

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS PART SIX - CHAPTERS 19-25

Israel had disappeared as a nation, deported by Assyria never to return because they lost sight of God. Judah continued as an independent kingdom for another century during which its leadership was characterised by dramatic extremes of godliness and evil. Hezekiah became king; he was one of the finest men of God since the time of King David. At last Judah had a leader who saw the need to take their faith in God into the tiniest detail of life. The high places of secret superstition were removed, God was approached through sacrifice in the temple, looking forward to the cross, and the word of God was taught to the people. For 14 years Hezekiah went from strength to strength in his spiritual growth and leadership of the people. Then came two great tests of his faith. In the first he trusted God and overcame. In the second he panicked and failed. We can learn a great deal from both.

CHAPTER NINETEEN begins with Hezekiah facing an overwhelming and most unpleasant enemy. The king of Assyria had sent his representative, Rabshakeh, to intimidate the people of Judah into surrender and presumably acceptance of deportation to some other part of the Assyrian empire. He taunted the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Their allies could not save them and God could not help so they might as well have given up. The situation seemed hopeless but at Hezekiah's urging they remained silent in the face of ridicule. What would God do? Hezekiah acknowledging his own inability to solve the problem, sought the wisdom of God through the prophet Isaiah, who had now been ministering for 47 years. The answer was that God had already solved the problem in a way which would shortly become apparent. Rabshakeh discovered that the king of Assyria had bigger problems on his hands than Judah but he tried one last bluff before leaving Jerusalem in the form of another letter to Hezekiah inviting surrender because the God of Israel could not save him. Hezekiah took the letter and spread it before God in the temple as we can spread any problem before God. God replied through Isaiah in first, a message to the Assyrian king that because of his arrogance against God he would be defeated and second, reassurance to Judah that they would prosper again. An epidemic destroyed the Assyrian army, and their king was assassinated.

CHAPTER TWENTY tells a sad story which shows how easily we can go from victory to defeat. Hezekiah became seriously ill. Isaiah was sent to him to let him know that he would die from this illness. It is a privilege to know from God when we will go to meet Him. It allows us to complete what we started and be ready. Hezekiah pleaded for more years of life on the basis of his good record. Isaiah was sent back with the news that God would give Hezekiah 15 more years. Isaiah treated him and he recovered. He was even permitted to ask for a sign that the extra 15 years would happen. The sign he chose involved a major disruption of the solar system, but God did it! A new power was rising to the east. Assyria was declining but Babylon was growing stronger and was set to become the next empire to threaten the countries of the Middle East. The king of Babylon sent messengers to Judah ostensibly to inquire about Hezekiah's health but presumably to spy out the strength and resources of Judah at the same time. Hezekiah foolishly showed off to the Babylonians in the mistaken belief that his success was his doing not God's. Isaiah was given one final message for Hezekiah. His boasting would bring about the ultimate enslavement of his people, but not in his day. Hezekiah professed to be unbothered that his sons would be captives of Babylon because it would not affect him. How far he had fallen!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE spells out the terrible consequence of insisting that we know better than God what is best for us. Hezekiah received 15 more years of life when he prayed not to die. During that time, as well as boasting to the Babylonians, he fathered Manasseh who came to the throne at the age of 12 and turned out to be the worst king Judah ever had. He reigned for 55 long

years during which he restored every kind of idolatry Judah, Israel and the surrounding nations had ever known. The streets 'ran with the blood of the innocent'. He 'seduced them to do evil' by his false teaching. All sin is equal before God, but false teaching is the most damaging. When he died he was buried in his own garden rather than with the other kings! His son, Amon, was no better but at least he only lasted 2 years before he was murdered by his servants. He too was buried in the garden rather than contaminate the royal cemetery.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO represents another of God's surprises. Two of the worst kings are followed by one of the best. Josiah was only an 8 year old when he took over from his father. As soon as he had grown up he ordered the temple restored. In the process of cleaning up the temple, Hilkiah the priest found the Bible, probably at this stage the 5 books of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy. He read it to the king who was deeply convicted by what he heard despite the fact that he was already a faithful believer. He realised just how far as a people they had fallen short of God's plan and asked God's wisdom. The answer was good in the short term but still bad news in the future for the nation as a whole. God forgives us but the consequences of sin continue on earth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE was Josiah's response to the word of God. First he led the people in a new commitment to God. Then he ordered every last trace of idolatry and those who led such things to be cleansed from the land. When this was done he even went north into what was now Samaria to get rid of the corrupt temple which Jeroboam I has set up at Bethel. In doing so he discovered that he had fulfilled a prophecy made in I Kings 13 three hundred years before about him. He next led the people to celebrate the Passover for the first time for many years. His life ended tragically when he intervened in a quarrel between the kings of Egypt and Assyria which was none of his business. The believers of that time must have wondered why God allowed such a thing to happen to an outstanding man of God. With the death of Josiah the kingdom of Judah was almost over. First Jehoahaz, his son, took over but he was soon taken prisoner and replaced by his brother Jehoiakim. Neither of them trusted God.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR relates how it was now Babylon who invaded to rule Judah. Jehoiakim rebelled but without success because he had not trusted God. He was followed as king by his son, Jehoiachin, who soon faced Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, was defeated and taken prisoner to Babylon. A large number of key people were also taken as slaves and the temple was looted. Zedekiah, another son of Josiah, was made king by Nebuchadnezzar. He too was an unbeliever and an unsuccessful rebel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE describes the last battle. Jerusalem was besieged and taken. The people who still remained were taken captive to Babylon where they would stay for 50 more years. Zedekiah saw his sons killed, was blinded and taken prisoner also. Nebuchadnezzar appointed a governor who tried to persuade the Jews to accept captivity before being murdered himself. Throughout the dark years of these last 4 kings God was still at work. Habakkuk and Jeremiah were active in Judah. Daniel and Ezekiel were witnessing of God's faithfulness in Babylon. Judah seemed to have died as a nation but God would one day raise them up again, like Jesus - and us!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What can we learn from Hezekiah's example about how to handle bullies?(19)
2. What does this story show us about the danger of praying for healing?(20)
3. What does the story of Manasseh reveal that points to the root of all sin?(21)
4. What made Josiah such an effective leader? What can we gain from his example?(22,23)
5. What explanation can you offer as to why 3 sons and 1 grandson of Josiah were all unwilling to follow his outstanding example?(24,25)