaluation of Jeroboam's life: twenty-two years trying to make something of himself and his kingdom (v. 20), but in the end it was all misguided. What truly mattered, his walk with God, was neglected. Where do your priorities lie? Do you spend more time and energy on your work and personal advancement than you do seeking to grow in God's grace and walking in His ways? If so, make today the day you rearrange your priorities, stripping your life of idols, and turning back to the Lord.

1 Kings 14:21-31

The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable—how much more so when brought with evil intent! - Proverbs 21:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

With the nation now split into two kingdoms, the remainder of 1-2 Kings becomes like a television drama in which the narrator follows two stories that are simultaneously developing.

The writer of Kings tells the story, first of one kingdom and then of the other, showing how the reigns of the various kings overlap and how God deals with them. If today's reading was part of the drama, the narrator might begin, "Mean-while, back in Judah . . ."

The spotlight of Scripture has been focused on Israel, but now it turns back to Judah. We haven't heard anything about Rehoboam since his foolish decision to oppress the people. But if the people of Judah were tempted to feel smug about God's condemnation of Jeroboam, the actions of Rehoboam would bring them back to reality.

The fact is that except for being the location for the true worship of God (v. 21), Judah was not much better off spiritually than Israel. Rehoboam even allowed the use of male prostitutes in pagan worship, a form of degradation not mentioned in Israel.

The people picked up this and other detestable practices from "the nations the Lord had driven out before [them]" (v. 24). Rehoboam's mother may even have been partly responsible for the revival of pagan practices. She was an Ammonite, one of Solomon's many foreign wives who turned him away from the Lord. As an Ammonite, she would have been a worshiper of Molech, a god especially "detestable" to God (1 Kings 11:5).

The parallel account in 2 Chronicles 12 says that Rehoboam turned away from God after he became strong as king (v. 1). So God's hand of judgment fell on Judah in the form of an attack by Shishak, king of Egypt.

According to 2 Chronicles 12:2-12, Rehoboam and his officials did humble themselves before God when threatened by Shishak. God relented when He saw this, but He permitted Shishak to take the temple's treasures.

Here is another example of the sins of the fathers being visited on their descendants. There was "some good in Judah" (2 Chron. 12:12), but it was hard to find amid all the sin.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Two days ago we urged you to help those around you follow the Lord wholeheartedly. Today, we want to turn the focus the other way.

Knowing Rehoboam's background gives us some insight into his lack of devotion to the Lord, although it does not excuse his disobedience! Tomorrow we'll see that the heart of his son, Abijah, was affected by his father's influence—he also ""was not fully devoted to the Lord"" (1 Kings 15:3). What kind of spiritual heritage are you building for the next generation? Ask God today to help you be an example that will point those coming behind you to the Lord.

1 Kings 14:21-15:24

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. - Psalm 51:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Charles Dickens's novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, opens with famous lines describing the scene in England and France prior to the French Revolution: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness."

Dickens portrayed a tale of two cities; today's passage is a tale of three kings of Judah, with similar dichotomies: wisdom and foolishness, belief and disbelief, light and darkness. Central to the reigns of Rehoboam, Abijah, and Asa, however, was the issue of the heart. Under Rehoboam, Judah took a turn for the worse. Idolatry ran rampant (14:22-24) and the temple was plundered of its treasures (14:25-28). But note how Rehoboam continued to keep up religious appearances. The end had not yet come, but Rehoboam's heart that feigned worship pointed the trajectory already.

The second king, Abijah, continued in the sins of his fathers, and the kingdom experienced continual war (15:6-8). Scripture highlights the fundamental problem: "his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been" (15:3). This heart focus is so important that David's God-oriented heart is further underscored (15:4-5).

If the first two kings represent folly, disbelief, and darkness, the third king, Asa, represents wisdom, belief, and light. In fact, Scripture calls Asa a "lamp in Jerusalem" (15:4). Asa was not perfect. He did not remove every high place, and his political dealings with foreign aid were not commendable (see 2 Chron. 16:1-10). But overall, he did what was right, like David. He rid the nation of idols, removed the shrine prostitutes, deposed his wicked grandmother from office, and returned silver and gold to the temple (15:11-15). The core issue is repeated: "Asa's heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life" (15:14). Three different kings, each moving toward light or darkness—the heart is what mattered most.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passage highlights the importance of a heart committed to the Lord, what Scripture sometimes calls a pure heart. None of us is without sin; even David failed miserably. But is your heart oriented toward God in humility, repentance, and a desire for obedience? Or is it turned to idolatry and personal pleasures? Take a moment today to search your own heart; then make Psalm 51:10 your prayer: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

1 Kings 15

1 Kings 15:1-8

Your hearts must be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands. - 1 Kings 8:61

TODAY IN THE WORD

The U.S. Navy officially began its exploration of Antarctica in 1838 when Lt. Charles Wilkes set out on an expedition to explore nearly 1■ miles of the Antarctic peninsula. But after that initial foray, the United States lost interest in the region until Navy admiral Richard Byrd reported that he had flown over the South Pole in 1929.

During the lull in between, the Navy still maintained an official Antarctic mission called ""Operation Deep Freeze."" It's just that nothing much was happening.

The kingdom of Judah, with David's descendants on the throne, was much like the Navy's ""Operation Deep Freeze"" from 1838-1929. The name of David was still there, but it didn't mean what it used to. There wasn't much depth of spirituality at the time.

The problem started at the throne. The writer of Kings specifically notes that the heart of King Abijah, David's great-grandson, ""was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of his forefather David had been"" (v. 3).

Abijah ascended the throne at the death of his father, Rehoboam. Abijah's half-hearted spiritual commitment was evident in the

same tolerant attitude he displayed toward the sinful practices his father had either instituted or allowed. In this case, "like father, like son" was not a good thing.

Verse 5 strengthens the contrast between David and his later descendants by citing David's lifelong faithfulness to the Lord-with the exception of his affair with Bathsheba.

But whereas David was continuously faithful, kings such as Abijah could not seem to put together two days of faithfulness in a row. The only incident recorded from his three-year reign is found in 2 Chronicles 13:2-20-a battle against Jeroboam and his army from the northern kingdom.

Even though Abijah's troops were outnumbered two-to-one, they called on the Lord and had victory over Jeroboam. Abijah "grew in strength" (2 Chron. 13:21), but 1 Kings 15:4 indicates that this was more for David's sake than for Abijah's. Judah was living on past spiritual glories that would not last forever.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Living off past victories is one of the easiest traps to fall into for the Christian.

It's great to look back and remember what God has done, but the Christian life is meant to be a process of continual growth. When God is at work in us, we don't have to live in the past because God's mercy is "new every morning" (Lam. 3:23). For your own encouragement, take a piece of paper and jot down the ways you have seen God at work in your life over the past thirty days. Then use it as a focus of praise to the Lord.

1 Kings 15:9-24; 16:29-34

If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm. - Psalm 37:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the lives of Asa, king of Judah, and Ahab, king of Israel, we find perhaps the best example of the great spiritual diversity that marked this period of the divided kingdom.

Asa was one of a handful of kings in Judah who "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (15:11). His long reign of forty-one years is one indication that God's hand was upon him, although longevity cannot always be equated with God's blessing.

There is much more information on Asa's reign in 2 Chronicles 14-16, including several details not included in today's reading.

Asa was a reformer, a vigorous defender of the true worship of God. He destroyed the idols his predecessors had made and expelled the male prostitutes whose presence kept a curse on the land. He even deposed his grandmother, Maacah, for idolatry, tearing down the pole she had erected to encourage worship of a pagan goddess.

Asa's war with Baasha, the king of Israel, is described briefly here, but 2 Chronicles 16:7-10 adds that God was displeased with Asa for relying on the ungodly king of Aram (Syria) rather than on the Lord. Although Asa's reign was not completely unmarred, he was committed to the pure worship of God.

Ahab is a name familiar to most Bible students. He was infamous not only for the evil things he did, but also for his marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of a pagan king. Ahab was even more wicked than his father, Omri, who had been the worst king of Israel up to that time.

Jezebel introduced Baal worship into Israel, an abomination that brought the prophet Elijah out of nowhere onto the biblical scene. The duel between this great prophet and the evil pair who occupied Israel's throne will occupy our attention for the next few days, including some of the most dramatic scenes in all of Scripture.

Today's key verse helps to explain the difference between the careers of Asa and Ahab. Although the latter reigned twenty-two years, he was walking on shaky ground from day one-and Israel suffered terribly for his godlessness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

There is no greater blessing than to know that the Lord is pleased with the road you have taken.

The Scripture is clear that one way we can delight the heart of God is to make His Word our delight (Ps. 1:1-2). We hope this is your experience each day as you study the Bible along with the rest of the Today family. From time to time we encourage you to memorize a helpful verse that the Holy Spirit can recall to your mind for strength in times of need. Today's verse fits that category.

1 Kings 15:25-16:34

Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. - Ezekiel 18:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

In many pieces of music or poetry, the term refrain describes the melody or group of lines that recur throughout the composition. Typically occurring at the end of each verse or division, the refrain brings completion to the trajectory of the piece, as well as cohesion to the work as a whole.

Today's text offers a dark refrain, summarizing the recurring motif of the passage. Scripture punctuates this narrative with the cascading repetition that each Israelite king "did evil in the eyes of the Lord," provoking Him to anger (15:26, 30, 34; 16:2, 7, 13, 19, 25, 26, 30, 33). Life in Israel was full of betrayal, idolatry, rival temples, and accumulating evil. It almost seems that Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, and Ahab were each trying to outdo the wickedness of the previous generation (see especially 16:25, 30).

These were dark times for the northern kingdom, and we might be tempted to pass over such passages quickly, hoping for more encouraging words. But the narrator of our text wants us to see more, quietly but clearly pointing to God's continued control, even in dark times. Three different times, Scripture reports that what was happening was "in accordance with the word of the Lord" (15:29, 16:12, 16:34). God did not approve of the ongoing wickedness, but it did not take Him by surprise; in fact, He was the one who had predicted it in the first place, and He was using it to accomplish His purposes anyway (cf. 14:10-11). The text reminds us that evil may run rampant, but we can be sure that God has lost neither sight nor control of the situation.

The second underlying message is that sin does not go unpunished. In fact, sin becomes its own punishment. Look at the results of doing evil for these kings: constant war, numerous plotting and betrayal, rivalry, insecurity, even murder. Evil begets more evil. Any promise of happiness or pleasure is shattered by the choice to engage in wickedness. Today's text provides a powerful example that the choice to sin so often leads only to further sin.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passage warns of the spiraling entanglement of sin, but its dark portrait also calls us to turn from those disastrous ways. Such a turn is not always easy, for it means exposing our deeds to the light (John 3:20); but no other option can bring true happiness. Ask God for the courage today to expose your own sin to His healing light, making a list of those words, deeds, and attitudes that violate His commands. Then pray over that list, asking God for forgiveness and strength from His Spirit to turn from those sins.

1 Kings 17

1 Kings 17:1-16

She went away and did as Elijah had told her. - 1 Kings 17:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

In ancient Canaanite religion, Baal was the fertility god who provided rain necessary for crops. One Canaanite poem emphasizes Baal's power this way: "Now Baal will begin the rainy season / the season of wadis in flood; / and he will sound his voice in the clouds, / flash his lightning to the earth."

Baal's presence in Israel (see 1 Kings 16:29-33) is now juxtaposed with the sudden emergence of the prophet Elijah. Where the previous chapter seemed to indicate Baal's dominance, Elijah's prediction of drought was a direct challenge to Baal's power (v. 1). That Elijah's word held true (v. 7) underscores the power of the true God over any rival deity. And note, too, the suddenness of Elijah's arrival. Without introduction, Elijah simply appeared on the scene. Just when it looked like Ahab's wicked ways would prevail, God had other plans. Isn't this the way of our sovereign God? The rise of evil is only temporary compared to God's eternal wisdom.

With a prophet raised up, Scripture reports the unexpected provision of God. With a drought at hand and Elijah's life at stake (cf. 18:4), God was sure to provide for Elijah's needs. But note the unusual way He did so. First, God used ravens to bring Elijah his necessary food. Aside from the unexpectedness of this provision, God had earlier declared the raven an "unclean" animal (see Lev. 11:15). Yet God used an otherwise rejected bird to provide for His prophet.

Next, God sent Elijah out of Israel to a foreigner, a widow in Sidon. Don't miss the strangeness of the event. In the ancient world, a widow was commonly a poor and needy woman. That's clearly the case here (v. 12). But this was also a woman living in the land of Jezebel the Baal worshiper (note 16:31). Of all the places to go, why choose a poor woman in an idolatrous country? Perhaps God chose to highlight His creative powers of provision! God can use whomever and whatever means He wants to care for His people.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In addition to God's creativity, today's passage also depicts true faith in action. Asked to use her last flour and oil for Elijah with the promise of continued provision, this widow "went away and did as Elijah had told her" (v. 15). This was a shining example of faith, an act of daily trust in God's word. Scripture calls us to similar acts of faith. Do you acknowledge God's provision for something so seemingly simple as your food each day? Whether through dramatic or mundane means, all our needs are met by God.

1 Kings 17:1-9

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. - James 5:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

During the great dust storms that devastated the southern plains in the 1930s, desperate farmers in one area scraped together several hundred dollars to pay a man who claimed he could bring rain by a series of planned explosions. The would-be rainmaker set off a series of explosions to shake up the atmosphere, but no rain came. The fearsome drought and destructive dust storms were destined to last for several more years.

Drought can have terrible ecological effects, but God can also use drought and other natural disasters for theological effects. He has done this before, most notably in the ministry of Elijah. We have met several of Israel's and Judah's kings. Today we get to meet one of God's most powerful prophets.

Elijah lived east of the Jordan River in the region of Gilead. It's appropriate to the character and ministry of this man that he appeared on the scene suddenly. We know nothing about his background or his family-and these details are not pertinent to God's purpose for him.

Imagine the jaws that must have dropped in Ahab's court when this blunt-spoken, roughly dressed man strode into the palace, pointed a finger in the king's face, and announced a three-and-a-half-year drought in Israel. Elijah didn't even give Ahab a chance to sputter out a reply!

God called Elijah into action to challenge the incredible insult that Ahab and Jezebel were perpetrating against His name by instituting Baal worship in Israel. This form of paganism seemed to be a special affront to God.

So God gave Ahab and the people of Israel a foretaste of the challenge that Elijah would issue later: ""If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him"" (1 Kings 18:21). Baal's followers claimed that he was the god of rain. As the God-sent drought proclaimed by Elijah parched the land, the nation would at least know who was the true God.

After his declaration, Elijah went back east across the Jordan, where God supernaturally fed him. Providing a daily supply of food and water in the middle of a drought was no problem for the God Elijah loved and served.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We also have the promise that our daily needs will be supplied by the God we are called to love and to serve.

Matthew 6:25-33 is one of those Scripture portions that every Christian needs periodically to read and to digest. Jesus assured us that our Father, the same God who fed Elijah, knows and cares about our daily needs. What He asks of us in return is our undivided devotion. Can you say that God is first in your affections and your decisions? Tell Him so today, and thank Him for His provisions!

1 Kings 17:17-24

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. - Lamentations 3:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

Thomas Chisholm wrote more than 1,200 poems about his personal experience of God's goodness and care. Although many of these poems became hymns, one in particular has become world famous. The familiar chorus declares: "Great is Thy faithfulness! / Great is Thy faithfulness! / Morning by morning new mercies I see. / All I have needed Thy hand hath provided; / Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"

As we have already seen, the widow of Sidon would have agreed with these words. Morning by morning, she found new flour and oil to provide for her needs. Yet her experience of God's faithfulness soon came under fire. Her son became ill and eventually died (v. 17). The text does not tell us why God allowed such disaster. Even Elijah seemed distressed at this turn of events (v. 20).

Elijah then turned to God in prayer, both crying out in anguish and pleading with the Lord for healing. And then the pivotal moment: "The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived" (v. 22). Initially, it seemed that God's earlier word of provision to the widow was being called into question. But the widow's own confession at the end of the passage emphasized the

faithfulness of God's word: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth" (v. 24). Scripture clarifies the purpose of these trying circumstances: so that this widow of Sidon—and we the readers—might know the trustworthiness of God's word.

Yesterday's passage demonstrated God's power over rain and famine; today's reading illustrates His power over death. It's one thing to provide for the living; it's quite another to conquer death itself. This miraculous healing is a foretaste of the future when we will all sing: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). In the end, death will not have the final say.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Perhaps you know of someone who has struggled to believe the trustworthiness of God's promises to His people. The struggle might be the result of hardship or even death itself. Our passage today shows us that grief and anguish are normal reactions to the pain of suffering and death. But they are not the end of the story. We have the promise that one day God will wipe away every tear and destroy death forever (Rev. 21:4).

1 Kings 17:7-24; Luke 4:13-28

He has filled the hungry with good things. - Luke 1:53

TODAY IN THE WORD

All morning long Tommy's mom talked with him about the importance of sharing his toys. Each time she asked if Tommy understood, he nodded his head and agreed to share his things when the other three-year-olds showed up for a play date. But when one of the kids picked up one of his toy trucks, Tommy ran over and grabbed the truck. Baffled, his mother came over and asked Tommy if he remembered their earlier discussion about sharing. Tommy nodded yes. Slowly it began to dawn on her that Tommy hadn't grasped that sharing meant actually letting others play with his toys!

Sadly, many Jews living in Jesus' day seemed to have a similar problem. For them, the issue concerned the intended recipients of the Messiah. Knowing that the gospel would eventually extend beyond Palestine, Jesus appealed to the account of Elijah and the widow in Zarephath to show that the blessings of God were also intended for the Gentiles. But the people listening to Jesus didn't want to be reminded of that (Luke 4:28-29).

It's somewhat remarkable that Elijah ministered to the widow of Zarephath considering the horrible state of Israel at that time. Ahab, a very evil king, together with his wife, Jezebel, a native of Sidon, introduced perverse Baal worship to Israel. Much of Elijah's ministry centered on exposing the falseness of Baalism and calling the people back to the Lord God.

When Elijah first encounters this poor widow, it's not clear how his request for food and water could be a blessing to her. Under normal circumstances, widows were among the poorest of the poor, but during a famine their situation could be life-threatening (v. 12). But her willingness to help Elijah opens the way for a miraculous provision for her (vv. 15-16).

Next the woman is faced with yet another challenge, the illness of her son. The harshness of her circumstances may explain why she initially blames the illness on Elijah. The loving Lord used Elijah to restore her son and to reveal Himself to this needy woman.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The story of the widow of Zarephath reminds us that there is no limit to the depth of God's love. Just as the oil kept refilling itself in her jar, so too God's ability to provide never runs dry. This is a good reminder, because sometimes we can be envious of God's blessing to others, especially nonbelievers, thinking that somehow we deserve that blessing instead. It is possible that God is blessing others so that they too will come to know the Lord as this widow did.

1 Kings 17:13-24

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? - Psalm 22:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Imagine visiting a region plagued by drought. Famine has ravaged the land and its people. You gaze into the eyes of malnourished children and starving families; the hopelessness, fear, and desperation are palpable; you lock eyes with death. Your attention is drawn to a frail woman, slowly gathering sticks, and her sickly son, standing nearby. This is the scene in today's passage.

In the time of Elijah the prophet, "the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land" (Luke 4:25). Deuteronomy 11:16-17 instructs that the Lord causes drought and famine in response to idolatry; this is the context of our passage (1 Kings 18:18). The Lord sustained His prophet Elijah throughout the famine. First, God placed him near a brook where ravens fed him daily. When the brook dried up, the Lord directed Elijah to the next source of sustenance.

A single-parent home during an economic crisis seems an unlikely place to find room and board, so it is easy to fathom the widow's surprise when the Lord commanded her to supply one of His prophets with food. It is equally astonishing for Elijah when he heard the Lord's plan considering the widow's welfare and her ethnicity, for she was not an Israelite. The absurd circumstances set the stage for God's glory to be revealed in His abundant provision. The Lord anchors hope in the torrent waters of despair: He brings plenty out of poverty (vv. 7-16), faith out of disbelief (vv. 18, 24), and even life from death (vv. 17-24).

In the beginning (v. Cool, middle (v. 16), and end (v. 24) of our reading, the author weaves in the phrase, "the word of the Lord." The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath magnifies the strong promise that God's word can be trusted (v. 16). In Zarephath, the land of Baal, god of rain and agriculture, a famine has seized the land, but the God of Israel triumphs in the life of an unsuspecting Canaanite woman (cf. Luke 4:14-30).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Upon the death of her only son, the widow cries out from the depths of severe pain (v. 18). Her question resounds with the raw emotion of feeling abandoned by God (cf. Psalm 22; Matt. 27:46). Has He given such great blessing only to snatch it away in a fury of suffering and loss? Perhaps you are asking the same question. May you find comfort in knowing that God is sovereign, He gives life, and He has won ultimate victory over suffering and death through Christ's death and resurrection.

1 Kings 18

1 Kings 18:1-40

O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again. - 1 Kings 18:37

TODAY IN THE WORD

On July 21, 1865, the first recorded example of a classic western showdown took place. After a dispute over women and money, Wild Bill Hickok and Davis Tutt agreed to a duel. A crowd gathered as the two gunmen approached each other from opposite sides of town. Tutt's shot went wide, but Hickok hit the mark with a single shot, leaving him the only man standing in the end.

Scripture recounts another classic showdown, but this one was between Baal and the true God. After three years of drought, God called Elijah to return to Israel. Elijah was brought before King Ahab, and the duel was set. A crowd gathered to watch 450 prophets of Baal attempt to goad their god into lighting an altar. After their lack of success (and no shortage of taunting by Elijah), Elijah carefully prepared his altar with wood, placed a bull on it, then shockingly drenched it with water three times!

Then without the ostentatious methods of the Baal prophets, Elijah uttered a short prayer—and God responded immediately with fire from heaven. The people acknowledged who the true God was. The showdown in today's reading leaves no doubt that Baal was a farce and Yahweh had the true power. The numerous verses devoted to the details of the showdown emphasize this very point.

There is, however, a subtler yet equally important message here about God's mercy. The chapter opens with no signs of repentance. Yahweh's prophets were being slaughtered (vv. 4, 13), Ahab continued his defiance (vv. 16-18), and the people waffled in their religious loyalty (v. 21). Yet observe God's activity: it was His choice to end the drought (v. 2); it was His work to preserve faithful servants in the land (vv. 3-4); and it was His mercy to "turn the hearts" of the people back to Himself (v. 37) and bring about the confession of verse 39. Even without signs of repentance, God was at work in His mercy to preserve and to bless His people.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What a picture of both God's power and His mercy towards His people! In what ways has God shown you His strength and power in your life? How has He shown you His mercy and tenderness? What better response than the one given by the Israelites: to fall down in worship, repeatedly crying, "The Lord—he is God!" (v. 39). Meditate on these simple but profound words today, making them your own prayer in response to God's power and mercy in your life.

1 Kings 18:1-21

Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his. - Psalm 100:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the record of Jewish history, the name of Antiochus IV Epiphanes holds a special place of infamy. He was the cruel Syrian tyrant who ruled Palestine from 175-164 B.C. His goal was to eradicate the Jewish religion, and he set out to do so with a vengeance. He sought to destroy all copies of the Hebrew Scriptures and tried to require the Jews to offer sacrifices to the Greek god Zeus. Antiochus's most infamous act of blasphemy was the offering of a pig on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem. His atrocities sparked

the Maccabean revolt which led to independence for Judah.

Some 700 years before Antiochus, the people of God also came under a brutal campaign to destroy the worship of the true God. But these atrocities arose from the throne of Israel itself-and God would not let the Israelites go unpunished.

The opening verses of today's reading make it clear why God secluded Elijah after his prophecy of drought. Looking for Elijah, Ahab scoured every nation and kingdom within reach (v. 10). There is little doubt that he was goaded into this by Queen Jezebel, who was determined to kill all of the Lord's prophets. The king's servant, Obadiah, had risked his own life to save 100 prophets.

After the drought had become severe, God ordered Elijah to step back into this murderous atmosphere. Elijah fearlessly obeyed, although Obadiah feared that Elijah would lose his resolve and be absent when it came time to meet. It took a solemn oath from the prophet to assure Obadiah that he would not flee when Ahab came (v. 15).

This was the second face-to-face meeting between the idolatrous, weak-willed king and the faithful, fearless prophet. The exchange was brief. Elijah had no good word to deliver to Ahab-only a challenge that would force wavering Israel to declare its loyalty.

Ahab agreed to Elijah's challenge, and the seemingly lopsided contest was arranged to take place on Mount Carmel. You can read for yourself the familiar story (1 Kings 18). It resulted in the drought's being broken and the stage set for the next showdown between Ahab and Jezebel, and Elijah.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes the obstacles that stand between us and obedience to God can seem very big.

Consider the obstacles Elijah faced. He had the whole civil and religious power structure of his nation against him! Yet he did not allow these intimidating factors to stop him from obeying what God had told him to do. Now take another look at your obstacles. Can God help you to get over them? Count on it! Why not turn your biggest obstacle into a prayer request today?

1 Kings 18:41-46

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. - James 5:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Three Gospels describe the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. In that moment of glory, when Jesus' face and clothes shone like the sun, two other figures appeared with Him: Moses and Elijah. Jewish tradition regards Moses and Elijah as the two most important prophets of God, honored and revered by all.

Our study of 1 Kings is beginning to show just why Elijah was considered such an important, powerful man of God. Here was a man who had been fed by ravens, who raised a widow's son to life, and called fire down from heaven. In the immediately preceding passage, Elijah had issued commands to Ahab, to the Baal prophets, and to the people of Israel. Elijah was, seemingly, a man in control. Yet, lest we think Elijah's power came somehow magically from himself, today's text instructs us otherwise.

The great showdown was over. Ahab headed off to feasting, but Elijah returned to the mountain and bowed his head in prayer. God's demonstration of power in 18:16-40 was impressive, but His promise in 18:1 ("I will send rain on the land") had yet to happen. Still, Elijah responded with confident prayer. Even after repeated reports of no evidence for coming rain, Elijah continued in prayer. He remembered God's earlier word, and believed what God had promised. In other words, this powerful prophet of God relied not on his own strength or ability, but on the ability of God (consider also Elijah's miraculous feat of the feet in v. 46).

Finally, on the seventh day, Elijah's servant reported a change: "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea" (v. 44). Soon a full storm broke forth, and the promise of God was fulfilled. What an important lesson about God's ways! In one instance, Elijah's prayer was answered immediately (18:36-38); in another, he had to pray over and over again until God responded. God does not always follow human expectations, but He does always keep His word.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

James 5:16-18 refers to 1 Kings 18 and encourages us to emulate Elijah: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). But the righteousness of Elijah in today's passage is nothing less than an orientation toward God and patient prayer in response to God's promises. That's the kind of righteousness God is looking for. How might today's message about "righteous prayer" change the way you pray? Let the humble, yet confident, example of Elijah stir you to a new attitude in your own approach to God today.

1 Kings 18:16-46; James 5:13-18;

As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word. - 1 Kings 17:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Elijah was one of the greatest prophets in the history of Israel. In the course of his life, he prayed for a drought on the land and God answered. He prayed for the Lord to raise the son of a widow from the dead, and God answered (1 Kings 17:22). He prayed for God to send fire from heaven, and God answered (18:38). He prayed for God to judge the wicked, and God answered (2 Kings 1:1–17). And then we read in James, “Elijah was a man just like us” (v. 17)!

Understandably, we might think that James is exaggerating here. Could we really pray to alter the forces of nature—and have God answer? By citing Elijah in our passage today, James is providing us insight into what a powerful prayer life looks like. It’s not simply believing in our minds very, very strongly that God will do something. Our prayer life is tied to how we are living.

We know from the story of Elijah that indeed he was not superhuman. He got tired, hungry, irritable, and even depressed, just as we do (see 1 Kings 19). But Elijah had two characteristics that consistently emerge: first, he had a certainty about who God was; and second, he obeyed the commands of God. Elijah almost always prefaces his pronouncements and his prayers with, “As the Lord Almighty lives,” (17:1; 18:15). And he went where God told him to go and said what God told him to say.

James is describing very practical ways that we can minister to each other, by prayer for each other when we need healing or forgiveness (vv. 14–16). But the key behind our prayers is that we are righteous. Righteousness is a gift of grace, and as we have seen over and over again in this book, is reflected in wise living. Our prayers for each other will be powerful when we know who God is and obey what He says. We can pray effectively when we are living in a way that pleases God and follow His desires.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you have extra time this weekend, read the whole story of Elijah in 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2. As you read, jot down the examples of his obedience and the ways that God answered his prayers.

We can have a powerful ministry of blessing others through our prayers. But first, we must be living in a way that glorifies God. Our decision to serve God affects more than just our own lives—it also has significant implications for our ability to serve others

1 Kings 19

1 Kings 19:1-9

I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint. - Jeremiah 31:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sleep in America is hard to come by. More than 82 million of us suffer from insomnia, and only about one third of us get the recommended eight hours of sleep on weeknights. BusinessWeek magazine estimates that sleep deprivation “costs \$45 billion a year in lost productivity, health-care bills, and expenses related to traffic accidents.” Insomnia has also been linked to depression, alcoholism, and obesity.

The need for physical rest is a powerful one, affecting every area of our lives, including our spiritual life. We see this in the example of Elijah in today’s reading. He had just won a great victory for God on Mount Carmel, facing down hundreds of false prophets and helping turn the hearts of the Israelites back to the Lord. On top of that, his prayer to end the drought was answered in dramatic fashion, and he ran at miraculous speed back to the city ahead of King Ahab’s chariot. He looks like a giant of faith riding a spiritual high!

In the next chapter, however, we see a tired, stressed-out servant of the Lord on the verge of a breakdown. Queen Jezebel’s brazen threat pushed him over the edge—he broke and ran like a scared rabbit. In the desert, he complained to God before lying down under a tree and wishing to die.

What was the problem? Extreme fatigue and physical deprivation were a significant part of his depression. Interestingly, God chose to meet the physical need first, sending an angel with bread and water for the exhausted prophet. After the need for food and sleep had been dealt with, God moved on to address Elijah’s emotional and spiritual situation (for the rest of the story, read on in the chapter).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

For today’s application, we suggest you take a nap—as simple as that. A midday siesta is a common feature in many cultures

around the world, from Mexico to China. Why not give yourself permission to do the same? If your job makes an after-lunch nap impossible, how about before-dinner?

Whatever you do, don't keep running until you're as exhausted and depressed as Elijah. As we'll see tomorrow, sleep and rest are gifts of God. We hope that you'll find your nap refreshing to both body and soul!

1 Kings 19:1-18; Psalm 46

Then Samuel said [to the Lord], "Speak, for your servant is listening." - 1 Samuel 3:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of thee . . . I simply present myself before thee, I open my heart to thee. . . . I am silent; I offer myself in sacrifice; I yield myself to thee; I would have no other desire than to accomplish thy Will. Teach me to pray. Pray thyself in me. Amen.—François Fénelon

Ole Hallesby shares a significant incident in his book, *Prayer*. Although his young son knew that he was not supposed to disturb his father during work hours, the boy nevertheless came into his father's office one day and said, "Papa, dear, I will sit still all the time if you will only let me be here with you!"

For many of us, however, simply wanting to "sit still" with the Lord may not be our daily experience. We are more comfortable doing things for God and speaking to Him than simply listening to Him.

Sometimes we aren't even sure how to listen to God. The Lord spoke to Elijah in "a gentle whisper" (v. 12), but we may prefer a great shout! Our culture suggests that "louder is better" and more important.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can hear the Lord in a variety of ways—directly through the ministry of the Holy Spirit or indirectly through other people or circumstances. Most often, however, we hear Him in conjunction with His Word, either through the words in the Bible itself or in prayer as we seek to understand His Word.

Although the busyness of our lives and our own fears of silence may make us feel uncomfortable to simply come before the Lord in silence, great blessing comes when we do. Find some time today, when you know you won't be interrupted, to come quietly before the Lord, silently reading through Psalm 46.

Slowly read the psalm, waiting quietly after each line to take in what the Lord has said to you from His Word. Pause and reflect on His truth. Don't worry if you feel silly or if you don't "hear" anything. In some ways, being silent before the Lord is like a human relationship: the better we know someone, the more comfortable we feel being silent with that person. Our ability to sit silently before Him increases as our relationship with Him deepens.

You may want to begin with prayer

1 Kings 19:1-21

I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal. - 1 Kings 19:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

The literary technique known as parallelism repeats similar words, phrases, or ideas in two or more subsequent clauses of text. The later clauses will cause the reader to recall former clauses by the use of this rhetorical echo. On a broader scale, narrative parallelism takes features from an episode and repeats them later, intentionally reminding the reader of the earlier event.

Today's account of Elijah provides us with a striking example of narrative parallelism, using the life of Moses. Both Elijah and Moses confronted a wicked ruler (18:18-19; Exodus 3-5), both gave tangible demonstrations of God's power over other deities (18:22-40; Exodus 7-11), both received supernatural sustenance on a wilderness journey (vv. 3-9; Exodus 16), both arrived at Mt. Horeb (Sinai) where they experienced a profound encounter with God (vv. 11-13; Exodus 33), and both appointed a successor to take their place (vv. 19-21; Deut. 34:9).

The author intends us to see the Moses-Elijah parallel, highlighting similarity after similarity between the two prophets. Yet having noticed the parallelism, what strikes us in today's passage is a major difference. Moses met with God after a covenant breach (Exodus 32), and then interceded for the people. Elijah met with God after a covenant renewal, and then accused the people of utter disloyalty (vv. 10, 14).

God's response to Elijah included both judgment and mercy. First, He agreed with Elijah and commanded him to anoint Hazael and

Jehu as instruments of judgment on apostate Israel. God's patience, though long, does not extend forever. Ahab would soon find that out.

Second, God disagreed with Elijah and spoke to his fear. When Elijah despaired that he was the only one left who served God, God indicated that 7,000 people still remained faithful. Our chapter ends with the call of Elisha, a demonstration of God's ongoing provision for the people's need for His word. Israel might have fallen deep into idolatry, but God had not given up. His call for repentance would continue.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Underlying today's reading is the real threat of persecution that God's faithful followers experience in a world bent on rebellion against His ways. Persecution continues today as Christians around the world undergo suffering and death in the name of Jesus. The Christian ministry "Voice of the Martyrs" offers countless reminders of such persecution, but also provides suggestions for ways to support and encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ. Consider visiting their site this week (www.persecution.com).

1 Kings 19:1-21

The righteous are as bold as a lion. - Proverbs 28:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Today's key verse might seem like an ironic choice, given that Elijah ""ran for his life"" when Jezebel threatened him for having killed all of her Baal prophets.

It's true that Elijah ran in fear. But he was not a coward; he had stood as boldly for the Lord as any other person in Scripture. It was his courage, in fact, that got him in trouble with Israel's cruel, blood-thirsty queen.

Jezebel wasn't making this threat lightly, and Elijah knew it. Her oath (v. 2) was a way of saying to Elijah, ""I'm putting my own welfare on the line to get you.""

The early verses of 1 Kings 19 reveal a spiritually, emotionally, and physically exhausted man. God used basic provisions to restore His prophet's strength-rest and refreshment. Beersheba was as far south as a person could go in Judah, and then Elijah went another day's walk from there.

Who of us hasn't felt like Elijah at one time or another? ""I have had enough"" (v. 4). In other words, ""I can't take it anymore, Lord. You might as well take me home.""

Although God had to deal with Elijah's attitude, there were reasons for the prophet's temporary collapse. He had just come through a tremendous showdown on Mount Carmel, standing all alone for the Lord. No wonder Elijah thought he was the last faithful Israelite still around (v. 10).

There's something else here, too. Elijah's complaint, ""I am no better than my ancestors"" (v. 4) probably indicates that he felt his ministry had failed, despite the great victory God had enabled him to achieve. He was one discouraged saint!

It's interesting to see how God brought Elijah back. Elijah took a forty-day trip to Horeb, the ancient name for Mount Sinai, where Moses had received the Law. There he hid in a cave, and there God asked him twice, ""What are you doing here?"" (vv. 9, 13). Elijah's answer was the same each time, and between questions God demonstrated to Elijah His amazing power and presence.

Rather than letting him continue in despondence and self-pity, God refreshed and restored Elijah. The prophet still had an important ministry to accomplish. The two kings he was to anoint would be instrumental in ridding Israel of Baal worship!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you identify with Elijah? Welcome to the group! You may be the only Christian at your work, at school, or even in your own family. You may feel like you aren't accomplishing anything significant where God has placed you right now. If you can relate to these feelings today, why not take a fresh approach? Look around to see if there is someone you can encourage with a word of sincere appreciation or praise. Giving a little bit of yourself to another person today may result in God's refreshing your spirit.

1 Kings 20

1 Kings 20:1-43

I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. - Ezekiel 33:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

One morning, after a night of heavy wind, a young boy discovered a fallen baby bird in the backyard. That day his family stayed clear, hoping the mother bird would come to the rescue. As the day wore on, however, and no mother bird appeared, the baby bird grew lethargic and quiet. The boy's parents warned that this night would likely be the bird's last. Yet in the morning, the family was surprised to see an adult bird tending to the fledgling. Expected doom had been averted!

The theme of judgment was clear at the end of chapter 19. So when we begin reading in chapter 20 about the Aramean king mustering his army and making belittling claims against Israel, we might reasonably expect that the end was near for Ahab. Yet as we read on, we are met with a surprise. Twice (and at impossible odds) God granted victory to Ahab and his army (vv. 13-21, 26-30). Moreover, God continued to send His prophets to speak God's word to Ahab.

Scripture tells us that God did this for a particular reason: so that "you will know that I am the Lord" (vv. 13, 28). Do you see the mercy and goodness of God, extended even to a wicked and rebellious king? God's offer of restoration and relationship remains far longer than we might expect! Rather than utterly destroy Ahab, God offered yet another chance for repentance.

Yet in the end, the judgment theme sounds again (vv. 35-43). God had given ample opportunities for Ahab to turn in repentance and humility toward God, but instead, Ahab refused to humble himself before the Lord and made a treaty with Ben-Hadad in violation of God's commands (see Deut. 20:10-20). While God continued to send prophets to Ahab, not once did Ahab seek out God's wisdom and guidance. Ahab's life would end in destruction as God promised, but his downfall was not because of an unmerciful God, but rather because of his own unrepentant heart.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What is your image of God? Do you see Him as an angry judge eager to condemn, hesitant to forgive? If so, face the challenge of today's reading which shows Him as a patient God who takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked," but desires to grant life and forgiveness (Ezek. 33:11). If God continued to extend His call for relationship with Ahab, surely He does the same for you. Make today the day you come humbly before God, asking for forgiveness for your sin, trusting in the work of Christ.

1 Kings 21

1 Kings 21:1-16

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. - Galatians 6:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the sad facts of human existence is that there are always scoundrels hanging around who are willing to do anything for a few coins. One of the greatest examples of this is the betrayal of Judas in turning Jesus over to the chief priests for thirty pieces of silver.

We shouldn't be surprised, then, that Jezebel's co-conspirators in the murder of Naboth were able to scare up two liars to help their cause.

For many reasons, this was a sad, low point in Israel's history. Here were the rulers of God's people, plotting the death of an innocent Israelite over a piece of land-for a vegetable garden, no less! This kind of widespread sin is all too reminiscent of the days of the judges, a period when Israel hit rock-bottom both morally and spiritually (see Judg. 19:22).

Even with the wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel, the elders and nobles of Naboth's city (v. 11) should have had the character to refuse the royals' murderous plot. Their readiness to act gives us a glimpse into the nation's low moral character.

These verses show Ahab and Jezebel at their worst. Ahab whimpered like the weak-willed, spoiled person he was, and Jezebel was her usual vindictive self. With the officials of Naboth's city also deeply involved in this travesty, apparently no one around was strong or brave enough to raise a voice of protest against the killing. It looked like a pretty neatly tied-up package.

But the God of Israel noted what took place. He heard what must have been Naboth's cries of innocence, and then his cries of pain as he was being stoned. The royal plotters didn't know it yet, but their conspiracy had not escaped the gaze of heaven.

We will see tomorrow that Naboth's murder was the spark that ignited God's judgment on the house and reign of Ahab. It's a touch of irony that Jezebel would specify that the scoundrels bring a religious charge against Naboth for cursing God. Her actions were the true curse in this situation, and she would pay with her own life in the most horrible way.

Today's lesson is another reminder of the impact that a nation's leaders can have on its character-for good or for evil.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Galatians 6:7 is an inviolable principle of God's universe; and because God is also faithful to bless righteous sowing, the principle works both ways.

Read Galatians 6:8, and you'll see what we mean. If the desire and commitment of your heart is to "sow to please the Spirit," you can look forward to a harvest of eternal life. Are you sowing for the Lord today? Then don't give up, because God has a good harvest for you (Gal. 6:9)!

1 Kings 21:17-29

Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! - Micah 2:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dr. Robert G. Lee, a great Baptist preacher, once delivered one of the most famous sermons of this century when he spoke on the subject, "Payday Someday." The sermon, three hours in length in its original form, is a spellbinding retelling of Ahab's and Jezebel's wicked reign and gruesome end. Dr. Lee's title captures perfectly the principle of God's certain justice, played out in the lives of Israel's infamous king and his pagan wife.

After Elijah was back and feeling like himself again, God sent him to Ahab with another prophetic word. Every time these two men met, the animosity in Ahab's heart toward God's fiery prophet was obvious. Ahab considered Elijah his enemy (v. 20), and in one sense this was true because Ahab had made himself the enemy of God.

Appropriately enough, Elijah's word of judgment was delivered to Ahab as he sat in his newly acquired vineyard. The king barely had time for a glass of lemonade in his ill-gotten garden before Elijah showed up to spoil the party. The Lord's judgment on the house of Ahab would be complete as on the houses of Jeroboam and Baasha (v. 22).

It's little wonder that Ahab paled at this word. Certainly he knew that God had wiped out every descendant of both these kings in punishment for their sins.

Ahab had merited as much, or worse, from God's hand. The worst disgrace in Israel was a dead body left unburied to be attacked by scavengers.

As we said above, Ahab's family was facing a gruesome end. But the writer was careful to add the parenthetical thought that Ahab was the worst of a bad lot (see 1 Kings 16:33).

Then, when it seemed the king was beyond any positive reaction toward God, Ahab humbled himself and adopted the traditional signs of repentance. There must have been some genuineness of heart on Ahab's part, because God relented somewhat when He saw the king's humility.

Ahab spared himself the full "disaster" that Elijah had prophesied, but it still fell on his family—a lesson for us to remember today.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Children also need to learn the lessons we can glean from today's story.

For example, children need to learn that the only accomplishments in life we can truly enjoy are those we achieve honestly. Examples of this valuable lesson are all around us in everyday life. Current events can be a helpful teaching tool when used to enforce the truth of Scripture. Be on the lookout for daily events that can help start spiritual discussions with the children in your life.

1 Kings 21:1-29

Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. - 1 Peter 4:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Anyone who has observed children playing has seen this typical scene: one child has a toy that another child wants; if the first child won't share, the second child either takes the toy by force or retreats to a corner to covet and sulk until he gets his way.

It's not an attractive picture, but it's what we see from Ahab in today's reading: a childish response of covetousness and sulking over a vineyard he wanted but couldn't have. Only in this case, the miffed Ahab and Jezebel exercise lethal force to take what they want. An innocent man is murdered just so that Ahab can have his vineyard. Naboth is an example of the injustice that God's people often face. Naboth was not simply being bull-headed by refusing to sell or trade his vineyard to Ahab. There was a divine command about not parting with one's inheritance except under extreme circumstances (Num. 36:7-9). Naboth stood for God's word and received

gross injustice: a false accusation of blasphemy and a painful death. It's a foreshadowing of Jesus, who Himself experienced the greatest injustice of all, and warned that His loyal followers would experience persecution as well (Mark 13:9-13).

But this is not where today's passage ends. Naboth was dead and Ahab happily occupied his new vineyard—and then God's word arrived. Elijah was sent to deliver the news: God had seen everything. Twice Ahab's life and actions were summarized as one who had “sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord” (vv. 20, 25). As a result, gruesome disaster would be Ahab's punishment.

God sees the injustice of our world and He does not turn His back. The wicked may try to hide their deeds or make them appear just, but our omniscient God is not fooled, and His justice will ultimately prevail. True believers can expect injustice, but they can also trust that God will one day set it all right.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's a common objection: How could a good God let evil things happen in the world? Though a difficult question to answer in full, Scripture does show us that God is not ignorant of the world's evil, and through Christ's own suffering the injustice of the world will eventually be remedied in full. Look up 1 Peter 4:12-13 to see God's further encouragement that our hardships are in fact a way that we participate in Christ's suffering. Then write out those verses on an index card and commit them to memory this week.

1 Kings 21:23; 2 Kings 9:30-37

Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel. - 1 Kings 21:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to information from the Social Security Administration, at least one biblical name has ranked as the most popular baby name atop the list for boys or girls every year in the past century. From Mary in 1910 to Jacob in 2009, biblical names have always been among the most popular in the United States. Other biblical names, however, are rarely used because of their history in the Bible. For boys, there may be no name less popular than Judas. The female equivalent from the Bible that will forever carry an intensely negative connotation is Jezebel.

King Ahab sunk to new lows for royalty in Israel, urged on by his wife Jezebel (1 Kings 21:25). He desecrated the faith of Israel, instigated crimes against the prophets of God, and promoted Baal worship. But the disgusting crime that appeared to arouse the anger of the Lord beyond them all was one Jezebel perpetrated on his behalf. She had a man named Naboth killed so that her husband could take his vineyard. The Lord immediately sent Elijah to proclaim judgment on Ahab, his descendants, and Jezebel. Ahab showed remorse, and the Lord showed him some mercy (1 Kings 21:29). Jezebel remained defiant to the undignified end.

Jehu had just been anointed as king of Israel, and God's first assignment for his new king was to avenge the murder initiated by Jezebel (v. 7). After killing former king Joram and Ahaziah, king of Judah, Jehu arrived at Jezreel. Jezebel greeted the news with actions befitting her selfish, shallow, wicked nature: she put on makeup and did her hair (v. 30). Whether divinely directed or simply as a natural response to her wickedness, the previous servants of Jezebel turned on her without hesitation (v. 33).

Jehu recommended a proper burial for the downfallen queen because of her royal descent, but it was too late. The prophecy of Elijah had come to fruition, an appropriate end for a woman who did as much as anyone in history to influence God's people negatively. After the dogs were through with her, no one would ever visit her grave or remember her fondly (2 Kings 9:37).

APPLY THE WORD

Perhaps we haven't stooped as low as Jezebel in the volume of our sins—but we are just as susceptible to pride in our own way. Jezebel was more concerned about her external appearance and meeting her selfish desires. Who among us can claim to be immune to such things? She served as the extreme example of sins that can be routine for us. Take some time today to ask God to forgive you and cleanse you from such unrighteousness.

1 Kings 22

1 Kings 22:1-40

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. - Isaiah 40:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

A wise man, dispensing advice about financial investing, once said: “The most important thing to do if you find yourself in a hole is to stop digging.” King Ahab may not have been looking for financial counsel, but he should have heeded this advice. Today's passage presents Ahab in a hole of another sort: the continual rejection of God's word.

Joined by King Jehoshaphat from Judah, Ahab asked for assistance with a military campaign against Ramoth-Gilead. Jehoshaphat initially agreed to help, but then wisely asked for “the counsel of the Lord” (v. 5). Ahab’s court prophets offered sycophantic support, telling Ahab what he wanted to hear. Jehoshaphat wasn’t fooled by this charade and called for a “prophet of the Lord” (v. 6). The remainder of the passage offers a number of lessons about God’s word as the true prophet Micaiah is juxtaposed with the false prophets of Ahab’s court.

First, a misapplication of God’s word will not convey truth. Zedekiah’s enacted parable about the “goring” of the Arameans (vv. 10-11) was likely based on God’s earlier promise in Deuteronomy 33:17. Nevertheless, this misapplication of God’s word did not make it an accurate prophecy.

Second, we see the assumption that we control God’s word corrected. Some characters in the text presumed that a prophet was free to offer whatever word he wanted (vv. 8, 13). But Micaiah’s response set the matter straight: “As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what the Lord tells me” (v. 14). A true word of God comes from God alone, not from human ideas and desires.

Third, God’s word is unfailing. Everything Micaiah had predicted came true (v. 38). Ahab tried to avoid his predicted death via a clever disguise, but a “random” arrow found its way to Ahab nonetheless. Fourth, opposing God’s word leads to destruction. Ahab was given ample disclosure about God’s intentions and his imminent destruction if he went to battle. In a profound act of folly, Ahab continued to pursue his own plan—and was killed.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The need for a true word of God, along with a humble acceptance of it, is a prominent topic in today’s reading. Pray today for the leaders of your church to preach God’s word in its fullness, neither domesticating its message nor manipulating it for personal gain. Pray also for your congregation, that together you would respond to God’s word in true obedience. Then send an encouraging note to your pastor telling him that you are praying for him, that God’s word would be truthfully and fully spoken through his ministry.

1 Kings 22:1-25

Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the Lord detests them both. - Proverbs 17:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the spring of 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt decided to try to rid Congress of Democrats who had opposed his New Deal legislation. In Maryland, Roosevelt attacked a senator named Millard Tydings as a man who had “betrayed the New Deal in the past and will again.”

An angry Tydings retorted that the president wanted a senator who would “cease to think and then do what he is told—nothing else.” The senator was saying, in other words, that the president wanted “yes men” who would rubber-stamp his decisions.

Ahab was another leader who wanted “yes men”—only his men were supposed to be prophets of the Lord who spoke His word to the king. The king of Israel had 400 such mouthpieces for the throne (v. 6). Apparently he and Jezebel liked to do things in a big way when it came to false prophets (see 1 Kings 18:19).

Aram, or Syria, had been an enemy of Israel for a long time. But since Ahab found himself with peace on his hands, he decided it was time to retake the city of Ramoth in Gilead, about thirty miles east of the Jordan River. To muster an army big enough to do the job, Ahab asked help from King Jehoshaphat of Judah, a good king who did right in God’s eyes (1 Kings 22:43).

Since Jehoshaphat was sensitive to the Lord, he suggested that Ahab seek God’s counsel—an idea that probably would not have occurred to Ahab on his own.

So Jezebel’s husband called in his four hundred prophets, each with his verbal “rubber stamp” ready. The scene that unfolds is what makes this section of Scripture on kings and prophets so intriguing. Once again, we read about a contest between the massed prophets of Ahab and a lone prophet speaking for the Lord. This scenario should have a familiar ring to it.

The faithful prophet was Micaiah, whom Ahab hated to see because he knew Micaiah would have news for him. Sounds like Ahab’s relationship with Elijah!

You can read about the contest. Micaiah gave Ahab the true word of God, a prophecy of the king’s death in battle. Amazingly, God even allowed a “lying spirit,” a demon, to speak through Ahab’s prophets. And true to form, Ahab really only wanted his ears to be tickled.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If we're not careful, we can communicate to those around us that we really don't want to hear anything that might be hard for us to take.

This is one of those issues that's worth some thought. Try to answer these questions today. Do your friends, spouse, or co-workers feel free to speak the truth to you-pleasant or otherwise? What would your reaction be if a friend or a loved one were honest about a need or a shortcoming in your life?

1 Kings 22:41-50

God of our fathers...You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. - 2 Chronicles 20:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

The brief account of Ahab's last battle that we read about yesterday leaves us with a few questions about the involvement and survival of King Jehoshaphat.

Today's reading makes no further mention of the ill-fated battle. It notes only some of the positive accomplishments of Jehoshaphat's reign. We noted earlier that this man was one of the good kings of Judah, and these verses confirm that. Jehoshaphat enjoyed God's favor for the steps he took to rid Judah of perversion and idolatry.

But the questions linger. If Ahab was wrong in defying the prophet Micaiah's warning from God and going into battle, wasn't Jehoshaphat guilty of disobeying God too? And what was this good king doing linking up with Ahab in the first place?

We find some answers in 2 Chronicles, where more details of Jehoshaphat's reign are recorded. He had allied himself with Ahab through marriage (2 Chron.18:1)-a very common diplomatic tactic in that day. So the occasion at which Ahab persuaded Jehoshaphat to help him take back Ramoth was a visit to the ""in-laws"" (18:2).

But God was not pleased with this alliance, and Jehoshaphat was rebuked by a prophet when he returned to Jerusalem after barely escaping from the battle with his life (2 Chron. 19:1-3).

But aside from this piece of bad judgment, Jehoshaphat was a religious reformer and a king who wanted his people to know and obey the Scriptures. He sent teachers with God's Law in their hands to the various towns of Judah (2 Chron. 17:7-9), and God honored the king for his devotion.

And much like Joshua before him, Jehoshaphat once won a great battle without ever firing an arrow (2 Chron. 20:1-30). An invasion by the Moabites and Ammonites, two traditional enemies of God's people, may have been part of the discipline God brought on Jehoshaphat for his alliance with Ahab.

But the king and people of Judah humbly sought the Lord. God promised that the battle would be His, and the people were told to take their positions and watch what God would do. As they sang and praised, God Himself wiped out their enemies. Jehoshaphat's reign was largely a time of revival and peace (2 Chron. 20:30).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What a great word God gave Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah as the battle loomed: ""The battle is not yours, but God's"" (2 Chron. 20:15).

Is that a word you need to hear today? If you are facing something that seems overwhelming right now, give it to the Lord. Praise Him for His care, and watch Him work. If you know someone else who is going through a hard time, take time to share this encouraging verse with that person.

1 Kings 22:26-40

The Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment. - 2 Peter 2:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Someone has said that a believer is invincible in the will of God.

That's a comforting thought, and we have plenty of biblical examples to prove that this is true. But the life and death of King Ahab of Israel reminds us that the opposite is true as well. A person who chooses to live outside the will of God is not invincible at all, but very vulnerable.

Ahab's death was about as unlikely as can be imagined, humanly speaking. But the king had signed his own death warrant when he

rejected the message of the prophet Micaiah and indirectly dared God to make good on His word. Judgment was sure to fall on Ahab at some point. God chose that it would be by a stray arrow in battle.

Out of fear that Micaiah's word might be true after all, Ahab probably disguised himself as he rode into battle with King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The king had enough knowledge of and experience with the true God to know that He is an awe-inspiring being.

In addition, Ahab may have feared that he would be a target because this attack meant he was breaking a treaty he had made with Ben-Hadad, the Aramean king (see 1 Kings 20:34).

Ahab was right about the Arameans' "gunning" for him. But no one could have predicted that a random shot would hit Ahab in just the right spot. The writer of Kings was careful to note that it was a random shot, another way of saying that this particular arrow was aimed by the Lord.

As the day wore on, Ahab slowly bled to death and was taken back to Samaria for burial. The dogs licked the blood washed from his chariot, as God had said, but at least Ahab's body was buried. Later we'll read about Jezebel's prophesied death.

This incident closes the record on Ahab's reign, but the story of his family was not yet finished. First Kings ends with the mention of Ahab's son, Ahaziah, who had a brief and unhappy reign. God was moving in judgment against this evil family, and the judgment yet to come was more gruesome than Ahab's death in battle.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul says that what happened to Israel was for our example and was written down as a warning to us (1 Cor. 10:11).

Ahab was weak-willed, a man devoid of spiritual fortitude. One warning we can glean from his life is the danger of adopting a passive attitude toward our spiritual lives. Let's pray today that God will enable us to stand in the face of temptation and compromise. The good news is that "the Lord is able to make [His servants] stand" (Rom. 14:4)!

1 Kings 22:51-2 Kings 1:18

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. - Proverbs 1:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

The writer of Kings was in the habit of summarizing the reigns of Israel's and Judah's various kings. Their deeds, misdeeds, and other notable life events were included in the annals that kings kept in those days.

If someone were to add a postscript to King Ahaziah's reign, Proverbs 1:7 would serve as an appropriate summary of his brief time on the throne. Talk about someone who never got the picture! Ahaziah was like a child who insists on going back to his misbehavior even after repeated discipline by his parents.

But then, what would you expect from the son of Ahab and Jezebel? It's frightening to think of Jezebel's having a child to exercise motherly influence over, but that's what happened. And in Ahaziah's case, she was an effective "discipler." Her son turned out to be a slavish worshiper of Baal.

From the Bible's standpoint, Ahaziah's reign was notable for only one thing: his utter contempt for the God of Israel. In the last three verses of 1 Kings 22, Ahaziah is dismissed. But in those few words an important name appears: Jeroboam.

Not only was Ahaziah like his parents, he was also charged with idolatry as vile as that which Jeroboam introduced into Israel. So when Ahaziah was seriously injured in a palace fall, he sent messengers to inquire at a Baal oracle in the Philistine city of Ekron to see if he would recover.

Ahaziah got a definite answer (2 Kings 1:6), but it came from a prophet wearing a hairy garment and a leather belt (v. Cool-our friend Elijah the Tishbite. God had sent Elijah to intercept the king's messengers and to pronounce judgment for his total disregard for the true God.

Ahaziah reacted to this report with typical contempt for God, sending a company of soldiers to arrest Elijah. Even the loss of his first troops didn't deter the king.

Was the death of these soldiers an act of cruelty on God's part? No, the issue at stake was: who was in charge here? The third captain the king sent had better sense than his commander, submitting himself to Elijah and to God. Elijah went to Samaria, delivered his message, and Ahaziah died.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

None of us would want to leave a legacy even remotely like the one King Ahaziah left behind.

At the other end of the spectrum is a life lived for God's glory and honor. If this is your goal, then today is a good time to do a follow-up on the question we asked on June 6: ""What kind of spiritual heritage are you building for the next generation?"" It's worth a few extra minutes of your time today to make a list of the top three things you are doing consistently to build a godly life.

1 Kings 22:41-53

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. - Proverbs 16:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the ancient world, writing of any length was done not in books but on scrolls of parchment which could be rolled up for storage and unrolled for reading. Consequently, there was usually a limit to how many lines of text could fit on a single scroll. If an author needed more space, a second scroll was used.

Coming to the end of 1 Kings, it's important to recognize that this book marks the end of a scroll, not the story (2 Kings will continue the tale). Nevertheless, the ending of 1 Kings provides an apt summary of the wisdom and the folly of the entire book by offering concluding remarks on two final kings, Jehoshaphat and Ahaziah.

After studying the abysmal life of Ahab since 1 Kings 15:35, the report on Jehoshaphat is refreshing: "In everything he walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (v. 43). Jehoshaphat even removed the shrine prostitutes left over from previous regimes. Finally, we say, some wisdom after all the folly of Ahab!

Not so fast. Although Jehoshaphat got high marks, not all was well. The high places were not totally removed, and an attempt at a new shipping enterprise ended in disaster (cf. Solomon's fleet in 1 Kings 9:26-28).

Finally, there's Jehoshaphat's peace with Israel. It may seem innocuous enough, but the broader context shows that peace with Israel meant a marriage alliance between Ahab's daughter and Jehoshaphat's son (2 Kings 8:18). That marriage nearly ended the southern kingdom (see 2 Kings 11). Godliness was there in Jehoshaphat, but so was foolish compromise.

Then there was Ahaziah, Ahab's son. The book of 1 Kings ends on a bleak note: "he did evil in the eyes of the Lord," provoking God to anger (vv. 52-53). Two kings, each tripped up by the folly of either compromise or idolatry. One might wish for a happier ending, but God was not done with His people. It will take another book, though, to finish the tale.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Take the opportunity to review the lessons you have learned from 1 Kings. What has God revealed to you this month about His ways or character? What new insights have you learned about yourself or the way God is calling you to live? Jot some of these down in a place you can return to over the years, then take a moment to offer a prayer of thanks for God's revealing Word, asking for the desire and strength to live out these new truths in your own life.

1 KINGS DEVOTIONALS

THEODORE EPP

RESULTS OF NEGLECT

1 Kings 1:5-14, 28-31

David's last years, possibly eight or nine after the death of Absalom (2 Sam. 18), were comparatively quiet. But there came a moment toward the last days of his life, after he had reigned almost 40 years, that a crisis began because he had been careless in making known his choice of a successor.

This crisis occurred when David was ill and about to die. His two oldest sons, Amnon and Absalom, were both dead. A third son possibly died in his youth, for very little is known of him.

The fourth son, who was then David's oldest living son, was Adonijah, the son of Haggith. He set himself up as king and prepared chariots and horsemen and 50 men to run before him (see 1 Kings 1:5).

David had not displeased this son at any time. He had never said to him, "Why hast thou done so?" (v. 6).

What factors led to Adonijah's attempt to take over the throne? There was only one--neglect on David's part. He had not done what God had ordered him to do. David was careless, not rebellious, yet that carelessness opened the door for Satan's counterfeit.

Our Enemy is always looking for opportunities to control our lives. Where he cannot stir us up to revolt against God, he will seek to make us careless so that before we realize what is happening we are dominated by our fallen natures.

"For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).

GOD LIVES!

1 Kings 17:1 James 5:16-18

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. He had a remarkable ministry, but he was still human. He had special gifts from God and was set apart to perform a special ministry.

The difference between him and us is due to the special work God had for him and the fact that he was fully submitted to God.

When he relied on his own resources, he became as weak as a child. At one period in his life he was discouraged almost to the point of death. Renewed by God, he was as bold as a lion.

He dared to stand before King Ahab and pronounce the judgment of God on him and his kingdom. The prophet showed no hesitancy and expected God to do what He said He would. The basic principle behind this is given in the New Testament.

The first thing that Elijah did when he stood before Ahab was to remind the king that the God of Israel is a living God.

Jezebel had brought Baal worship into Israel and had 850 priests leading in the worship of idols. So the first thing Elijah said was "As the Lord God of Israel liveth" (1 Kings 17:1).

Elijah was unafraid when he stood before Ahab because he had knelt in humility before Almighty God.

The Lord gives grace to the humble, but He resists the proud. For this reason we are to submit ourselves to God, but we are to resist the Evil One, and he will flee from us.

When we are right with God in our hearts, then we will ask for the things that please Him, and He will answer us.

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:51).

ONE STEP AT A TIME

1 Kings 17:2-7

Obedying God always comes first; then He reveals the next step. Too many of us, in doing the work of God, want to see the end result immediately. But that is not trusting God, that is trusting sight. Faith does not see; it trusts and obeys.

When Elijah had delivered His message to Ahab, the Lord told him what his next step was to be.

Tradition says that this brook [the brook mentioned in today's scripture passage] ran into the Jordan about 15 miles above Jericho. Its waters came from the mountains of Ephraim from a spring concealed under a high cliff and shaded by a dense jungle.

It is probable that it was in such a spot that God hid His servant--a place of safety made known after Elijah's first step of obedience.

The ravens were to bring Elijah his food at Cherith. Suppose, however, he had thought he knew a better hiding place and had gone back to some spot in the mountains of Gilead? He could have starved to death, for the ravens had not been commanded to go there.

The ravens were told by God to go to the Brook Cherith, by those high cliffs near the Jordan River where a special stream was fed by a spring. There God would protect Elijah from Ahab.

The brook bordered the land of Samaria, the very land over which Ahab was king. There God protected His servant.

"Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22).

SUFFICIENT FOR EACH DAY

1 Kings 17:8-16

Because Elijah was a man like us, he undoubtedly wondered what God had in store for him when he saw the brook beginning to dry up. Since he was trusting in God, however, he believed and help arrived.

God did not send a sudden squall of rain for that immediate neighborhood, nor did he provide some supernatural source of water in that place. Instead, Elijah was to arise, go to Zarephath and dwell there. Only at Zarephath would a widow provide food for him.

Few of us have faced the extremity this widow experienced. It seemed as though each day she might face starvation; yet each day by faith she trusted God to meet her need.

The result was that she and her house "did eat many days" (1 Kings 17:15). God supplied not a year at a time but a day at a time.

This is what we need with regard to God's grace. We do not need a great stockpile of it for future use but a daily appropriation of it, which God supplies freely.

The manna was gathered daily, not in the evening but in the morning, and each one gathered for himself. So must we accept grace from God.

We cannot hoard today's grace for tomorrow or call on yesterday's grace for today. We cannot gather enough on a Sunday to last a whole week. We need to have daily contact with God, particularly in the morning.

"Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11).

NEW LIFE

1 Kings 17:17-24

The death of her son apparently reminded the widow of some past sin. Her conscience was aroused, and she wanted to vindicate her character in her own eyes. Under such circumstances a person wants to turn the blame, if there is any, on someone else.

Perhaps our reaction to some sorrow or loss or problem is "Do I deserve this?" or "Why has God treated me so harshly?" If we have lost a loved one, perhaps we ask why God took that loved one.

We wonder why we have to suffer and why our neighbors do not. This is the carnal nature expressing itself, not the spiritual nature.

Elijah's one purpose in bringing this young boy back to life was to honor God. The psalmist said, "Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Ps. 37:4). God could easily give new life to this lad.

Life flowed into the boy's body again, and Elijah put him in his mother's arms. She said, "Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth" (1 Kings 17:24).

Perhaps others could say that of us if we would only trust and obey God, showing the same spirit of trust and submission that Elijah did.

"I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

A SECRET BELIEVER

1 Kings 18:1-7

As Elijah, in obedience to God's command, set out to meet Ahab, he saw that the famine was very severe in Samaria, one of the areas ruled by Ahab and inhabited by the Israelite people.

Apparently it extended beyond Ahab's kingdom, but Samaria seemed to be getting the brunt of it. This, of course, was in line with God's judgment--He was disciplining His people.

The Prophet Isaiah wrote: "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it" (Isa. 1:19,20).

This principle was literally fulfilled before Elijah's eyes. The people had rebelled, and they were not eating of the good of the land.

Obedience to God is the key to His blessings upon us. The Israelites had suffered for three and a half years because of their disobedience, but because of the obedience of a man of God, the Lord's judgment would be lifted.

The first man Elijah met, however, was not Ahab but Obadiah, the governor of Ahab's household. Obadiah held a position of prestige and influence in overseeing Ahab's household and possessions.

But instead of Obadiah's lifting up Ahab, apparently Ahab tended to drag Obadiah down so that he was more concerned about herds and possessions than about the will of God.

Does this speak to our hearts? Perhaps God allowed this man's life to be included in the Scriptures to teach us this lesson.

"In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him [Christ]" (Eph. 3:12).

WHERE DO WE STAND?

1 Kings 18:7-16

Elijah commissioned Obadiah to tell Ahab that he was looking for him. Obadiah's response was one of fear. This man seems to have lacked moral strength and spiritual backbone. When the commission was given, he was reluctant to obey.

The similarities between Obadiah and Elijah are few, and the contrasts are many. They were both God-fearing men, and both had a commission. Elijah had a commission to show himself to Ahab, and Obadiah had a commission to tell Ahab that Elijah was coming.

But this was about as far as their similarities went. These two men contrasted greatly with regard to obedience.

When God told Elijah to do something, he did it without hesitation. Obadiah, on the other hand, hesitated, fearing for his life. He lacked faith in the power of God.

Why not check our own lives against the lives of these two men. Where do we stand? Are we where God wants us? Is God able to use us, or are we rejoicing only in what He is doing through others?

Let us learn to know Him. Let us take time to do so, for this knowledge does not come overnight. Time spent in the presence of God brings eternal results.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts" (Ps. 139:23).

CHARGE AND COUNTERCHARGE

1 Kings 18:17-19

The monarch's first words were "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17). I am not sure how Ahab said that, but I have a feeling he was shaking in his boots.

He was standing before a man who had been in the presence of God. Though Ahab could say to his servants, "You do this and do that," and though he was surrounded by his bodyguards, I am sure he was awed in the presence of Elijah.

The king's accusation was false, and under such circumstances the normal reaction is for a person to justify himself. The Spirit-filled person, on the other hand, has surrendered all his rights and has no self to justify.

Elijah might have moderated the king's displeasure by telling him that rain was on the way, but that was not the message Ahab needed at that moment. The king and his people had to be humbled before God.

God's glory was at stake, and His honor had to be vindicated. Thus, Elijah's answer was fearless. He sought no favor from the king.

Even though Ahab's bodyguards were with him and would have slain Elijah at the king's command, the prophet minced no words. These soldiers held no terror for him.

The language he used is seldom heard in our day to rebuke leaders of nations who are doing wrong. "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim" (v. 18).

"Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17).

MAKE A DECISION!

1 Kings 18:20-24

God worked not only in Ahab's heart but also in the hearts of the Israelites. He subdued the king so that he obeyed Elijah's orders, and He also made the people of Israel willing to gather at Mount Carmel.

Even the 450 prophets of Baal attended, though the 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah may have anticipated what was to follow, for apparently they did not respond to the command to meet at Carmel.

It is very possible that all of the Israelites, those of the king's household and the false religious leaders who came to Carmel had contempt in their hearts for Elijah; nevertheless, a power beyond themselves caused them to come.

Seven times during the course of that great day, Elijah spoke, and his words were the true index of his heart. His first words were addressed to the people of Israel, not to the prophets of Baal: "How long halt ye between two opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21).

Elijah demanded a definite decision on their part. There was only one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the great I Am. There was no other God. He will not accept a divided heart on the part of His people.

We, too, have a decision to make in this day. We must decide between the god of materialism and the God of grace. We cannot serve God and money or other material objects. The individual who is not for Christ is against Him.

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Josh. 24:15).

THE MAJORITY CAN BE WRONG

1 Kings 18:25-29

As the majority group, the worshipers of Baal had been given first chance. Because there were so many of them it took them only a very short time to prepare the sacrifice. As is often the case in matters that pertain to God, however, the majority was on the wrong side.

When Elijah admonished these idolatrous priests not to put any fire under their offering, he was warning them that he would not stand for any tricks.

They had often deceived people, but what they were now doing was out in the open with many eyes watching them. There was no opportunity given to these tricksters and imposters to use fire on the altar to Baal.

The frenzy of Baal's prophets reached its height at noon. In the excitement generated by the rhythm and speed of the priests' action, it would not have taken a great deal for the people watching them to have been swept off their feet emotionally and to have joined in the wild orgy.

But Elijah was ready for this very thing. He very effectively used the weapon of sarcasm to expose the intentions of these evil men and at the same time to insure emotional stability among the observers.

It is possible that Israel had never seen such earnestness and enthusiasm at any previous time. But such things are no proof that the cause is good and true.

Some people assume that such a display of zeal and fervor is evidence of spirituality; however, this can be far from the truth.

"The king is not saved by a mighty army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength" (Ps. 33:16, NASB).

THE FIRE FALLS

1 Kings 18:30-39

By having water poured over the sacrifice as often as he did, Elijah prevented any human counterfeiting or trickery. Then he began to pray.

This short prayer has only 63 English words (even fewer in Hebrew), and it takes about 20 seconds to speak them.

But the prophets of Baal had prayed to their idol for several hours and had received no answer at all. Elijah prayed for 20 seconds, and God answered by fire.

Elijah's prayer differed in character and sincerity from that of the prophets of Baal. James described it when he said, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16).

Even some Christians seem to misunderstand what this verse means. They shout in prayer as though God were deaf. They put on

a demonstration as though they had to attract God's attention.

Earnestness in prayer does not involve physical gestures but a condition of the heart and will with regard to the purposes of God.

Perhaps here we may learn to examine our own prayers. Since Elijah's prayer was motivated by his desire to see God honored, God answered His servant.

In writing concerning prayer James said, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (4:3). Right motives are essential if our prayers are to be answered.

"For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).

Rain At Last!

1 Kings 18:40-46

To have allowed the prophets of Baal to continue living and exercising all their evil practices would have exposed the Israelites to further corruption.

It would have left the impression in the minds of these priests as well as the Israelites that the prophets of Baal, though agents of apostasy, were immune from judgment. God said that they were all to be destroyed. Not one of them was to escape.

When Elijah declared that there was the sound of abundance of rain, no rain had as yet fallen. There were no clouds in the sky, no thunder and lightning, nothing that gave visible proof that rain was imminent.

There was not a physical sign anywhere that rain was on the way. Elijah's statement was based on his faith in the Word of God.

The scene, as depicted in 1 Kings 18, is remarkable. Ahab was probably still surrounded by his nobles, riding in all his pomp to Jezreel--at least 16 miles away.

Then the rain began to fall, and ahead of the king ran Elijah in the power of the Lord. The countryside that had seen so much sun and so little rain was dry and hot and showed the ravages of the drought.

Then suddenly the sky was filled with dark clouds, the lightning flashed, the thunder rolled, and the rain poured down. The hand of the Lord was on His prophet, and Elijah outran the chariot to the gates of the city!

"For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (Heb. 10:36).

A MIGHTY MAN FALLS

1 Kings 19:1-8

Elijah traveled on foot about 95 miles to the southern border of Judah. Then he went another day's journey into the wilderness.

By that time he was completely exhausted. He had remarkable physical strength and endurance, but he had extended himself to the breaking point.

He had first prepared for the "showdown" with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. Then it was necessary to kill the prophets of Baal. Such invasion of Satan's territory is not done easily.

Then Elijah prayed for rain with great earnestness, and finally he ran about 16 miles to Jezreel to see what results would follow the great triumph at Mount Carmel. All of this took place in one day.

Satan knows that a tired body is an added opportunity for him, and he took advantage of it in this case. When Jezebel threatened Elijah, he seemed to lose control and continued running until he sat under the juniper tree in the wilderness.

Then he requested that he might die. Elijah had lost hope of seeing the people of Israel return to the Lord. Thus life no longer was attractive to him.

When hope is gone, life is not worth living. Perhaps it seemed to Elijah that the Lord had given up also, but this was not the case. The Lord did not answer the prayer of His discouraged servant when he asked to die.

The present world has no answer to the turmoil and strife going on in its midst, but the Church is not without hope. Our hope lies in the coming of our Lord. This we must never forget.

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12).

GOD IS STILL IN CONTROL

1 Kings 19:8-18

Perhaps we have felt like Elijah and said, "What is the use?" Perhaps we have given the best of our lives to accomplish something for the Lord and feel that we have been left stranded.

Perhaps we feel that the Enemy is seeking to destroy all traces of Christianity and belief in the true God and that he is after our soul too. Perhaps we feel we are the only one left of all God's people.

If so, we need to be reminded, as Elijah was, that God still had 7000 who had not bowed their knee to Baal.

And God still is the Almighty God. He is still on His throne. People cannot dethrone Him, no matter how hard they try. All we need for life and godliness and Christian service is found in Him.

Perhaps we have tried hard to overcome temptations and to rise above our testings. Perhaps we have fought against the overwhelming odds of modernism in our church.

Perhaps we have done so and have found few, if any, standing with us, and we are about ready to give up our belief in the fundamentals of the Word of God. Do not give up. God is still in control of this world and this universe.

Perhaps we have tried hard to live for the Lord and have failed. Perhaps we fail today as we failed yesterday and the day before and are asking, "What's the use?"

Let us come out of the cave of darkness and listen to the still, small voice of God. He tells us that He has given us all that pertains to life and godliness (see 2 Pet. 1:3). Every provision has been made for us.

"In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11).

WE CAN DO IT ALSO (Elijah)

James 5:16-18

The Bible says Elijah was a man subject to like passions, or as another translation says it, "A man of like nature" (James 5:17, RSV).

God permits us to see where Elijah failed so that we need not think we are dealing with a perfect man. He was human just as we are; what sets him apart from most of us is that he fully believed God.

What Elijah accomplished is possible to us today if God should call us to such a ministry and if we will believe and trust Him for it.

It is true that we know nothing of Elijah's family background or of his life before his public ministry began. He appeared suddenly, and he went away suddenly.

Yet he was a man who had the same fallen nature that we have; he was subject to temptations similar to ours; he faced the same tests and trials that all humans face.

He walked with the same God we have the privilege of walking with. He sought the Lord for the same things that you and I seek Him for.

We may seek the Lord as Elijah did, for our Saviour made God's will very plain: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7).

The Apostle Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13).

"The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27).