

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

- PART 5 - CHAPTERS 19-22

By the end of chapter 16 the spiritual condition of the northern kingdom of Israel seemed beyond hope with corrupt leadership, false gods and years of antagonism to the people of Judah who had stayed faithful to God. All it took to begin a major revival was one farmer available to God. Elijah became the mouthpiece of God to the king. Having done so he learned the secret of daily dependence on God for all his needs, and then taught the same principle to a struggling family, finally showing them the miracle of resurrection life.(17) When Ahab had had enough time to think about the consequence of his own actions, Elijah was sent to meet him again to demonstrate in a way he would never forget which God was real and answered prayer. The people turned back to God, the false prophets were disposed of and the king started to take God seriously. Ahab even tried to witness to his wife, Jezebel.(18) This was when Elijah's problems multiplied.

CHAPTER NINETEEN tells an extraordinary story. Having faced the king, 850 heathen priests and the whole nation, Elijah was confronted with a death threat from one woman - and panicked! He ran back into the wilderness to save his life, then asked to die. He had forgotten how faithfully God provided before. The Lord had not changed and so, once again, day by day, food and drink were miraculously supplied. Little by little he relearned dependence upon God's strength rather than his own. Forty days later he was at Mount Horeb where Moses learned who God really was and the basis of salvation. When Elijah was hidden in a cave as Moses was in Exodus 33, God asked Elijah an embarrassing question, "What are you doing here Elijah?" He gave his excuse that he was the only believer left in Israel. The Lord had something important to teach Elijah about His power to create, to judge and to save. Again the Lord asked the same question and received the same weak excuse, but now Elijah was ready for fresh instructions. He was to appoint two new kings, one in Aram and one in Israel, and a new prophet, Elisha, who would carry on after him. And by the way, God said, 'You are not the only one. I have 7000 others who still trust me!' He followed orders and found Elisha, first his pupil then his successor.

CHAPTER TWENTY describes a remarkable transformation in King Ahab. A powerful enemy came from the East with a large army and numerous allies to bully little Israel into submission. He demanded that Ahab hand his treasure and family over to him as the price of peace. At first Ahab was inclined to give in but the leaders of Israel urged him to resist so he did, first with a brave answer of defiance to the king of Aram. Another of God's agents who had remained faithful went to Ahab with an amazing promise. Despite all that had happened God had not given up on His people and waited to give them victory. Most surprising of all it would be Ahab who would lead them. The Lord knew that the heart of Ahab had softened. A couple of hundred young men, a new generation, would give example to a tiny army of 7000, perhaps the 7000 God had reminded Elijah He still had who trusted Him. The king of Aram and his officers, drunk and overconfident, led their vast army to defeat, and only escaped with their lives. God's prophet returned to Ahab to warn him that Benhadad would return with a new army so be prepared. One defeat does not cause the Devil to give up on us. He leaves 'until an opportune time'.(Lk.4:13) Because the enemy had a very small view of God they believed He only worked in mountains. Consequently they decided that the next battle should be on the plain. God again promised victory to prove that He is God of everywhere and again He used Ahab to win an overwhelming victory. This time the king of Aram and his officers were trapped and could easily be finished off to achieve a peace which would last. They had another misconception about God, that He is merciful to everyone, regardless of whether they are repentant. Ahab, like Saul before him,(I Sam.15) fell for their pretence of humility because of his own pride and let them go on promise of friendship. Another young prophet was

used to get God's message of disapproval across to Ahab. He was warned of the consequence of compromise on himself and his kingdom. He went home to sulk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE contrasts with the chapter before in which Ahab really trusted God for victory in an impossible situation. This time he sank to the depths of defeat. Coveting the vineyard of his neighbour he wanted to obtain it as a vegetable garden. Naboth refused his offer because it was more than a piece of land. It was his family inheritance which he treasured beyond money. Ahab went home and sulked again. Jezebel discovered the reason her husband was in a bad mood and tried to fix it by having Naboth murdered on a false charge of blasphemy - against a God she did not believe in! So, Ahab got the land he wanted. The Lord sent Elijah once again with a warning to Ahab of the terrible consequence of his action in his own death, that of his family and especially of Jezebel who would be eaten by the dogs. Ahab as a young believer repented in humility and so the Lord delayed the judgement on his family until after his death.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO tells a remarkable story which began well but ended badly. The king of Judah took the initiative in seeking reconciliation between the two warring states. As the stronger believer his visit could have been an encouragement to Ahab. The king of Israel saw the opportunity for an alliance to retake territory still held by the king of Aram whom he had allowed to escape. Jehoshaphat wisely wanted to know what God's will was. Ahab called in his large group of spiritual advisers, the prophets, who were typical state servants giving the advice the king wanted to hear, and calling it the message of God. Jehoshaphat was unconvinced so Ahab told him of Micaiah, a prophet who never told him what he wanted to hear. Micaiah was obviously a prophet with a sense of humour. He began by advising the king he would have victory, and then the truth - he would die in battle! One of the so-called prophets who had already said the opposite challenged Micaiah who was thrown into jail until the battle was over. Ahab came up with a cunning plan to protect himself and set the king of Judah up as a target in his place. The plan misfired but not the arrow which found and killed Ahab, exactly as God had said. His godless son, Ahaziah, took over for a short, ineffective reign. Meanwhile down south in Judah, Jehoshaphat continued the witness of his father Asa, trusting God personally, and sometimes dealing with false teaching and open homosexuality.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Why as Christians do we sometimes, like Elijah, succeed in big things and fail in the face of small problems? What does God do with spiritual leaders who fail? Elijah was in the wilderness for 40 days. What other stories does this remind you of? Why after this experience was appointing new leaders Elijah's main responsibility?
2. What can we learn from the way God trains and uses Ahab in chapter 20 about the discoveries it is important to make early in our Christian lives?
3. What insight does chapter 21 give us into the character of Ahab? What approach did the Devil therefore use to tempt him and try to bring him down? What do we learn about why and how God forgives even the worst crimes?
4. What does chapter 22 teach us about the value and pitfalls of reaching out to encourage a young believer? What do we also learn about how to know the will of God?