

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

PART FIVE - CHAPTERS 14-18

With the death of Elisha a powerful voice of God was lost in Israel. Elijah and then Elisha had between them had a godly influence over 6 successive kings of Israel, Ahab, Ahaziah, Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Jehoash (Joash). None of them had become strong believers but all had been deeply affected by the courageous witness of these two remarkable men. The lack of the scriptures and the Jerusalem temple in the northern kingdom of Israel meant that what little faith they showed at times remained untaught. Over the same period Judah had been ruled by Jehoshaphat, Jehoram (Joram), Ahaziah, Joash (Jehoash), and Amaziah. The first, fourth and fifth were men of God despite some foolish mistakes. The second and third followed the idolatrous example of the northern kings. In Judah, the southern kingdom, the contrast between believing and unbelieving leaders was sharper because those who trusted the Lord had the scriptures, good teachers and the temple in which to know that through sacrifice they were forgiven, and then to be able to worship.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN continues the story of the inter-relationship between Judah and Israel, which nearly always went wrong for Judah as mostly faithful leaders were dragged down by the devious kings of Israel. This time it was Amaziah who followed his father's faith but was not strong enough to deal with the secret superstitions of his people in the 'high places'. He dealt first with his father's murderers and then with the rebellious Edomites. Buoyed up by pride in his victory he made the mistake of challenging Israel. He was defeated, the city of Jerusalem was looted and he was taken prisoner. It is easy to fall into the mistake of thinking that the victories God gives us are our own achievements and therefore that we can handle anything. He too was eventually assassinated and succeeded by his teenage son, Azariah. In Israel the next king was Jeroboam II, the promised fourth generation from Jehu. He began a long, militarily successful and prosperous reign but spiritually nothing changed despite the witness of a new prophet, Jonah.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN tells of the long but sadly insignificant reign of Azariah otherwise known as Uzziah. He too failed to deal with the 'high places'. He suffered leprosy as a result of his presumption in thinking he could play the role of priest as well as king. (II Chron.28:16-23) This was God's way of underlining the seriousness of changing His plan as with Miriam, (Num.12) and Gehazi. (II Kgs.5) As a leper he was isolated from the people and government affairs which were run by his son, Jotham, another godly but rather ineffective leader. In the northern kingdom, the death of Jeroboam brought in an era of instability in leadership and eventually of defeat by the powerful new neighbour further to the north, Assyria. Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, was soon murdered by Shallum, who in turn was murdered by Menahem. Faced with the Assyrian threat Menahem tried to buy them off by heavy taxes on the rich. His son, Pekahiah, succeeded him before being killed in another coup led by the next king Pekah. In Pekah's time the new king of Assyria invaded again and took most of the people away as hostages, never to return to their own land. Yet another coup killed Pekah, and Hoshea reigned over what was left of the kingdom of Israel. Amos and Hosea, two of the minor prophets, sought during this time to bring Israel back to God but it seemed like no-one was listening, and so defeat was inevitable.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN continues the story in the south where Jotham was succeeded by his son, Ahaz, who turned completely away from the faith of his father and grandfather to the very worst of northern idolatry including being prepared to sacrifice his sons in the fire. Faced with a joint invasion from Israel and Aram he turned to their common enemy, Assyria, presenting their king with the temple treasures. Tiglath-Pileser obliged by attacking Aram and thus removing the threat to Judah. Ahaz went to visit him in Damascus and was so impressed with his god that he had the heathen altar copied and brought back to the temple of God in Jerusalem. He attempted to adapt

the God of the Bible to the ways of the world which denied Him. Despite the faithful witness of the prophet Isaiah, (Isa.7) Ahaz remained an unbeliever till his death.

CHAPTEEN SEVENTEEN is the final act in the tragic drama of Israel, the northern kingdom. A succession of unbelieving and murderous kings had nothing to offer to the threat of Assyria. Already weakened by mass deportations Israel was effectively under Assyrian control. When the last king of Israel, Hoshea, tried to rebel against Assyrian rule his country was besieged and over-run by the Assyrian army. This time the king of Assyria was determined to have a permanent solution to his troublesome province. Most of the population were removed and resettled in other parts of his empire. To make sure they could never return he replaced them with other people from Assyria. The people of Israel were reminded that what had happened was exactly what God warned them when they came out of Egypt would occur if they turned to other gods. They had no grounds for complaint. The new settlers in Israel soon learned that God was displeased with their importation of false gods and things went badly for them in the shape of an epidemic of man-eating lions. The Assyrian king ordered the deported Israelites to send a priest back to their old country to teach people the ways of the God of Israel. He did this at Bethel where God had been worshipped as a cow, so it was no surprise that there was no spiritual revival in the land. There was no further history of Israel though many people have speculated over the years as to how they might have survived as a distinct nation. Because they had no faith in God alone there was nothing to keep their identity. On the other hand the mixture of Israelites and Assyrians with at least a partial knowledge of God did manage to establish an identity as Samaritans.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN relates a very different story in Judah. Isaiah, Hosea, Amos and Micah had all in various ways pushed home to Judah the warning from Israel's fate. Their words were not wasted on the new king of Judah, Hezekiah. Despite the example of his father he turned back to God and dealt with idolatry and superstition as no-one had done since the time of David and Solomon. The 'high places' finally went. The key to Hezekiah's wholehearted faith was that he not only restored the practices of God but His word. He clung to the scriptures whatever he faced. He refused to submit to Assyria and he defeated the Philistines. All went well for 14 years until the Assyrian king, Sennacherib decided to invade and punish Judah for their independence. At first he was able to buy peace with gold and silver but the Assyrians were determined to break Hezekiah. Sennacherib's representative, Rabshakeh, taunted the people of Jerusalem for their faith in God and reminded them that God had not saved Israel, so why did they expect to do any better? Hezekiah ordered the people to remain absolutely silent, as Jesus later did, (Lk.23:9) despite the enormous provocation. Privately the leaders of Judah were despairing. What would God do?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. How do we make the same mistake as Amaziah in taking on challenges God did not ask us to? What picture is represented in our lives by the enemy robbing Judah of the treasures in the temple?
2. How did the arrogance of Azariah (Uzziah) cause him to miss out on God's best for him? How can one wrong action ruin a ministry even for us?
3. How do we make the same error King Ahaz made in bringing a copy of the Assyrian god into the temple of God? What effect does this have upon us and those we seek to lead?
4. What happened when God's patience with Israel finally ran out? How does the same thing happen with nations today? What would be the equivalent today of the Assyrian king trying to bring some knowledge of the God of Israel back to the new generation?
5. Why was Hezekiah so much more effective than some of the believing kings of Judah who had preceded him? How do we face the same kind of open ridicule from heathen leaders? How should we respond?