

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON THE BOOK OF I KINGS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY

### PART 4 - CHAPTERS 15-18

With the death of Solomon, the golden age of Israel under David and his son was over. The first step down was the division of the country into two in the reign of Rehoboam, the result of godless arrogance. From this point on, and for two centuries, the ten tribes of Israel in the north were more or less continually in conflict with Judah, which included Benjamin, in the south. Judah, which centred its outlook on the world largely on the temple in Jerusalem containing the word of God, went spiritually up and down according to whether its kings trusted God wholeheartedly or not. Israel on the other hand had replaced God with two cows,(12:28) and therefore never had a God-centred view of how society should be. Israel's kings were consistently godless. The only glimpse of truth in that country came from prophets sent by God to remind them of Him. A number would be won back to the Lord, at least for that generation, but the leadership remained rotten. These two models of a nation have persisted ever since. There are societies which have a Christian memory, which from time to time will be a basis for revival. There are also communities whose very roots are anti-Christian, in which the Christian gospel will always be treated as an alien influence.

Chapters 12-14 described the lives of two kings, Rehoboam and Jeroboam, who had wonderful opportunity but wasted it. There were consequences for them, for their families and for the whole of their countries. At least during their lifetimes there were memories of God to which they could be drawn back. With their deaths even these memories faded. The next generations were almost totally in the dark spiritually but at least in Judah the temple and what it stood for was still there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN tells first of Abijam the son of Rehoboam who followed in his father's footsteps, but was still preserved to some extent by the spiritual legacy of his great-grandfather David. His reign was a non-event as our lives will be without God. His son Asa succeeded him and probably to everyone's surprise he found a strong faith in God. Who taught him, we do not know, but despite the lack of leadership there were obviously still some faithful prophets and priests around who took the opportunity to influence the young king. The real measure of each of these kings was not only that they did not worship idols themselves but, as far as possible, they gave a lead in removing the places where idolatry happened. The most spiritually mature went further and restored the teaching of the word of God. It is not enough just to be against something. Truth must take the place of idols or else there will be a vacuum which will soon be filled with another idol. Infighting in the northern kingdom produced two more kings in a short time and continuing conflict with the south. Asa split the alliance of Israel and Syria against him and so reduced the problem, as Paul divided his opposition to good effect.(Acts 23:6) As an old man, Asa became 'diseased in his feet', as do many Christians who lose enthusiasm for going to people with the gospel.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN continues the sad story of successive kings of Israel, each replaced through treachery and violence by another man who wanted to dominate. Though none of them trusted the Lord, every now and then God would still speak of how it could be for a new king and his family if only they put the Lord first. At the same time He would warn about the consequence for generations to come of ignoring Him. No-one listened. The chapter concludes with the worst of them all, Ahab. Whereas previous kings had simply followed corrupted forms of Jewish worship like the calves, Ahab, under the influence of his Sidonian wife, Jezebel, brought into Israel the gods Baal and Asherah who were to challenge the worship of the true God for centuries.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN begins the story of two men, Elijah and Elisha, whom God used successively to remind the people of Israel that despite everything they had done, He had not given up on them. Elijah was sent by the Lord to King Ahab to spell out to him the consequence of his misrule on the whole country in the form of drought and therefore famine. Having done so, Elijah was in trouble. God provided an escape for him in the form of a refuge in the wilderness, the last place one would expect to hide in a drought. Daily God met his every need as He promises to meet ours.(Phil.4:19) After a time the Lord sent Him to a family to whom he could now teach the very principle God had already taught him. Flour in the Bible pictures the word of God, broken down for us, oil the Holy Spirit. Together they are our spiritual food. Next Elijah was used to teach this family that trusting God results in the miracle of new life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN continues the story of Elijah's witness to a seemingly unreachable king. Already the Lord had planted one of His agents, Obadiah, a secret believer, in the royal household. He and the king went in opposite directions looking for grazing for the king's animals. Elijah met Obadiah and asked him to bring his master to a meeting. Nervously Obadiah agreed, and the meeting took place on Mt Carmel, a mountain on the Mediterranean coast. The basis of the contest to decide which God was the real one was sacrifice and prayer. First the false prophets of Baal and Asherah tried to persuade their gods to send fire from heaven. Elijah teased them that they needed to make more noise if their gods were to hear - and they believed him! Nothing happened for the simple reason that their gods did not exist. Then in a simple, brief prayer Elijah called upon the God who does exist, the God of the Bible, to solve His own problem in His own way, and He did. The effect on the gathered crowd was dramatic as they realised God must be the true God. The effect on the false prophets was equally dramatic - death. For the first time even Ahab took Elijah's words seriously as he promised rain. God was getting through to him!

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What do the lives of the two kings, Abijam and Asa, show us about the influence on children of the generations before, and how God can still get through and cause a surprise in those who have an ungodly upbringing? What do the successive changes of king in Israel teach us about the motives and methods of politicians? What is the message for us in the record of Asa becoming 'diseased in his feet'?(Isa.52:7; Rom.10:15; Eph.6:15)
2. What two examples does chapter 16 give of the consequences on us and our families of ignoring God's warnings? What warning does it also contain of the likely outcome of marrying a wife or husband who does not share our faith in the true God?(II Cor.6:14-18)
3. The story of Elijah seems like that of some super-hero far above us. In what ways can it still be an inspiration to us of how God might use us also? How can we challenge a godless government while still being 'subject to the governing authorities'? (Rom.13:1-7)
4. Chapter 18 could be considered the very climax of Elijah's ministry in that he confronted false teaching publicly. How might we do the same in our society?