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The Bible Story

Volume 5,

Chapter 104

Civil War Threatens

DAVID WAS warned that Absalom, his son, was near and would probably try to attack Jerusalem in a violent effort to seize the government of Israel. King David and hundreds of his faithful subjects, soldiers and servants and their families hurriedly moved out of the city so that it wouldn't become a scarred site of battle. (II Samuel 15:13-23.)

When David realized that the ark was being taken from its place in Jerusalem, he was very upset.

King David's Secret Agent

"Don't bring the ark out of Jerusalem," David told the priests, Zadok and Abiathar. "Return it to where it was. It shouldn't be exposed to the uncertainty of travel. We should rely on God, not the ark."

Zadok and Abiathar obeyed with the understanding that by staying in Jerusalem they could also observe what would take place there and inform David of the circumstances. David hardly knew whom else he could trust in this time when so many of his subjects were deserting him. (II Samuel 15:24-29.)

He felt that this terrible situation could be the result of past sins concerning Uriah and Uriah's wife, as God had warned. (II Samuel 12:7-10.) Accordingly, he decided to walk to the top of Mount Olivet, just east of Jerusalem, to pray to God. This he did in a repentant manner, covering his head and wearing nothing on his feet. Many others accompanied him, weeping as they went.

After a period of worshipping at the top of the hill, David was approached by a friend by the name of Hushai, who was not a warrior, but a counselor. Hushai spoke of his desire to accompany the king wherever he would go. (II Samuel 15:30-32.)

"Instead of going with me," David told him, "you could help me more if you would return to Jerusalem and join Zadok and Abiathar to keep me posted, through their sons, of how matters take place in Jerusalem when Absalom arrives there. Perhaps you can even come into Absalom's confidence and wisely offset any advice that might be given to him by Ahithophel, who forsook me for my son." Hushai wanted to do anything he could for the king. He obediently returned to the city. (II Samuel 15:33-37.)

On the way down Mount Olivet, David was hailed in a respectful manner by a man named Ziba. He was a servant of Mephibosheth, a son of Jonathan, who was Saul's son and David's boyhood friend. Ziba was leading two donkeys heavily loaded with

food. When David asked him where he was taking it, Ziba told him that the donkeys were for carrying David and the members of his family, by turns, so that they wouldn't become so weary by walking.

"The bread and the fruit are for keeping up the strength of the young men, and the goatskin of wine is to refresh any who become faint if you have to go into the desert," Ziba explained. "I trust you will return soon to your throne."

"Where is Mephibosheth?" David asked. "I'd like to thank him."

"This isn't my master's idea," Ziba replied. "He stayed in Jerusalem. He feels that he should be the new king because he is of the royal family of Saul."

David was surprised and disappointed to hear that one he had thought of as being so loyal should suddenly become almost as ambitious as Absalom. Under the strain of his distress, David made an error in perception.

"You seem to be more faithful to me than Mephibosheth is," David observed. "I think you deserve everything that belongs to him."

Ziba bowed low and grinned with satisfaction. He had just lied about Mephibosheth, who was still loyal to David. The wily servant was making every effort to obtain David's goodwill and gratitude. He was certain that it would be well worthwhile, because he was convinced that David would return to the leadership of Israel (II Samuel 16:1-4.)

Curses and Hatred

Later, as David and his followers moved along a ravine well outside of Jerusalem, a man of Saul's tribe came running along one bank of the gully, throwing stones at David and those with the king. He angrily shouted insults and curses, and accused David of having murderously taken the throne of Israel from Saul.

"Now at last you're paying for all the bloody crimes you've committed!" the Benjamite yelled. "Your own son is taking from you what you took from Saul! Get out of Israel before someone carries you out as a corpse!"

Abishai, second in command of Israel's military forces, was among those accompanying David. When he noticed what the angry man was doing, he became angry too.

"Why should this miserable dog be allowed to treat you like this?" he asked David. "Let me send men up the bank to catch him and cut off his head!"

"No!" David quickly replied, holding out a restraining hand. "Your way isn't the way I wish to take in this matter. Let him curse me. God allows him to curse me. God hasn't prevented my son from seeking my life, so why should He prevent this man from showing his hate for me? It could be that if I patiently endure abuse, God will have mercy on me, and will perhaps rescue me from this time of trouble."

Begrudgingly Abishai restrained his men. The angry Benjamite continued shouting and throwing stones and dust until he became weary and hoarse. Then he disappeared over the side of the ravine. David and the hundreds of people moved on to the northeast toward the Jordan valley. (II Samuel 16:5-14.)

Meanwhile, Absalom and his soldiers and supporters moved into Jerusalem from the south, triumphantly taking over the undefended city. Among those who welcomed the king's son was Hushai, David's friend who had agreed to return to Jerusalem to try to help David in any way he could.

"God save the king!" Hushai kept on shouting as Absalom passed up a street with his guards.

Absalom smugly looked around to see who was greeting him so enthusiastically, not realizing the words were meant for King David instead of for him. When he recognized Hushai, whom he knew was a close friend of his father, he ordered the procession halted.

"What are you doing here?" he called out to Hushai. "What has become of your loyalty to my father? I'm surprised that you haven't fled with him and his few remaining subjects!"

"Situation Ethics"

"Whoever is chosen by God to be king, and whoever is preferred by the people, that is the man I choose to be with," Hushai declared. "I served your father well, and now I am ready to serve in your presence, too." (II Samuel 16:15-19.) Hushai really meant he would serve David in Absalom's presence.

Conceitedly assuming that Hushai was seeking to come over to his side, and knowing him for a wise and capable man, Absalom was pleased to welcome him as one of his advisors. Shortly afterwards he held a council meeting to decide what his next major move should be. Here was the opportunity for Ahithophel, David's disloyal former advisor, to make a base suggestion aimed at forcing Absalom and his father even further apart. Ahithophel knew that a reconciliation between David and Absalom would be disastrous to himself.

"The ten women who were left in your father's palace were his wives," Ahithophel whispered to Absalom. "As victor, you should openly take them as YOUR wives. I shall see that the public soon hears you are abhorred by your father. When it is common knowledge, people will take a more definite stand on one side or the other. The result will undoubtedly be in your favor." You see, Ahithophel, like many people today, believed in "situation ethics."

Absalom went by Ahithophel's advice, and took his father's ten wives. They were actually concubines, women who were part-time mates. (II Samuel 16:20-23.) God allowed this crime as the fulfillment of a prophecy made to David through Nathan. The old prophet had told the king that someone else would openly take his wives because he had taken Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. (II Samuel 12:9-12.)

Later, Ahithophel gave Absalom more counsel. It was a simple plan by which David's son could quickly and surely become the undisputed king of Israel.

"Let me have twelve thousand of the best Israelite soldiers available to us," the advisor told Absalom. "I'll take them tonight in pursuit of David and the people with him. We'll make sure that David dies, but that no one else is harmed. Those who escape won't be pursued, but we'll bring back as many as we can to join you, including those soldiers who have been so attached to David in recent years. Our greater numbers will be their speedy undoing."

The idea was to Absalom's liking, as well as that of his leaders. (II Samuel 17:1-4.) However, Absalom called for Hushai, explained Ahithophel's proposal, and asked what Hushai thought about it.

"Ahithophel is a wise counselor," observed Hushai, "but I don't believe his plan for this situation is good," Hushai knew the plan would work. So he just said it wasn't good.

"Even twelve thousand men probably couldn't as much as find David, and he'd have to be found to be killed," Hushai said, making the most of this opportunity to belittle Ahithophel's idea. "David is an old hand at war strategy. In his state of mind now, he's probably being especially wary not to be overtaken. He's like a mother bear that has had her cubs taken away from her. He can be both furious and clever. Undoubtedly he's hiding in some cave or pit right now, separate from his people, with his soldiers concealed to trap any who come looking for him, even in greater numbers than theirs. If his men were to kill just some of the twelve thousand of yours, your new recruits may panic. Israel would rally at once to your father's side, and you would lose your chance at the throne. You would be most unwise to follow Ahithophel's advice on this matter." (II Samuel 17:5-10.)

Counterespionage Service in Action

"Then suggest a better way to help me into quickly becoming the undisputed king of Israel," Absalom impatiently demanded.

"I suggest that many more men than twelve thousand be used against David," Hushai replied. "Soldiers should be drafted from all parts of Israel to build you a mighty army that you can personally lead into battle anywhere without fearing defeat. Then you can be certain of taking David and destroying all who would defend him. If he is hiding out in the open, he will surely be found. If he is concealed in some city, there'll be enough men available to tear that city down. Besides, you'll need a large fighting force to repel any surprise attack from outside the nation."

The thought of being at the head of an army of multiple thousands appealed strongly to Absalom's sizable vanity, just as Hushai knew it would. When Absalom made it known that he was greatly in favor of this plan, his supporters enthusiastically agreed with him, and that was just as God knew it would be because He had decided it that way. (II Samuel 17:11-14.)

While plans were being made for drafting a large army, Hushai went to Zadok and Abiathar, the priests, to tell them what had taken place. "David must be informed of this," Hushai said. "Send a message to your sons, wherever they are, and instruct them to take word to the king."

The priests told a certain woman what to do and say. She sought out their sons, Jonathan and Ahimaaz, where she knew they were hiding outside Jerusalem, and conveyed the message to them. They took it to David, who learned that he should hurry eastward across the Jordan River as soon as possible. There was the chance that Absalom would change his mind and decide to immediately send a small army in pursuit of the king.

Contacting David wasn't without its perils. Just as the priest's sons started on their mission, they passed a young man who recognized them. It wasn't long before Absalom heard that Jonathan and Ahimaaz were seen hurrying northward. Absalom guessed that something contrary to his welfare could be taking place. He sent soldiers to find the priests' sons and bring them back for questioning.

Aware that something like that might happen after they were recognized, Jonathan and Ahimaaz decided to delay their trip for a little while, lest they be overtaken in open country. They sought refuge at the home of a friend who was loyal to David, and not any too soon. Absalom's men were scouring the neighborhood, and even entering and searching homes. When they came to the home where the priests' sons were hiding, their search was in vain. After the soldiers had gone, the woman of the house went outdoors to where some ground corn was spread on a cloth. She took up the corn in the cloth, thereby uncovering the mouth of a well from which Jonathan and Ahimaaz climbed out and went safely and thankfully on their way.

After David had been told what had been taking place, he and those with him set off at a brisk pace eastward across the Jordan River. They crossed the stream that same night and continued to the northeast. (II Samuel 17:15-22.)

Ahithophel was told that Absalom favored building a large army over the next few days instead of a quick pursuit of David with only a few thousand men. When the advisor learned that his suggestion wouldn't be followed, he realized that Absalom's cause was lost. Ahithophel was very wise in politics. (II Samuel 16:23.) He knew that any delay long enough to raise up a large army would give David time to recruit a loyal army among the rugged cattlemen of the eastern tribes. This would mean that support for David would grow even faster than support for Absalom. Absalom wouldn't stand much chance of overcoming that support, since David's army would have better leadership. Ahithophel knew then that he had been very foolish for deserting David, that there was no more political future for him, and that he would soon be regarded as a traitor to his nation and probably be put to death as one.

Later, somebody found him hanging lifeless from a rafter in his home. He knew that it would eventually happen to him, and he preferred that it would come about by his own hand. (II Samuel 17:23.)

Eastern Tribes Are Loyal

David's group soon reached the city of Mahanaim on the south border of the territory of Manasseh, adjoining the territory of Gad. There they were welcomed to stay by loyal Manassites and Gadites. Loyal clan chiefs quickly began to rally support around King David. Every day more and more followers joined David from all parts of Israel, most of them having come to volunteer for a growing army.

While King David was at Mahanaim, even Shobi son of the former king of Ammon, brought gifts and help to David and the people with him. So did two chief Israelites, Barzillai and Machir of the tribe of Manasseh. Having heard that the Manassite city was overcrowded and short on food because of the many guests, they sent beds, metal basins, earthen vessels, grains, beans, lentils, flour, honey, butter, cheese and even sheep. David was very thankful for these needed things. (II Samuel 17:27-29.)

So many people came to join David that it was necessary for him to count them and put leaders in command of an organized army. It was divided into three parts, with Joab, Abishai and Ittai in charge.

Meanwhile, Absalom's army had been mobilized. It wasn't as large as David's son hoped it would be, but he didn't have the patience to wait for the size of fighting force Hushai had talked about. Anxious to pursue David, Absalom moved his army across the Jordan River to a wooded area on the high plains south of Mahanaim.

When David heard that Absalom's army was so close, he ordered his officers to take their troops out to meet Absalom before his army could surround the city of Mahanaim. David intended to go along, but the chief men under him pointed out that it was going to be a battle for the safety of the king, and that he should remain in the city and pray for God's help. (II Samuel 18:1-3.)

"So be it," David finally agreed, addressing Joab, Abishai and Ittai. "One reason I want to go is to see that Absalom is taken prisoner without being harmed. If I can't be there, then it is the responsibility of you three." (II Samuel 18:4-5.)

Absalom was surprised and troubled when he heard that David's smaller army was coming to meet his. He was disappointed that he wouldn't get a chance to besiege Mahanaim. Riding on a mule at the head of his army, he tried to convince himself that David's men were bluffing, and would not be so foolish as to actually clash with a much larger number of troops.

At last the two armies were very close. Then they rushed together in deadly combat. There was the thumping of many feet, a clashing of swords, shrieks of pain and the rattle of armor. Absalom was aware that all about him his men were falling, but no one tried to attack him or even get near him. The noisy, bloody action moved on, leaving him alive and strangely alone among his dying soldiers.

Chapter 105

Civil War

THE ARMY of Absalom and the smaller army of David had rushed together in battle on the high plains east of the Jordan River. (II Samuel 18:1-6.) Absalom, mounted on a mule, found himself surrounded by his dead and dying men, but he hadn't even been attacked.

Then Absalom became aware that his father's well-trained soldiers, even though smaller in number than those of their Israelite enemies, had begun to rout Absalom's quickly mobilized and ill-trained army. His men were running for their lives in all directions, furiously pursued by David's experienced troops.

Absalom Defeated

There was nothing for the shocked Absalom to do but follow his men. Most of them tried to escape in a nearby forest known as the Wood of Ephraim, though it wasn't in the territory of Ephraim. This forest may have been the spot where Jehphthah's army had defeated the army of Ephraim many years previously. (Judges 12:1-6)

Riding under an oak tree with low-spreading boughs, Absalom was either caught by the head in a forked branch or got his hair tangled in the branches. The original Hebrew in this instance is not specific. The mule raced on, leaving its rider dangling with his feet off the ground. He struggled to release himself, but he was only half-conscious because of the blow to his head when caught in the crotch of the branch. He couldn't force or wriggle himself loose. (II Samuel 18:6-9.)

One of David's men saw Absalom hanging from the oak limb, and reported it to Joab, who demanded to know why he hadn't walked up to the helpless man and killed him.

"If you had brought him to me dead, I would have given you a fancy armor belt and ten pieces of silver," Joab stated.

"But everyone knows that David wants his son brought back unharmed," the man countered. "I wouldn't have done anything to Absalom for a thousand pieces of silver. Why should you want me to go against the king's wishes?"

"I don't have time to discuss the matter," Joab said impatiently. "Just show me where Absalom is." Joab was more concerned about David's safety and the unity of the nation than he was about David's love for his rebellious son. Joab was also a murderer at heart.

When Joab and ten of his men found David's son still hanging by his head from a tree limb, Absalom was barely moving. Contrary to David's order, Joab threw three heavy, metal darts into Absalom's chest. Joab's ten men then yanked him down from the tree and made certain, by use of their swords, that his life was ended. (II Samuel 18:10-15.)

Absalom might have died even though Joab and his ten men hadn't attacked him. But Joab had disobeyed David.

Absalom's body was thrown into a pit in the forest and covered with a heap of stones. Fairly close to Jerusalem Absalom had already caused a monument to be erected to his memory in the event he didn't have a son to carry on his name. Instead of being buried there, he ended up in a hole in the Wood of Ephraim.

Joab instructed the trumpeters to sound a signal that the battle was over and that this needless bloodshed should be stopped. About twenty thousand men died that day. Almost all of them were from Absalom's army. More than half that number lost their lives by trying to escape into the forest, where they died from injuries, by fatigue, from being trapped by their pursuers and even by the attacks of wild beasts. (II Samuel 18: 16-18.)

Ahimaaz, son of Zadok the priest and one of the two young men who had taken a message from Jerusalem to David days previously, was present at the battle site. Being an athletic young man with a desire to be helpful, he hoped that he could be the one to run with the news of battle back to David. He was so anxious for this opportunity that he boldly suggested it to Joab.

Eager to Report Violence

"This isn't a very good time for you to be a messenger," Joab told him. "Perhaps you can run another time when the report is a happier one for the king. Surely you wouldn't want to be the one to tell him that his son is dead."

Ahimaaz was disappointed, especially after Joab sent a young Ethiopian runner off for Mahanaim to tell David that the battle had been won. Joab intended that the runner should give only news of the battle's outcome, but without telling anything about Absalom.

"Let me be a second runner," Ahimaaz suggested to Joab. "Even though I arrive later, I would very much like the opportunity to take news to the king."

"I don't understand you," Joab frowned. "There would be no reward coming to you for bringing news that somebody else already has brought. But go ahead and run if it means so much to you."

Ahimaaz eagerly set off in pursuit of the Ethiopian. At a certain point he turned off on a different route, through level country, which he knew would help him reach Mahanaim sooner, even though the distance was greater. By the time he wearily neared the city, the other runner was behind him. A watchman on the wall saw Ahimaaz approaching and called down to David, who was waiting in a high enclosure near the main gate, to tell him that there was a man running toward the city. (II Samuel 18:19-24.)

"If he is alone, then probably he is bringing a message," David observed concernedly.

"Now I see another man running behind him," the watchman called down.

"Another runner could be bringing even more news," David said. By that time the watchman recognized Ahimaaz by the way he ran. He told David, who was certain that the priest's son would be bringing only a good report. (II Samuel 18:25-27.)

"I have good news!" Ahimaaz breathlessly called out as he neared the gate.

He looked up to see the king, and crouched down with his forehead to the ground in a gesture of respect. He was happy that David was there to personally receive his message.

"Today the great God has saved you from your enemies!" Ahimaaz excitedly shouted up to the king. "Your men have won the battle!"

"I am thankful to God," David answered. "You say my men have won the battle, but if my son's army has been defeated, what has become of my son?"

"When Joab sent me, there was much excitement about some matter," Ahimaaz carefully replied. "I started out before I could learn what it was all about."

"Stay here while I talk to the other messenger who is coming behind you," David told Ahimaaz. "Probably he can tell me more" (II Samuel 18:28-30.) David anxiously awaited the next message.

As the tired Ethiopian neared the gate he shouted between gasps that he had been sent to tell the king that God had destroyed David's enemies by giving a complete victory to his army.

"Is my son Absalom safe?" David anxiously called down to the messenger.

"May all your enemies die as your son did," the Ethiopian blurted out, not realizing how blunt his answer was to the king.

The Criminal Pitied

Shocked and sick at heart, David went to his living quarters. On the way he couldn't help weeping, muttering Absalom's name repeatedly, and wishing aloud that he could have died in Absalom's stead. So great was David's affection for his son that he seemed to forget all the evil and even murderous intentions Absalom had harbored toward him. (II Samuel 18:31-33.)

A report rapidly spread to David's army that the king was almost ill with grief because of Absalom's death. From there the news was carried to other areas, soon plunging much of the nation into a state of mourning, whereas people who were faithful to the king should have been pleased and happy because David's army had won. But King David's excessive grief for Absalom and his seeming lack of concern of his faithful subjects quickly gave them a feeling of despair. They felt that their devotion to David had been rejected.

Instead of returning to Mahanaim with triumphant jubilation, the men of David's army silently skulked back as though they had committed some kind of crime. Soon they began to feel resentful. (II Samuel 19:1-4.) The gloomy attitude of David in spite of his offense to so many people angered Joab. Without any effort to be respectful to his superior, Joab rudely told David what he thought.

"Your attitude has made the people feel dejected," Joab declared in a tone of irritation. "Instead of being thankful to your army for saving your life and the lives of your family, you have caused the men to feel ashamed. You act as though you care more for your enemies than you do for your friends. Would it have pleased you if Absalom had lived and your troops would have died? Only you can bring your subjects out of the gloom that is over the nation. It's up to you to come out of your solitude and go out and show your good will and gratitude. If you don't, your army and your followers will forsake you before this night is over, and you'll run into far more trouble than you've had all your life!"

In spite of this emphatic, even insolent talk, David didn't command Joab to cease speaking, although the king thought much less of his army commander from then on. He realized that the blunt Joab was right about showing gratitude to the army and his friends. Shortly David appeared in public to greet the people and dispel their gloom with cheerful words of thanks and friendliness. Within a few days many Israelites were in a more pleasant mood. (II Samuel 19:5- 8)

At the same time there was growing unrest in many parts of the land. The civil war had all but torn the nation apart. There were still many who wished that Absalom had become king. Others were displeased because David didn't return to Jerusalem after the victory over Absalom's military forces. (II Samuel 19:9-10.) But the people of the tribe of Judah, who made up a large part of Absalom's following, weren't anxious for David to return. Because Jerusalem was at the border of the territory of Judah, the attitude of the people there naturally gave David a reason for concern.

"Remind the leaders of Judah that I am of their tribe and that I am looking to them for their support and confidence," David declared in a message to Zadok and Abiathar, the priests at Jerusalem. "Tell Amasa that I am going to remove Joab as commander of my army, and that I wish to replace him with Amasa, the commander of my son's defeated army."

Welcome to Dissension

When news of this intended change went throughout Judah, the people were pleased because Amasa was also of the tribe of Judah and Joab was disliked by so many in that tribe. David was aware of that. His strategy was wise for more than one reason.

Amasa went through Judah persuading the tribal elders to support King David. Soon the inhabitants of Judah began to be friendly toward David. They even sent a delegation of leaders to him to inform him that he was welcome back to Jerusalem as king of the nation. When the people of that tribe heard that David was about to leave Mahanaim, thousands of them swarmed down to Gilgal, and from there eastward to the Jordan River. (II Samuel 19:11-15.)

By the time David, his family and many of his followers appeared on the east side of the Jordan, a special ferry had been built for bringing the king across the river. As David stepped off on the west bank, a roar of welcome went up from the throats of the great crowd.

Among the first to come to greet David was Shimei, the Benjamite who had angrily thrown stones at David when the king was previously fleeing from Jerusalem. With him were a thousand other Benjamites to help Shimei impress King David. All of them bowed toward David as he came across the river. Ahead of them Shimei threw himself on the ground before the king.

"I am the one who cursed you and threw stones at you when you were escaping from Absalom," Shimei despairingly confessed. "Because I know how wrong I was at the time, I was the first here today so that I might ask you to forgive me and forget my foolish and disrespectful conduct." (II Samuel 19:16-20.)

There was an awkward silence while David gazed at the prostrate man. Abishai, Joab's brother, gave a signal to some of his soldiers, who strode forward and roughly jerked Shimei to his feet.

"Any man who curses our leader, who was chosen by God, deserves only death!" Abishai growled. "Is that not right, my king?"

"As king of Israel, it is my responsibility to make such decisions," David spoke out with subdued anger. "I don't understand why you should choose to make them for me, particularly when I don't approve of them, and I am not in favor of this man or any other man being put to death on this day!"

His face red with embarrassment, Abishai barked at his men to release Shimei, who fell trembling to the ground again.

"I shall pardon the things you regret doing to me," David told the Benjamite. "You shall not die. Return to your home in peace." (II Samuel 19:21-23.)

As the procession started toward the west, David noticed the familiar figure of Mephibosheth, Saul's crippled grandson. When David had been on his way out of Jerusalem because of Absalom threatening to take the city, Mephibosheth's servant, Ziba, had told the king that his master had expected to become king. David was so disappointed by Mephibosheth's attitude that he had decreed that Ziba should take over Mephibosheth's possessions. (II Samuel 16:1-4.)

"I regretted to hear from Ziba that you were hopeful of becoming king when I left Jerusalem," David told Mephibosheth. "I had thought you to be loyal to me." (II Samuel 19:24-25.)

"I never had the idea of becoming king, and I have always been loyal to you," Mephibosheth declared staunchly. "Ziba lied to you about me. Because of that, I lost everything I owned. But why should I cry about that when you have already done so much for my family?"

David could tell that the man was speaking the truth. He looked at Ziba, who was standing uncomfortably off to one side, trying to hide his expression of guilt.

"I told you before that you could have your master's possessions," David said to Ziba. "Now that I find that you didn't tell me the truth, I want you to give Mephibosheth's property back to him and divide the produce of the land as before."

"He is welcome to all of it," Mephibosheth said. "All that matters to me now is that my king is returning to his home to rule." (II Samuel 19:26-30.)

Barzillai, the Manassite who had been David's foremost host in Mahanaim, also accompanied King David across the Jordan. David invited Barzillai to accompany him to Jerusalem so the king could honor him for all he had done for David at Mahanaim. Being an aged man, Barzillai insisted upon returning home. But he allowed his son Chimham to go with King David. (II Samuel 19:31-40; I Kings 2:7.) Apparently King David gave this young man a share of his own family's inheritance at Bethlehem. (Jeremiah 41:17.)

Another Insurrection

After parting with Barzillai and the people of Mahanaim who had become close friends to him, David later went on to Gilgal and from there to Jerusalem. But while this trip was taking place, the leaders of the various tribes began to argue about the manner in which the king was conducted back to the capital. There was much ill will among the other tribes because the people of Judah had taken over the ceremonies that had to do with David's return. Feeling ran higher and higher in this matter. (II Samuel 19:41-43.) This mounting envy was the start of strife that would promptly divide the nation of Israel.

A Benjamite named Sheba, a scheming and ambitious man of much influence and means, realized that the time could be right, even during David's triumphant return to Jerusalem, for ten of the tribes to form an army with which Judah could be controlled or even overpowered.

"We don't have enough voice in the government in Judah," Sheba declared to the people. "We should band together to build our own power!"

Men from every tribe except Judah flocked to Sheba. But the tribe of Judah escorted David safely to Jerusalem. (II Samuel 20:1-2.) When David found out that an army was being recruited to be used against Judah, he told Amasa, his new army commander, to assemble an army within three days.

In his desire to be more obedient, David put away the ten concubines he had left to take care of his home, and never had anything more to do with them than to see that they were cared for the rest of their lives. (II Samuel 20:3-4.)

Amasa failed to get a fighting force together in three days. David turned to Abishai, Joab's brother and an experienced military leader, and ordered him to pursue Sheba with the troops who were with David in Jerusalem. Abishai started northward. With Abishai was his brother Joab, ambitious to regain command of the army.

Chapter 106

A Plague of Numbers

AMASA, David's new commander, had taken soldiers northward to pursue Sheba and the rebellious Israelites. David decided that Amasa was too slow and Abishai, a more experienced officer, would do much better. So Abishai was sent with more troops.

Joab went with Abishai because he was intent on regaining command of the army. When they overtook Amasa, Joab pretended to be friendly with him, but suddenly ran his sword into Amasa's chest. (II Samuel 20:1-10.)

A Cruel Age

In plain view of many soldiers Amasa fell by Joab's cruel and deceptive action. He died in great agony. Not a man had the courage to protest. Joab then proceeded to boldly take over the command of Amasa's soldiers as well as those of his brother, Abishai.

Joab and his soldiers continued northward in their pursuit of Sheba's army. Perhaps Sheba would have escaped if it had not been for a reliable report that Sheba and his men were in the city of Abel. When Joab and his men arrived at Abel, which was south of Mount Lebanon in the territory of Dan, they were unable to batter their way through the gates.

Unhampered by the inhabitants, who made no move to defend themselves, Joab's troops piled a bank of sand and rocks up against one section of the wall, so that they could use battering rams against the higher, thinner part of the wall. (II Samuel 20:11-15.)

When they were about to break through a wise woman appeared on top of the wall and loudly requested to speak with Joab. Action ceased while Joab came forward to identify himself and find out what the woman wanted.

"We are a peaceful, faithful people!" she called down. "Why have you come here to destroy our city?"

"I'm not here for the purpose of destroying a city!" Joab shouted back. "I am here to capture a Benjamite by the name of Sheba, who with his army is fortified within your walls. He has conspired against King David, and deserves to die. If your city doesn't give him up to us, we'll come in after him. We'll subdue him even if we have to tear your city apart!"

"What if we deliver him to you?" the woman asked.

"If you do that, we'll go away in peace," Joab promised.

"Then do no more damage to our walls," the woman said. "Give us a little while, and we'll throw this Sheba's head out to you!"

There was no way of knowing whether or not the woman had enough influence to fulfill her promise. But Joab waited. In any event, she was a person of considerable influence there, and managed to have Sheba beheaded. The head was tossed down to Joab, who made certain that it was really Sheba's head. As he promised, Joab left Abel and returned to Jerusalem to report to David that another plan to take over the government of Israel had been foiled. (II Samuel 20:16- 22)

David was relieved to learn that the present danger was over. But he was disappointed and troubled because Joab had forced his way, even by murder, back into the command of the army of Israel. David could hardly change the situation, inasmuch as Joab was so admired for his ability as an army officer -- though he had enemies. God was obviously allowing Joab to remain as commander. Even the king of Israel couldn't do much to change that.

David took advantage of this period of peace to improve the organization of his government and to appoint officials to various responsibilities. (II Samuel 20:23-26.)

Murder Brings Famine

During the next year the amount of rainfall in Israel was so small that there was a serious crop failure throughout the land. The following year the rainfall was even less. The year after that there was an even greater drought. David was very concerned. He was certain that God had brought on the condition for some specific reason. He asked the priests, Zadok and Abiathar, to try to find out why God had withheld rain from the Israelites.

An answer came from God to the priests, who told David that the famine had come to Israel because of Saul. He had ordered many Gibeonites to be slain in spite of a promise Joshua had made that they wouldn't be killed even though they were Canaanites.

David called the leaders of the Gibeonites to find out how they felt about the matter. He was told that they remembered the incident with very strong feelings, and that they still expected some kind of settlement from the Israelites, but not with money, valuables or property.

"To right that wrong made by Saul, payment must be made with seven lives from the family of Saul" the Gibeonites firmly stated.

On behalf of the nation David promised to give the seven men to the Gibeonites. (II Samuel 21:1-6.) This would seem to be a heartless thing to do, but something had to be done, because a whole nation was suffering a famine brought on by faithless King Saul who broke the agreement between Israel and the Gibeonites. Seven men were chosen from among Saul's descendants and turned over to the Gibeonites. Mephibosheth was excluded because of the oath of perpetual friendship between his father Jonathan and King David. (I Samuel 20:12-17, 42.) The Gibeonites hanged the seven men David gave to them. The hanging corpses were protected from wild beasts and birds for some time. They weren't cut down until it started to rain days later when David finally took pity on their guardian. (II Samuel 21:7-14.)

When he was much younger, David had led his army in a long and successful struggle against the Philistines. For years they had remained subdued. Now a small army of them appeared on the west border of Judah to threaten the Israelite civilians living there. When the aging king heard of it, he set out with troops to stop the invaders before they could grow in numbers or penetrate farther into Israel.

A little while after the Israelites attacked the Philistines, David found that the vigorous action of battle was very tiring to him. He grew so weary that he sank to his knees on the ground. The champion of the Philistine troops, a giant named Ishbi-benob, thought that David was wounded, and that this was a wonderful opportunity to become famous as the slayer of the king of Israel. (II Samuel 21:15-16).

Casting aside his huge spear, which was much heavier than the average man could use, Ishbibenob pulled out his oversize sword and rushed toward David. Abishai, brother of Joab, noticed the giant charging toward David with his sword upraised. Abishai leaped forward in time to thrust his shield over David just as the Philistine slashed viciously at the king. The blow landed on Abishai's shield, or otherwise it would have meant instant death for David.

Ishbi-benob was enraged at Abishai's action. He yanked back his sword to thrust at Abishai, but the smaller man was too quick for him. It was the giant who fell from a sword thrust, and not the Israelite. When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they gave up the fight and fled westward back to their home territory.

Another Temptation

David had come very close to losing his life because of the weariness that was natural for a man of his years. His officers and advisors begged him not to go into the battle again. They pointed out to him that it would be a blow to the whole nation if he were killed in battle. Besides, it would invite unqualified men to seek control of the kingdom. (II Samuel 21:17.)

Not long afterward the Philistine troops moved back into Judah. Again the champion was another giant, this one named Saph. David didn't go with his soldiers for this encounter, which resulted in victory for the Israelites when a man named Sibbechai courageously stood up to Saph and killed him in hand-to-hand combat.

Undaunted, the Philistines came into Judah a third time, and with still another giant, a brother of Goliath. As before, the Philistines hastily retreated when their champion was overcome by an Israelite named Elhanan.

The Philistines couldn't seem to learn that having giants on their side wasn't necessarily a guarantee for victory. For a fourth time they came into Israel, this time accompanied by a man who was unique not only for his enormous size, but because he had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Apparently the Philistines thought that this freak would somehow impress and terrorize the Israelites to the point that they would give up. The giant was killed by David's nephew Jonathan, regardless of all his extra toes and fingers. For the fourth time the Philistines retreated to their home country. This ended, for a time, a period of trouble for Israel. (II Samuel 21:18-22.)

To show his thanks to God for protection, blessings and promises, David was inspired to compose a song. It is recorded in the Bible from II Samuel 22:2 to 23:7.

Surrounded by capable leaders and protected from invasion by many heroes (II Samuel 23:8-39), Israel's matters were going well. David allowed himself to feel too secure and powerful. He began to wonder just how many people were in his kingdom, and how Israel compared in numbers to other nations. The more he thought about it, the more he was tempted to take a census, although God didn't want such a thing to be done.

At last the king called in Joab, his army commander, and asked him to take men to every part of Israel to find out how many men were fit for army duty.

"May all the people in our land be multiplied by God a hundred times," Joab remarked. "But no matter what their numbers, sir, it surely would displease God if we were to count them with the purpose of trying to measure our nation's strength. If we were to find that it is greater than we think, we could be tempted to make some unwise moves against other nations."

"For one who obviously has been without fear of God," David observed after giving Joab a long stare, "your present concern with what could displease the Creator shows quite a change in your thinking."

"Believe as you choose," Joab replied in his usual brusque manner. "I don't think the idea is wise, and I know that the officers under me think the same."

An Error Progresses

"I respect your opinion and those of the other officers," the king went on firmly. "Nevertheless, I shall meet with you and those officers to give you the details of how I want the census taken." (II Samuel 24:1-4; I Chronicles 21:1-4.)

Nine months and twenty days later the unwilling Joab and his men returned to Jerusalem with their report after spending that much time in covering almost all of Israel to number the able-bodied men. (II Samuel 24:5-9.) The report given to David was that Judah had about half a million men who could serve as soldiers, and the other tribes, not counting Levi and Benjamin, could supply over a million men. The grand total included the standing army and frontier guard. (II Samuel 6:1.) Also the twelve monthly courses of troops that did garrison duty for King David at Jerusalem, and the twelve tribal chiefs' reserves. (I Chronicles 21:5; 27:1-22.)

Joab and his men didn't take a census of the tribe of Levi because that tribe supplied the priests and their helpers. They didn't get around to counting the men in the tribe of Benjamin or completing the census because the census was disgusting to Joab. Besides, by the time they got back to Jerusalem David was in a state of great distress and told Joab not to bother to complete the count. (I Chronicles 21:6; 27:24.)

The prophet Gad had come to the king with the alarming news that God had disclosed to him that He was very displeased with David for counting the people, a function that God would have performed only at His command.

"You would be making a grievous mistake to discount what I'm telling you," Gad warned. "God told me something terrible to tell you. He said that because of what you have done punishment will come to Israel. It will come in one of three ways. God is allowing you to choose that way!"

"Go on," David muttered, shakily fearful of what Gad was about to say.

"You must decide between three years of famine for Israel, three months of heavy attacks by enemy nations and three days pestilence from God," Gad continued. "Tell me what your choice is. I must speak to God for you." (II Samuel 24:10-13; I Chronicles 21:7-12.)

David was quite shocked by Gad's words. For a brief period he sat and stared blankly while the stark, awful truth sank into his consciousness that God was again calling him to account for a sin. But even under the stress it wasn't difficult for him to make the decision that had to be made.

"Even though God is most powerful, I would rather fall into His merciful hands than fall into the hands of my vengeful enemies," the king told Gad. "If famine comes to our nation, I might not suffer as much as others, but if pestilence comes, it could fall upon all with equal misery. Therefore tell our God that if punishment must come to Israel because of my sin, let it be pestilence. May the Creator have mercy on us" (II Samuel 24:14; I Chronicles 21:13)

Next morning, in the outlying sections of Israel, hundreds of people fell dead. It was as though their hearts had stopped beating. The abrupt deaths were confusing and terrifying to the people who saw others dropping all about them. They couldn't know that it was only the start of a terrible punishment sent supernaturally by God. By the end of the day the mysterious lethal malady had spread inward over the land, killing thousands more people.

God's Altar of Mercy

When a whole day had passed, many people were dead. The awful reports had reached so much of Israel that the nation was in a devastating state of fear and mourning. But the situation grew steadily worse, and as a third day rolled around the pestilence had crept inward across Israel from all directions almost to Jerusalem. By that time seventy thousand Israelites had died!

From the death reports that flooded into Jerusalem, it was evident to David that the area of the capital was the only region left in Israel where people hadn't been touched by the fatal seizures. It occurred to the king that possibly God was leaving Jerusalem till the last so that the thousands living there would receive the full measure of God's anger.

"I have sinned! I have done a wicked thing!" David loudly groaned, at last prostrating himself in repentant dejection on the floor. "Don't let any more of my people die, God! Take me, instead! Spare those in Jerusalem!" (II Samuel 24:15-17, I Chronicles 21:14-17.)

Only a little while later that day Gad came to David to tell him, and other leaders who were dressed in sackcloth as a sign of mourning and repentance, that God had instructed that a special altar should be quickly erected at a certain place on Mount Moriah, a high area on the northeast side of the city.

"God knows that you deeply regret that you did wrong," Gad said to David. "If you build this altar and make sacrifices there as soon as possible, God won't allow the awful death plague to continue."

The king heeded Gad's advice without delay. Together with some of his advisors, he hurried to Mount Moriah. The top area of the hill was owned by a local Jebusite king by the name of Ornan (or Araunah), who had built a threshing floor there. King Ornan's city, Jebus, was adjoining David's city and the two kings were friends. Ornan was there at the time threshing wheat with his four sons.

King Ornan was aware that people were dying in the regions outside the city, and he was fearful of his sons or himself being struck down at any time. But he had work to do, and he reasoned that they would be no safer at home than at work. He was even more concerned when he looked up to see the brilliance of an angel above the land and to see David approaching with a few men. Ornan's first impulse was to run and hide somewhere because he thought the king wouldn't be coming to visit him at such a time unless he had some reason to be angry with him. Hesitantly he went to meet David and inquired how he could be of service to the ruler.

"I would like to buy this property from you," David told Ornan.

"If the king desires my property, he can have it," Ornan declared.

"I'll give you more than a fair price," David said eagerly, "I need this high spot on which to build an altar to make special sacrifices to God. If it can be done this very day, perhaps He won't let any more people die, and Jerusalem could be spared!" (II Samuel 24:18-23; I Chronicles 21:18- 24.)

Ornan stared at the anxious face of the king. He wondered if selling his property could really be such a matter of life or death.

Chapter 107

God Chooses Solomon

BECAUSE DAVID had gone against divine orders and had taken a census in Israel, God had caused seventy thousand sudden deaths in Israel.

Israel's king had then heeded the advice of the prophet Gad, who had told him that the plague would be stopped if David would quickly build an altar. The site God had chosen for the altar was Mount Moriah, a high area on the northeast side of Jerusalem.

God Selects His Temple Site

The spot was owned by a local Jebusite king named Ornan. Ornan had a threshing floor there and with his four sons was busy threshing wheat when David arrived. (II Samuel 24:1-18; I Chronicles 21:1-20.) As king over all the land of Israel, David could have taken over the place to do as he wished. But it wasn't his way to conduct himself in such a manner. When Ornan learned why the king wanted his property, he was very anxious to cooperate.

"You are welcome to all that I have here without price," he told David. "If you are in need of wood for the fire, use my threshing instruments. If you need animals for sacrificing, take my oxen."

David was pleased at Ornan's willing and helpful attitude. Because he wanted to act in a hurry, he accepted all that Ornan offered, but he insisted on paying. The oxen cost the usual price for farm animals. But David wanted several acres of land so God's temple could later be built on the spot God had chosen. So he bought the whole hill at a fair price. (II Samuel 24:19-25; I Chronicles 21:21-25.) An altar was hastily erected, and animals were sacrificed on it as soon as possible. God showed His approval by sending fire from heaven to kindle flames on the altar.

A little while later servants came to David to inform him that reports of new plague deaths had suddenly ceased coming in from surrounding areas and, no deaths had been reported from within the city. (I Chronicles 21:26-30).

"That means that God has accepted your prayers and your sacrifices," Gad assured David. "The plague has been stopped!"

Relieved and thankful, David dropped to his knees to worship God for being so merciful as to halt the terrible spread of death before it could reach the people of Jerusalem.

Realizing that this was the place where God wanted His future temple to be built, David spent the rest of his life preparing materials and setting aside most of his wealth to pay construction costs and to decorate the temple. He gave his son Solomon the complete plans and instructions God had given him. (I Chronicles 22:1-19; 29:1-19.)

David also thoroughly organized the priesthood and the government. (I Chronicles, chapters 23- 28)

David's life had been so eventful and wearing that, two years later, although he was only sixty-nine years of age, his body was as worn and weakened as that of a much older man. Among his various infirmities mentioned slightly in Psalms 31:10 and 38:3 was his inability to remain comfortably warm, especially during the cool evenings. Even though blankets were piled on him, his circulation was so poor that he always felt chilled.

His servants and advisors decided that the only way he could be helped was by putting a much younger person close to him, so that the vigor, strength and warmth of youth would be imparted, even in a small measure, to the ailing king. Using their own judgment, the advisors chose a young woman for this purpose -- surprising as it may seem to those who read this account and who will perhaps be moved to decide that David was again being very foolish. This wasn't David's idea. The Bible states that she was very helpful in caring for David and that there was no kind of wrong relationship. (I Kings 1:1-4.)

A Brother's Schemes

The deplorable thing that resulted from the king's infirmity was the conduct of Adonijah, at that time David's oldest son. Adonijah decided that his father was too old and senile to rule Israel, and that he, Adonijah, should be the one to take his father's place. He tried to impress the people by copying the overly colorful ways of the late Absalom when he was attempting to win the public to his cause. Adonijah chose several very fancy chariots in which to ride about, and hired fifty men to run in front of his chariots to loudly announce to the people that an important person was passing through and to clear the roads or streets of all obstructions.

David, in his ailing condition, wasn't told of all Adonijah was doing. On the other hand, he was aware that his son was strutting around with attendants, but he did nothing about it. David was very sentimental about his sons, and wasn't always as firm as he should have been for their good as well as his.

Whatever the situation, David made no move to prevent his son from trying to take over the reins of the government of Israel. Adonijah managed to obtain the backing of some of the influential figures of the nation, including Joab, the military commander, and Abiathar the priest. Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet refused to help him. So did most of the powerful men and leaders who had been close to David. (I Kings 1:5-8.)

To promote his cause and establish goodwill among his friends and others whom he hoped to win over to his side, Adonijah arranged for what we of this age would call a campaign rally. It was held at a place where such functions were popular, and where impressive sacrifices were made. Food and wine were in abundance. The mood of those invited was anything but solemn. Most of David's sons were asked to attend, as were many high officials. (I Kings 1:9-10.) Most of David's officers were ignored. So was Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba, the one David knew God had appointed to be the next king of Israel. (I Chronicles 28:5.)

Nathan the prophet decided that Adonijah had carried matters much too far, and that David should be stirred up to do something about it. Knowing that Bathsheba had great influence with David, he asked her to go to the king to warn him that there was danger of Solomon and his mother losing their lives if Adonijah decided to take extreme measures to obtain full and certain leadership.

"I am aware that you know David wants your son to succeed him as God has commanded," Nathan told Bathsheba. "You must go to your husband and tell him that this won't happen unless Adonijah's ambition is brought to an end at once. God wants David to do his part. When I know that you are speaking about this matter to David, I'll join the two of you and repeat that the matter is extremely urgent." (I Kings 1:11-14.)

Bathsheba was anxious to do what she could to insure Solomon's stepping into his father's place. She went at once to David to explain how Adonijah had been acting and how he was already the king of Israel in the minds of some of the people. She pointed out that if his following increased and if David should die, she and Solomon would come to be regarded as enemies of the state because they were not included in Adonijah's followers.

The Plot Defeated

It was one of those days when David wasn't feeling too well. The young woman especially chosen to wait on him was trying to make him comfortable. Bathsheba could see that the king was moved by the things she said, but he only nodded or shook his head. Then it was announced that Nathan the prophet wished to speak with David, whereupon Bathsheba left. When Nathan came in, he mentioned to David all that Bathsheba had told her husband, but in a different way intended to appeal to David's greatest interests.

"I don't understand why you are allowing another to become king of Israel when it has long been God's command that Solomon should come after you," Nathan pointed out to David. (I Kings 1:15-27.)

"Call Bathsheba and have her come to me at once," David responded, straightening up and suddenly looking very determined.

Nathan knew as he departed that the king had made a decision of some kind. He was sure that it was the right one. When Bathsheba arrived, David spiritedly reminded her that he had made a vow that Solomon should surely become king of Israel and that he wished to repeat that vow. Turning from Bathsheba, he told a guard to call Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet and Benaiah, a great hero and captain of his guards. (II Samuel 23:20-23; 8:18.) When these three men arrived, David instructed them to take Solomon to a public gathering place just outside the west gates of Jerusalem.

"Benaiah, see that he is accompanied by most of my guards," David ordered. "And have him ride on my personal mule. Nathan and Zadok, you will anoint my son Solomon as the next king of Israel.

Make a public proclamation so that the people will know what is taking place. After the ceremonies are over, bring Solomon back here."

"So be it!" Benaiah exclaimed. "I know this is according to God's will. God has been with you, my king. May He be with Solomon to exalt the throne of Israel and to make it even greater than it has been during your reign."

When the people in and around Jerusalem saw the king's guard marching before and after the mule-borne Solomon and the two priests, they swarmed together in increasing numbers to follow the parade. By the time the ceremonies were over, and Solomon had been anointed king, a huge crowd had gathered. There were the sounds of great celebration, including the blowing of trumpets and pipes and shouts of "Long live King Solomon!" with such volume that the noise was heard in all the city and in some areas beyond. (I Kings 1:28-40; I Chronicles 29:20-25.)

Just at this time Adonijah's long, party-like rally to gain followers was coming to an end. The last meal was over. Guests were beginning to leave when the sounds of musical instruments and the shouts of thousands of voices came clearly to Adonijah and those with him.

Conspirators in Trouble

"There must be trouble somewhere," Joab observed concernedly. "Perhaps the city is being attacked. What else could cause such an uproar?"

As the wondering listeners paused anxiously, Jonathan the son of Abiathar the priest came in from the street to join them. Adonijah greeted him warmly, remarking what a brave man he was and that surely he must be the bearer of good news.

"It could be good news for some, but I doubt that it is for you," Jonathan replied uneasily. "David's son Solomon has just been anointed the next king by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet. The loud music and shouts you hear are coming from the huge crowd that witnessed the ceremony. The people are happy and enthusiastic about it." (I Kings 1:41-48).

A cheerless silence came over Adonijah's guests. Wordlessly they filed out of the place and hurried to their homes, not wishing to have anything more to do with any movement to try to force their erstwhile champion on the throne of Israel. As for Adonijah, he was the most uncomfortable and fearful. It was evident that most of the people wanted Solomon to become king, and that David would deal harshly with anyone who opposed the king.

There was dancing and singing in celebration of Solomon's appointment as king. But Adonijah became alarmed at what he imagined would happen to him because he had tried to become king against his father's will. So he decided to seek protection at the tabernacle. There he went to the altar where the sacrifices were made, and clung to it desperately. The altar was regarded as a refuge for those who had sinned. Adonijah thought it would be the safest place for him if David's soldiers should come after him. (I Kings 1:49-50.)

Solomon had taken over the responsibilities of the ruler of Israel as soon as he had returned to the palace. Although he was only about twenty years of age, he was capable of good judgment, and took his high office very seriously. When he heard that Adonijah was at the tabernacle and was trusting in the king to spare his life, he sent men after Adonijah. The would-be king thought that his end had come when he saw the soldiers swiftly approaching the altar, and heard one of them order him to come with them.

"If I step away from this sacred altar, you'll kill me," Adonijah shouted fearfully.

Strong arms reached up to wrest him down from the altar. He was hustled quickly off and brought before Solomon. He prostrated himself before his half-brother, expecting the new king to give an order for his execution.

"You know that you have acted foolishly in trying to become king," Solomon stated. "Because of this, whether you live or die will depend on how you conduct yourself from now on. If you go the right way, not a hair of your head will be harmed by any of my men. Now return to your home."

Surprised and relieved, Adonijah muttered his thanks and hastily left the palace. (I Kings 1:51- 53.)

A Wise Father's Advice

Not long afterward, David informed Solomon that he was about to die, and that he had some valuable advice to give him. The advice was the kind that any wise father should give his son, but there were reminders from the former king of Israel to the new king.

"Keep God's commandments and statutes and judgments," David told Solomon. "You will prosper and be successful if you do. God told me that if my children would live according to His laws, men of our family would continue on the throne of Israel. So prove yourself an obedient man, worthy of being a king.

"Consider Joab and the murders he has committed in the name of warfare. Handle him with care and good judgment, remembering that he has great influence with many people, but don't let him live long enough to die of old age. I should have had him punished by death long before now.

"Be kind to those of the family of Barzillai the Gileadite, who was such a help to me at the city of Mahanaim while I stayed there in my forced absence from Jerusalem.

"Consider also the case of Shimei the Benjamite, who cursed me when I was fleeing from Jerusalem. He tried to make amends by meeting me at the Jordan river when I was returning to Jerusalem. I promised him that I would not give orders to have him put to death. But you know he was guilty. You should deal with him as harshly as you should deal with Joab."

Some months after Solomon had become king, David died. He served forty years as king of Israel. (I Kings 2:1-11; I Chronicles 29:26-30.)

During that time Israel became a powerful nation, but not as wealthy and powerful as it would have been if David and especially the people had followed God's laws more closely. Probably David is the most remembered king of Israel because of his eventful life and because he wrote a great portion of that part of the Bible called the Book of Psalms. With much mourning David was buried in a special sepulchre at Jerusalem. A great amount of wealth was buried with him, part of which was taken from his tomb centuries later.

Solomon used unusual wisdom at times during his reign, insomuch that Israel remained strong and respected by the surrounding nations. But matters didn't always go smoothly for the new, young ruler.

Adonijah Tries Again

Adonijah, who had tried to become king, decided that he would like to marry Abishag, the young woman who had been chosen to physically strengthen David during his last days. Adonijah cleverly went to Bathsheba about the matter, knowing that she would have far more influence with the king than he would have.

Bathsheba promised Adonijah that she would ask her son the favor. When she did, Solomon became very angry. He considered Adonijah's request through his mother very improper. He rightly suspected that this was the beginning of some kind of plot to seize the government.

"Adonijah might as well have asked for the whole kingdom as well," Solomon observed wrathfully to his mother. "I warned him that his conduct would determine his fate. This turn of events proves to me that he isn't worthy to live!" (I Kings 2:12-23.)

Solomon was concerned mostly by the thought that Adonijah was making a move to again gain popularity with the people for the purpose of another effort to become king. He ordered Benaiah, the commander of the royal guard, to see that Adonijah should be executed. (I Chronicles 18:17; I Kings 2:24-25.)

Afterward he ordered Abiathar the priest to come before him.

"I know how vigorously you worked for Adonijah to become king," Solomon frowningly reminded Abiathar. "You were against David my father, even though you knew God had set him on the throne. It's my opinion that you deserve death as much as Adonijah has deserved it." Abiathar's face turned white. Judging from the king's stern expression, he was about to order another execution.

Chapter 108

Solomon Builds the Temple

ABIATHAR the priest, standing before angry King Solomon, expected to be executed because he had told the people of Israel that Adonijah should be their king.

God's Sentence

"You are guilty of treason!" Solomon exclaimed to Abiathar. "But I won't put you to death now because you served for so many years as priest during my father's reign and shared all his troubles. However, you are no longer to serve as a priest. Go to your home in the country outside Jerusalem and stay there." (I Kings 2:26-27.)

Abiathar's removal from priestly duties brought about the fulfillment of God's prophecy to his ancestor, the high priest Eli, who had become careless in his office back in Samuel's time. God told him that the priesthood would be taken from his family. (I Samuel 2:12-36.) Abiathar was the last of the descendants of Eli's family.

When Joab heard what had happened to his co-conspirators, Adonijah and Abiathar, his usual self-confidence suddenly left him. Fearing that he would be called before Solomon for sentencing, he followed Adonijah's example and fled to the tabernacle, where he claimed special refuge from death by clinging to the altar.

On learning what Joab was doing, Solomon sent Benaiah to drag him away from the altar and execute him. When Benaiah ordered Joab to step away from the altar or be dragged away, Joab declared that he preferred to die at the altar. Benaiah hesitated to act. Instead, he reported to Solomon what Joab had said.

"If Joab wants to die at the altar, so be it!" Solomon decreed. "Then bury him on his property out in the desert."

The grim order was carried out, ending the life of a man who had been a very capable army commander, but who had for years faced the penalty of death because of his brazen acts of treacherous murder. (I Kings 2:28-34; II Samuel 3:26-27; 20:8-10.)

Benaiah then became the undisputed commander of the army of Israel, something that hadn't been possible while Joab and his supporters had been around to interfere. At the same time Solomon put Zadok the priest in Abiathar's place. (I Kings 2:35.) Zadok was of the family of Eleazar, and thus the priesthood returned to the family God had first chosen to be priests. (I Chronicles 6.)

No Mollycoddling of Criminals

Next Solomon sent for Shimei, the Benjamite who had cursed David. David had told Solomon that such an untrustworthy man shouldn't be allowed to live too long.

"Get a home for yourself here in Jerusalem," Solomon ordered Shimei. "Then stay here. If you ever go outside the walls, you'll meet with death. If you wish to continue living, stay in this city."

"You are a good man," Shimei grinned with relief at the king as he bowed low. "Your humble and thankful servant will do as you say." (I Kings 2:36-38.)

Three years later two of Shimei's servants ran away from his home and hid themselves in the Philistine city of Gath. Shimei was determined to get the two back. When he was told where they were, he took other servants to Gath, found the runaway couple and brought them back to Jerusalem. All this was reported to Solomon, who had Shimei brought before him.

"I warned you that if you ever left Jerusalem you would be responsible for your death," Solomon reminded the trembling Benjamite. "You promised then that you would obey that restriction. Why have you broken your word? Don't you realize that you're now subject to death? But even if you hadn't gone out of Jerusalem, you are still guilty of cursing my father the king, and for that wickedness it's God's judgment that you pay the death penalty."

By this time Shimei was too frightened to answer. At a gesture from the king, soldiers removed Shimei from the palace. A little later he was executed. (I Kings 2:39-46.)

Solomon Marries Pharaoh's Daughter

Although God had told the Israelites that they shouldn't intermarry with those of other nations, Solomon desired to marry a daughter of the king of Egypt. There were many beautiful women in Israel, but the king had received reports that the Egyptian princess was so beautiful that he made a special effort to become friendly with the Egyptian king. Pharaoh was pleased that Israel's leader would make such harmonious gestures. It wasn't difficult, after that, to arrange for the Egyptian woman to be brought to Jerusalem, where she was married to Solomon. (I Kings 3:1.)

At that time Solomon built a new palace and continued construction on a stronger wall around Jerusalem, started by David. Because matters went so well in Israel, Solomon declared a special day of worship at Gibeon, where the tabernacle was. In front of it was the brass altar that had been made by the Israelites when they were on their way from Egypt to Canaan. There Solomon and many of his people sacrificed to God. (I Kings 3:2-4; II Chronicles 1:1-6.)

That night Solomon was weary from the many activities of the day, which included a moving speech to the men of high rank in the nation. The king fell into a deep sleep. He dreamed that he met God, and that God told him that because he had been obedient in so many things, he could have anything he wished to ask for as a special gift from the Creator.

"You have already given me much by being so merciful to my father and allowing me to sit on the throne of Israel," Solomon said. "I don't have the wisdom I should have as king. There are problems and decisions that perplex me. I don't know sometimes which way to turn."

I want to choose the right ways because a great nation should have great leadership. Above all things I choose to ask you for special wisdom with which to rightly and justly rule your people." (I Kings 3:5-9; II Chronicles 1:7-10.)

Solomon dreamed that he prostrated himself before God during an uncomfortable silence that followed. Had God expected him to ask for something greater than wisdom? Should he have asked for good health for his people or for some other thing that would have been less personal?

Finally God spoke.

A Divine Gift of Wisdom

"Because you have asked for wisdom with which to rule well, I shall grant you wisdom that is greater than that of any man. Your wisdom will surpass that of anyone who has ever lived, and will be greater than that of anyone to live in the future. I am pleased that you didn't ask for long life, riches or death to all your enemies. Therefore I shall also give you wealth. You shall be the most honored of kings. If you obey my laws, I shall give you a long life."

When Solomon awoke he had a strange feeling that what had taken place was more than a dream. The more he pondered over it, the more clearly he realized that God had actually spoken to him. It was such an outstanding experience for him that as soon as he returned to Jerusalem, he made more burnt offerings and more peace offerings, and gave a special feast for his servants and those who worked with him in the governing of Israel. (I Kings 3:10-15; II Chronicles 1:11- 13.)

An example of the wisdom God gave to Solomon is shown in the case of two women of low character who came before the king to both claim the same child. They lived in the same house. One gave birth to a baby. The other gave birth to a child three days later. The woman who had the first birth claimed that the other woman accidentally lay on her own child and smothered it.

"When she discovered it was dead," the first woman told the king, "she came into my room at night, while I was asleep, and stole my infant son from me. She put her dead son next to me. When I awoke to nurse him, I found him lifeless. I thought at the time that it was mine, but in the morning I discovered it wasn't my child. This is my child you see before you. I want him back."

"But it didn't happen the way she told it," the second woman said to Solomon. "This baby is mine. I didn't steal it from her. The dead baby is hers."

Solomon knew that one of the women wasn't telling the truth. Probably he could tell which one it was, but he wanted to show up the untruthful one before those present. He called for a soldier with a sword to come before him. When the man strode in, weapon in hand, Solomon instructed him to take the baby.

"Cut this infant in two!" the king ordered the startled soldier. "Then give half to this woman and the other to that woman."

"Don't!" exclaimed the true mother, leaping forward in anguished excitement. "Give her the baby! Please don't harm it!"

"Don't listen to her!" the other woman blurted out. "That's enough!" Solomon said, holding up a restraining hand toward the women and the soldier. "Give the child to the woman who doesn't want you to harm it. She tried to save it, and that proves that she is its mother."

Reports of this matter, as well as others that had to do with Solomon's decisions spread around the nation. People could discern that Solomon was being inspired by God. Respect for the king of Israel grew with the news of how wisely he handled problems. God was keeping his promises made to Solomon in the dream. (I Kings 3:16-28.)

Solomon enjoyed a peaceable and prosperous reign as the years went on. Nearby kingdoms such as Moab, Ammon, Syria and Damascus paid tribute to him. Including all the nations that came under his authority, Solomon's kingdom extended from the Euphrates River on the north and east to Egypt and the Great Sea (the Mediterranean) on the south and west.

Solomon Grows in Fame and Influence

From all parts of the land food was brought to Solomon's table. To feed everyone in the royal establishment the provisions for just one day included two hundred and forty bushels of fine flour, four hundred and eighty bushels of meal, ten stall-fattened bulls, twenty bulls from pastures and a hundred sheep and goats. To this was added varying numbers of deer, antelope and fattened fowl. How many people were fed every day by this amount of food isn't stated in the Bible, but there must have been quite a crowd. (I Kings 4:1-25.)

God forbade Israel to maintain cavalry of chariot horses as part of a standing army. (Deuteronomy 17:14-16.) God didn't want the nation to build a mighty war machine that would cause the nation to lose sight of God as their protector and provoke the jealousy of other nations. However, Solomon accumulated thousands of war-horses. (I Kings 4:26-28; II Chronicles 1:14- 17.) When war did come in a later age, the Israelites had less success in battle, using cavalry, than they did before they had any to use.

Until Solomon's time the seats of learning were presumed to be in Egypt and the east, where the Arabians, Chaldeans and Persians lived. In these nations were a few men famous for their exceptional -- and sometimes unusual -- knowledge. There were seers and sages, and even wizards who received their information from demons.

Because God had imbued Solomon with an exceptional mind, good sense and an understanding of people and things, he had more wisdom than any of the so-called wise men. He also had more knowledge than most, having a God-given ability to apply himself diligently to observing, studying and remembering. He could speak with authority on anything from small insects to animals and from minute plants to large trees. He knew much about history, mathematics, music and other subjects.

Probably he had at least a basic understanding of astronomy. He wrote more than a thousand songs. Hundreds of his proverbs, of which he produced thousands, are preserved in the book of Proverbs in the Bible for our learning. Solomon's fame for wisdom and knowledge became so great that kings from all nations came in person or sent representatives to ask his opinions and advice. (I Kings 4:29-34.)

This was the result of the gift from God. When the Creator makes a promise, He carries it out in full and often unexpected measure.

Solomon Begins the Temple

Over a hundred miles north of Jerusalem, close to the territory of Asher, on the eastern edge of the Great Sea, was the little kingdom of Tyre. Hiram, king of Tyre, had always been friendly toward David. As a gesture of goodwill, he had sent craftsmen and materials, about thirty years before, for building David's home at Jerusalem. Much of it was constructed with cedar that grew near Tyre. (II Samuel 5:11; I Chronicles 14:1.)

When Hiram heard that Solomon had become king, he sent emissaries to bring congratulations. Knowing what Hiram had done for his father, Solomon was appreciative. (I Kings 5:1.) It was then that the idea came to Solomon to employ the excellent craftsmen of Tyre to work on the temple he knew should be built during his reign.

"You will remember that my father wanted to build a temple that would be dedicated to God," Solomon told Hiram in a return message taken to Tyre. "He had so many wars to fight in his time that it wasn't God's will that such a project should be undertaken. Now Israel is at peace. I intend to build that temple while my nation is free from strife. It would please me and my people if your nation would supply cedar and fir trees for lumber, for which I will pay you in gold, silver or any produce of Israel you desire. I also wish to hire your expert craftsmen to work with the men I shall supply as laborers." (I Kings 5:2-6; II Chronicles 2:1-10.)

Hiram was happy to learn of this. He sent messengers back soon with a letter to the king of Israel.

"I am honored to do what I can to help you build the temple," the letter read. "I shall supply all the fir, cedar and any other kind of trees you need. My men will move the timber down from the mountains to the sea after cutting it to the sizes you require. Then they will float it southward to Joppa, and from there you can transport it to Jerusalem. In payment for this, we choose to receive produce from your country." (I Kings 5:7-9; II Chronicles 2:11-16.)

Eventually the timber, carefully cut to Solomon's orders, arrived in Jerusalem. In return, Solomon sent great amounts of wheat, barley, oil and wine. Part of it was for Hiram's workers and part for Hiram and his household. The part for his household was sent every year for many years after that. (I Kings 5:10-12.)

At that time there were many people in Israel who weren't Israelites. Some were prisoners of war from David's reign. Many others had been drawn to Israel because that nation had become so famous and respected due to Solomon's reputation for learning and wisdom. And many came because Israel was peaceful and prosperous. When Solomon found that there were 153,600 such people, he decided to use them in the preparation and transport of materials for the building of the temple, which had long before been planned by David, through God's inspiration, down to the smallest detail.

Now it was Solomon's duty to carry out those plans. He put seventy thousand of the aliens in Israel to work leveling the temple site and transporting stones and timbers. Eighty thousand were used to cut gigantic foundation and building stones in the nearby hills. Thirty thousand men, picked mostly from the Israelites, were sent in relays of ten thousand at a time to help the Tyrians with the cutting of timber around Mt. Lebanon. Each unit worked a month then rested for two months while another unit worked. There were so many workers in all that more than three thousand foremen were required to oversee them. (II Chronicles 2:17-18; I Kings 5:13-18.)

For years, this vast force labored to supply and prepare timber and stone for the temple. All the materials brought to Jerusalem were already cut, smoothed and grooved or bored to exact measurements, so that their placing together was the only process that remained, though that part required seven years of labor because of the care and perfection involved. Huge squared and polished stones, said by some writers to have been up to thirty feet in length and as much as six feet thick, were slowly moved into the city by large gangs of men and work animals. These were for the foundation. They were set into the top of Mt. Moriah, where a threshing floor had once been, and where David had later built an altar on which to make special sacrifices because of a plague that had come to Israel.

With workmen teeming over Mt. Moriah, one can imagine that there was generally quite a din. The noises of tools on wood and stone might have been heard all over the city. But it didn't happen that way. There was no sound of a metal tool because all cutting, trimming, grinding, drilling and polishing had previously taken place. (I Kings 6; II Chronicles 3.)

Slowly the temple took shape.

Chapter 109

Solomon Dedicates God's Temple

IN THE EARLY years of Solomon's reign the top of Mt. Moriah began to look much different than it did about a decade before. Then there was only a threshing floor there. The threshing operations had been removed so that David could build a special altar. (II Samuel 24:15-25.)

Lay a Firm Foundation

In Solomon's reign the altar was removed and the top of the small mountain was leveled off to make a much wider area. The leveled mountain had to receive the huge foundation stones that were laboriously moved in to form the base of the temple and its surrounding flat area. All this was encompassed by a stone wall. Within it came into being, some of the most elaborate and ornate structures that had ever been built. (I Kings 6.) These beautiful buildings and their highly decorative interiors had been planned by David, but God had forbidden him to carry out their construction because David had so often relied on his army to protect Israel instead of relying on God. (I Kings 5:2-3.)

The chief architect and skilled metal worker on this great project was a man from Tyre by the name of Hiram, the same name as that of the king of that country. Besides putting plans for the temple into workable order, he also designed and labored on much of the decorative work and on such things as vessels, tables, lamps and pillars (I Kings 7.)

Ever since the tabernacle had been constructed when the Israelites had been at Mt. Sinai, it had consisted mainly of fabric and skins so that it could be taken down and carried. Now, at last, the tabernacle was replaced by a beautiful, solid structure of stone, timber, gold, silver, precious stones, carved figures, dazzling colors of linen and carved palm trees, flowers and fruit. As in the original tabernacle, there was the outer area, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The Ark of the Covenant was later placed in the Holy of Holies.

To the sides and back of the main buildings were added chambers for the priests and attendants, and rooms for storing treasures. The portable brass laver for the priests to wash in, made at Mt. Sinai, was replaced by a round brass, bowl-shaped container twenty-one feet across and supported by twelve large brass bulls.

The main sections of the temple were much larger than similar sections of the tabernacle. The outer part, or porch, was about forty-two feet wide. The main building was floored with fir and had inner walls of cedar. Both were then covered with gold. Aside from the priest's chambers, this building was about a hundred and twenty-six feet long, forty-two feet wide and sixty-three feet high. That wasn't a huge building, but with other structures, stone-paved court, towers and walls, the whole establishment covered several acres.

The furnishings of the temple were many, including chains, candlesticks, tongs, bowls, snuffers, basins, spoons, and censers to burn incense in. All these were fashioned from brass, gold or silver, and in a style and skill that made them outstanding in appearance and quality. (I Kings 6 and 7; II Chronicles 3 and 4.) The temple was finished, along with its furnishings in the eleventh year of Solomon's reign. (I Kings 6:1, 37-38; II Chronicles 3:1-2.) In the next several months Solomon placed in the temple the very fine furnishings that David had dedicated for the temple.

Solomon's Invitation

Almost a year after the temple was completed, when abundant crops had been harvested and it was time for the Festival of Tabernacles, Solomon invited the leaders of all the tribes of Israel and all of the chiefs of the clans to come to Jerusalem. (I Kings 8:1-2; II Chronicles 5:1-3.)

It wasn't necessary for the king to invite anyone to Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles, because that was an assembly commanded by God, just as it still is. (See Leviticus 23:33-35, 41; Zechariah 14:16-19; Deuteronomy 16:13-15.) Observing God's annual Holy Days is as important to God and to obedient people as is the observance of the weekly Sabbath. (John 4:45; 7:10; Acts 18:21.) Solomon knew that Israelites who respected their Creator would come to the Fall Festival at Jerusalem of their own accord. But on this occasion he invited them to arrive a week earlier to attend the dedication of the temple. (II Chronicles 7:8-9.)

Thousands upon thousands of Israelites poured into Jerusalem to attend the greatest occasion since the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. There was an elaborate parade in which the Ark of the Covenant was brought from the place where David had housed it. The priests and their assistants followed, bearing the costly equipment, such as bowls and candlesticks, with which the tabernacle in the wilderness had been furnished.

The ark was carefully and ceremoniously deposited beyond the holy veil in the Holy of Holies, where had been constructed two cherubim of olive wood, overlaid with gold. Standing side by side, each was twenty-one feet high and with two wings ten and a half feet long, so that their four wings extended out from the figures for a distance of forty-two feet. The ark was placed beneath these towering, gleaming statues.

At that time there was nothing inside the ark except the two tables of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments. They had been there since Moses had put them in the ark at Mt. Sinai. (I Kings 8:3-9; II Chronicles 5:4-10.)

During the parade and the ceremonious furnishing of the temple and even long afterward, sacrifices were made at many places in Jerusalem by priests who weren't otherwise occupied. So many sheep and oxen were sacrificed and eaten in the next several days that the number was never known or recorded. The multitudes of people who had come to the city showed such an enthusiasm for making offerings that Solomon was quite pleased.

What was much more important was how much God was pleased. He must have been in some measure, or the next awe-inspiring event wouldn't have taken place.

Priests were coming in and out of the holy area. At a brief interval when all were outside for a musical portion of the dedication, a strange, thick glowing cloud suddenly filled the temple.

Nearby were the many singers and musicians performing at the time, possibly rendering the 136th Psalm written by David. When they noticed what was taking place, it was difficult for them to continue. Some of the priests tried to get back inside the building, but quickly retreated when they found that the mysterious cloudiness was more than just an ordinary mass of vapor. Then other people who were close to the temple saw the strange cloud. The festive noise and music died down to be replaced by an awed silence. (I Kings 8:10-11; II Chronicles 5:11-14.)

Solomon was standing facing the altar, which contained wood and flesh laid on it for a burnt offering. He turned to the crowd and enthusiastically pointed to the cloud-like mass that wafted through the doors and windows of the temple.

"This is a sign that God is with us!" he exclaimed loudly to the people. "The Eternal -- Yahweh - - the God of Israel has accepted the house we have built for Him! This has become His dwelling place!"

While the crowd stood in respectful awe Solomon ascended a brass platform erected especially for the occasion. From there he reminded the people how merciful God had been to them ever since their ancestors had left Egypt, and how the temple had at last come into being. Then the king dropped to his knees, held his hands toward the sky and voiced a prayer with such volume that it could be heard by thousands. He praised God for how great He is. He observed that the temple wasn't much of a residence, compared to the whole universe, for a Creator who was great enough to fill all the universe. Solomon asked that God would put His name on the temple nevertheless, as a place where He would come to be close to His people, and that God would listen to their prayers, forgive their sins when they repented, and rescue them from their enemies, famine, disease, drought and pestilence. (I Kings 8: 12-53; II Chronicles 6:1-42.)

The Eternal Answers

Right after Solomon had spoken the last words of the eloquent and moving address to God, a blinding bolt of fire hissed down from the sky, followed by a sharp, deafening crack of thunder. The fire struck squarely on the altar. There was a burst of thick smoke. When it cleared away only seconds later, the wood and animal flesh that had been there were entirely gone!

God's dramatic manner of showing that He was pleased with the temple, the sacrifices and Solomon's prayer caused the thousands of startled onlookers to bow with their faces to the ground in reverence. (II Chronicles 7:1-3.)

To encourage the crowd, Solomon waved to the musicians and singers to continue. They soon regained their composure and went on with their playing and singing with more zest than ever. Gradually the people got to their feet and joined them in song. The sound of their spirited voices could be heard for miles. Meanwhile, the vapor-like cloud continued slowly swirling through the temple, still delaying the priests in carrying out many of their intended duties. A great part of them joined the musicians with instruments of their own, adding to the volume of the music.

The people were so inspired by the unusual events at the dedication of the temple that they moved into the days of the Festival of Tabernacles with an exceptionally happy and worshipful attitude. There was much activity, including informative addresses from the king and from the high priest, musical concerts, periods of mass worship and prayer, dancing, visiting, dining and the sacrificing and eating of many animals. It was a happy time. The occasion is one commanded by God for the benefit of His people. It is to be observed by God's New Testament Church also, although there is now no need of sacrificing animal flesh because Christ is the sacrifice for those who repent, believe and obey God's laws.

Twenty-two thousand cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep were sacrificed and eaten at the temple dedication alone. Because the main brass altar was too small to handle the offerings that were to be consumed, another temporary altar was erected nearby. (I Kings 8:54-64; II Chronicles 7:4-7.)

A Palace, Too

The cloud departed from the temple after the seven-day festival -- plus an eighth day that was a Holy Day -- was over. The Israelites returned to their homes in a joyful and thankful state of mind. It had been a prosperous year for them, and they had been brought closer to God because of their experiences at the temple and the inspiration and instruction they had received from God through Solomon and the priests. (I Kings 8:65-66; II Chronicles 7:8-11.) Years later Solomon wrote, among his many wise observations, one that fitted the occasion well: "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice." (Proverbs 29:2.)

The cost of the temple was more than paid for by the offerings set aside by David for the project, and by other offerings made to God over the early years of Solomon's reign.

Solomon's next project was the building of a palace for himself. It was thirteen years in construction! It took longer to build than the temple because fewer men worked on it and the king wasn't as anxious to finish the palace as he had been to finish the building dedicated to God. The main section was a beautiful structure of costly stone and cedar more than two hundred feet long, over a hundred feet wide and as high as a modern six-story office building. In this part was Solomon's sumptuous throne room, furnished with costly objects and decorated with precious stones set in lavish areas of gold. Here was where thousands of problems were brought to him, and where he made so many of his wise judgments and decisions.

Another section was built for Solomon's wife, the Egyptian princess who had been brought up from her native land years before. (I Kings 7-89:24; II Chronicles 8:11.)

Other areas contained dining rooms, game rooms and guest quarters. One ancient authority refers to Solomon's palace as being a somewhat mysterious place, inasmuch as the exact number of rooms remained a secret. Many of them were allegedly underground, some connected by obscure passages to vaults.

Whatever the facts, the outstanding one was that Solomon's palace was a most unusual residence. It was surrounded by vast porches built of huge blocks of stone. Beyond the porches were beautiful gardens embellished with unique sculpture. Porticos, pillars, walls, towers and gateways were supported, connected or bedecked by hundreds of cedar beams.

As with the temple, much of the material for the palace came from Tyre or nearby territory in exchange for produce from Israel. And again Solomon hired the expert artisans from Tyre.

"Obey Me and I Will Make You Great"

After Solomon finished building the temple and palace, God contacted him a second time. Again it was in the same manner in which He had appeared to Solomon after he had become king and when he had made special sacrifices at Gibeon. He was awakened from a deep sleep by a firm, commanding voice speaking his name. Perhaps he was only dreaming that he had awakened. However it happened, he realized later that it was God's voice or the voice of an angel bringing a message from the Creator.

"When you dedicated the temple to me," the voice uttered, "I answered your prayer by hallowing that place. I put my name there and occupied the temple with the desire to remain there on and on into the future.

"If you will obey me as well as did David your father, and if you will live according to my commandments, statutes and judgments, men from your family will be on the throne over all Israel forever. I made the same promise to your father. But if you or your children turn from my laws to follow pagan religions, I will cut off Israel from the land I provided. Your nation will become only a word spoken in mockery and derision. I shall leave that high temple. It will fall into ruins and people passing will ask what I have done to it. They shall learn that it happened because Israel forsook their God, who had rescued them from Egypt. If they choose to follow other gods, those gods won't be able to rescue the people from the evil I shall bring on them." (I Kings 9:1-9; II Chronicles 7:12-22.)

After this reminder, Solomon renewed his determination to continue to obey God. His intentions and attitude at that time were right. He was thankful for his personal prosperity and that of his nation. But the king had certain strong desires that could cause trouble for the whole nation unless they were controlled.

When the complete cost of Solomon's palace and his other public buildings was finally summed up, it was evident that produce from Israel wasn't enough to fairly pay the king of Tyre for all he had provided for King Solomon's projects.

Solomon decided that the difference could be generously made up for by giving the king of Tyre twenty towns in the north border region of the territories of the Israelite tribes of Asher and Naphtali.

These towns were inhabited by Canaanites, living in the nation Israel. King Hiram of Tyre was anxious to learn just what he had obtained. He set out on a tour of his reward, pleased that his small kingdom could be enlarged by so many towns.

Hiram was somewhat shocked when he found that the towns were inhabited by mostly rather poor farm workers. Because he preferred to deal in other kinds of commerce, he was disappointed that there was so little activity except in agriculture. The message Hiram soon sent to Solomon was not a happy one for the king of Israel.

"I have decided that it would not be to the best interests of either of us for me to accept the proffered towns. Undoubtedly they are of much greater value to Israel than to my nation. For you they could be necessary fortifications. For me they are a bit too far inland to be of sufficient benefit." (I Kings 9:10-14; II Chronicles 8:1-2.)

This refusal of the towns, a matter which Solomon considered somewhat of an indignity, meant that some other way would have to be found for paying Israel's debt to Tyre.

Possibly the king could have come up with some means besides that he finally chose. (I Kings 9:15.) It had a part in the eventual downfall of his nation. It has been a cause of other nations failing financially. Our nation is burdened heavily with it.

Solomon decided that he would pay Israel's debt on the palace and other public projects simply by demanding more taxes from the people.

Chapter 110

King Solomon's Sins

TO PAY A DEBT to the king of Tyre, Solomon required that the Israelites pay more taxes. With this extra revenue he also built a part of the wall around Jerusalem and repaired and fortified several cities to the northwest and north.

Most of the hard labor on the cities was done by Canaanites living in those vicinities. These Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites were drafted for work, and were regarded almost as slaves. (I Kings 9:15-23; II Chronicles 8:1-10.)

Solomon's Fabulous Voyages

About the same time Solomon increased his fighting force by adding to the numbers of his horsemen and chariots. He even established a navy, but it was more for commercial purposes than for war. The home port was in the Gulf of Aqaba, the east finger of the Red Sea reaching up toward the rock-walled city of Petra. With these ships the king hoped to establish trade relations with distant countries that could supply unusual produce and rare items.

The Israelites had recently become a maritime people. But Solomon had to ask aid of the Tyrians, many of whom were sailors because their people had lived for generations on the eastern shore of the Great Sea. Tyrians trained a number of Israelites in the crafts of shipbuilding and the skills of sailing. Probably the ships were manned by crews that were more Tyrian than Israelite. (I Kings 9:26-28; II Chronicles 8:17-18.)

The ambitious voyages, some three years long, turned out to be profitable for Solomon. In one trip alone his ships would bring back cargoes that were worth fabulous sums. They sailed down the Red Sea, probably putting in at ports on the northeast coast of Africa. From there they went eastward into the Arabian Sea and on to the distant ports of India, Ceylon, Malaya and Japan.

When the ships returned, they brought spices, apes, peacocks, gold, silver, ivory, rare kinds of wood and other kinds of valuable and unique objects that stirred up deep interest and wonder in the many Israelites who had the opportunity to view them or own some of them. (I Kings 10:11- 12, 14-15, 22-23; II Chronicles 9:10-11, 13-14, 21-22.)

Queen of Sheba Visits Solomon

Meanwhile reports of Solomon's wisdom and wealth stirred the feminine curiosity of the Queen of Sheba to such an extent that she decided to make a trip to Jerusalem to find out in person how much the reports were exaggerated. The land of Sheba lay in Southern Arabia and in Ethiopia and Upper Egypt and Nubia. At that time the Queen of Sheba (Sheba was a son of Cush, the son of Ham) ruled Ethiopia and Egypt. Historians have so falsified Egyptian history that they have completely lost the identity of this famous queen who is dated in history books over 500 years too early.

The Queen of Sheba, as she is referred to in the Bible, set out from her capital city Thebes with many servants and a large train of camels loaded with spices, gold and jewels. This wealth she presented to Solomon as a gift of friendship when she arrived in Jerusalem.

No Question Too Hard

To test the power of Solomon's mind, the queen asked him the answers to many difficult riddles. In ancient times this kind of mental gymnastic was a sort of equivalent of the higher type of intelligence test of today, except that it was regarded more of a game or a matching of wits. Solomon gave such prompt and outstanding answers that his guest was startled. She then asked him about many practical things, including her personal problems. The helpful and informative replies she received kindled in her a growing respect for the Israelite king.

In the days that followed during her long visit, the queen was amazed at the beauty of the temple, the magnificence of Solomon's palace, the unusual design of his throne, the extraordinary choice of food at his table, the faithful obedience of his servants, the efficiency of his staff members and officers, his superb clothing and the rich attire of those about him and the way in which he made sacrifices to his God with such roaring fires.

"When I heard glowing reports about your wisdom and prosperity, I didn't believe them," the queen admitted to Solomon. "Since coming here I've found that the reports should have been twice as exciting and colorful to completely inform me. Israel must be very happy to have a king like you. Your God must indeed love your people to allow them to have such a wise ruler." (I Kings 10:1-10; II Chronicles 9:1-9.)

When the queen prepared to leave, Solomon didn't allow her camels to be taken back unloaded. She had given him gold of highest quality and of enormous value, besides costly stones and an immense quantity of spices. Not to be outdone, Solomon made a generous remark that could have cost him half his kingdom if his guest had been a very greedy person.

"If there is anything I have that you desire," the king told her, "all you have to do is ask and it shall become yours."

After she had made her choices, Solomon had them carefully packed for her camels to carry. In addition to what the queen asked for, he gave her many gifts he was certain she would like to have but for which she modestly refrained from asking. (I Kings 10:13; II Chronicles 9:12.)

For a long time after the Queen of Sheba had returned up the Nile River to her native country, Solomon continued to prosper. In the course of a year it wasn't unusual for him to receive incredible quantities of gold.

He was given regular tribute by bordering nations. He had established trade agreements with others. His merchant caravans were constantly on the move to and from the north, east and south.

From Lower Egypt he brought up an increasing number of chariots and horses. Horses were in demand in Israel. (I Kings 10:24-26; II Chronicles 9:23-24.) God had forbidden their use in war. (Deuteronomy 17:14-16.) Solomon possibly reasoned that this ban applied only to the past. At any rate, he unwisely established a standing cavalry and a chariot brigade. After he obtained all the horses he wanted, those that continued coming from Egypt and elsewhere were sold at a profit to people who wanted them for domestic or sporting purposes. Many mules from Egypt also added to revenue for the king. (I Kings 10:28-29; II Chronicles 9:25, 28.)

Lust of the Flesh

The Bible states in a figurative manner that silver was so common in Jerusalem that it attracted little more attention than did the stones on the ground. Solomon had so much silver and considered it so low in value that he wouldn't allow any drinking vessels in his palace that were made of silver. All cups, chalices, goblets and tumblers had to be made of gold. Even some of the equipment for his army was made of gold instead of brass. Some of the soldiers' shields used at state functions were of great value because of the gold content.

With all the income Israel's king received because of his keen business ability, plus the tributes and gifts he received, he became the wealthiest of kings at that time. But this wouldn't have come about without the help of God in many direct and indirect ways. (I Kings 10:16-17, 27; II Chronicles 9:15-16, 27.)

While his wealth was increasing, Solomon remained faithful to God in the regularly required sacrifices and in most other matters of obedience. At the same time he had a growing weakness that increased with his wealth and his fame. It was the desire for the love of many women. His ability and means to obtain them was a great temptation to him. In spite of his wisdom, his choice of wives started with that of an Egyptian princess related, by marriage, to the Queen of Sheba. Possibly this had some bearing on the trade pact he developed with Egypt in his early years as king of Israel. From then on he seemed to have a special liking for foreign women, including those from the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians and Hittites. (I Kings 11:1- 2.)

Israel's powerful fighting force kept the pagan nations subdued. Solomon not only succeeded in keeping them in their respective territories, but he included some or parts of some of them in his expanding kingdom. They paid regular, heavy tributes. These were submitted in the form of gold, silver, precious stones, brass work, cloth and livestock. (II Chronicles 9:26, 28.) It was possible that occasionally a young and pretty daughter of a king or chief was also included, eventually becoming another of Solomon's growing number of wives, of which there were seven hundred! Besides these, the king had three hundred concubines, or secondary wives. (I Kings 11:3.)

When Israel had come to Canaan, God had forbidden His chosen people to intermarry with those of Canaan or nearby nations. The Creator knew that intermarriage with foreigners would result in the Israelites being drawn into the worship of idols and false gods. (Exodus 34:11-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-6; I Kings 11:2.) That is exactly what happened to Solomon, regardless of his brilliant mind and deep wisdom.

A Thousand Versions of Idolatry

During his years of attempting to please or at least stay on the friendly side of a thousand wives, Solomon was asked by many of them to consider turning to their several gods. At first the king gave in part way to the wishes of his favorites by promising them that he would consider the building of shrines and altars for the worship of their pagan deities.

Solomon gradually lost sight of God and became totally concerned in physical things.

As time passed Solomon made casual promises to so many of his wives that he found it was easier to carry out his promises than it was to listen to repeated, nagging requests – though probably he almost willingly carried out some of the favors because of his special affection for some of his women.

Solomon therefore ordered small temples to be erected for the worship of the Zidonian goddess Ashtoreth (also known as Astarte or Easter), for Chemosh the god of the Moabites and for Molech and Milcom, idols of the Ammonites. This was done on the mount just south of the Mount of Olives, in full sight of the temple dedicated to God. (I Kings 11:4-8.)

Meanwhile, Solomon was paying a price for his excesses. Instead of becoming wiser and more mentally alert as he reached middle age, his mind lost much of its God-given brilliance. At that same time he aged rapidly in a physical way, insomuch that he looked older than he was. His unwise manner of living was leading him toward an early grave.

Then came a stinging message from the Creator, whose anger had been steadily growing because of Solomon's turning to idolatry. Whether it came to him in a dream or through some prophet who was close to God, what Solomon learned was a staggering shock to him.

"You have ignored my repeated warning about turning to other gods," God told the king. "Because you have done this thing and have broken so many of my laws, I have decided to take the kingdom of Israel from you!

"I am going to give it to one of your servants. But for the sake of David your father, I will not completely do it while you are alive. You are going to live long enough to witness the start of great trouble in this nation. After you are dead and your son has inherited the throne, it will quickly be wrested from him. Again, out of respect for David and for the sake of Jerusalem, I shall allow your son to retain leadership over the tribe of Judah." (I Kings 11:9-13.)

Years previously, during David's rule, God had spared the life of a young Edomite prince named Hadad when Joab had tried to kill all the males of Edom. Hadad and some of the people had escaped to Egypt. Hadad later returned to his country to enlist a small but powerful army with which to plague Israel. This occurred at the time God told Solomon Israel would be troubled. Another man, by the name of Rezon, a captain in a Syrian army David had defeated, escaped to Damascus and established another small army with which to give Solomon's soldiers more grief.

These two men were used by God to plague Israel, especially during Solomon's last days. (I Kings 11:14-25.)

And Now -- a Real Competitor

Then a third man came on the scene to give Solomon even more concern. He was Jeroboam, an ambitious and capable man whom Solomon employed as the superintendent of public work projects in and around Jerusalem. He was the servant God had mentioned in His recent, dire prediction to Solomon.

One day as Jeroboam was coming out of Jerusalem, a man stepped up to him when no one else was around and asked to speak with him. At first Jeroboam didn't recognize the fellow, who suddenly removed a new coat he was wearing. Then Jeroboam recognized him as the prophet Ahijah, who had succeeded Nathan and Gad, prophets in David's time. Ahijah's next surprising move was to violently tear his coat into twelve pieces. He kept two of the pieces and handed the other ten to the astonished Jeroboam.

"These ten pieces of cloth represent ten tribes of Israel," Ahijah said. "Take them."

"But why are you giving them to me?" Jeroboam asked.

"God has told me that He is about to tear the kingdom of Israel from Solomon, and that He will give you ten of the tribes over which to rule," Ahijah explained.

"But why me?" Jeroboam queried "And why only ten tribes?"

"Isn't it enough to learn that God chose you?" Ahijah pointed out. "And aren't ten tribes enough? For David's sake and for the sake of Jerusalem, Judah will remain under the rulership of Solomon's family. You will become king over ten of the tribes, which Solomon's family will lose because of the king's disobedience in turning to pagan gods and breaking so many of God's laws. God has instructed me to tell you that if you will be obedient, you and those after you of your family will continue to rule the ten tribes." (I Kings 11:26-39.)

Later, after Jeroboam had thought over the exciting event, he could scarcely contain himself. He had much to say to his family and friends about what he was going to do. His statements soon reached Solomon, who became so envious and angry that he sent soldiers after Jeroboam.

"That man is a traitor!" Solomon declared. "He is scheming to seize my throne! Bring him to me, and I shall sentence him to death!"

Jeroboam had friends in the palace who warned him before the soldiers arrived. He escaped from Jerusalem, but he knew that it would be dangerous to stay anywhere in Palestine or even in bordering countries. He fled all the way to Egypt, where the young king there was pleased to harbor a man of Jeroboam's ability. (I Kings 11:40.)

The highly talented and studious Solomon suddenly died at an age when he should have been at the prime of his wisdom -- at about sixty.

If he had been a more temperate and obedient king he probably would have lived for many more years. The passing of such a famous ruler was a mournful event for Israel and for many people outside Israel. Solomon had reigned for forty years after having become king at about 20 years of age (I Kings 11:41-43; II Chronicles 9:29-31.) Through him God not only did great things for Israel of that time, but also for people of today who gain from reading the books of the Bible Solomon wrote -- Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

Solomon designated his son Rehoboam to succeed him. After a period of mourning for Solomon, thousands of people gathered at Shechem, about thirty-five miles north of Jerusalem, to witness Rehoboam's being made king. Among those in the crowd was Jeroboam, who had returned from Egypt when he heard of Solomon's death. (I Kings 12:1-2; II Chronicles 10:1-2.)

When Rehoboam appeared before the people on the inaugural platform, he expected them to cheer, but they didn't. He glared disdainfully at them, but his expression changed when he saw Jeroboam moving toward the platform. Many men of high rank were pressing in behind him. None of them looked either pleased or friendly.

Chapter 111

A Kingdom Divided

REHOBAM, Solomon's son, had come before a public gathering to be proclaimed king officially (I Kings 12:1; II Chronicles 10:1), although he had actually been Israel's new ruler from the time of his father's death. (I Kings 11:43.)

Rehoboam's attitude was that of a young man accustomed to what great wealth could provide. He had little interest in the welfare of his people.

Jeroboam's Seditious

Conflict with his subjects started on his inauguration day. Jeroboam, to whom God had promised rulership of ten tribes of Israel, led a crowd of men from all parts of the nation up to the platform where the new king stood. (I Kings 12:2-3.) "If you will permit me, sir, I have something to say to you on behalf of the people," Jeroboam addressed Rehoboam.

The king stared impassively at Jeroboam. He resented what he considered an intrusion at a ceremony in which he was the star. He wanted to refuse Jeroboam, but knew that the crowd would be angry if he didn't agree to listen. Finally he nodded curtly to Jeroboam.

"For years your father has troubled us with heavy taxes," Jeroboam spoke out. "Lately he has forced many men of Israel into heavy labor on various projects. We can't continue under these conditions much longer. Now we're respectfully asking you to help us by lowering our taxes and stopping the draft of men into forced labor."

Rehoboam felt like asking Jeroboam and the others to go mind their own business. Instead, he managed to appear friendly and quite thoughtful, as though the suggestion deserved his royal consideration.

"What you have brought up is something I have thought about," he said. "I want to help my people. Come back here in three days. Meanwhile, I'll confer with my advisors. There will be a decision made by the time we get together again." (I Kings 12:4-5; II Chronicles 10:2-5.)

"Thank you," Jeroboam said, bowing. "If you will help us, we shall serve you well for as long as you are king."

As he promised, Rehoboam went to men who could advise him. First he asked the opinions of older men who had been consultants to Solomon. They told him that he would be wise to consider doing what the people asked, and that he would be looked up to as a good and fair ruler if he would help them out of their trouble. Later, Rehoboam conferred with younger men who were more inclined to his way of thinking.

"Why worry about what the people want?" they asked the king. "Taxes and forced labor aren't hurting them too much. If you decrease what your subjects should give, your income will decrease. Why let the people talk you into something you'll regret? Be stern with them. Show them who's running this nation!" (I Kings 12:6-11; II Chronicles 10:6-11.)

When Jeroboam returned with others to confer with the king, he wasn't too surprised at what happened. The new ruler strode regally out before the crowd and peered at the expectant faces. He was smiling, but his smile was more arrogant than friendly.

Rehoboam's Foolish Decision

"Three days ago you asked me to lower your taxes and demand less labor for projects in Israel," Rehoboam commenced. "I told you I would consult my advisors about these matters, and I did. Now you'll get my answer."

The king gazed about with a growing smile before he continued. Obviously he was savoring those moments while his audience hung on every word he uttered.

"You think my father taxed you too heavily and worked some of you too hard? Then you should appreciate how easy he was on you. I am young and have more competent men working with me and more projects in mind. Therefore I have more power than did my father, and so I am going to require more labor and heavier taxes. Some of you complained because my father's labor gang foremen struck you with ordinary leather whips when you became lazy. You didn't realize how well off you were then. From now on my foremen will beat you lazy ones with whips that have metal tips!" (I Kings 12:12-15; II Chronicles 10:12-15.)

There was silence among the people as Rehoboam's words sank in. Then an angry, muffled muttering could be heard. It died out as the crowd slowly melted away. Jeroboam wasn't as disappointed as he appeared to be. He knew that the people were on the verge of revolting against the king. It was his opportunity to stir them up further, which he promptly did.

As a result, every tribe of Israel except Judah (and Benjamin, the small tribe whose territory adjoined that of Judah) rebelled against Rehoboam. As representatives of the ten tribes were returning in disappointment to their homes, Rehoboam sent the chief collector of taxes to speak to the representatives of the people.

Hours later an excited servant hurried to Rehoboam, who was still staying at Shechem, convinced that the people would passively submit to any extra burden he put on them.

"Adoram your head tax collector has been stoned to death!" the servant exclaimed. "There are reports that the people are prepared to take the lives of anyone who attempts to collect taxes. There are even rumors that an angry crowd is forming to come here and demand to talk to you!"

The frightened king didn't waste time calling for advisors to advise him to leave. It was entirely his own idea to get to his chariot as soon as possible and head swiftly south on the road to Jerusalem, where he knew he would be safer among the people of his own tribe. (I Kings 12:16- 19; II Chronicles 10:16-19.)

While Rehoboam was establishing himself in the royal palace, leaders of the ten rebellious tribes met to form a nation separate from Judah and Benjamin. They started by declaring Jeroboam king. His leadership convinced them that he was best fitted to be over them. That was as God had planned it, so that a large part of Israel would be taken from the rule of Solomon's family. Otherwise Jeroboam wouldn't have been allowed to become a ruler as he wasn't of the royal line. (I Kings 12:20.)

Jeroboam's Idolatry

Reports of what was going on quickly reached Rehoboam. He began to realize that matters were much more serious than he had been given to believe. He gave orders that all the soldiers of Judah and Benjamin should be mustered to overrun the seceding tribes and force them back into allegiance to the government at Jerusalem.

One hundred and eighty thousand troops answered Rehoboam's call. Just when the king was about to send them into action, a prophet by the name of Shemaiah came to tell him and the people of Judah and Benjamin that God didn't want them to war against the other tribes.

"If you do," Shemaiah warned them, "God will surely bring some kind of sudden and severe punishment on you."

Rehoboam was afraid. Even though some of his young friends and advisors considered him cowardly for doing so, he wisely called off the planned attack.

"I happen to know that if we go to war against our brothers, God won't be with us in battle," he hesitantly explained to his astonished officers. "Dismiss the troops and send them back to their homes."

By striking the king with fear, God prevented a civil war He didn't want to take place. (I Kings 12:21-24; II Chronicles 11:1-4.)

One of the first things Jeroboam did as king was to rebuild and fortify the mountain town of Shechem, which he occupied with a small army after Rehoboam had fled. Shechem had been mostly in ruins since it had been ravaged by Abimelech nearly two hundred years before. Now Jeroboam planned to make it the seat of government of his kingdom. He also rebuilt and fortified the town of Penuel, located east of the Jordan near the Jabbok River. It was on a route to foreign cities, including Damascus to the northeast. Manned by Jeroboam's soldiers, it was an important outpost for checking on caravan traffic moving to and from Jerusalem. (I Kings 12:25.)

In his efforts to strengthen himself as ruler, Jeroboam felt he had to do some scheming. He reasoned that if very many of his people felt obligated to go to Jerusalem to observe God's annual Sabbaths and Festivals, they might repent of their rebellion and feel that Jeroboam had led them astray.

"They'll surely do away with me if they begin to think that way," Jeroboam thought. "Something will have to be done to keep them away from Jerusalem."

Instead of showing obedience and asking God for help in his office of king, Jeroboam chose to pursue the opposite direction by deliberately leading the people away from God. He had two images of calves constructed of gold. One was erected in the town of Bethel, only a few miles north of Jerusalem. The other was set up in the town of Dan, on the east side of the Jordan not far southwest of Mt. Hermon. Jeroboam then made a proclamation to all his people.

"From now on it will not be necessary for you to go all the way to Jerusalem to observe those old Mosaic festivals. Why be under the law?" he said, trying to deceive the people. "There is a golden calf at Bethel in the south and another at Dan in the north. They represent the gods which brought your ancestors out of Egypt. Now it will be easier, more convenient and even safer for everyone to confine your religious duties within the borders of your own land. Priests and their assistants at both locations will assist all who need help or instruction in sacrificing or worship."

A Pagan Priesthood

The "priests" referred to weren't of the family of Levi. They were men of low rank who were willing to conduct sacrifices to idols for whatever they were paid.

Surprisingly, many people fell in with the king's suggestion to break God's law. Instead of being faithful to their Creator, they began making sacrifices to the calf images. Within only weeks Jeroboam's kingdom was infested with one of the evils God had especially warned the people about over the centuries. As for the real priests -- the Levites -- who lived in that part of the land, and the other people in the ten tribes who remained faithful to God, they fled to Judah and Jerusalem. (I Kings 12:26-31; II Chronicles 11:13-17.)

But Jeroboam wasn't satisfied with the change he had made. God's Festival of Tabernacles was soon to be observed. He feared that this happiest time of the year would draw many to Jerusalem, where it had been joyfully kept. In a fanatical attempt to control his subjects in this matter, he denounced God's law. He then announced to the people that there would be no reason for them to go anywhere to observe the start of the Festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. He said he had officially changed the date to the fifteenth day of the eighth month -- the period we now know as Halloween! (I Kings 12:32-33.)

To attempt to alter the Holy Days established by God was rash, irreverent, and sinful. Mad as it was, Jeroboam didn't do any worse than others who -- masquerading as God's ministers -- have worked to change or do away with God's Sabbaths down through the ages. Today many churches have summer "camp meetings" instead of observing the Festival of Tabernacles in the fall. They keep Easter instead of Passover, Whitsunday instead of Pentecost. They celebrate the beginning of a new year in the winter, whereas God tells us that the new year begins in the spring. Sunday is regarded as a holiday instead of God's weekly Sabbath, and so on. These flagrant deviations will be corrected over the whole world when Christ comes to Earth to rule. (Zechariah 14:16-19.)

To impress those who came to his centers of worship, Jeroboam often assumed the role of high priest. One-day when he was burning incense before the calf image at Bethel, a man broke through the audience and strode toward the altar.

God's Warning

"God has sent me from Judah to declare a curse on this altar!" he loudly announced. "A child by the name of Josiah shall be born to the house of David! He, too, shall burn something on this altar, but it won't be incense. It will be the bones of you lying priests who sacrifice here!" (I Kings 13:1-2.)

These events were fulfilled many years later just as God prophesied. (II Kings 23:15-17.)

The king turned to peer at the stranger. He put down the incense container and placed his hands on his hips.

"So you are a prophet from Judah!" he said in a mocking tone. "Prove it to me and to these people by giving us a sign. If you fail, we'll know that you are a liar and that you deserve to die for reviling this sacred idol and temple!"

The stranger stared at the king, seemingly at a loss for words.

"A sign!" Jeroboam barked impatiently. "Give us a sign right now or admit that you lied when you said God sent you."

"There is your sign!" the prophet blurted out, pointing to the smoking altar. "That altar shall break apart and dump its ashes on the floor!"

"Well?" Jeroboam asked after seconds had dragged by and nothing happened. "Your time is up. Men, seize this wretch!"

The king extended an arm toward the prophet. Attendants grabbed him and started to drag him away, but stopped when they noticed that something was wrong with their leader. His face was suddenly pale, and his expression was one of stark fright. His bare arm, still outstretched, was somehow hideously white and wrinkled and stiff. He was unable to draw it back or drop it to his side!

Doubters Convinced

While startled people stared, a loud cracking sound came from the altar. It fell apart as though it had been sliced by an invisible bolt of lightning, crashing to the floor in a cloud of smoke, sparks and flying ashes. Shrieking and groaning with fear, the crowd quickly scattered. Even some of the attendants fled. Jeroboam was so shaken by this double blow that he staggered back against the wall. (I Kings 13:3-5.)

"Beg your God to make my arm as it was before!" the king wailed. "I spoke hastily. How could I know that you are a true prophet?"

The attendants were relieved to fall back from the man from Judah, who fell to his knees, thanked God aloud for sparing him, and asked that the king be healed. Almost instantly the withered arm took on its normal color and shape. Jeroboam muttered with satisfaction as he pulled his arm back and forth and flexed it up and down. Soon afterward he recovered his composure. His attitude toward the prophet became very friendly, but at the same time he had trouble hiding his concern about what had happened.

"Come to my home with me and have dinner," he said to the prophet as he motioned to attendants to do something about the altar and the spilled ashes. "I want an opportunity to reward you for what you did about my arm. Besides, I would like to talk to you about becoming one of my priests. It could be very rewarding for you." (I Kings 13:6-7.)

"I wouldn't go with you if you gave me half of your possessions!" the prophet exclaimed. "God told me not to eat nor drink while in this profane town. I'm not even to return by the way I came, lest evil men wait to harm me."

Jeroboam's eyes narrowed as he watched the prophet stride away. Because the man had spurned him and his offer, he wanted to have him seized and put away. But he feared to have him touched lest God should strike again with some ailment more severe than a useless arm.

Jeroboam would have been pleased if he could have known what would soon happen to the prophet. Two brothers who had witnessed what had taken place at the altar hurried home to tell their father, who was also a prophet. The father had failed to leave the country when idol worship started.

"Tell me which way this man went!" the father excitedly asked. (I Kings 13:8-12.)

The trudging prophet from Judah could never have guessed what was about to take place.

Chapter 112

Israel's Turning Point

FROM JUDAH had come a prophet who troubled King Jeroboam of Israel at Bethel. He predicted that one day the bones of the false priests would be burned on the altar there. (I Kings 13:1-6.)

On his way back to his home in the nation of Judah, he stopped to rest in the shade of an oak tree. There he was approached by an older prophet whose sons had witnessed what had occurred at the temple at Bethel. The old prophet slid down from his donkey and eagerly went up to the resting man.

Hearsay Evidence

"Are you the one from Judah who prayed that King Jeroboam's withered arm would be healed?" the older man asked.

"I am the one," was the answer. (I Kings 13:7-14.)

The older man was pleased. He wanted to become acquainted and find out more about the interesting prophecy he had made about what would happen to the altar at Bethel.

"You look weary and hungry," he said to the resting man. "Come with me to my home and have something to eat and drink."

"I have been told by God that while I am here I must neither eat nor drink," the prophet explained. "I am not to accept help from anyone in this idolatrous area. I am not to retrace my steps. Neither am I to associate with people here. Thank you, but I can't accept your hospitality. I must go now."

The fellow struggled to his feet and started away without another word. The older man hurried after him and put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"But I, too, am a prophet," he pointed out. "And I, too," he lied, have received instructions from God. I was told by an angel that I should find you and bring you to my home for nourishment."

The prophet from Judah turned to give the other man a searching look. It seemed only reasonable that God wouldn't allow him to continue being too weak and thirsty during his mission, even though he had been warned not to consume anything.

"Because God has spoken to you, I no longer have reason to refuse your kind offer," the prophet said, yielding to temptation. "I would be very happy to return to your house with you."

His eagerness for refreshment caused him to make a terrible decision. He was hungry and thirsty. He wanted to believe that God had spoken to the older man.

The painful fact was that the older prophet masqueraded as one of God's prophets, but was in reality a follower of Jeroboam's perverted religion. The older man had made up the story in order to get the other to come home with him. He wanted to question him about the Bethel prophecy. God was allowing the older man, even in his shameful dishonesty, to severely test the obedience of the man from Judah. (I Kings 13:15-19.) The prophet from Judah should not have listened to hearsay.

Later, at the older prophet's home, the meal had just been finished when God again spoke to the man from Judah by a voice from heaven.

"You have disobeyed by retracing your steps at Bethel and by eating and drinking here. Because you have done this, you will never return home. You will not be buried in the tomb where your relatives are buried."

The man from Judah was miserably stunned by the realization that he had been so careless and weak willed as to disobey God and believe the older man's claim that God had contradicted Himself. (I Kings 13:20-22.) Suddenly the prophet from Judah was very afraid of the older man. He wanted to get out of the house and start running back toward Judah. His host, who was as surprised as his guest was at God's sentence of death, was aware of the man's abrupt discomfort and impatience.

The Penalty of Disobedience

"I know that you're anxious to leave," the older man said. "The donkey is saddled."

The guest didn't need a second invitation. He left at once on the donkey. On passing through a desolate area, he was terrified to see a lion standing in the road. The animal rushed toward him and sprang. Those were the prophet's last conscious moments. His punishment was swift for not following God's instructions.

Some men who were traveling on the same road were startled a little later to see a lion standing over a man's body. They hid behind boulders to watch, puzzled because the lion kept on standing over its victim, meanwhile ignoring a donkey grazing only a few yards away. The men wondered why the donkey didn't seem to fear the lion. They couldn't know that both animals were being used by God for a purpose.

At Bethel they told several people what they had seen. (I Kings 13:23-25.)

It wasn't long before the old prophet heard about it. Using another donkey, he left at once to look for the slain prophet, whom he found a short distance away. The lion was still standing there, but when it saw him it sauntered away, leaving him free to go to the dead man, whom he managed to hoist on the waiting donkey and take back to Bethel and bury in his own sepulchre.

"After I die," he told his sons, "bury me in my tomb with this man of God. When his prophecy comes to pass about the bones of some of the men of Bethel being burned on the altar, I have cleverly planned that mine won't be burned there if they are beside those of this prophet from Judah." (I Kings 13:26-32.)

In spite of the supernatural breaking of the altar and the damaging and healing of his arm, Jeroboam didn't split away from the wrong ways he had established. The old false prophet convinced him that since God allowed the prophet from Judah to be killed by a lion, he didn't represent God and his words need not be feared. Even in the face of the warning from God about what would happen to the false priests, Jeroboam continued to hire men for those offices who had little ability and low character. This was going to mean the difference between his staying on as king of the ten tribes and the sudden end of his rule over them. (I Kings 13:33-34.) It was Israel's great turning point.

To warn Jeroboam one more time of his evil ways, God allowed his son, Abijah, to become very ill. Jeroboam was greatly concerned when the boy didn't recover. No one could tell what caused the sickness or how long it would last. But it was obvious that Abijah couldn't live very many more days if he stayed in his weakened condition.

Outwit God?

"Perhaps Ahijah the prophet would know what's wrong with Abijah and what should be done for him," Jeroboam said to his wife. "He was the one who told me that I would become king. Possibly he has other supernatural knowledge."

"Would it be wise for you to be seen with him?" Jeroboam's wife asked. "He has made some strong statements about the golden calves."

"I don't intend to see him," the king explained. "I want you to do that. You'll have to disguise yourself so that you won't be recognized as my wife by anyone who sees you, including Ahijah. Possibly we can outwit God's prophet." (I Kings 14:1-3.)

Jeroboam's wife didn't relish the mission, but she set out with servants and donkeys to travel to Ahijah's home at Shiloh, about eighteen miles to the south. As gifts for the prophet, she took ten loaves of bread, some small cakes and a bottle of honey. (I Kings 14:3.)

Dressing in drably plain clothes prevented her from being recognized on the trip. Deluding Ahijah obviously would be easy, inasmuch as he had become blind! He had servants, but he preferred to open the door after Jeroboam's wife knocked.

"Come in!" he exclaimed. "Come in! I am honored to be visited by the wife of King Jeroboam!"

The woman was so startled that she lost her composure and temporarily couldn't think what to say. It was unnerving to be instantly recognized by a blind man with whom she had no acquaintance. What she didn't know was that God had told Ahijah only a little while before that she was coming, the reason for her visit and what he should say to her.

"Why have you tried to conceal who you are?" Ahijah asked. (I Kings 14:5-6.)

"My husband thought it was necessary," she replied uneasily. "How did you know who I am?"

"God told me," the prophet answered. "He also gave me a message for you to take to your husband. You are to convey to him all that I'm about to tell you."

Jeroboam's wife was suddenly filled with fear by the feeling that she was about to hear something terribly unpleasant.

"Tell Jeroboam," Ahijah began, "that God wants to remind him that he was given a high honor and a very special opportunity when most of the kingdom of Israel was taken away from the house of David and given to your husband to rule. He could have become a great man by following David's example of obedience. Instead, he foolishly chose to mislead the people by causing them to turn to worshipping metal images -- an evil pursuit in which he has outdone any ruler of Israel before him." (I Kings 14:7-9.)

Jeroboam's wife became more uncomfortable by the second because she knew that the accusations were true. But the most shocking part of the prophet's utterance was yet to come.

Prophecy Fulfilled

"Inasmuch as Jeroboam has acted so wickedly," Ahijah continued, "God will bring evil times to him. He will lose his rulership. God has already chosen another man to reign in his stead. Any of Jeroboam's family who try to rule Israel shall be destroyed by this man. Then God is going to shake this nation as a strong stream shakes a reed. The people shall be driven out of the land and scattered in other countries because they have worshipped the idols their king has set before them.

"As for your son Abijah, whom you came to ask about, he shall die as soon as you return home. None of your husband's family shall receive a proper burial except him. That he shall have because he didn't want his father to set up idols for Israel to worship." (I Kings 14:10-16.)

Jeroboam's wife was pale and trembling as she left Ahijah's house. She couldn't wait to get back to the town of Tirzah, where Jeroboam had moved his palace after deciding to leave Shechem. At the same time she feared to go home because of Ahijah's prophecy that her son would die as soon as she returned. She hoped desperately that the prophet would be wrong, but when she reached the room where Abijah had been confined to his bed for many days, she was told that he had just died. (I Kings 14:17-18.)

Matters weren't going much better in Jerusalem. The true priests and many other faithful Israelites had swarmed into Judah from the other ten tribes to escape idol worship. (II Chronicles 11:13-17.) But after three years a large part of Judah and Benjamin had turned to the abominable practices and customs of pagan religions. Rehoboam didn't set out to promote idolatry as Jeroboam did, but he was so absorbed in his own interests, including his eighteen wives and sixty concubines that he failed to give proper attention to the welfare of his subjects. (I Kings 14:21- 24; II Chronicles 11:18-23.)

In the fifth year of his reign Rehoboam received a shocking surprise. A messenger came from the desert of Shur between the Sinai Peninsula and Judah to report that a large army was moving northeastward toward Jerusalem. Reports disclosed that at least sixty thousand horsemen, twelve hundred chariots and uncountable thousands of footmen were moving steadily toward Jerusalem.

The Egyptian army and their allies were about to attack Israel!

Rehoboam was nearly overcome with panic. His dwindling army was somewhere off to the north, involved as usual in skirmishes with Jeroboam's troops. With Israel divided, there wasn't enough military strength to even defend Jerusalem's walls.

Days passed, during which many defenseless towns in southern Judah were attacked and easily taken over by the Egyptians. In that time Rehoboam managed to muster enough troops for defense of the city, but there weren't enough to send out to meet the invaders. (II Chronicles 12:1-4.)

Another Warning

There was great turmoil in Jerusalem when the Egyptian army came in sight of the capital of Judah. The vast force was led by Shishak, the Egyptian king who had harbored Jeroboam after Jeroboam had escaped a death sentence by Solomon. (I Kings 11:37-40.) Also known in historical records as the great chief of the Meshwesh Libyans Sheshonk I of Dynasty XXII, King Shishak brought many Africans who weren't Egyptians. There were Ethiopians, Libyans and even men from a tribe that lived in caves in the mountains along the Red Sea. There were enough horsemen and foot soldiers to surround Jerusalem several ranks deep. The Israelites' only hope was in the city's strong walls, which Solomon had built for such a situation.

The tension grew by the hour. Waiting for an attack that might never come didn't improve the morale of the caged-up Jews. It was possible that the Egyptians planned to besiege Jerusalem until the occupants would surrender because of lack of food. The city was crowded with people, including most of the leaders and officials of Judah and Benjamin. Traffic stopped when the gates were closed and barred.

One man who came into the city just before the gates were shut was Shemaiah the prophet. He was the one who had warned Rehoboam five years before not to start a full-scale war with the ten tribes over which Jeroboam had become king. Shemaiah asked to speak at once to Rehoboam and the leaders of Judah. Rehoboam had a special respect for the prophet. He immediately called the men of high rank together to listen to what Shemaiah had to say.

"I have a message from God for all of you," the prophet began. "He wants you to know that He has sent the Egyptian army against Judah because you and many of the people of Judah have turned away from God and have taken up idol worship and other ways of perversion. The Egyptians will overrun Jerusalem just as they have overrun your towns that have been taken! You will be completely at their mercy!" (II Chronicles 12:5.)

Rehoboam and the others in the room stared at each other in fear. They knew that the only mercy they could expect from their attackers would be sudden death. After Shemaiah had gone out of the room to leave them to their terrifying thoughts, some of them dropped to their knees and called out to God to forgive them for what they had done. Others followed the example, but only because they were so desperate that they yearned to cry out for forgiveness and help. Facing death as they did, they were truly remorseful because of their foolish and corrupt ways.

Later, as some of the men with Rehoboam were still sprawled in humility and dejection, Shemaiah returned to state that he had some news they would welcome.

"God has heard your prayers," the prophet told them. "He knows that you are deeply regretful of leading your people wrongly. Because you have humbled yourselves, God has decided not to allow the Egyptians to destroy you. But they will take this city and you will become their servants and pay tribute. Then you will learn how much better it is to be servants of God than of man."

Rehoboam and the others were on their feet and eagerly crowding around Shemaiah to shower him with questions. At that moment there were frenzied shouts from outside. Through a window Israelite soldiers could be seen milling excitedly about on a part of the walls. (II Chronicles 12:6- 8.)

"The Egyptians are attacking!" a breathless servant yelled. The wall guards nervously fingered their spears and bows as they looked down to watch Shishak's many thousands approach and surround Jerusalem.

Chapter 113

Safety Only Under God!

Because the people of Judah and Benjamin had turned to idolatry, God allowed a huge Egyptian army to invade Judah and capture many of its towns. When the Egyptians reached Jerusalem, they intended to break through the massive walls and take over the wealthy capital.

At first God purposed to let the invaders destroy the city's occupants, including King Rehoboam. (II Chronicles 12:1-4.) But he spared them after Rehoboam and other leaders repented of their evil pursuits. (II Chronicles 12:5-7.)

The Temple Looted!

The Bible doesn't tell how the Egyptians managed to get into the city. Probably it was by means of extra heavy battering rams or wall-scaling apparatus. However it was done, the Israelite soldiers atop the walls undoubtedly took the lives of many of the attackers by showering down arrows, spears, rocks, molten lead and anything else they could pour, throw or drop. At the same time arrows from Egyptian bows downed a great part of the would-be defenders, who would have lived if they hadn't resisted.

Once the attackers were inside the city, the outnumbered Israelite soldiers surrendered. They expected to be slain. When the Egyptians merely took away their weapons, they had reason to be puzzled. They didn't know that Shishak had given an order that no Israelite in Jerusalem should be put to death unless he resisted. What Shishak didn't know was that the God of Israel had planted in the Egyptian king's mind the decision to give that order.

It was a bitter episode for Rehoboam when Shishak, followed by his officers and flanked by Egyptian troops strode into the palace where the Israelite king and other leaders nervously waited.

"I am disappointed," Shishak said as he looked about, omitting any formalities that could take place between two kings, even under such unusual circumstances. "I assumed you would meet me in that part of your palace where you usually receive visiting dignitaries. I have heard that the furnishings there are somewhat unique."

Rehoboam knew that his conqueror was telling him that he wished to be conducted to the throne room with its many treasures. He bowed very slightly, and tremblingly led the way. When Shishak saw the ornate, ivory throne, so resplendently bejeweled, his dark eyes glittered with admiration. He walked slowly about, taking in the costly objects in the vast room, but his gaze kept returning to the magnificent throne Solomon had designed.

Scarcely able to control his excitement, Shishak demanded to be shown through the rest of the palace and through the temple. He knew that other treasures were stored elsewhere, and forced the Israelites to disclose the location of the secret rooms, far below ground.

After Shishak and his officers were satisfied that they had located most of the wealth of the city, scores of their men poured into the palace, temple and treasury to seize valuable objects and pack them in the costly rugs, draperies and curtains that were at hand. Everything the Egyptian leaders desired was taken. Even the ivory throne was dismantled to be moved to Egypt. Shishak had no intention of leaving such a prize behind, even if it cost the lives of all the Egyptians required to carry it across the desert.

One might wonder what happened to the Tabernacle equipment and furnishings in the sacred rooms of the temple. If Shishak had any awe for the God of Israel, probably he wouldn't have attacked Judah. Having little or no fear of the Creator, he therefore wouldn't leave anything of special value. But God caused Shishak to leave enough furnishings to carry on the temple service. (II Chronicles 13:11.)

Egyptian Bondage Again

When the king of Egypt left Jerusalem with the greatest amount of wealth any conqueror had ever taken from a city, that wasn't the complete cost to the Israelites. Because the people of Judah would remain subject to Egypt, Shishak demanded that they send a regular tribute to him. Such tributes might not have been possible to raise if the Egyptians had devastated the land and ruined the economy. This drain of wealth to Egypt fulfilled the prophecy of Shemaiah that Judah would become a servant to Egypt. (II Chronicles 12:8-9; I Kings 14:25-26.)

In the next few years Judah partly recovered from the invasion. Rehoboam's close brush with death caused him to apply himself more dutifully as ruler. Restoring the costly furnishings of the palace and temple was impossible. Some were replaced by items of much lesser value. Brass shields, for example, took the place of the gold shields of the palace guards. Inexpensive substitutes were made wherever replacements were needed. (I Kings 14:27-28; II Chronicles 12:10-11.)

What was more important was the establishment of activity at the temple and the halting of pagan religious practices throughout Judah. But in time, as Rehoboam carelessly fell back into his former corrupt habits, the idolatrous customs started to creep back in the land like a poison coursing through a man's bloodstream. Meanwhile, Jeroboam's army continued fighting with Rehoboam's army in occasional small-scale battles. These senseless skirmishes went on all the rest of Rehoboam's life, which ended twelve years after the invasion by the Africans. Solomon's son was buried in Jerusalem where those of the family of David had been entombed. (II Chronicles 12:12-16; I Kings 14:29-31.)

Abijam, one of Rehoboam's many sons, then became king of Judah. Unhappily, he wasn't much of an improvement over his father, whose tendencies and desires showed up in Abijam. God allowed this young man to reign just long enough -- three years -- in order that there would be a continuance of the family of David on the throne and so that he could accomplish at least one outstanding thing in the history of Judah while he was king. (I Kings 15:1-5; II Chronicles 13:1- 2.)

The startling report came to Abijam that Jeroboam had mustered 800,000 troops with which he planned to conquer Judah and became ruler of all twelve tribes.

Abijam tried desperately to raise an army of the size of Jeroboam's, but he could get only 400,000 soldiers together. In time he could have increased the number. Time was something he didn't have, inasmuch as Jeroboam might march into Judah any day. Abijam wanted to prevent that. (II Chronicles 13:3.)

"We Know God Is with Us!"

He took his army north toward Tirzah, the capital of the ten tribes. The move was none too soon. Jeroboam's army was moving south at the same time. When Abijam learned that the two armies were about to meet, he halted his men at the base of Mt. Zemaraim, a few miles east of Bethel.

A little later Jeroboam arrived with his men. Confident that he had the upper hand, he halted them very close by, as though defying the southern army to dare to start something. As the tension mounted, a strong voice sounded from somewhere above. Many thousands of eyes looked up to see a lone figure standing on the top of Mt. Zemaraim.

"Listen to me, Jeroboam!" the figure called down. "Hear me, you men from Tirzah! You should know that God said only those of David's family should always rule the kingdom of Israel, or at least a great part of it. It was an agreement that is to stay in effect as long as there is salt in the sea. In spite of that, Jeroboam desires to become king of all Israel, even though he is not of the royal family. Nor is he worthy to continue to be ruler of even a part of the kingdom because of his idolatry and because of the ways in which he troubled my father when Rehoboam was a young and inexperienced king!"

By this time Jeroboam and the soldiers of both armies began to recognize the speaker as Abijam, who hoped that he could avert a battle by pointing out that Jeroboam was foolish to attack Judah.

"Do you actually believe that you can prevail against the army of a tribe that has stayed closer to God than you have?" Abijam continued. "What advantage will your greater numbers be to you as long as you have only your powerless calf images to rely on? And how can you expect victory after having put the priests of God out of your land, replacing them with pagan priests? As for us, we are relying on the God to whom we sacrifice at the temple at Jerusalem. WE KNOW HE IS WITH US. You would be wise to not fight against us. If you do, when you hear the sound of trumpets from the priests who are with us you will know that you are about to fail in battle!" (II Chronicles 13:4-12.)

As Abijam slipped out of sight, scattered laughter and hoots of derision came from some of Jeroboam's soldiers. Others seemed to be sobered by what they had heard. Many of them didn't get to hear all that Abijam had to say, having been ordered by Jeroboam to quietly leave and go on the double around Mt. Zemaraim and move up to the rear of the army of Judah.

It was a jolting surprise to Abijam's troops to discover that they were being blocked from the south as well as from the north. Fighting their way free of the two mammoth jaws of humanity appeared impossible.

They were so filled with fear that many of them called out loudly to God for help. At a signal from Abijam, who had returned from the top of the mountain, the priests sounded their trumpets with a peal that could be heard for miles.

God Topples House of Israel

The sound had a strong effect on Jeroboam's men. Abijam's words about what would happen when the horns blew were still fresh in their minds. They paused in their charge, fearing that the sound really could be an ill omen. In those same fateful moments Abijam's troops sensed the uncertainty of their attackers. Encouraged, they forgot about escape and turned to rush at Jeroboam's hesitant men. The noisy shouts and sudden fierce conduct of the southern army unnerved the northern army as though by a miracle. Abruptly the frightened men turned and ran, giving their incited pursuers full opportunity to strike them.

Hours later the ground around Mt. Zemaraim was littered with half a million corpses from Jeroboam's army. The remaining 300,000, many of them badly injured managed to escape in all directions. It was an astoundingly quick end to such a large army. Jeroboam fled when he saw that defeat was certain. Abijam and some of his men pursued, but failed to overtake the fugitive.

After resting for a day from the exhausting strain of battle, Abijam and his men moved on to seize several towns in the nearby regions. The king of Judah didn't plan to take over every town in northern Israel. He wanted only to have control over those that were close to Jerusalem. (II Chronicles 13:13-19.)

Because of his confidence in God in the conflict with Jeroboam, Abijam became a stronger king for a time. Then his personal interests and pursuits became more important to him than the welfare of the people. In his lifetime he married fourteen wives and was the father of thirty-eight children, an achievement that was almost a career in itself. When he began to fall into his father's ways of living, God allowed his life to come to an end. Otherwise, much of the nation probably would have followed his wrong examples. (I Kings 15:6-8; II Chronicles 13:20-22.)

Asa, one of Abijam's twenty-two sons, became the next king of Judah. Even as a very young man, he had observed how idolatry had brought so much trouble to Israel. As soon as he came into power he began a strong campaign to rid his domain of evil religious practices by destroying pagan altars, images and places where idols were worshipped. Besides, he gave his officers orders to put out of the country all who were found to be sodomites, degenerate men who often posed as priests at places of idol worship.

In banishing idolatry, Asa met with an awkward situation in his palace when he found that his grandmother, one of Rehoboam's wives, was an idol worshipper. She had arranged to have a special idol made and set up in a nearby grove for private worship. It was embarrassing to the king to ban the queen dowager from his court, but he had no choice. As for the idol, it was torn down and burned.

As the purge of his nation progressed, Asa proclaimed that the people should look to God and His Commandments for the only right ways of living, and that only then could they enjoy a time of peace. As a result of changes for the better in the people, there was no war for the next ten years.

Again crowds thronged to the temple to worship and sacrifice. It was almost as it had been in the early days of Solomon. However, some sacrificed at places they picked themselves, usually close to their homes. The priests and the altar had been established at the temple for that purpose. Other places should have been removed by Asa. It was the one thing he failed to do in his efforts to help Israel. Otherwise, he lived very close to God. (I Kings 15:9-15; II Chronicles 14:1-5.)

Prosperity Invites Looters

With peace came a measure of prosperity to Judah. It was a time to build new, fortified towns where the borders of the land could be strengthened, and to muster and equip men for better defense. Military might could not substitute for God's protection, but if any nation was known to have a small army and poor fortifications, it was almost the same as inviting some greedy king to attack. (II Chronicles 14:6-8.)

As it happened, a covetous king WAS planning to attack Judah. He was Zerah, leader of a nation of Ethiopians. He wasn't very concerned about the size of Asa's army because he believed that he, Zerah, commanded a much larger number of troops. And he was right. There were a million, plus the drivers, archers, and spearmen of three hundred war chariots!

Even before Zerah's northbound army had reached the Paran desert south of Canaan, Asa was notified of the invaders by scouts who constantly patrolled the borders of the nation. Judah's king hastily gathered his 300,000 soldiers from Judah and 280,000 archers from Benjamin and took them southward. If there had to be a battle, he preferred to fight it as far from Jerusalem as possible. It wasn't until he came within a few miles of his enemy, in a valley in southern Judah, that he realized how greatly his troops were outnumbered. He had only about half as many men.

As the two armies faced each other and lined up for battle only a mile or two apart, Asa became very troubled. His capable and experienced officers couldn't give him much encouragement because they felt that the probability of defeat was very great. Asa knew that the lives of over a half million men and the safety of Judah and possibly all Israel depended on the outcome of a fray with the invaders. Only God could alter that obvious outcome. It was time for the king to pray.

"You know that we must stand against these enemies," Asa said to God, "and you know that they are so numerous that they could surround us. But we will go against them in your name, trusting that you will not let them prevail against us, for if they do, and if we are your people, it would be as though they prevailed against you. If helping us in battle were something you are too weak to do, it would be foolish to ask. We know, though, that you have the power to do anything. We're putting our lives into your merciful hands."

By then the Ethiopians and their Egyptian allies had spread out all across the southern horizon and to the southeast and southwest, like a gigantic, curved trap ready to snap shut with bone-crushing force on its victims. (II Chronicles 14:9-11.)

A growing cloud of dust came up from the middle of the valley, heralding the charge of Zerah's chariots, followed at a slower pace by a horde of foot soldiers whose shields, spears and swords glistened sharply in the brilliant sunlight. Shouts from thousands of throats came up the valley like the savage shriek from some kind of massive animal. Only minutes later the rumbling chariots were close, and heading straight toward the ranks of the House of Judah!

Chapter 114

Troubles in Israel and Judah

An army of a million soldiers, led by an ambitious Ethiopian named Zerah, had come from the south to invade the nation Judah. King Asa met them with only about half as many troops.

Knowing that he would probably be utterly defeated unless God purposed otherwise, he earnestly appealed to God for help. (II Chronicles 14:8-11.)

God Overthrows an Army

Unaware that violent storm clouds were quickly gathering overhead, the invaders charged toward the Jews first with their three hundred swiftly-drawn chariots. When they were only a short distance from the first ranks of Asa's archers a cloudburst struck. At the same instant, God sent a violent earthquake which shattered the ground and quickly halted the chariots' charge. The chariots floundered instead of running down their intended victims. Giant hailstones fell. The Ethiopian charioteers, in panic, fled.

Egyptian records tell of this divine overthrow. Psalm 46:1-11 describes how God did it.

The sudden destruction of the chariot brigade was a bad omen to the invaders. When Zerah's oncoming foot soldiers saw what had happened, they were unnerved. They realized something supernatural had occurred. Their savage shouts died away or turned to murmurs of puzzlement and fear.

The Israelites realized God was helping them. They let loose a cloud of spears and arrows on Zerah's foremost ranks then rushed in for close combat with swords and spears. The Jews were anxious to fight while the enemy was so disorganized and their will to battle was at a low ebb.

As the fighting went on, the falling back quickly developed into a retreat, and the retreat became a rapid, frantic flight to the southwest. (II Chronicles 14:12.) When the pursuit reached Gerar, a town near the coast south of Judah, the enemy troops tried to make a stand against the Jews, who promptly forced them out of Gerar and on to the south.

While battling their way through the town, Asa and his men discovered why the enemy had tried to fight back at that location. The town was full of loot that had been taken by Zerah and his army on the way north. Gerar, as well as other towns in southern Canaan, had been overrun and the occupants had been slain or taken as prisoners. Some of Zerah's men had been left behind to guard what had been accumulated and brought to Gerar. These guards were chased out along with the thousands of wounded who fled on southward in front of Asa's soldiers.

When it was obvious that what was left of Zerah's fleeing army was too broken up to ever rally and threaten Judah again, the Israelites gave up the chase and turned back to Gerar. There they gathered together the booty left by the defeated invaders, to take it back to Jerusalem. Returning it would have been impossible, inasmuch as some of the rightful owners were dead, and those who weren't could not be located. Besides articles of gold, silver, brass and leather there were arms, food, clothing and large herds of sheep, cattle and camels. (II Chronicles 14:13-15.)

A "Pat on the Back" from God

When the victorious Asa, riding at the head of his army, was within a few miles of Jerusalem, a small crowd of prominent citizens set out from the city to be first to welcome and congratulate him. But there was one who was ahead of them. He was Azariah, a man God had chosen to take a message to the king. He approached the oncoming army so closely on his burro that one of Asa's officers was about to give an order to have him removed from their path.

"Don't bother him," Asa said. "If he has come out to welcome us, let us stop and honor him for his goodwill."

The king was pleased to learn that this man had made a special effort to be first to welcome the returning victors. He was affected and encouraged much more, however, when he heard more from this fellow.

"Please listen to what else I have to say, King Asa," Azariah called out. "God has told me things I must tell you. You know now that God has answered the prayer you made to Him before going into battle with the enemy from the south. God is with you, and He will stay with you as long as you obey Him. If you disobey and forsake Him, He will forsake you. Without the Creator's help and protection, life can be uncertain, miserable and even worthless.

"Recall Israel's past. Whenever the nation turned from God, great trouble developed among the people. No one was safe at home or in the streets or fields. Crops failed. Disease increased. Neighboring nations started wars. Even the priests couldn't help, because most of them forgot God's laws. But when the people repented and turned back to God, He was always ready to forgive and help them. God has told me to remind you to keep these things in mind and to remain strong by being loyal to God. If you do, your nation shall prosper and can depend on God for its protection." (II Chronicles 15:1-7.)

Asa was so moved by these words that as soon as he returned to Jerusalem he set out with fresh enthusiasm to comb out of Judah and Benjamin any places of idol worship his men had overlooked before. He even sent soldiers to the north to weed out idolatry from the towns his father had captured from the ten-tribed House of Israel after the battle with Jeroboam's army.

People who looked to God for their way of life began to flock to Judah from the ten tribes, especially from Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon. They wanted to live in that part of the land that had God's fullest blessings. (II Chronicles 15:8-9.) Every day more Israelites showed up at the temple.

That caused Asa to become painfully conscious of the condition of the temple. It hadn't had much repair since being damaged by the Egyptians in Rehoboam's time. Asa tried to restore it and its furnishings to something like their original condition and beauty.

The repair of the temple took place before one of God's annual Sabbaths was due. Asa sent word over all Judah and Israel that the day would be observed at Jerusalem with special services and ceremonies. This day was Pentecost, which is observed in these times in late May or June by those who submit to God's authority.

Asa Remembers God

Animals that had been herded up from Gerar after the rout of Zerah's army were brought to the temple. Seven hundred cattle and seven thousand sheep were sacrificed that day. While these offerings were being made, Asa assured the onlookers that their continued obedience would be rewarded in many ways. The people responded with loud cheers and music. They made it known to the king that they wanted to make a public promise to God that they would do their best to live by God's laws, and that they were in favor of death to anyone who failed to obey.

"I know God is pleased by your attitude and intentions," Asa said to the crowd. "Now let the Creator hear the voices of you who wish to make this solemn promise."

"We will do our best to serve God! If we fail, we deserve death!"

These words from thousands of throats surged out with great volume from around the temple, followed by the blast of horns and more joyous shouting and singing. The people were in earnest in this matter, most of them having been faithful to God, for the most part, during the recent eras of idol worship. (II Chronicles 15:10-15.)

Before Pentecost ended, a long line of Asa's servants carried treasures of gold, silver and brass into the temple. These were some of the valuables Asa's father had taken from Jeroboam's army sixteen years before. Abijam had intended that they should be used to pay for temple repair and service, but he hadn't carried out that intention. At long last Asa dedicated this wealth to God's business in the temple. (II Chronicles 15:18.)

Asa's efforts to help Israel and Judah by turning to God and abolishing idolatry resulted in a period of peace and prosperity. That period probably would have lasted longer if Asa hadn't acted unwisely in a situation that developed between the two nations of Israel and Judah, in which the king of Judah looked for help in the wrong direction.

Jeroboam, former ruler of the ten tribes -- the nation Israel -- had died thirteen years before. He was succeeded by a son, Nadab, who did nothing to remove idolatry from the nation. (I Kings 15:25-26.) During a skirmish with the Philistines in the town of Gibbethon in the territory of Dan, Nadab was killed after only two years as king. He wasn't slain by Philistines, however. His death was planned by a viciously ambitious man from the territory of Issachar. His name was Baasha, an officer of high rank in Nadab's army.

The attack against the Philistines to drive them out of Gibbethon gave Baasha an opportunity to do away with the king. While in command of Nadab's army, he ended the lives of all of Nadab's family and seized control of the ten tribes. (I Kings 15:27-28.) This was the fulfillment of the prediction made by Ahijah the prophet to Jeroboam. (I Kings 13:33-I Kings 14:16.) His family line was wiped out and someone else took over the rulership. (I Kings 15:28-34.)

Asa's Faith Weakens

Baasha was far from pleased because many people of Israel were moving to Judah so that they could get away from the idol worship that still abounded in so many places in Israel. He was also angered by Asa's bold entry into Israel's southern towns to destroy idols. Baasha hoped to soon muster an army strong enough to capture Jerusalem and take over all twelve tribes. With the fighting force he commanded, he dared only seize a small town about six miles north of Jerusalem. This town, called Ramah, was on the main road leading into Jerusalem from the north. Baasha immediately started turning it into a strong fortress. His intention was to gain control of traffic in and out of Jerusalem on the north side. (I Kings 15:16-17; II Chronicles 16:1.)

When Asa was informed of what Israel was doing so close to the capital of Judah, he was quite perturbed. He wanted to avoid war, and yet he wanted to get Baasha and his men away from Ramah. He thought of a possible way to solve the problem. Unfortunately, it was a way that was certain to compound his trouble.

He issued an order that the gold and silver objects in the treasuries of the temple and palace should be packed for moving a long distance. When they were ready, he sent them off by a heavily guarded caravan to Damascus, about a hundred and forty miles to the north. There they were delivered to Ben-hadad, king of Syria, along with a message.

"Friendly salutations from Asa, king of Judah," the message read. "I am sending you treasures from my kingdom to bind an understanding that should profit you more than any agreement you might have with Baasha to keep peace with him and his nation. He is now busily fortifying a town near Jerusalem. If you wish to expand your southern borders without resistance, now is your opportunity."

Ben-hadad could have kept the bribe of gold and silver without doing anything, but he welcomed this chance to take over a part of Israel. Even before his caravan returned, Asa was relieved and pleased to receive a report that several towns in the territory of Naphtali had been captured by Syrian troops. Until then, he wondered if his gifts to Ben-hadad had been wasted. (I Kings 15:18- 21; II Chronicles 16:2-5.)

When Baasha heard about the Syrians, he was fearful that they would move on southward, invade Tirzah and plunder his palace. He hurriedly set off for his capital, leaving a small number of soldiers behind to guard the unfinished fortress.

As soon as he was told that Baasha had departed, Asa took soldiers to Ramah to seize it from the outnumbered guards.

If it had been finished it would have been an exceptionally strong fortress because of its heavy, wooden beams and massive wall stones. Much unused material was stacked inside the half-built wall. Workmen from Judah could have completed the construction, but Asa didn't want a fortification there.

Asa decreed that all able-bodied men should go to Ramah to help dismantle and transport the stone and lumber to the towns of Geba and Mizpah only a few miles away in the territory of Benjamin. If Ramah no longer existed, Baasha couldn't claim it as a war prize.

Israel's Kings Reject God

Asa's will was carried out. Thousands of men came to Ramah, which soon became only piles of rubble beside the highway. Geba and Mizpah became fortresses instead. (I Kings 15:22; II Chronicles 16:6.)

Meanwhile, King Baasha of Israel was trying to build his army with the intention of conquering Judah. Then, as king of all reunited Israel, he would become militarily strong enough, he hoped, to push back the Syrians and any other enemies who invaded Israel. His ambitions were somewhat dimmed when a prophet by the name of Jehu, sent by God, came to Baasha to tell him what his and his family's future would be.

"God has instructed me to remind you that it was He, and not you, who made it possible for you to become ruler of the ten tribes," Jehu told Baasha. "Someone had to succeed Nadab. You were allowed that privilege. If you had been thankful for it, and if you had led the people according to God's laws, you could have become a much more powerful king and could rule for many more years. But because you have lived sinfully and ruled carelessly, causing your people to sin, your fate will shortly become the same as that of Jeroboam. You and your family shall be cut off from leadership of any part of Israel."

Baasha motioned for guards to escort the prophet out. He didn't wish to hear anything more Jehu had to say. It troubled him, but he didn't want to appear concerned in front of others. If Baasha had been as troubled as he should have been, he would have changed his ways and perhaps God would have spared him. His life came to an end soon after Jehu's visit. The king was buried in Tirzah after twenty-three years of incapable reigning. (I Kings 16:1-7.)

Baasha's son, Elah, became the next ruler. He lived as his father had lived. Only two years later, while he was in a dulled condition from drinking too much, he was slain by a man who had been waiting for just such an opportunity. He was Zimri, one of Elah's cavalry captains. Having dispatched the king, Zimri took command of Tirzah. Then he had all of Elah's family put to death. Jehu's prophecy to Baasha was fulfilled. (I Kings 16:8-14.)

Zimri and his men enjoyed the comforts and pleasures of the palace. They didn't have to share them with officers of the army, because the army of Israel was busy besieging the town of Gibbethon, which had been taken by the Philistines.

Zimri was sure that when the Israelite soldiers returned from the siege, they would accept him as ruler without too much trouble.

Matters didn't quite turn out that way. When the soldiers heard what he had done, they decided that their army commander, Omri, should be the next leader of the ten tribes. Omri was pleased to accept this hasty elevation. His first move was to call off the siege and take his army to Tirzah to besiege it instead.

When Zimri was informed that the town was surrounded by the troops he planned to control, and that Omri had come to have him arrested for murder, his future suddenly looked bleak. He ordered his men to defend the gates and the walls, but they saw no reason to die for a leader who wasn't backed by the army of the ten tribes.

By the time Omri's soldiers had broken into Tirzah, Zimri had locked himself alone inside the palace and had hidden in the strongest part of the building. The sound of soldiers running through the streets, pounding on the palace doors and yelling his name was too much for Zimri. He was overcome with panic. Seizing a lighted torch, he set fire to his hiding place. (I Kings 16:15-20.)

"If I can't have this palace, then nobody else will get it!" he screamed.

Chapter 115

Elijah and the Famine

ZIMRI an ambitious and murderous man had tried to become king of the ten tribes of Israel by murdering King Elah. (I Kings 16:8-10.) Zimri had then hidden in the palace at Tirzah. When the army approached, he had set fire to it, knowing that he would be slain if he were found.

Zimri madly shouted that he would rather see the palace burn than give it up to anyone else. The building and everything in it went up in flames, including Zimri, who was allowed by God to consider himself king for only seven days. (I Kings 16:11-18.)

Disunity in Israel

In the months that followed, the people of the ten tribes were divided into two parts as to who should be their next ruler. Military people were in favor of Omri, but civilians favored a man named Tibni. The dispute continued for such a long time that each man came into power over different parts of the ten tribes. After four years Tibni died, leaving full leadership of the ten tribes to Omri. (I Kings 16:21-23.)

Omri wasn't satisfied with the place in which he lived in Tirzah. He considered it a poor substitute for the burned palace. Besides, he didn't like the location. One day he was riding through a valley situated about ten miles west of Tirzah and over thirty miles north of Jerusalem. He was impressed by the sight of a long, flat-topped hill rising about five hundred feet from the valley floor.

"Find out who owns that hill," Omri told one of his aides. "I want to buy it for my palace site."

When the owner was found, he sold the hill to the king for two talents of silver, a very reasonable sum. Omri's palace was later built there. It was the beginning of what eventually grew into the important city of Samaria.

Perhaps Omri was used by God to start Samaria, although the king didn't purpose to carry out God's will. As other leaders did before him, he practiced idolatry and encouraged his subjects to do likewise. He died twelve years after Zimri's death. (I Kings 16:23-28.)

Ahab, a son of Omri, became the next ruler of the ten tribes. Unfortunately for the people, his leadership wasn't an improvement over that of the kings who had gone before him. In fact, he stooped to some new lows as a king, by marrying a cruel, scheming Canaanite woman who detested God and who was extremely ambitious of forcing idolatry into Israel. She was Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the nearby coastal nation of Zidon. (I Kings 16:29-31.) Ethbaal was a murderer, a thief and a pagan priest who officiated during rites to the goddess Venus, or Astarte, later called Easter.

A Look at Judah

A few years before Ahab's time as ruler of Israel, King Asa of Judah had hired King Ben-hadad of Damascus to help him against King Baasha of Israel. (II Chronicles 16:1-6.) A prophet named Hanani had then come to Jerusalem to tell Asa that he had a message from God for the king.

"God was displeased when you paid the king of Syria to help get King Baasha of Israel away from the Jerusalem area," Hanani said. "If God could rescue Judah from the million Zerah brought from the south, why couldn't He do the same for Judah at any other time as long as you rely on Him? God is always willing and able to help those who obey Him. Because you looked to a nation that has long been an enemy of Israel for your help, you have lost the opportunity to overcome both Baasha and Syria and you shall continue to have wars."

Asa was furious at Hanani because of what he said, even though he knew that he was guilty of buying help from the Syrians.

"Imprison this man!" Asa angrily yelled to his guards. (II Chronicles 16:7-10.)

From that time on Asa's relationship with God deteriorated. He was no longer as close to God as he had been. He lost a compassionate attitude toward his people, insomuch that he wasn't always fair to many of them. In his last years he was unable to walk because of what was probably a gout condition. Whatever it was, it was very severe. Nevertheless Asa did not pray to God for relief and healing of this ailment. Instead, he put his total trust in physicians.

He died after ruling Judah for forty-one years, and was buried with great honors in Jerusalem after a very special funeral. (II Chronicles 16:11-14.)

Utter Depravity in Israel

By the time Asa's rule over Judah ended, the hill in Israel where Omri's palace was located had become covered with buildings that comprised early Samaria. Some of these structures were dedicated to the worship of heathen gods. One of them included a huge altar for making sacrifices to Baal, who was supposed to be god of the sun. Another place was a school where instruction was given to men who were recruited to train as priests to carry out the base rites of idol worship brought to the land by Jezebel, Ahab's wicked wife. Samaria had become the capital of idolatry in Israel. (I Kings 16:29-33.)

Jezebel's hatred for those who followed God was so intense that she sent soldiers to kill those men who were known to be true prophets. Ahab didn't object even to this wholesale murder. Oddly enough, his chief steward, Obadiah, somehow managed to remain faithful to God despite his surroundings.

Quite possibly he was meant to be in his high position so that he might help others who were serving God. For one thing, he succeeded in saving the lives of a hundred prophets by hiding them in caves in nearby mountains and sending them food and water to live on. (I Kings 18:3-4.)

Ruled by such a depraved pair, most of the people of the ten tribes were worse off than they had been for years. To add to that, some great calamity was certain to come from God unless Israel turned from idolatry. One day a prophet named Elijah came to the palace at Samaria to speak to the king. He explained that he had made a special trip from the territory of Gilead, east of the Jordan River to bring an urgent message from God to Ahab. Palace aides ordinarily didn't admit uninvited visitors, but when Ahab heard about him he was curious to hear what the stranger had to say.

God Sends Famine

"I have come to warn you that because of the sinfulness of this nation's people, this land will suffer a lack of rain and dew," Elijah told Ahab. "There won't be any more rain until I return to announce its coming."

"Interesting!" exclaimed Ahab mockingly. "Then I suppose you'll be honoring me with another visit a few days from now?"

"I doubt it," Elijah replied. "It will be more like a few years from now." (I Kings 17:1.)

Ahab was in a pleasant mood, or he might have ordered guards to seize Elijah and jail him for being insolent. Besides, he wanted to prove to spectators that he was a fair and compassionate ruler.

"Let him go for now," Ahab said. "He's only a harmless crank."

As soon as Elijah had slipped out of Samaria, he was told by God to go eastward and hide near a certain brook that flowed into the Jordan River. He was informed that he shouldn't be concerned about food because birds would supply it. Even to Elijah, who had great faith in God, the idea of birds feeding him was fantastic. (I Kings 17:2-4.)

When the prophet reached the brook, he looked around till he found a nearby cave for shelter. In it he made a bed of leaves and grass. This was to be his home where he was to stay hidden from human eyes until he was instructed what next to do. It wasn't an unpleasant spot in which to dwell. The cold, clean brook ran close by to supply water for drinking and bathing. From the cave Elijah could look down a ravine to the open valley where the brook joined the river.

Toward evening he began to wonder about food, having walked more than twenty miles from Samaria that day. Elijah was almost as hungry as he was tired. As he rested by the stream, he became aware of a flock of ravens approaching quietly, and then swooping to the ground only a few yards away. They left something lying on a wide flat rock that almost resembled a table. At first Elijah could hardly believe what he saw. There were small pieces of bread and cooked meat on the rock!

The hungry prophet didn't wonder where the ravens had obtained it. He thanked God for it and ate. The bread tasted as though it had been freshly baked, and the meat as though it had been roasted recently. Elijah wasn't concerned about whether or not it was clean meat.

He knew that God wouldn't provide him unclean food. After eating all he needed, he spent a time praying and then went into his cave for a night of well-deserved rest.

Next morning, as he refreshed himself at the stream, he saw the ravens flying in, and watched them as each bird carefully deposited on the rock something it carried in its beak. After the ravens had flown away, he again ate more bread and meat.

Elijah wondered where it had come from. Had the birds taken the bread from some bakery or kitchen not too many miles distant? Had they brought the meat from God's sacrificial altar? Or had God miraculously put the bread and meat into the beaks of the ravens and directed them to put it down before Elijah? However it happened, the prophet knew that God caused it to occur. He was thankful for the supply of food in the months that followed. (I Kings 17:5-6.)

Elijah Sent to the Gentiles

During those months, no rain fell in Samaria or the pagan regions for many miles around. Ahab clearly remembered the warning made to him by Elijah and what the prophet had said about the drought ending when he returned to announce it. The king was increasingly troubled. Regardless of his tendency toward idolatry, he feared anything that seemed to come from God.

At last he decided to establish a wide search for Elijah, hoping that the prophet would appeal to God to send rain. All the searchers eventually returned to report failure, whereupon they were promptly sent back to continue the hunt. (I Kings 18:10.) Meanwhile, more streams dried up and more cisterns and wells went dry. The land became a sickly yellow-gray color. The supply of water was dangerously low. (I Kings 18:5.)

About a year or two after Elijah had come to live in the cave, the nearby stream dried up completely. The only way to get water was to go down to the Jordan River, and that meant a risk of being seen. God didn't want Elijah to be discovered yet by anyone who would report his whereabouts to the king.

He instructed the prophet to go to the town of Zarephath, about a hundred miles northward at the eastern edge of the Great Sea. There he was to find a certain widow who was to supply him with food and lodging.

Traveling mostly at night, Elijah was very careful not to be seen. In the daytime he rested and slept in well-hidden shady places in ravines and among boulders. Food and water weren't naturally present wherever he went, but God somehow supplied him with enough to keep up his strength. When he reached Zarephath it was daylight, but because the town was in the idolatrous nation of Zidon, it was very unlikely that anyone would be looking for him except the woman he was to meet.

Just outside the gates of the town he saw a thin, weary-looking woman picking up a few sticks. He had a strong feeling that this was the widow about whom God had told him. He was very thirsty, so he didn't lack for a reason to start a conversation.

"I haven't had any water for hours," Elijah called out to the woman. "If you know where there is water, would you please get some for me?" (I Kings 17:7-10.)

The woman hesitantly approached the prophet and looked at his tired eyes and parched lips.

"I'll get water for you," she said, starting toward the gates, "but I can spare only a little."

"A little is better than none," Elijah observed. "I am very hungry, too. Could you give me a small piece of bread?"

The woman turned back to the prophet a little impatiently.

Gentile Widow's Faith

"Sir, I don't have any bread," she told him. "All I have is a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a bottle. When you first spoke to me, I was looking for a few sticks with which to build a fire and bake the oil and flour into a bit of bread. That will be the last food my son and I shall eat. Then we shall starve to death." (I Kings 17:11-12.)

"You and your son won't starve," Elijah said confidently. "The God of Israel has told me about you, and it's not His will that you should die from lack of food. Your jar of meal and bottle of oil will last until God sends rain."

The woman stared at Elijah. Ordinarily she would have considered a man who talked as he did some kind of fanatic, but somehow she felt that the God of Israel had sent him and she trusted God to keep His promise. She motioned to Elijah to follow her, and trudged off to her home within the walls of Zarephath. Later, after Elijah had eaten the biscuit-sized bit of bread the woman had unselfishly made for him, he watched her begin to prepare more with the very last of the oil and flour. He wasn't surprised at what she had to say.

"There is more oil in this bottle than there was before I used it last!" she exclaimed. "And there is more flour in the jar than there has been for days! My memory must be failing me."

"There's nothing wrong with your memory," Elijah assured her. "You were kind enough to attend to my needs first. Because of that, God will see that as long as the drought lasts there will be plenty of oil in that bottle and plenty of flour in that jar."

The prophet's words proved true during the months that followed. Regardless of how much oil the widow poured from the bottle, it always had some left in it. It was the same with the flour jar. It didn't become empty, no matter how much was taken from it. (I Kings 17:13-16.)

During that time, the widow's young son became seriously ill. Days later he died, leaving his mother in an extremely grief-stricken state. To add to her misery, she became somewhat embittered because she felt that Elijah had something to do with her son's death.

"What are you really here for?" she tearfully asked the prophet as she stood before him with the lifeless little form in her arms. "Did you come to seek out my past sins and tell God about them so that He would punish me by taking away my son?"

"Give me the boy," Elijah patiently said to her. "Why?" the woman asked, twisting around so that she was between Elijah and her son.

In spite of the mother's attitude, Elijah reached out and tenderly took the limp body from the mother, who was surprised at her sudden willingness to part with it. The prophet walked up a stairway to his room on top of the house, where he had lived since coming to Zarephath. There he placed the boy on his bed.

"God, I know you must have a reason to bring misery to the woman of this house by taking her son," Elijah prayed. "I don't know what it is, but I know that she has suffered greatly in these past days, and especially in these last hours. I'm asking that in your mercy you would forgive her for any sins she has committed and bring life back to this child." (1 Kings 17:17-21.)

By this time the little boy's body had become cold. Elijah lay down very close to it, hoping that his warmth and strength would be of some value while God supplied the spark of life that only the Creator could impart.

The minutes slipped by. The prophet thought he felt a movement in the boy's body, but he couldn't be sure.

Chapter 116

" ... If the Lord be God, Follow Him "

ELIJAH the prophet had been instructed by God to stay hidden in a city near the coast of the Great Sea during many months of the drought that had come to the ten tribes of Israel. (I Kings 17:8-16.)

God Gives Life

The young son of the woman in whose home Elijah stayed had died. He had taken the boy to his room, and had asked God to restore the youngster's life. (I Kings 17:17-21.)

After a while the youngster began to breathe and move. God had answered the prophet's prayer and had brought life back into the youngster!

Elated and thankful, Elijah took the boy back downstairs to the weeping mother.

"Your son lives again, thanks to God's great mercy," Elijah said to the widow.

The kneeling woman glanced up through her tears. When she saw that her son was gazing at her with a weak smile and reaching out for her, she cried out happily, leaped to her feet and eagerly took the youngster into her arms. After a time, when she was able to speak, she told Elijah that the miracle proved to her that he was a man God had sent for a good purpose, and that she regretted making unkind remarks to him. (I Kings 17:22-24.)

Elijah continued to hide in the woman's home. About two years after he had arrived there, God instructed him to go to King Ahab, who still had many men looking for the prophet. Elijah set out at once for the city of Samaria.

By this time conditions had become very severe throughout the land. There was scarcely enough water for the people to drink. Most of their food had to be brought into Israel from distant regions by pack animals. There were dead cattle and sheep everywhere. If the drought continued, the people would soon start to perish from lack of food and water. (I Kings 18:1-2.)

Ahab was almost frantic. Countless sacrifices and prayers had been made to the pagan gods, but the rainless days continued. The ten tribes of Israel were without rain for three and one-half years. (Luke 4:25-26; James 5:17) The king was convinced that the God of Israel could bring rain, but he was sure that God could be contacted only through Elijah, whom he desperately hoped would be found in time to ask God to save his kingdom.

In one of many attempts to find grass to save his horses, mules and donkeys, Ahab made a two-party search for springs around Samaria. He headed one group to cover a certain area. Obadiah, his chief steward, headed another group to go through a different region. (I Kings 18:3-6.)

As Obadiah's party, mounted on donkeys, slowly combed a parched range of hills, a lone figure appeared on the western horizon. As soon as the figure came close, Obadiah was surprised to recognize him as Elijah, whom he had seen in Ahab's palace. Obadiah slid off his donkey and bowed low before the prophet, whom he greatly respected as a follower of God.

"Aren't you Elijah?" Obadiah asked, suddenly wondering if he could be mistaken.

"I am Elijah," the prophet answered. "I remember seeing you in my brief visit in Ahab's palace. I understand that your king is looking for me. Please go tell him that I am here."

God Protects the Faithful

"If I told Ahab you are here," Obadiah pointed out, "it could mean my death. He has been searching Israel and even other nations for you for three years, to tell you to ask God to send rain. Even though he needs you, he could be in the mood to kill you because you have remained hidden from him. But God would take you away from here before you could be harmed. If I say you are here and Ahab finds you aren't, he'll take my life. Perhaps you heard how Ahab's wife caused the death of many of God's prophets, some of whom I was able to rescue. If he were angered, Ahab wouldn't hesitate to follow his wife's example." (I Kings 18:7-14.)

"Don't be concerned about me or yourself," Elijah told Obadiah. "I promise you that if you go now to tell Ahab where I am, neither you nor I will meet death because of what you do. If Ahab wants to see me, he can do it this same day by coming here."

Obadiah knew that Elijah couldn't make such a promise unless he had special help from God. Without further words with the prophet, he instructed his men to continue on the planned course while he went in another direction to meet Ahab.

"I have found Elijah!" Obadiah called to the king when he had almost caught up to him.

"You mean Elijah the prophet, the man I've been trying to find for three years?" Ahab asked excitedly.

"The same man," Obadiah replied. "He is awaiting you on the other side of that range of hills."

Ahab wasn't pleased to learn that the prophet expected the king to come to him, but he motioned for his men to follow Obadiah, who led the group over the ridge to where Elijah sat resting in the shade of a boulder. Ahab rode close and rudely shouted at him without the courtesy of a proper greeting. (I Kings 18:16-17.)

"So it's you at last!" the king blurted out, frowning down at him. "You've given Israel plenty of trouble these last three years!"

Elijah stood up, stepped toward Ahab and gazed steadily at the angry face.

"You accuse me of troubling Israel?" Elijah asked. "You know I have done nothing to hurt this nation. But you have, and so have the rulers in your family before you. You have caused Israel untold harm by forsaking God and turning to pagan idols and deities."

"Why should we quibble over these things?" Ahab asked. "All that matters now is that you ask your God, if indeed He has control over the elements, to send plenty of rain on our land. Your God is supposed to have Israel's welfare constantly in mind. Surely He won't let this terrible condition continue."

"Don't make the mistake of believing that rain will come to Israel simply by your telling me to pray to God for it," Elijah said. "I am God's servant, not yours."

Ahab was able to restrain himself only because he felt that Elijah's continued existence could mean an end to the drought.

Only One Prophet of God

"So you expect some great reward for your unique services," Ahab exclaimed disdainfully. "Name your price!"

"I do not seek a reward," Elijah replied calmly. "But there is something I am going to ask you to do."

"Aha!" Ahab snorted. "Then you do have your price. What is this favor you have in mind?"

"Send word around the country for the leaders of the people to gather at the eastern end of Mt. Carmel," Elijah answered, ignoring Ahab's insults. "Also gather four hundred and fifty of your priests of Baal at the same place. And tell your queen, Jezebel, to send four hundred of her priests of Astarte. If you will do this, I shall come to Mt. Carmel to consider asking God for rain." (I Kings 18:17-20.)

Although these requests puzzled the king, he knew that asking questions wouldn't help matters. He was so anxious to see the drought ended that he was willing to carry out whatever the prophet requested, even though he disliked Elijah and would have had him killed if there had been nothing to gain by letting him live.

Mt. Carmel is a range of hills extending about eighteen miles southeast of the Bay of Acre on the Great Sea. From the eastern tip of the range, which was where Elijah intended to meet the gathering of leaders and prophets, it was about twenty miles to Samaria. When Elijah arrived there a few days later, thousands of Israelites were congregated on the plain off to the north and east. The prophet promptly climbed to the eastern summit of the range and spoke out loudly to all below.

"How long will it take you people to make up your minds about whom to follow?" Elijah asked, "If you choose God, then follow Him completely and forget about Baal and any other idols. If you choose Baal, then be loyal to him and don't try to mix any of God's laws into that pagan religion. Most of you seem to be trying to worship both God and Baal. What is to be gained by such a foolish pursuit?"

There was no response except silence from the audience. Although they had been living like heathen, they still wanted to call themselves God's people. Elijah waited a minute or two for some other kind of reaction, but there weren't even any hoots of derision.

"Among the thousands assembled here, I am the only prophet of God," Elijah continued. "I am somewhat outnumbered by the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal that King Ahab had brought here by my request. I requested also that he bring four hundred of his queen's prophets who conduct the worship of the goddess Astarte, but obviously his wife refused to allow her priests to associate with a prophet of God. (I Kings 18:21-22.)

"But let us get to the problem at hand. The land and the people here will soon perish unless rain comes. God has held back the rain because so many have turned to idolatry. God is the only one who has the power to release the rain."

This statement brought strong murmurs from the many who felt that their god Baal had just been slighted. There were excited and angry shouts of "Baal!, Baal!" from the king's priests. Elijah held up his hands for silence.

"Baal Must Be Asleep"

"Let us carry out a demonstration to prove which deity has the greater power," the prophet continued. "I request that two bullocks be brought here, and that the priests of Baal choose one of them, cut it up and place it on the wood of an unlit altar. I shall have the other bullock dressed and put on the wood of another altar. Then let the priests of Baal call on their god to set the wood of their altar on fire. I shall call on my God to set my altar on fire. The altar that catches on fire should prove who is the true God that all of us should follow. Do you agree that this is a fair test?"

"Agreed!" the crowd chorused (I Kings 18:23-24.)

An altar was hastily constructed close to where Elijah stood, and wood was brought to cover it. Two bullocks were led up in sight of the people. One was picked by the priests of Baal, who filed up the hill with great dignity. The animal was slaughtered and cut up before the onlookers, and placed on the altar. The other bullock was put aside for the time being, tethered near God's ancient, crumbling altar that happened to be not far away.

When all was in readiness, a colorful demonstration was made by the priests of Baal. They danced around their altar several times, chanting, singing and yelling as they went. They then prostrated themselves before the altar, entreating Baal in loud, shrill voices to bring down fire so that the wood and bullock could be burned. Nothing happened. The priests then started leaping up and down around the altar. The more athletic ones sprang up on the edges of the altar and then jumped back to the ground, where they groveled in the dirt and screamed for Baal to help them. This continued until noon, while the voices became hoarse and the priests began to sound more like bullfrogs than human beings. At that time Elijah appeared and again addressed the thousands on the plain below.

"You have seen how hard the priests of Baal have worked for the past several hours," Elijah said to the crowd, above the rasping croaks that came only occasionally, now, from the raw throats of the weary priests. "You have seen, too, how futile their vigorous efforts have been. Their god is supposed to be the god of fire. Why hasn't he answered by sparing a bit of himself and igniting the wood on their altar? Could it be that Baal is traveling in some distant land, and has heedlessly left his worshippers to perform their own miracles? Or could it be that he is asleep and that his servants haven't screamed with quite enough volume to awaken him? Perhaps he has gone hunting or visiting and forgot to tell his priests that he would be away for a time. Or possibly he can't be bothered today because he is in the privacy of his bathroom." (I Kings 18:25-27.)

There was a low murmur of laughter from the crowd below. The monotonous and ridiculous gyrations and utterances from the priests of Baal had become ludicrous even to many who were previously inclined to consider Baal a real god with mysterious powers. There were others who were angered by Elijah's jibes. The prophet was aware that he was surrounded by enemies who wanted to do away with him. If he hadn't been certain of protection from God, he wouldn't have dared to make degrading remarks about the king's god.

"Now See What God Can Do"

The priests of Baal couldn't give up and admit defeat in front of their king, who was watching closely. They had to keep on dancing and shouting. But they had another bit of splashy ceremony to carry out. While they swayed and jiggled they produced knives and started slashing at themselves. Even with their bodies caked with blood they continued their frenzied dancing.

"Here us Baal!, Hear us, Baal!" they groaned over and over.

Finally weakened from exertion and loss of blood, all they could do for the rest of the afternoon was to mumble incoherent pleadings to their god. Toward evening Elijah appeared on the mountain again to address the people. (I Kings 18:28-29.)

"I see that many of you have gone to your tents and camps because you have tired of the futile performances of the priests of Baal," the prophet spoke out. "Now I ask that you come as close as possible to the foot of the mountain to observe that the God of Israel can do. There is an ancient altar up here that I shall now repair. I shall build it back up with twelve large stones to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, all of whom should be worshipping God instead of imaginary deities or idols. See for yourselves, now, what will happen when the living God is called on."

At Elijah's direction, wood was placed on the altar. The bullock that had been put aside was slaughtered, cut up and spread out on the wood. A ditch was dug all around the altar. Twelve barrels of precious water, obtained from a nearby spring that was one of the few left in the land, were poured over the sacrificial meat. Wood, altar and ground inside the ditch were thoroughly soaked, leaving no possibility of Elijah or his assistants setting fire to the contents of the altar by any devious means. With all in readiness, Elijah stood before the sacrifice and lifted his voice in prayer. (I Kings 18:30-35.)

"God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Israel, make it known today, through your great power, that you are the one and only real God in Israel. Let it be known to these people that I am your servant, through whom you have caused these matters to be brought about here at Mt. Carmel. Hear and answer this prayer, Lord, so that those here will be convinced that there is no God like you. Cause them to realize the foolishness of looking to anyone or anything but you for their lives and welfare!"

Elijah said nothing more. He didn't scream, dance, leap, roll in the dirt or slash himself. Instead, he stepped back from the altar as though expecting something extraordinary to happen. And it did.

Some of the onlookers noticed a strange object in the sky over Mt. Carmel. It appeared to be a glowing fireball. There were excited murmurs from many throats as the gleaming object descended swiftly to the altar Elijah had prepared. The instant it touched the sacrifice, it burned fiercely, causing a burst of smoke. The glow was so intense that people covered their eyes or turned their heads. Seconds later the fiery essence grew dimmer and disappeared. Not only the meat and wood, but also the stones and water in the ditch had been consumed! There was only a blackened crater where the altar had been!

Chapter 117

"O Lord, Take Away My Life!"

FIRE had descended from the sky about Mount Carmel to consume the sacrifice Elijah had prepared for God. Besides burning up the meat and wood, it burned up the stones of the altar, much of the ground under and around it and the water that lay in the ditch surrounding the altar. (I Kings 18:30-38.)

The Penalty of Idolatry

Fear gripped the onlookers. They fell to the ground, shouting that God was the only God, and that they had sinned in having anything to do with idols. Some of them shouted resentfully at the priests of Baal. Noting the swiftly growing anger of the crowd against the priests, Elijah held up his hands for silence.

"God requires these men of Baal should be punished here and now for leading Israel into idolatry!" Elijah called out. (Deuteronomy 13) "Come up here and seize them! Don't let a one escape!"

Shouting with wrath, the crowd charged up the mountain to surround the four hundred and fifty priests, who were thrown into panic by this sudden turn of events. Quickly overpowered by greater numbers, the men of Baal become prisoners of the people.

"Take them down to the foot of the mountain," Elijah told those who had arrested the priests. "They will be put to death and their bodies placed in the dry creek bed there." (I Kings 18:39- 40.)

Some of the frenzied priests screamed for help from Ahab, who was grimly watching the scene from not far away. The plight of his priests didn't bother the king as much as did the fact that Elijah was in control of the situation. But the sight of the altar being suddenly absorbed by the fire had unnerved him, and he dared do nothing contrary to Elijah's wishes. In response to his priests' appeal he slowly shook his head and turned his back. The struggling, yelling men of Baal were dragged down the mountain to be punished for their sins.

Most of the people returned to their camps or left the region to go back to their homes. Ahab was anxious to learn what Elijah would do about ending the drought, but he did not want to give the appearance of pressing him on the matter. He was relieved when the prophet approached him.

"I know that you're waiting for me to tell you when rain will come," Elijah said. "I can't yet say, but it could happen before many more hours pass. When it does come there will be plenty of it. Why don't you rest and eat while I go about my business on top of the mountain?"

Ahab was greatly encouraged by this statement. He went back into his tent, and Elijah went close to the pinnacle of the east shoulder of Mt. Carmel, where he bowed himself on the ground and sincerely asked God for rain. Shortly he asked his helper to go to the highest part of the mountain to see if there were any signs of cloudiness in the western sky. The man returned a little later to report that the sky was as cloudless as it had been for more than three years.

The Drought Ends

"Go look again," Elijah said, and returned to praying. Shortly the man came back to tell the prophet that the sky was still completely clear. Elijah had him to continue going up and looking and returning at brief intervals to state the condition of the sky. When he came back from his eighth trip to the top of the mountain, the man excitedly informed the prophet that there was a small cloud just above the western horizon.

"Go to King Ahab and tell him that rain will fall very soon," Elijah instructed his helper. "Tell him that he would be wise to get across the plain now in his chariot before the downpour turns the dusty plain into an impassable sea of mud." (I Kings 18:41-44.)

Ahab was almost wild with satisfaction when he heard the news. By then, even from the sheltered site of his tents, he could see a small cloud rising up in the western sky. Excitedly he called his servants to pack the tents and other equipment and move out as soon as possible.

The cloud rose and expanded and Elijah knew God was about to answer his request. For that the prophet took time to utter words of thankfulness. Within an hour or so the small, white cloud would expand completely across the western sky. The vapor grew darker. A strong, high wind started the cloudy masses to churning ominously. This abrupt change in the heavens from a peaceful blue to a boiling dark gray struck deep fear into thousands of people in that part of Israel.

When lightning started to flash and thunder rolled across the plain, Elijah had already hurried down Mt. Carmel. By the time he reached the base, Ahab and his chariot driver were getting started. Soon the rain would be pouring out of the sky and the creek bed would begin to fill with a surge of muddy water to wash away the lifeless bodies of the priests of Baal. Just after Elijah crossed the stream, Ahab passed over with his chariot. And the loaded donkeys weren't far behind. If they had been much later, they could have been swept away by the rapidly rising stream.

One of the towns near the east peak of Mt. Carmel was Jezreel, about twenty miles to the southeast. That was Ahab's goal, and Elijah's, inasmuch as the city of Samaria was too far south to reach before the widespread cloudburst. Ahab's chariot driver galloped his horses before the storm. But Elijah, who was a natural athlete and also had some help from God, outran the chariot all the way to Jezreel. (I Kings 18:45-46.)

Next morning, after causing alarming flash floods over a large part of Israel, the torrent from the sky abated. Later, Ahab and his men continued on safely to Samaria.

As for Elijah, although he was the man who had most to do with the ending of the drought, he was regarded at Jezreel as just another vagrant by innkeepers. He was thankful however, to find a shelter from the downpour. Meanwhile, Ahab was being received with much pomp and honor in the best of the town's inns.

Heathen Fury

When Ahab told his wife what had happened at Mt. Carmel, Jezebel was furious because of her husband giving credit to the God of Israel for causing rain to come.

"The drought was bound to end naturally sometime," she angrily reminded Ahab. "Are you becoming childish, that you should believe self-styled prophets like Elijah, who time their utterances with unusual events of nature to try to convince people that they have unnatural powers?"

"Events of nature?" Ahab echoed. "Do you consider what happened to Elijah's altar something natural?" "I wasn't there to see it, and I have only your influenced version of what happened," Jezebel countered disdainfully. "Your childish belief in this rustic prophet has cost the lives of four hundred and fifty men. If I had been foolish enough to send four hundred of my priests, as Elijah impudently requested, probably you would have been willing to let them die, too. If I had been there, matters would have turned out quite differently. It's too late now to undo what you've allowed to be done, but I'm going to see that this Elijah doesn't interfere any more in the religious affairs of Israel!"

"You'll have to find him first, and don't ask me where he is because I have no idea," Ahab said angrily, striding away.

"I'll do more to him than find him," Jezebel muttered, smiling to herself.

Meanwhile, Elijah stayed in Jezreel. The more he observed the people of the town, the more discouraged he became. He had imagined that word would spread how God had shown His power at Mt. Carmel, and that people everywhere would repent. From what he saw in Jezreel, everyone appeared relieved that the drought was over, but they didn't seem to be seeking God in the fervent manner of people who were truly regretful that they had fallen into idolatry.

Jezebel's spies soon discovered where Elijah was. Right afterward a man walked up to the prophet, thrust a piece of paper into Elijah's hand and disappeared. After Elijah read the message on the paper, being already discouraged as he was, his faith in God was a bit shaken. The message was from Jezebel, informing him that she intended to see him dead within twenty-four hours, and that she hoped her gods would kill her if she failed. (I Kings 19:1-2.)

Elijah left Jezreel at once, hoping to get out of the nation of Israel and reach safety in the nation of Judah before Jezebel's men could seize him. His servant, the man who had reported seeing the little cloud from Mt. Carmel, had come with him to Jezreel, and wanted to stay with him in this time of great danger. The two succeeded in reaching Judah and traveling through it to Beersheba, a town on Judah's southern border more than eighty miles to the south of Jezreel.

Elijah felt that Jezebel's men could show up even that far south in pursuit of him. He convinced his servant that they would both be better off separated. (I Kings 19:3.) Anxious to get out of a populated area, Elijah went on by himself several miles into the Paran desert that extends down into the Sinai Peninsula. Hot, weary, thirsty and hungry, he stopped to rest in the shade of a desert canebrake. By this time he felt sure he could never do any more good among the people of Israel and was so depressed that he wanted to die.

"Let Me Die!"

"I don't want to go on living like this," he prayed. "God, I would rather have you take my life than be murdered by Jezebel's servants."

The prophet was so tired that he fell asleep. Some time later he was awakened by someone shaking him gently by the shoulders. Before he could open his eyes, he heard a voice telling him to get up and eat, but when he was awake and looked around, nobody was in sight.

Elijah settled back, believing that he had dreamed someone had awakened him. He was about to fall asleep again when the pleasant odor of warm bread came to him. He sat up and looked around once more.

This time he was surprised to see a small roll of bread on a flat stone over a bed of hot coals. He picked it off the stone and found that it had just been baked. Then he spied a bottle of water nearby. When he reached for it, he discovered that somehow it was very cool.

Elijah recalled that he had seemingly dreamed that someone had told him to eat. He wondered if this could be some scheme by Jezebel's men to poison him, but he quickly dismissed the idea that such a complex means would be used when it would be simpler to do away with him in his sleep. He could only conclude that God had sent an angel to supply his needs. He gave thanks for it and enjoyably consumed the bread and water.

Relaxed by his repast, Elijah lay down and went back to sleep. Once more, after a good sleep, he felt himself being shaken by the shoulders, and again, when only half awake, he seemed to hear a voice telling him to get up and eat. This second time he was told that he should eat plenty because he would need strength for the long distance he intended to cover. (I Kings 19:4-7.)

He opened his eyes to find that there was nobody about, but there was another larger roll just finishing baking over still-glowing coals, and the bottle he had drained was again full of water. He found he was again hungry and thirsty. Eating and drinking a second time was anything but difficult. Afterward the prophet continued southward.

Walking several miles a day across the arid land, he kept on going until he reached Mt. Sinai, where the Ten Commandments, and lesser laws had been given to Israel six hundred years before.

The trip took forty days, during which all he had to eat and drink was what had been miraculously supplied him on the first day into the desert from Beersheba. (I Kings 19:8.)

Part way up Mt. Sinai Elijah found a cave in which he decided to stay for a time. Possibly it was the same cave Moses was in when he briefly glimpsed God. While he was resting there, Elijah heard a voice clearly ask:

"Why have you come here to Mt. Sinai, Elijah?" The prophet was frightened. It was shadowy in the cave, and he imagined that the dark areas he saw could be Jezebel's men who had followed him. He reasoned that no one else would know his name, but after a time it occurred to him that God would know his name, and that the voice might be that of an angel.

This Is Only Small Power

"I have come here to escape being killed by the soldiers of Jezebel, queen of King Ahab," Elijah spoke out, wondering if anyone was listening to him. "I have sadly observed how the Israelites have broken your covenant that was made here at Mt. Sinai. They have forsaken God's altars for those of pagan gods. They have slain the true prophets. As far as I know, I am the only one left, and I won't have much longer to live if my enemies find me. I am dismayed by these events. I have been ambitious for God, but now I am doubtful that I did anything worthwhile. I was sure that Israel would be sobered after what happened at Mt. Carmel. Apparently the people weren't very impressed." (I Kings 19:9-10.)

"Don't be discouraged," the voice said. "Be assured that God is with you. Rest for now because, soon God will come very close to you. When He does, come out of the cave to meet Him."

In spite of being excited and puzzled by what he had been told, Elijah felt encouraged and peaceful, and fell into a deep, refreshing sleep. Next morning he was awakened by the shrill whine of wind, growing stronger by the minute. He jumped up, ran to the mouth of the cave and peered up at the surrounding rocky peaks. The blast of air past the mountain was so great that he had to step back to keep from being swept away. Holding fast to rocks, he looked out to see huge boulders on the brow of the mountain being toppled by the wind. They crashed down from ledge to ledge, landing on the slopes below with thunderous impact. Fearful that some mammoth rock would come grinding down where he was Elijah went back into the cave, where he remained until the wind abated. At first he thought that the mighty movement of air indicated that God was passing by, but he concluded that God's only connection with the wind was that He caused it.

While he thought about the matter, the cave started to creak and shake. There was a growing rumbling that became so loud that Elijah ran into the open, afraid that the roof of the cave would collapse on him. Outside the cave he saw the terrifying spectacle of mountain peaks swaying and boulders and rock slides plummeting from the heights. Quickly, again, he sought the safety that existed inside the mountain.

When the earthquake was over, he decided that the fearsome shaking of the earth wasn't caused by the presence of God but by only a small fraction of His great power.

When he considered it safe to venture out on the ledge again, Elijah looked down on the rubble cluttering the edge of the level expanse where the Israelites had camped on their way to Canaan. The mountain erupted with fiery lava and ash. The sky became filled with dark clouds. Flashes of ball lightning occurred, changing to long streams of chain lightning that crackled and spit down on Mt. Sinai and the surrounding peaks. Massive showers of sparks shot in all directions as the fiery bolts grounded and fused on smoking rocks, filling the air with fumes like those of brimstone.

Chapter 118

Syria Challenge God

IN A CAVE in Mt. Sinai, Elijah was told by a voice that he should come out of the cave to meet God, who would soon be passing by. (I Kings 19:9-11.) Later, there was a very strong wind, followed by a powerful earthquake. Afterward, the prophet decided that God was not in either unusual display of nature.

Then the mountains erupted into volcanic activity and were stabbed by blazing bolts of lightning. Everything vibrated with the tremendous roar of steady thunder. Elijah crouched in fear, wondering if this could be God's manifestation of Himself, but he was afraid to stay outside the cave and watch what was taking place.

That Was Only Small Power

The lightning storm ended as abruptly as it had begun. The prophet walked slowly to the mouth of the cave, not knowing for certain what he would see. It was then that he thought he heard a voice coming from a great distance. Startled and uneasy, he pulled his coat up over his head, hesitant to see whatever or whomever should be waiting for him outside the cave.

After he had groped his way to the ledge, the voice came to him again. It was a clear, quiet voice of small volume. Seemingly, now, it came to him from all directions. (I Kings 19:11-13.)

The prophet let the coat drop off his head. He stared all around, but there was nobody in sight. The only visible moving thing was a column of smoke rising from the tip of a nearby crag that had been struck by lightning.

"I am your God," came the words. "Within the hour I passed by the cave you are in more than once, but I was not in the wind, earthquake or lightning. Now I have come to tell you that you have done well as my servant, though lately you let fear of the woman Jezebel get the best of you. I have more work for you, but you can be of the greatest value only if you rely fully on me and dedicate yourself fully to what you must do."

Elijah was both humbled and encouraged by what God said. He wanted to declare that he would be very enthusiastic about whatever God would require of him, but he was so overcome in the presence of the Creator, even though he couldn't see Him, that he feared to speak.

"Don't be concerned about Jezebel's men," God continued. "Go back to Israel, but don't return by the way you came here. Take a route to the east, as though going to Damascus. In the west side of the Jordan valley, a few miles east of Jezreel, you'll find a man named Elisha. He shall take your place, in due time, as the leading prophet of Israel in these years.

"Later, you will anoint a man named Hazael as king of Syria. You will also anoint a certain Jehu as king to replace Ahab. These two shall be used to punish the disobedient and rebellious rulers of my people. All Israel doesn't deserve punishment, because there are many thousands who have continued to observe my laws and have refused to worship idols." (I Kings 19:15-18; Romans 11:1-4.)

Days later, when Elijah arrived in the area where he had been instructed to go, he inquired about until he found where a man lived by the name of Elisha -- an industrious young man of a well-to-do family. Elisha happened to be plowing with a pair of work bulls when the prophet found him. Eleven of Elisha's men were also plowing in the field. Elijah recognized the man he was seeking. He walked into the field and tossed his cape over Elisha's shoulders as the younger man drove his team by. The surprised plowman pulled his animals to a halt and stared at the stranger.

Careless Prosperity

"I have been told that only prophets of God wear capes like this one," Elisha said, "and that when a prophet tosses his cape over another man, it means that the man has been chosen to become another prophet. Am I to assume that this special honor has come to me?"

"You are right," Elijah answered. "I am a prophet of God, sent to let you know that you have been chosen for a purpose."

Elijah felt that more explanation wasn't necessary at the moment. He knew that Elisha would ask questions soon enough, so he walked away, intending to return later. He heard quick footsteps behind him, and turned to see Elisha running excitedly toward him.

"If God can use me, I'm willing to go with you this very hour," Elisha told Elijah. "But first let me say good-bye to my parents."

"You shouldn't leave without seeing them," Elijah agreed. "When I placed my cape on you, I didn't mean that you have to go with me now. Stay for a little time with your family. I shall return for you."

Elisha was very eager about his call from God. To him this was the greatest day of his life. He wanted the last night with his relatives and friends and servants to be a happy one. He was not in love with wealth. Accordingly, he had his men kill and dress two of his work animals to be boiled for a festive dinner that evening. To show he was permanently giving up his previous job to devote himself wholly to God's service, Elisha used his own plow and yoke for fuel.

Next day Elisha saw Elijah crossing the plowed field. The younger man told his family good-bye and joined the prophet. His parents watched the two disappear over a rise, unaware that their son would one day be a prophet who would become very important in the affairs of the nation. (I Kings 19:19-21.)

About five years passed, during which northern Israel recovered from the three-year drought and became prosperous. For a time matters went rather well for Ahab in spite of his continuing in idolatry. All Israel became lax. Then one morning he was awakened with the jolting report that a large army had surrounded his capital city of Samaria. The flags of Syria and thirty-two adjoining states could be plainly seen. Messengers appeared at the gates to demand an audience with Ahab, who promptly met them.

"We bring to you the words of our king, Ben-hadad of Syria," the spokesman messenger said to Ahab. "He wants you to know that he will call off the siege of your city if you will send out to him tomorrow your gold, silver and the choicest of your wives and children. He expects you to decide immediately and give your decision to us to take back to him." (I Kings 20:1-3.) Israel's prosperity was just too much for these greedy men to resist.

Ahab was stunned. He knew that he could be facing disaster if he appeared anything but agreeable. He reasoned that the only thing to do was at least seem to go along with the demands, and later try to find a way out of the sudden trouble.

Unexpected Courage

"Tell your king, whom I consider my master, that I am at his service and that all I have is his," Ahab shakily told the messengers, hoping that his submissive answer would satisfy Ben-hadad for the time being.

When the king of Syria heard from his messengers what Ahab had to say, he decided that the king of Israel was so frightened that he would submit to any terms. He immediately sent his messengers back to make further demands of Ahab.

"Our king wants you to know that he has changed his mind," they reported. "He has decided not to require that you send him the things he previously asked for."

Ahab was greatly relieved, but his relief didn't last long.

"Our king has decided to trust his gods and instead of your going to the trouble of taking to him the things he asked for, tomorrow he will send men into your city to search for and take everything that looks good. He expects you to cooperate fully. Only then will he remove his army from around Samaria."

Ahab was more troubled than ever. He immediately summoned the leading men of the city to explain the situation to them and ask what they thought should be done.

"Don't give in to him," they fervidly entreated the king. "If you let his men inside the walls, the city could be taken over that much sooner. Besides, if we give him what he demands, we can't rely on his taking his army away. Once he gets what is valuable, he might destroy Samaria and the people who are left."

Ahab was fearful of going contrary to Ben-hadad's demands, but he knew that the Israelite elders were right. His courage bolstered somewhat, he surprised the impatient Syrian messengers with what he had to say.

"Tell your king that although I regard him highly and at first consented to what he asked for in the beginning, I can't allow his men to come into my city and take whatever they want."

When Ben-hadad was told what Ahab had said, his fond hope of taking Samaria without a battle was swept away. In its place came a vengeful desire to do away with the city and every person in it.

"May the gods take my life," he muttered angrily, "If I don't set so many men against Samaria that there won't be room enough in the dust of the city for them to stand on! Tell that to the king of Israel!" (I Kings 20:4-10.)

When Ahab heard Ben-hadad's declaration that he would destroy Samaria, he wasn't as frightened as he had been when he first heard from Ben-hadad. He had just enough courage to cause him to send back a caustic answer to the other king.

"Tell your master that his threat to wipe out my city fails to impress me," Ahab instructed the messengers. "Remind him for me that a soldier who is just about to go into battle shouldn't boast about his victories. He should wait until he is returning from battle." (I Kings 20:11.)

The exchange of communications between the two kings had been going on most of the morning. It was about noon when Ben-hadad received Ahab's latest and last message. He was in a spacious dining tent, eating and drinking with the lesser rulers of the provinces close to Syria, whose troops comprised a part of the besieging army.

"Prepare to attack the enemy's city!" Ben-hadad shouted, staggering to his feet. "I would have spared the wretched Israelites until tomorrow, but now Ahab will pay for his insolent remarks by seeing his palace sacked this very day!" (I Kings 20:12.)

While the worried Ahab and his chiefs and royal guardsmen excitedly discussed what should be done, the king was told that a stranger with a vital message had come to speak to him. The stranger identified himself as a prophet and informed the king that God that same day would give Ahab a victory over the huge Syrian army, to remind him again that the God of Israel was the only real deity.

Impossible Odds

"Why would God tell me that I can be victorious over my enemy?" Ahab asked impatiently, staring doubtfully at the stranger. "I don't even have an army!"

"God wants you to make an army out of the men in the city of Samaria," the prophet answered. "For your leading soldiers, use your royal guards and the experienced retainers who are sons of your clan chiefs. Arm the rest of the men in the city as fast as you can. Prepare them for action right away. If you do these things, God will help you."

"But who will be the head of this motley crowd?" Ahab asked.

"God expects you to be," the prophet replied. "If you aren't willing to do that much, you won't get any help from Him" (I Kings 20:13-14.)

Ahab had two hundred and thirty-two skilled soldiers who were his retainers and royal guards. A hasty count of able-bodied men in the city of Samaria added up to seven thousand. Many of them had no training as soldiers. Fast and frantic efforts were made to form what would at least look like an army out of seven thousand, two hundred and thirty-two men. (I Kings 20:15.)

They marched out at noon to face Ben-hadad's army. By this time Ben-hadad and the thirty-two kings with him were drunk.

"Two or three hundred Israelite soldiers have come out of Samaria and are running this way!" someone shouted into Ben-hadad's dining tent.

"Good!" the Syrian king muttered, sinking back on his pillows. "Take them alive for questioning, whether they have come to attack or whether they have come to bargain! I'll teach them what my gods can do!" (I Kings 20:16-18.)

The Victory Is God's

Scores of Syrian warriors were dispatched to meet the small body of Israelites. Confidently they surrounded them, intending to close in and herd them to the Syrian camp. The Israelites rushed at their would-be captors, bringing them to the ground with fast movements capable only of the best-trained soldiers of northern Israel, the king's royal guard.

More Syrian troops ran from their camp to take the place of their fallen fellow-soldiers. At the same time the seven thousand men of Samaria began to pour out of the city.

The sight of them unnerved the Syrians, who assumed that the men crowding out of the gates were as skilled in fighting as the first ones who had come out. Panic-stricken, they turned and raced back, trampling the tents and colliding with other Syrian soldiers preparing to attack. Pandemonium spread like fire among the thousands of soldiers and their officers.

This was the beginning of a surprising and sudden defeat of the Syrians. The lesser kings in Ben-hadad's dining tent decided without delay that they wanted no part of what already looked like a losing war. They fled to their horses and returned northeastward with some of their troops. Ben-hadad wasn't too confused, in his condition, to decide that he should leave, too. He was helped on a horse and raced away with most of the cavalry he had brought to Samaria.

The Syrian foot soldiers, superior in numbers, might have regrouped and crushed the Israelites, but they lost the will to fight when their leaders ran out. Many of them escaped. Others became the victims of the Israelites, who pursued them for a short distance from Samaria.

As for the large number of chariots, the drivers had little inclination to fight a battle by themselves by chasing their enemies over rough ground. Most of them died trying to escape. The area around Samaria became littered with dead and injured horses and broken vehicles. (I Kings 20:19-21.)

Ahab, who had gone with his men to direct them in the defeat of the Syrians, realized that the victory had been a miracle that could come only from the one true God. When news of the event reached the rest of the nation, many in Israel became more conscious of God and His power. Jezebel, of course, scoffed at the belief that God was as great as Baal, Astarte, and even lesser pagan gods and goddesses.

Not long after the short siege of Samaria, the prophet who had told Ahab that God would help him came again to the king to make another prediction and give some advice from God.

Defying God

"Next spring, after the rains are over, Ben-hadad will return with another large army," the prophet said. "Because of his stinging defeat, he will be more determined than ever to be the victor. Prepare for his invasion by mustering and training as large an army as you are able to get together." (I Kings 20:22.)

At the same time, up at the Syrian capital of Damascus, advisors to the king were trying to convince him that he should challenge the God of Israel again and invade Israel after the spring rains were over and the ground was firm enough for chariots.

"We lost the battle because the Israelite gods dwell mostly in the hilly regions," they profoundly explained to Ben-hadad. "By casting some kind of spell on your men, those gods prevented your riders and foot soldiers from success. If you would build another army as great as the one that surrounded Samaria, and if you would meet Ahab's forces on some wide plain, where the hill gods of Israel have no power, you would surely enjoy a great victory."

"To muster an army as large as the one I had before," Ben-hadad told his advisors, "I would have to use the troops of the province leaders who deserted me. I wouldn't want to take them with me again."

"Use their soldiers, but don't let the leaders go," the advisors suggested. "Tell them that experienced officers will represent them to insure their safety."

Ben-hadad was far from sold on the idea, but after days of thinking it over, he grew increasingly ambitious. (I Kings 20:23-25.)

"Make plans to rebuild my army," he finally announced to his aides. "I am going to challenge the God of Israel and invade the land again!"

Chapter 119

Despot Goes Unpunished

THE ARMY of Ben-hadad, the Syrian king, had been depleted and routed from Israel. (I Kings 20:1-21.) But Ben-hadad decided to enlarge what was left of his army and try again to conquer the limited forces of King Ahab of the House of Israel.

During the next several weeks all able-bodied men were conscripted from Syria and adjoining territories that paid tribute to Ben-hadad. By the next spring the army was as large and as well trained as the one that had unsuccessfully besieged Samaria. (I Kings 20:22-25.)

Feeble Human Protection

At the same time Ahab was mustering and training men for a bigger army. He had been told that the Syrians would make another invasion of Israel after the rainy season was over. When that time came, Ahab had a trained army, but it was pitifully small compared to the Syrian fighting force of many thousands of foot soldiers and hundreds of chariots and cavalry.

Neither side was aware of the size of the other's army until the Syrians came into the plain east of Aphek. When Ahab learned of this, he took his soldiers to the northeast to meet the Syrians. He wanted to head the enemy off in the event another siege of Samaria was planned.

When the Israelites came in sight of the immense number of Syrians spread over the plain, discouragement ran high. At the same time the Syrians felt very confident when they saw that the Israelites had only two small divisions of men. Victory for the invaders looked as though it would be quick and easy. Some of Ben-hadad's officers observed that the previous loss to Syria would be avenged at the cost of moving into Israel with an army that was several times larger than necessary. (I Kings 20:26-27.)

"I'll agree with that only after I know for sure that there aren't more Israelite troops concealed in some gully on the edge of this plain," Ben-hadad told his officers.

When it was evident to Ahab that the Syrians intended to camp where they were at least overnight, he decided to set up camp two or three miles west of them. That evening was an uneasy one for Ahab, who expected at any minute to receive a report that the Syrians were coming. While he was pacing nervously in his tent, an officer announced that a stranger had been picked up on the edge of the camp. And that he claimed that he had a message he wanted to give only to the king of Israel. Thinking that the man might be a Syrian spy, Ahab asked that he be sent to him at once so that he could question him. The king was relieved and a little surprised when the stranger made it evident that he was a prophet with news from God.

"The Syrians have come here with the belief that the God of Israel has power only over the mountains and hilly regions," the prophet told Ahab. "They think that if they do battle with you on a level plain, God can't help you.

I have been sent to tell you that He will again give you victory over the Syrian army, so that all will be shown that God has power in every part of every land and over all the earth, and that great numbers of soldiers, horses and chariots are as nothing to him." (I Kings 20:28.)

"But how does God expect me to overcome such a vast army?" Ahab asked.

God Proves Himself Again

"Camp here seven days," the prophet said. "The Syrians won't make a move until then. Don't be afraid to stand and defy them. God will intervene to perform a miracle, just as He did when Samaria was previously surrounded."

Knowing when the Syrians would attack was a great advantage to Ahab. His men had a week of needed rest, even though they couldn't forget that they were outnumbered. As the prophet had predicted, seven days later the Syrians started swarming westward across the plain. The footmen came first. The cavalry and chariots had been instructed to hold off until the Israelites were all but wiped out, and then to attack whoever was left so that they could have some part in the defeat of their enemies. When Ben-hadad had found that the Israelite army was so small, he decided to preserve the most formidable part of his fighting force to proudly parade unscathed through conquered Israel and cause the people to regard the Syrians with awe and fear.

Ahab's faith in God wasn't very great because he had never turned completely to God for a way of life. As he and his men faced the oncoming enemy, he was fearful that these were his last minutes of existence. He had only a strong hope, instead of a strong belief, that God would save him and his army.

As the two bodies of humanity closed in on the plain, the Israelites knew they were fighting for their lives. The Syrians felt that they wouldn't have to exert much effort defending themselves. Their aim was to kill as many Israelites as possible in the shortest time necessary.

But a strange thing happened as the two armies met. The confident Syrian warriors were suddenly filled with an awful fear that almost instantly turned them into cringing cowards. They dropped their weapons and shields and turned and ran before the amazed Israelites, who at first thought they were pretending to be afraid.

When they saw the Syrians running into each other and stumbling to the ground in wild confusion, the Israelites knew there was no pretense. They took full advantage of the unbelievable situation, charging into the Syrians and dispatching them swiftly. The growing slaughter spread from the foremost ranks of the enemy footmen across the whole army until it became a disorganized, howling, shrieking mob.

By the time the sun had set, a hundred thousand Syrians lay dead on the plain. The Israelite army was almost intact. (I Kings 20:29.)

The rest of the Syrian footmen fled to the nearby walled city of Aphek, where they looked for refuge. The tremendous carnage shocked Ben-hadad.

He fled in fright with his cavalry and chariots, following his foot soldiers to Aphek. Ahab and his troops, though very weary, weren't far behind. But by the time they reached the city the Syrians were inside and the gates were barred.

Although Ahab was excited and thankful for the success that had come to his army, he remembered that the prophet had said the victory would go to Israel. He couldn't believe a victory was complete while many thousands of the enemy was taking refuge inside a city against whose walls and gates the Israelites had no equipment for attack.

Walls Are No Protection

As the pursuers paused before Aphek, they saw men appearing on the walls. The number grew rapidly. It was evident that the Syrians intended to make a defense from there if the Israelites came close to the city. Ahab was discouraged. The only thing he could do was besiege Aphek, something he wasn't prepared for because his food supplies were limited. He hadn't planned to carry on warfare very far from Samaria for very long.

The problem was settled very soon in a surprising manner. As Ahab and his men moved a little closer to Aphek, more and more Syrians crowded up on the walls, preparing to hurl anything heavy or pointed down on the Israelites. Suddenly there was a sharp cracking sound from the walls, followed by a growing rumbling. Ahab and his troops stared in astonishment as the walls buckled and collapsed in a ground-shaking roar, sending up a huge cloud of dust. Twenty-seven thousand Syrians went to their deaths in the jumble of stones and heavy beams. (I Kings 20:30.)

Instead of rushing into Aphek after the dust had cleared, Ahab wisely stayed outside where his troops could attack any Syrians who tried to leave the place. Because they were well inside Aphek and back from the walls, Ben-hadad and his top officers escaped death and injury. With the city exposed, the Syrians hurried to hide themselves in the private quarters of the ruler of Aphek. There they discussed what to do next. If they stayed there, they reasoned, it could be the most perilous thing to do.

"The kings of Israel have been known as men who have been unusually merciful to those who ask for mercy," one of Ben-hadad's officers observed. "If we are found concealing ourselves here, probably we'll be slain at once, but if we go out to Ahab with the attitude that we regret what we've done, possibly he'll forgive us and spare our lives. He might even let us go free."

"I can hardly believe that," Ben-hadad said, shaking his head worriedly, "but I agree there's nothing to lose by trying it." Then he added bitterly, "As for regret, I have plenty of that. I deeply regret that I listened to you fellows and others when I was talked into building another army for attacking Israel."

Ahab and his men were alertly watching for anyone trying to escape from Aphek when they saw a group of men pick their way through the wall rubble and slowly approach them. They were dressed in coarse, raggy cloth, and ropes were draped around their necks. These were ancient eastern signs of humility.

"Spare these men," Ahab told his officers. "I want to know what they want."

Ahab stood high in a chariot that had been left behind by the Syrians, so that he was easily recognized as the king of Israel by the men who came close to him and prostrated themselves on the ground.

Mercy Without Wisdom

"We have been sent from your servant, Ben-hadad, who has instructed us to ask you for mercy," the fearful Syrian officers declared. "The king of Syria wants you to know he realizes now that he was very unwise to make war against a neighboring nation whose God is so powerful."

"From what you say, I know now that your king wasn't killed in the collapse of the walls." Ahab replied. "That is welcome news to me. I have no desire to see him dead. In a way, he is a brother of mine because we are kings of adjoining nations." (I Kings 20:31-32.)

The Syrians could scarcely believe what their ears took in. It meant the difference between life and death for Ben-hadad, and probably for them. They were relieved at Ahab's declaration. They reasoned that Ahab surely wouldn't have any further murderous intent toward his enemies.

"We are happy that you have such a fair attitude toward our king," one of the subtle Syrian officers said. "Your brother Ben-hadad will be intensely pleased to learn that you regard him as you have said."

"Go back into Aphek and bring your king out to me," Ahab instructed the Syrians.

Ben-hadad's officers returned through the wall rubble to their leader, whose gnawing fear abated when he learned what Ahab had said. A little later the defeated king emerged with his officers from the broken walls, walking in a slow, respectful manner up to Ahab's chariot. While his officers bowed to the ground, Ben-hadad leaned forward in a stiff gesture of respect. Ahab invited him up in his chariot. (I Kings 20:33.)

"I have made a grave mistake in planning war against Israel," Ben-hadad declared in a strained and embarrassed tone. "I had been told that your God dwells only in the hills and the mountains, and couldn't protect you on the plains. His power must be greater and more far-reaching than my advisors realized."

"The God of Israel is the most powerful of all gods," Ahab said in all sincerity, even though Ahab practiced idolatry, mostly because of his wife.

"I want to be fair to Israel," Ben-hadad nervously continued. "My father took some cities from Israel when your father was king. I will restore them to you. To show you what respect I have for Israel, I will reserve certain streets and dwellings in Damascus, my capital city, for the use of the people of your nation who travel up our way."

If Ahab had been led by God's influence, in the manner in which God's servants are guided, he wouldn't have been so friendly with this man who hated him. Ben-hadad and his advisors should have been seized for their murders and given the extreme punishment. Instead, Ahab treated one of Israel's worst enemies like a guest, suggesting to him that they should agree not to war against each other any more. Of course the grinning Syrian agreed, whereupon Ahab said good-bye to him and let him go on his way to freedom -- and to prepare for war with Israel three years later. (I Kings 20:34.)

When Invaders Are Not Punished

While Ahab was on his way back to Samaria, a prophet stopped the king. He informed the king that the leader of Israel had made a fatal error in giving Ben-hadad his freedom.

"Because you didn't take the life of that heathen king that God has already condemned, your life will be required for his," was the prophet's dismal prediction.

The rest of the trip to his palace was a miserable one for Ahab. He knew the man who had spoken to him was truly a prophet of God, and he had no reason to doubt him. (I Kings 20:35- 43.)

It wasn't until he talked to his wife, Jezebel, that Ahab received some measure of comfort, for Jezebel only laughed, as usual, at what God's prophet had to say. After a season of war, it was a relief to Ahab to get back to the comforts of his palace. While walking about in his garden, he decided that it should be extended so that there would be room to grow more than shrubs, flowers and fruit. He wanted room in which to grow berries, herbs and vegetables for royal consumption.

Just beyond the garden wall was a fine vineyard owned by a man named Naboth. He enjoyed a good income from the sale of his choice grapes, wine and raisins. He was thankful that he had inherited such a valuable piece of property from his ancestors who had taken good care of it. His happy and peaceful life was disrupted the day he was summoned to appear before Ahab.

"I need your vineyard," Ahab told him. "I want to expand my gardens to include other kinds of produce. Your land is next to mine. No other ground is available adjoining my gardens. I'll pay you what your vineyard is worth. If you don't consider that fair, I'll buy a bigger and better vineyard and give it to you for yours." Ahab was guilty of coveting his neighbor's property. (I Kings 21:1-2; Exodus 20:17; Isa. 5:8.)

"I respect your wishes, sir," Naboth replied uncomfortably, struggling to appear composed, "but God's law very plainly states that an inheritance in Israel shouldn't be sold unless the owner is quite destitute, and even then he should have it returned

to him when he is able to make payment. If I turned over my inheritance to you for a price, both of us would be guilty before God." (I Kings 21:3; Numbers 27:8-11; Leviticus 25:10-13, 23-28.)

Ahab dismissed Naboth with a wave of his hand. He had his mind set on extending his garden, and this rebuff by a common neighbor quoting God's law greatly upset him. Like a child who had been deprived of a wanted toy, he went to his private quarters, there to stay for many hours in a sulky mood. (I Kings 21:4.) Servants reported to Jezebel that Ahab was in bed and hadn't requested food for many hours. The queen took time out from her many pursuits to go to Ahab and ask if he had started on some kind of ridiculous Israelite fast.

Ahab explained matters to his wife, who had no sympathy for him. She was disgusted that he had considered Naboth's reason for not selling his property.

"This is absurd!" Jezebel scoffed. "Aren't you the king of Israel? Shouldn't your desires come before those of some common grape farmer? Don't brood over this thing. Get up and eat and drink and forget about it for now. I'll handle it for you, and I promise that the vineyard will be yours soon."

Ahab didn't want to know how his wife would get the property. He was certain that she would use devious means that might bother his conscience. He decided to forget about it for a time, besides, he was hungry.

Using Ahab's signature and royal seal, Jezebel sent letters to prominent men of the city, telling them to proclaim a public meeting and announce that someone had blasphemed God and the king, and that whoever it was would have to die. (I Kings 21:5-10.) Jezebel then hired two men to appear and swear that Naboth was the guilty one!

Chapter 120

Strange Bedfellows

AHAB king of Israel greatly desired a vineyard adjoining his palace garden. Naboth, the owner, refused to sell it to him. (I Kings 21:1-4.) Jezebel, Ahab's wife, decided that she would obtain the property for her husband simply by doing away with the owner. (I Kings 21:5-7.)

A Rigged Trial

Leading men of the city gathered at a public meeting in Samaria because they thought that they had been summoned by the king. Jezebel had done the summoning. Ahab didn't know about it. The meeting was for the purpose of trying one who reportedly (by Jezebel) had spoken in an evil manner against God and the king. The leaders had already been informed (by Jezebel) that the man was Naboth. He was brought to the meeting and placed on a high platform where all could see him. (I Kings 21:8-12.)

"But I have never said anything against God or the king!" Naboth remonstrated when he was accused.

"Bring the witnesses!" someone in authority called out. Two men who were strangers to Naboth were summoned to the platform to stand in front of the indignant victim of Jezebel's scheming.

"Is this the man you overheard shouting profane insults about our king?" the witnesses were asked.

"This is the man," they nodded in accord. "We were passing by his vineyard at dusk when we heard him making some shocking statements to a servant. When he saw that we were very close, he stopped talking and hurried away."

"Stone the blasphemer!" was the shout that welled up from the crowd, a great part of which included priests of Baal and their friends and followers.

At a nod from a high official, city police climbed on the platform and seized Naboth. His loud protests and struggles were useless. He was dragged to a field outside the city and cruelly stoned to death before a thrill-seeking crowd.

Not long afterward Jezebel received the news she awaited -- that Naboth was dead and that members of his immediate family would be taken care of by various underhanded means so that there would be no one left in Samaria to claim Naboth's vineyard. (I Kings 21:13-14; II Kings 9:25-26.) Ahab was busy with other matters, and wasn't sure of what had happened, except that Jezebel's plans would be effective. That was as Jezebel had planned. Ahab knew that Jezebel was as thorough as she was ruthless. Later that day when she saw Ahab, she cheerfully informed him that Naboth's vineyard was his. (I Kings 21:15.)

"You mean he has changed his mind and has decided to sell it?" Ahab asked eagerly.

"Better than that," Jezebel answered gaily. "You won't have to buy it because Naboth is dead!"

"How did he die?" the king queried staring at his wife perplexedly. "Even if he is dead, the land will go to someone in his family."

"Don't be concerned about details," Jezebel snapped impatiently. "I happen to know that there will be no one to inherit Naboth's vineyard, and that therefore it is the property of the crown. Could it be that in spite of the trouble I've taken to arrange matters for your benefit, you've lost your desire to expand your gardens?"

The Penalty

"Not at all," Ahab assured her. "I appreciate whatever you've done for me. Tomorrow I'll take possession of the vineyard."

Next day Ahab was pleased as he strolled between the neat rows of grape vines. He planned to remove all but a section of the best of them and plant other things. First he would have a high wall built all around, and would have the wall removed that was between his garden and the vineyard. In Ahab's mind there was no concern for Naboth. He was certain that Jezebel had brought about his death. He didn't know how and he didn't want to know.

"Don't you think that the price of this land is much too high?" a voice came from behind the king.

Ahab wheeled to gaze with irritation at someone he at first didn't recognize. When he did, he was quite startled. Elijah the prophet stood staring at him accusingly!

"Elijah!" Ahab exclaimed uncomfortably. "Where did you come from? Why do you speak of the price of this land as too high?"

"Because I don't think you would want to pay for it with your life," Elijah replied. "That's the price you'll have to pay because the owner was murdered. Dogs licked up his blood after he was stoned yesterday. Because you allowed your wife to plan his death, and haven't cared about anything except gaining this vineyard, dogs shall also lick up your blood!" (I Kings 21:16-19.)

The king's face turned ashen gray. He knew that this man of God didn't make false or futile pronouncements.

"At one time you were my friend," Ahab stammered. "Now you are my enemy. Otherwise you wouldn't come here to seek me out just to make evil predictions against me."

"I am doing what God told me to do," Elijah continued. "You have always been aware of God's laws. You've had plenty of opportunity to live by them."

Because you have persisted in wrong and shameful ways, you and your family must go the awful way of Jeroboam and Baasha, who also led the people in the wrong ways. As for your idolatrous and murderous wife, dogs won't just lick up her blood. They'll EAT her! Others of your family will share the same fate. If dogs don't devour them, their flesh is going to be consumed by scavenger birds." (I Kings 21:20-26.)

Ahab had nothing more to say. He walked slowly away, leaving the prophet standing in the vineyard shaking his head. The king returned to his private quarters in the palace and slumped dejectedly on a couch. He was beginning to realize how much he had allowed his wife to wrongfully influence him, and how low he had sunk.

Groaning with misery of mind, Ahab rolled over and madly yanked his cloak, tearing it in two. Having vented his disgust of himself, in a limited manner, by ruining his costly clothes, he lay on the couch and sobbed. The king of Israel was starting to know the meaning of bitter regret.

Remorse without Change

For the next several days Ahab was seen only by Jezebel and his servants. He ceased eating and drinking. His only apparel was rough sackcloth, a sign of sorrow. His servants wondered why he refused food, went about in his bare feet and dressed so shabbily, but they dared not ask him the reason. Ahab's state of mind was different than it had ever been in his life. He regretted the way that he had lived, and that was all that concerned him at the time.

As for Jezebel, she laughed at her husband when he told her what Elijah had said and raved at him for being sorry and for fasting.

"My people's gods were here long before the Israelites brought their God along," Jezebel told Ahab. "Now their strange religion is driving you crazy. Look at you, lying there in rags like a beggar! Have you forgotten that you're a king? If your subjects could see you now, they would lose all confidence in you as a ruler. If you don't come to your senses, it will be up to me to rule Israel."

"You've already been doing too much of that," Ahab muttered. Jezebel gave her husband a long, searching stare. She wondered if it were possible that Ahab was seriously thinking about trying to curb her evil pursuits and activities. Finally she shook her head derisively and walked away, laughing shrilly.

At that time Elijah received a message from God informing the prophet that although Ahab had not fully repented, he had become so humbled that God was willing to delay a part of the curse He had put on the king and his family.

"I will not bring evil on Ahab's family while Ahab is alive," God told Elijah, "but it will surely come later in his son's days." (I Kings 21:27-29.)

Strength and Peace through Law

While unpleasant events were taking place in the house of Israel, there was peace and prosperity in the house of Judah. Judah's king Jehoshaphat, son of Asa, was a

king who followed God's laws and worked to put idolatry out of Judah. (II Chronicles 17:1-4.) He built strong fortifications in the land and manned them with many well-trained troops. His reliance was more on God than on his soldiers, but fortifications and troops were things most of Judah's enemies respected and feared more than they did the only true God.

Even so, many of the people of surrounding nations were so conscious of the power of God that they brought gifts to Jehoshaphat, hoping that their offerings to one of God's royal followers would help insure their prosperity. Even the Philistines brought tributes of silver and valuable merchandise. Arabians from the deserts to the south and southeast brought flocks of thousands of male sheep and goats.

It was most unusual for neighboring nations to furnish tributes of their own will, but almost any good thing could be expected for Judah. God was sending rewards for the obedience of the Jewish king and the people who followed his example. They knew what to do because Jehoshaphat had sent priests to all parts of the nation to instruct the inhabitants of Judah how to live according to God's laws, and be happy, healthy and prosperous as a result. (II Chronicles 17:5-11.)

With an army of 1,160,000 soldiers around Jerusalem, besides those who guarded the cities, Jehoshaphat wasn't bothered with war or threats of war. Such a large army was possible only because the national economy was in good condition. Most everyone in Judah made a good living, and wasn't burdened by excessive taxes. (II Chronicles 17:12-19.)

During this period of grief for Israel and good conditions for Judah, a marriage occurred that didn't have God's approval. It later resulted in trouble for all the twelve tribes. Omri's granddaughter and Ahab's daughter, Athalia, was married to Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's son. (II Kings 8:16-18, 26; II Chronicles 21:5-6; I Kings 16:29-31.)

The wedding took place at Israel's capital, Samaria. Otherwise, Jehoshaphat probably never would have gone there. (II Chronicles 18:1; I Kings 22:1-2.) His presence provided an opportunity Ahab had hoped for since he had learned of the prosperity in Judah. After the wedding, he prepared a great feast in Jehoshaphat's honor, hoping to find special favor with the king of Judah. (II Chronicles 18:2.)

"Probably you know that the Syrians still occupy some of the cities they promised to give back to me," Ahab mentioned to Jehoshaphat. (I Kings 20:34; I Kings 22:3.)

"I've been anxious to repossess Ramoth-gilead east of the Jordan River, but it begins to appear that the only way I'll get it back is to drive the Syrians out."

"You defeated the Syrians twice before," Jehoshaphat observed. "Surely you can do it a third time."

"I'm afraid not," Ahab said with a gloomy sigh. "In the last three years the Syrians probably have built another great army that would dwarf mine.

If I commanded a magnificent fighting force such as yours, I would have no fears. I would be confident even if I had the use of a mere part of your army. But I can't ask you to help me with my problems. You have no interest in a city east of the Jordan."

"I have a great interest in any part of Israel," Jehoshaphat said. "Why shouldn't I? Your people and we Jews are all Israelites. If you need help against your enemies, my soldiers are available to you." (I Kings 22:4; II Chronicles 18:3.)

"You mean you would be willing to send troops against the Syrians?" Ahab asked, struggling to mask his elation.

"If it's God's will," Jehoshaphat replied. "Before any such undertaking, we should inquire of God to find out. If it's not His will, we could be defeated, no matter how many troops we use. We should ask a prophet of God to inquire." (I Kings 22:5; II Chronicles 18:4.)

"Of course," Ahab agreed. "I'll see to it at once."

Even though Ahab had gone through a miserable period of remorse, he did something he thought would insure help from Jehoshaphat. He called together Jezebel's four hundred prophets of the groves who had escaped the death penalty for idolatry earlier only because they had refused to answer Elijah's summons to Mt. Carmel, where the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal were executed. (I Kings 18:17-40; 22:6; II Chronicles 18:5.)

"I want you to determine what God would have me do about sending an army to seize the city of Ramoth-gilead," Ahab told the prophets. "I wish to do this thing, but if God decrees otherwise, I'll not act on it. I'll return later to learn what I should do."

Prophets of Convenience

Knowing what the king's will was, the prophets knew better than to pass on a negative answer. When Ahab returned they told him what he wanted to hear -- that he should act to take over Ramoth-gilead, and that he would be successful.

On learning that four hundred prophets were required to obtain information from God, Jehoshaphat was quite disturbed. He knew that not one of them was close enough to the Creator to be used as a true servant.

"I think it would be wiser to ask just one man who is a true prophet of God to contact God for us," Jehoshaphat suggested to Ahab. "That man should be one who has the reputation of living according to God's laws. I'll not be satisfied in this matter until I learn what God has to say through someone I'm convinced is completely dedicated to the Creator's service." (I Kings 22:7; II Chronicles 18:6.)

Ahab knew what Jehoshaphat meant. He began to feel ridiculous for calling in four hundred men to do something the king of Judah knew could be done by only one right one. Elijah could be the man, but Ahab had no idea of where Elijah was. Then Ahab thought of Micaiah, the prophet who had warned him that he would lose his life because he had allowed the king of Syria to escape from Aphek three years previously. The king of Israel didn't want to have any more to do with this fellow, whom he strongly disliked because of the prediction. But he was so anxious to please Jehoshaphat that he gave his servants orders to bring Micaiah to his palace.

"I have sent for a man who is reportedly a strong follower of God." Ahab told Jehoshaphat. "I don't like or trust the fellow because he came to me some time ago to tell me that I would soon die. In spite of what he said, I'm still alive and in good health. If he has anything to say to either of us, I wouldn't rely on it." (I Kings 22:8-9; II Chronicles 18:7-8.)

"I'll know if he's the right man when I see him," the king of Judah remarked firmly.

In an effort to impress Jehoshaphat, Ahab arranged for their two thrones to be placed in a spacious open area near the main gates of the city. There the two kings sat while the royal guards of Samaria displayed their skills and equipment. Other groups entertained with music and dancing.

Then, to Jehoshaphat's surprise, the four hundred prophets, attired in robes that were alike, slowly marched up to a position before the kings and began to chant.

"TO RAMOTH-GILEAD YOU SHOULD GO
TO WIN AGAINST THE SYRIAN FOE.
THE CITY SHALL BE YOURS AGAIN
BECAUSE THE LORD WILL HELP YOUR MEN."

While the prophets soberly chorused the lines over and over, one of them rushed about in a helmet with long iron horns attached to it. By charging about like a frenzied bull, he attempted to depict the victory the others were chanting about.

Ahab hoped that his guest would be moved by the performance. He was, but not in the way the king of Israel had in mind. To Jehoshaphat it was a silly display at a time when the issue at hand was serious. His interest lagged until the four hundred prophets marched somberly away and a man walked up before the kings and was announced as the special prophet Micaiah. In a loud voice Ahab inquired of him if Israel should go against Ramoth-gilead.

"You should go!" Micaiah proclaimed. "God will deliver the city to you!" (I Kings 22:10-15; II Chronicles 18:9-14.)

Both kings stood up in surprise. They hadn't expected that kind of answer. Each had a different reason for expecting that Micaiah wouldn't agree with the many other prophets.

Chapter 121

When a King Repents

MICAIAH the prophet stepped before Ahab the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah. He told them that God would help Israel take the city of Ramoth-gilead from the Syrians. (I Kings 22:1-15; II Chronicles 18:1-14.) Ahab couldn't believe his ears. He was certain that the prophet would predict failure.

"Did God actually tell you to tell me that I would succeed against the enemy?" Ahab demanded.

The Truth Is Out

"He did not!" Micaiah answered so that all could hear. "That's what your servant who brought me here told me to tell you. He said that the other prophets had agreed to say that you would be successful, and that I should say the same thing so that you wouldn't be disappointed."

Ahab's face turned a deep pink. He opened his mouth to shout something to the prophet, who hastily continued.

"Here is what God wants me to tell you. The soldiers of Israel will be victorious against the Syrians, yet they shall be scattered as sheep that have lost their shepherd. They shall straggle back to their homes because of the loss of their leader." (I Kings 22:16-17; II Chronicles 18:15- 16.)

"Hear that?" Ahab whispered hoarsely to Jehoshaphat. "I told you this man would have only an evil report for me. Now he's trying to predict that my soldiers will come back safely from battle and that I won't."

"Let me tell you more," Micaiah went on. "I had a vision from God in which I saw Him sitting on his throne, surrounded by His angels. God asked them which one would persuade Ahab to attack Ramoth-gilead, so that he should lose his life there. An evil spirit came among them and explained that he would manage to get the king of Israel to go to his doom simply by causing his prophets to lie to him by telling him that he would overcome the Syrians. God permitted this, and sent him on his way. Now you know why your four hundred prophets said you would succeed, whereas you will actually die if you go to battle." (I Kings 22:18-23; II Chronicles 18:17-22.)

There was murmuring from the crowd and from Ahab's prophets. The one wearing the helmet with the iron horns, who considered himself the great holy man, strode up to Micaiah and struck him in the face with such force that Micaiah almost fell to the ground.

"Don't try to convince the king that God hasn't worked through me to tell Ahab the truth!" he angrily shouted. "If there is a false prophet around here, it's you. If you are the special servant of God you claim to be, then how did God's Spirit get from me to you to speak to you?"

As Micaiah gingerly rubbed his head bruises, there was an expectant silence. The accuser stood glowering at the prophet. He was unconcerned about what God would do to him because he didn't have that much belief in God. Ahab was taken in by this dramatic device. Like all the others watching, he wondered if something would happen to the man who had struck Micaiah. Nothing did, so he assumed that Micaiah was a false prophet. Perhaps it didn't occur to him that God might prefer not to do anything for Micaiah at that time.

"The king obviously believes you," Micaiah told his attacker. "God has a reason for not dealing with you now, but not many days later you'll be running for your life."

Persecution of the Faithful

"Arrest Micaiah!" Ahab called to his guards. "Take him to the mayor of Samaria and tell the mayor that I want this man put in prison and kept alive only with bread and water until I return from taking possession of Ramoth-gilead!"

"If that's the way it's going to be, I'll be consuming much bread and water," Micaiah observed to the crowd, "because Ahab won't be coming back alive. Everybody remember what I'm saying here today." (I Kings 22:24-28; II Chronicles 18:23-27.)

Jehoshaphat was puzzled. He knew that Micaiah was a true prophet, but he couldn't understand why God didn't come to his rescue. He concluded that he would leave the matter up to the king of Israel.

A few days later the two kings, each in his own chariot, led the armies of Israel and Judah across the Jordan River and into the high plain country toward Ramoth-gilead. The closer they came to their goal, the more concerned Ahab became for his life. He feared Micaiah's prediction would come true because he knew that his prophets had spoken only what he wanted to hear.

In an attempt to provide more safety for himself, he decided that he would not approach the enemy in his personal chariot. Instead, he would use an ordinary army chariot, and wear the armor of a charioteer instead of his royal robes and insignia. In short, he wanted to hide his identity by disguise.

As a further precaution, he boldly asked Jehoshaphat to put on royal robes. The king of Judah considered this an unreasonable request, but he complied because he wanted to prove to the king of Israel that he could be a dependable ally. He wasn't too certain that it was the wisest thing to prove, however, inasmuch as Ahab had made some unusual demands. (I Kings 22:29-30; II Chronicles 18:28-29.)

Ben-hadad, king of Syria, had already been informed that an Israelite army was coming from the west. He immediately dispatched his army, including many chariots, to meet the enemy before Ramoth-gilead could be attacked. He remembered all too well how Ahab and his retainers, the clan chiefs' sons, had led the small Israelite army in two smashing victories over Syria twice in four years. (I Kings 20:13-29.)

"Ahab is a great fighter," Ben-hadad told his thirty-two chief chariot officers. "You thirty-two concentrate on him above all others."

Gang up on him and get him at all costs. Do away with him, and his army will become a lesser threat." (I Kings 22:31; II Chronicles 18:30.)

As the Syrian and Israelite armies clashed on a plain south of Ramoth-gilead, the Israelites were puzzled by the way the leading Syrian chariots drove through their lines. It seemed as though these leading charioteers were intent on fighting their way into the midst of the Israelite army, rather than trying to destroy as many soldiers as possible. Suddenly several of the chariots headed toward a certain Jewish area of the Israelite army, now standing almost motionless. Soldiers scurried to get out of the way of the charging vehicles, whose riders struggled to shield themselves from a cloud of weapons. Jehoshaphat, standing in his chariot, abruptly realized that he was being personally attacked by the enemy.

"That's Ahab!" some of the Syrian captains kept yelling. "Destroy him!"

A Sinner Cannot Hide

"I am not Ahab!" the king of Judah desperately shouted, expecting spears and arrows to come plunging into him at any moment.

Above the clatter of weapons and the noise of excited voices, one of the captains, who had seen King Ahab at the battle three years before, bellowed to the Syrians that the man was telling the truth that he wasn't Ahab. There was a quick exchange of turbulent remarks between the captains. Then the Syrian chariots wheeled about and rumbled swiftly away through the rattle and clank of Israelite arrows and spears hitting the shields of the riders.

Ahab, watching at a distance, was pleased for having the foresight to keep himself from being recognized. At the same time he began to feel panic as he realized that certain chief Syrians were obviously more interested in getting to him than in fighting with his soldiers.

At this time some Syrian archer fitted an arrow to his bowstring, drew it back with all his might and let it fly. It struck between armor joints of a certain chariot rider in the Israelite army, causing a deep wound in the man's chest.

That man was Ahab. "Get me out of here before the Syrians find me or my soldiers learn that I've been wounded," Ahab told his driver. (I Kings 22:32-34; II Chronicles 18:31-33.)

As Ahab was being taken from the battle zone, an officer leaped into the chariot to prevent the king from falling down, which would have created much attention. Ahab returned to the battle after the arrow was removed and his mortal wound bandaged. As the vehicle moved along, nearby troops saw that Ahab was standing in it with two of his officers. They didn't realize that he was being held up, and that he was making a great effort to keep his head erect and to keep fighting.

The battle increased for the rest of the day. By sundown Ahab had lost so much blood that he died. His officers feared that news of his death could demoralize his army. Before the report could get out, they sent out orders that every man was to return immediately to his country and his home.

The prophet Micaiah had foretold that the soldiers of Israel would return to their homes because of the loss of their leader. The prophecy was fulfilled as the army broke up and went back westward across the Jordan.

Ahab's body was taken back to Samaria in the chariot in which he died. After the corpse was removed, the chariot was washed because of the blood the king of Israel had lost. Dogs came around to lick up the blood, thus carrying out the prophecy made by Elijah, that dogs would one day consume Ahab's blood because of his disobedience to God. (II Chronicles 18:34; I Kings 22:35-40; I Kings 21:1-19.)

Because of an Unholy Alliance

Unhappy because of how matters had worked out, and disappointed in himself for having become involved, Jehoshaphat returned with his troops to Jerusalem. When he was almost there, riding before his army, a man stood in front of him in the road, and held up his hand to try to stop the whole vast procession. Guards ran forward to remove him. Jehoshaphat signaled for a halt, and asked that the man be brought to him. He turned out to be Jehu, the prophet who had informed King Baasha that he would die because he had lived and ruled contrary to God's laws. (I Kings 16:1-4.)

"What is your reason for standing in the way of the army of Judah?" Jehoshaphat asked Jehu.

"I have news for you about your future," Jehu answered. "I know it will interest you because it also has to do with what will happen to Judah."

While the army moved on, Jehoshaphat conferred with Jehu, who made some statements that caused the king to become even unhappier.

"You have been unwise in forming an alliance with an ungodly king," the prophet told Jehoshaphat. "In the past you have followed God and have done many good things for your people. God has been pleased about that, but He is far from pleased about what you have lately done. Because of it, calamity will come upon this nation." (II Chronicles 19:1-3.)

The king of Judah was so troubled that during the weeks that followed he toured every part of his kingdom to carefully inspect his judicial system. He wanted to make certain that the officials were conscientious and fair. In some places he made replacements. In others he added more judges. He admonished every man in authority to fear God and be completely just, so that God would give them greater wisdom in making decisions.

When Jehoshaphat returned to Jerusalem, where the high priest and supreme court of the nation functioned, he made some changes for the better there, too, besides advising the Levites and the judges to be courageous in their decisions. Being fair often requires courage.

Jehoshaphat worked diligently to make conditions right in Judah, hoping that God would take these things into account, and that Jehu's pronouncement of trouble wouldn't come to pass. He even reminded the Levites to be more obedient to their chief priest, Amariah. (II Chronicles 19:4-11.)

Months later Jehoshaphat received a report that trouble was on the way to Judah in spite of all he had done since returning from Ramoth-gilead.

"A massive army is coming this way up the west side of the Dead Sea!" the king was told. "Moabites, Ammonites and many of their neighboring nations are surely headed for Jerusalem!"

"Where is this army now?" Jehoshaphat asked, trying to hide his concern.

"Only a few miles east of Hebron on the west shore of the Dead Sea," was the answer. (II Chronicles 20:1-2.)

"That is only about twenty miles from here!" the king exclaimed. "We could be attacked in two days!"

"At the rate the army is moving, it would be closer to three days at the soonest," it was explained.

"You Are Our God"

Jehoshaphat was stunned, even though he had been expecting something like this. He immediately called a meeting of his top officers, who were as upset as the king when they learned that such a large army was so close. Some of them were in favor of sending out the army of Judah at once to meet the invaders. Jehoshaphat disagreed. He knew that there was something that had to be done before his soldiers went into action. He sent fast messengers to all parts of Judah to proclaim a fast and ask the people to pray for the protection of the nation. Within only a few hours people began flocking to Jerusalem, anxious to gather there to ask God for help. This crowd wasn't composed of just the leaders of Judah. The many thousands were made up mostly of families who wanted to come to the temple. Jehoshaphat welcomed this opportunity to lead the growing assembly in prayer. (II Chronicles 20:3-4.)

"God of our fathers, we come to you now to ask for help," Jehoshaphat cried out as he stood in the court before the temple. "We know You are the Supreme Ruler of the universe as well as the One who controls even every heathen nation of this world. You have power that none can withstand. You are our God, who drove out the inhabitants of this land and gave it to the descendants of Israel forever. Your people lived here and built this temple for You.

In time of war, famine, pestilence or any kind of national disaster, they came to the temple to ask for help because they knew that your Presence was in the temple. Again we are in a time of danger because enemies are invading our land. When our forefathers came here, they passed in peace by the Moabites, Ammonites and inhabitants of the land south of the Dead Sea, even though You could have given the Israelites the power to destroy them. Now the armies of these nations are close at hand to attack us. They surely plan to push us out of the land You gave to Israel. The numbers of the enemy are so great we are fearful of defeat if we rely on the strength of the army of Judah. We look to our God for protection and strength. Be merciful to us!" (II Chronicles 20:5-12; Deuteronomy 2:4-9, 18-19, 37.)

God Listens

After Jehoshaphat's prayer there was a period of quiet reverence. It was broken by the voice of a man named Jahaziel, a Levite who strode up beside the surprised king and began to boldly speak. Jehoshaphat quickly motioned to his guards to let the man alone.

"Hear what I have to say to you, people of Judah!" Jahaziel shouted. "Listen to me, King Jehoshaphat and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Our king has just prayed to God for help. I have been instructed by Him to give an answer to that prayer. God wants you to know that we shouldn't be afraid because the invaders are so numerous. Our army won't have to fight against them. God will take our part in the battle. All that is expected of us is that we go tomorrow to meet our enemies and witness what will happen to them!" (II Chronicles 20:13-17.)

A murmur of surprise came from the crowd. Jehoshaphat was almost as stunned as he had been when he had first learned of the invaders.

Chapter 122

Victory Without War

THE people of Judah had assembled in Jerusalem to ask God for protection from a huge invading army. They were surprised when a Levite went before the crowd at the temple and announced that God would spare the nation. (II Chronicles 20:1-17.)

"God has told me," Jahaziel declared, "to tell you that He will fight for us! There will be no action necessary from our army. But the Creator wants us to go out tomorrow to where the enemy is camped, to see for ourselves how He will deal with the invaders. He will do this for us because of the prayers and obedience of our king and thousands of our people!"

Three Armies Against God

Jehoshaphat was as surprised as anyone else by this unusual pronouncement. Matters could have become very awkward if the king had decided that Jahaziel should prove his statements. God caused matters to work out by giving Jehoshaphat the capacity to see at once that this man was being used by God in these critical hours.

Relieved to hear this almost unbelievable news, Jehoshaphat fell to his knees and bowed his head to the ground. The people followed his good example, remaining prostrate while the king gave a prayer of thanks. Afterward, the Levites praised God with an instrumental and choral concert. (II Chronicles 20:18-19.)

Next morning the army of Judah marched off to the southeast to meet the invaders at a location Jahaziel had mentioned in his declaration. Jehoshaphat admonished the people to believe God and His prophet. The soldiers weren't first to go. They were led by the Levites, who sang and played anthems as they moved along. Behind the army came a crowd of the people of Judah, curious to learn just how God would fight against the enemy.

Meanwhile, only a few miles away, the horde of Ammonites, Moabites and troops of Seir were about to grind to a halt on the march toward Jerusalem. The Moabites and Ammonites had begun to regret asking the men of Seir to join them in an invasion of Judah. Now, with victory seemingly only hours away, they didn't relish the thought of sharing the spoils of that victory with others.

Resentment mounted with the Moabites and Ammonites until it led to a plan to get rid of the unwelcome allies by turning back from the line of march and ambushing them from boulders and rises on both sides. Taken by surprise and caught from two directions, the men of Seir were mercilessly disposed of in a short time.

In closing in on their victims, some of the spears and arrows of the Moabites and Ammonites overshot so far that some of the attackers became victims. A vengeful attitude quickly developed into action between the soldiers of the two nations.

Some of them started hurling spears and shooting arrows. This was followed by some close combat with swords and knives. More troops joined in to help their comrades.

Soon all the soldiers were fighting for their lives among themselves. The battle finished only after there was no one left to fight. If any remained alive, it was only because they were clever enough to escape.

God Rewards Faith

When Jehoshaphat and his army reached the region through which the enemy was supposed to be marching, they came on a gruesome sight. Thousands of corpses were strewn out before them almost as far as they could see. The Israelites were sobered by what God was able to do. (II Chronicles 20:20-23.)

Having seen the defeat of their enemies, the Israelites didn't turn around and walk away. There was much wealth in such a great army, and it wasn't God's will that it should spoil and corrode or become lost. They gathered so much spoil that they found that carrying all of it away at one time was too much for them. For three days the men of Judah worked at collecting and carrying away arms, clothing, food, jewels, gold, silver and other valuable articles from the invaders. Next day, before returning to Jerusalem, they assembled to thank God for what He had done for them.

Jehoshaphat led his army back into the capital while thousands cheered in welcome. The Levites in the parade resumed their music, inspiring a festive mood to quickly develop among the people. The march ended as the king came before the temple, where Jehoshaphat reminded the crowd that although festivity was in order, a spirit of thankfulness should come first. (II Chronicles 20:24-28.)

News of the strange fate of the enemies of Judah soon reached the nations to the east and south of the Dead Sea. Travelers through eastern Judah told of seeing the vast spread of corpses. Others later claimed that a whole valley was strewn with skeletons. The people of Moab, Ammon and Seir weren't the only ones who were dismayed by these reports. Rulers of other nearby countries were troubled by what the mysterious God of Israel had done. For the next several years there was peace in Judah. (II Chronicles 20:29-30.)

During the early part of this period of peace, Jehoshaphat planned to build a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber, a port at the end of the east finger of the Red Sea. This was the same port from which Solomon had sent ships southward into the Arabian Sea and to Africa and India and to other distant easterly lands. Judah's king hoped that he could be at least half as successful as Solomon had been in bringing back unique valuables from strange lands. Unhappily, the plan didn't have God's approval, and for a reason of which Jehoshaphat should have been quite aware.

After Ahab died, his son Ahaziah became king of Israel. As the son of Jezebel, he couldn't be expected to do better than his mother and father. He had been reared with pagan instruction. He was allowed to rule Israel for only two years.

A Forbidden Alliance

In spite of what had happened because of his teaming with Ahab against the Syrians, Jehoshaphat finally let Ahaziah join him in the building of the ships after first refusing to be his partner. The two kings planned to share in any profit they made in trade with other nations. (I Kings 22:41-49; II Chronicles 20:31-36.)

When the fleet was well under construction, a prophet named Eliezer came to Jehoshaphat with some disagreeable news. "God has sent me to tell you that you shouldn't have become a partner with Ahaziah in sea commerce," the prophet respectfully told the king of Judah. "Because you have joined with an evil man, this effort will surely fail."

"You mean that there is a curse on the venture?" Jehoshaphat asked unhappily.

"It won't get to the venture stage," Eliezer replied. "God won't let the ships sail out of the port."

After the prophet had gone, the king was very discouraged. The ships, which were especially large, were almost ready to be launched. If he withdrew his workmen and his financial support, the expensive project would have to be taken over by Ahaziah, who wasn't prepared to handle it alone. Jehoshaphat felt that he had no choice but to continue what he had started, at the same time trusting God would reconsider his situation or that Eliezer had been mistaken about the matter.

After the ships had been launched and fully outfitted, they lay at anchor in the upper end of the Gulf of Aqaba. The king of Israel and the king of Judah came to Ezion-geber to inspect the fleet before the ships departed on their maiden voyages.

There was a crowd present, including dignitaries from many parts of the land. Just before the inspection tour was to take place, a wind came up. It became so strong that it wasn't safe for boats to take the kings and others out to board the ships. Waves grew larger and higher. The ships began to roll and toss, their masts swaying a little lower with the passing of every swelling ridge of water.

Then one of the ship's anchor lines snapped. It was evident then to the excited onlookers on the shore that the gale was about to cause a major catastrophe. The loosed vessel rammed into the nearest leeward one. The ships were so large and had so much surface for the surging water to strain against that they snapped apart. Other ships fell apart by only the action of the turbulent water.

Within minutes every vessel was sunk or broken. Workmen who hadn't been drowned clung desperately to floating debris. The birthplace of Israel's largest sea fleet since Solomon's time had become its graveyard.

As the wind meanwhile abated, Jehoshaphat was without words. While Ahaziah and others around him shouted with excitement and cursed the weather, the king of Judah was vividly recalling how the prophet Eliezer had told him that the ships would never sail out of the port of Ezion-gaber.

He realized how foolish he had been not to heed the prophet, no matter how unhappy or angry Ahaziah would have become. (II Chronicles 20:37.)

At the moment the king of Israel was very unhappy, but gradually he regained some composure and ceased making angry and profane remarks. Suddenly he turned to Jehoshaphat.

"Why should we let a freak wind discourage us?" he asked. "Instead of brooding over this, we should start building a new fleet right away!"

Jehoshaphat Learns a Lesson

Jehoshaphat, gloomily staring out over the bay, turned to give Ahaziah a long look.

"No! I'll never make this mistake again!" Judah's king replied curtly, and walked away.

Ahaziah's face and hopes fell at the same time. He knew by Jehoshaphat's firm answer that the king of Judah would not supply money for another fleet.

When Ahaziah returned to Samaria, he was told that the Moabites, who had been paying regular tribute to Israel since being conquered in David's time, had refused to pay anything after Ahab's death. (II Kings 1:1.)

"The Moabites will regret this!" was Ahaziah's angry reaction. "I'll take my army into their land and force them to pay with more than mere tribute!"

The government of Israel was far from being burdened with wealth. Revenue from the Moabites was badly needed. Plans were immediately made for an invasion of Moab, but if they included Ahaziah's presence, they were suddenly changed when the king was severely injured in a fall from the top floor of his personal quarters to the floor below.

The king of Israel suffered from pain deep within his body, as though vital organs had been bruised or dislocated. There were as many opinions and treatments as there were doctors in that day, but no relief came to the king.

Disappointed, Ahaziah decided to inquire of a pagan god what would happen to him. There were many false gods, but the one Ahaziah selected was an idol who was considered, among other things, a deity of medicine. It was the Philistine god of Ekron, called Baal-zebub, another name for Satan. This idol was generally known as the god of flies because he was believed to possess the power to destroy flies, especially where meat sacrifices were made to pagan gods.

"Go to Ekron and ask the priests of Baal-zebub to inquire if I shall recover from the cause of my pain," Ahaziah instructed some of his aides. (II Kings 1:2.)

On the way to Ekron, which was southwest of Samaria, the aides were stopped when a man boldly stepped in front of the procession and demanded to know why they were going all the way to Ekron to ask for information from the god of flies

instead of inquiring of the God of Israel. Ahaziah's men were startled to learn that this stranger knew about their mission.

"Go back and tell your king that he is foolish to try to learn something from a god who knows nothing," the man told them. "Why didn't he ask the one true God? Because your king has looked to a pagan god, he won't recover from his injuries. His condition will grow worse, and he will die!" (II Kings 1:3-4.)

Elijah and the King

Impressed by the words and the authoritative manner of the stranger, Ahaziah's men turned about and went back to Samaria. When Ahaziah learned that they had returned so soon he angrily asked for an explanation. The aides told him what had happened, and how the stranger had predicted his death.

"You allowed someone you didn't know to tell you what to do, even against my orders!" the king stormed. "What did this man look like?"

"He wasn't a young man," was the answer. "He was a hairy man and his robe was held at the waist by a broad leather belt."

"Then it was the prophet Elijah!" Ahaziah exclaimed. "My father told me that he looked like that. That's the man who troubled my father. Now he's back to trouble me, but I won't allow it for long." (II Kings 1:5-8.)

A little later, one of the king's captains led a platoon of fifty soldiers out of Samaria. They followed the route taken by the aides on their way to Ekron. They had marched only a few miles when they saw a man sitting alone on a small hill. The captain approached the man, who fitted the description of Elijah.

"Are you Elijah, the one who considers himself a prophet of the so-called God of Israel?" the officer called up to him derisively.

"I am Elijah," the prophet answered.

"Then come down here!" the officer commanded. "I have fifty men to escort you from this hot hill to a cool dungeon in Samaria!"

The soldiers laughed boisterously. Some of them yelled out scornful remarks about God and Elijah.

"If my men sound rude, please don't feel hurt and bring down fire from the sky on us," the officer said, holding up his hands in mock fear.

"I have no power to bring fire down from the sky," Elijah stated. "But the God of Israel has that power, and as sure as I'm a prophet of His, He'll bring down fire on you!"

There was more laughter from the soldiers. It was cut short when a bolt of lightning cracked down into the fifty troops, killing them instantly. Although their captain was a short distance away, he didn't escape the searing, shocking force of the fingers of

fire. Seconds later, fifty-one charred bodies lay at the base of the hill from which Elijah somberly departed. (II Kings 1:9-10.)

Soon afterward, as the prophet rested at another spot on the road between Samaria and Ekron, he was approached by fifty more men, led by a captain, all of whom acted and spoke with disrespect for God and the prophet after the commanding officer had made sure he was talking to Elijah.

"Come along with us, and don't try any of your peculiar God-of-Israel type magic," the captain warned the prophet.

"I don't deal in magic," Elijah declared. "I leave matters to God, who deals fairly with all, just as He is about to deal with you and your men."

Immediately lightning hissed blindingly down on the fifty-one men, electrocuting them just as lightning had dispatched the first fifty-one men sent to arrest Elijah. (II Kings 1:11-12.)

Again Elijah moved away from the scene of death. Later, he saw more soldiers coming toward him. He hoped that these would have a different attitude, so that they wouldn't deserve punishment.

His desire was carried out when the captain of the approaching soldiers came up to him, fell on his knees, and asked Elijah to spare his men and himself.

Chapter 123

A Change of Mantles

ONE HUNDRED and two men of the army of Israel had been burned to death by lightning. They had defied God and attempted to arrest Elijah and to take him to Samaria. (II Kings 1:1-12.) When fifty more approached the prophet, their captain fell to his knees before Elijah and asked for mercy.

Soldiers Learn a Lesson

"We heard about how fire came down from the sky to consume those who came before us," the humbled officer told Elijah. "We didn't want to come here after you, lest we suffer the same fate, but we have been ordered by the king to respectfully ask you to go with us. We trust that your God knows that we are only carrying out orders, and that He will spare us." (II Kings 1:13-14.)

Elijah was pleased that this officer would come to him with such a different attitude. But being taken back to Samaria was another matter. If that happened, he could be imprisoned or even face execution.

"Go with him," a voice said to Elijah that only he could hear, and that he recognized as the voice of an angel.

Regardless of what might happen to him at Samaria, the prophet obeyed. He nodded to the officer and stepped in with the soldiers to march with them to the capital of Israel, there to be taken before Ahaziah. From his bed the king regarded Elijah with a sort of sullen awe, as though he wondered if the prophet would call for lightning to strike the palace.

"Why did you ask your God to destroy my men?" Ahaziah inquired resentfully, although with some hesitance.

"I didn't ask God to destroy your men," Elijah answered. "God did it for reasons of His own. He also has reasons for soon dealing with you. Because you looked to a pagan god for advice and help, instead of the only true God, you shall die in your bed!"

On orders from the distressed king, Elijah was escorted out of the city. Soon afterward the prophet learned that King Ahaziah had died.

The king of Israel had no sons to succeed him. Jehoram, his brother, became the next king. For the next nearly twelve years he was to follow in the ways of Ahaziah, whose personal interests came before those of his people. (II Kings 1:15-18.)

By this time, Elijah had long since established colleges for training prophets, or ministers of God, at two and possibly three towns in Israel. After leaving Samaria, he went to visit one of the colleges, and there conferred with Elisha, who had left his family about ten years before to be trained as a prophet by Elijah.

Elisha had become the foremost minister under Elijah. It was evident to students and other followers of God that Elisha would in time take Elijah's position as the head, under God, of the colleges and groups of disciples.

That time came with Ahaziah's death. Elijah's work was finished, inasmuch as he was getting well along in years, and the Creator had chosen Elisha to deal with the next king of Israel. Both Elijah and Elisha were aware of these things. They also realized that Elijah would be taken from his familiar surroundings, so that he wouldn't be regarded as an old has-been, as time went on, by his enemies.

Elisha's Loyalty and Dedication

"I should go visit the college at Bethel," Elijah told Elisha, hoping that he could thus slip away.

"Then I'll accompany you," Elisha said, determined that the older man shouldn't leave by himself.

Elijah hesitatingly gave in to Elisha's request, and the two rode on donkeys to Bethel. There some of the students, called in those days "sons of the prophets," excitedly came to Elisha to tell him that they had heard that Elijah was about to leave for some other part of the world.

"I know about it," Elisha told the students. "Don't discuss the matter around others. There could be some who would start rumors." (II Kings 2:1-3.)

Following a hasty inspection of the college at Bethel, Elijah told Elisha that God had directed him to go to Jericho, and that Elisha should wait for him in Bethel.

"You shouldn't make the trip alone," Elisha hastily commented. "Count on me to stay with you wherever you go."

Elijah couldn't gracefully forbid the younger prophet to go with him. Thwarted again in his desire to be alone, he smiled and nodded to Elisha, who didn't want to part with his superior any sooner than necessary. When they arrived at Jericho, Elisha was accosted by students and followers who anxiously informed him what they had learned about Elijah's leaving.

"I am aware of it," Elisha told them. "Don't tell it around, or some of our people who follow God might become upset." (II Kings 2:4-5.)

Shortly afterward, Elijah informed Elisha that he had been instructed to move on to the Jordan River, and that it was his wish that Elisha stay behind so that he could make the trip in lone meditation.

"So be it," Elisha agreed. "If you want to be by yourself I'll stay behind. But I won't forsake you. I'll be behind only a short distance so that I can watch for your safety."

This wasn't quite what Elijah meant. He sighed to himself, but at the same time he was pleased that this man should show so much loyalty. He shrugged his shoulders in resignation and motioned for Elisha to accompany him.

When they arrived at the Jordan, Elisha looked back to see that about fifty men had followed from Jericho to see what would happen to Elijah. They didn't think that the two prophets would go any farther. The river in that area couldn't easily be forded, and they hardly expected the elderly Elijah to attempt to swim across.

Neither Elisha nor the fifty men from Jericho could imagine what happened next. Elijah removed his cape, folded it up, walked to the edge of the river and struck the water with the piece of clothing. The water, moving from the north, ceased flowing past the spot where Elijah stood, but the water that had already passed continued flowing to the south, leaving an exposed river bed.

God Inaugurates a Leader

While water slowly rose deeper to the north, Elijah strode across the almost waterless bed of the river with Elisha close behind him. By picking their way from rock to rock, they kept from walking in the wet sand and mud. As soon as they reached the east bank, the growing wall of water broke away and ran swiftly off the south, and the river soon returned to normal in that spot. (II Kings 2:6-8.)

While the students from Jericho stared in amazement, the two prophets walked out of sight on the east side of the river. When the two were alone, Elijah turned to Elisha.

"I know that you know that I am about to be taken from here," the older prophet stated. "I know that you have stayed close to me for that reason, and I appreciate your fidelity. If there is anything that I can do for you before I go, tell me now what it is."

"Because I was the first you chose to teach God's ways, I consider myself as sort of a first spiritual heir of yours," Elisha replied. "Because of that, I ask that you give me a double portion of your special power from God, just as a foremost heir is entitled to a double portion of his father's property. I need this so that I'll have the wisdom and power needed to deal with people and situations."

"Your request is wise," Elijah replied, "but it wouldn't be possible for me to give you such a thing. Only God can do that, and it will be up to Him. If God allows you to witness my departure, then you will know that your request will be granted. If you don't see me go, it will be a sign that your desire will be denied." (II Kings 2:9-10.)

As the two men continued to walk eastward from the Jordan, the sky took on a strange, glowing hue directly overhead. Something resembling a flaming chariot drawn by flaming horses emerged from the glowing sky, swooping toward the ground with great speed. There was a sound like a strong wind. It quickly grew to almost a roar. The younger prophet was aware that dirt and sand were stinging his face.

He momentarily closed his eyes. The force of the wind suddenly abated, although a loud sound remained for a short time. Elisha opened his eyes and looked around. Elijah wasn't there. A glance upward gave Elisha a start.

The flaming chariot was being drawn into the sky by what appeared to be a strong whirlwind. This time the chariot wasn't empty. Elijah was in it!

"My teacher and master!" Elisha cried out sadly. "You have been of more value to Israel than all the horses and chariots of this nation!" (II Kings 2:11-12.)

Which Heaven?

Seconds later Elijah was out of sight. Elisha kept on trying to keep him in view, but there was nothing to see but empty sky. The younger prophet finally gave up and picked up Elijah's cape, which had fallen to the ground. He walked back to the east bank of the Jordan. There he struck the water with the cape, expecting that the river would be divided as it had been when Elijah performed the same act. The Jordan kept on flowing as usual.

"God, give me the power that you gave Elijah," Elisha prayed, realizing that he had expected a miracle because the cape was Elijah's instead of looking completely to God as the source of power.

Again he struck the water with the cape. Immediately the river broke apart in the same manner it had done only a short time before. While the fifty men from Jericho watched the twice-performed miracle, Elisha walked back across the bed of the river. (II Kings 2:13-14.)

As he strode up the west bank of the stream, his mind was filled with one question: What had become of Elijah? For many centuries people have been taught that Elijah was taken from this planet to the realm where God lives and from which He rules, even though the Bible states that no one except Christ has ascended into the heaven where God's throne is located. (John 3:13; Acts 2:29-34.)

The Scriptures show that Elijah was taken up into heaven, but there are three heavens mentioned in the Bible. The first is the atmosphere surrounding Earth to a depth of about forty miles, in the lower part of which birds fly. (Genesis 1:20.) The second heaven is the space of the whole universe, the starry expanse that is billions and billions of miles across. (Genesis 1:14-16; Ezekiel 32:8.) The third heaven is the unseen place or throne from which God controls the whole universe. (Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:49; II Corinthians 12:2.)

The first heaven, or atmosphere, is the one into which Elijah was taken. We live and move in that heaven, inasmuch as we need air to keep us alive. Elijah was taken up to a high altitude, but he still remained in the first heaven.

Those who wrongly teach that Elijah was taken to the third heaven point to an account in the New Testament in which Christ went with three of his disciples to a mountain to pray. In a vision the disciples saw Elijah and Moses talking to Christ, who later told His companions not to tell others about the vision. (Matthew 17:1-9.)

Because Elijah was taken from his old environment in Israel, that didn't mean that he died. He was put down safely in a distant place where he wasn't known, there to peacefully live out the rest of his life. Wherever that place was, Elijah surely kept aware of the events taking place both in Israel and Judah.

A full four years later, when an evil man was king of Judah, HE RECEIVED A LETTER FROM ELIJAH. It warned him that he would soon become diseased and die because of the terrible things he had done. (II Chronicles 21:12.) How long Elijah lived after sending the letter is something that probably won't be known until the prophet tells about it after he is resurrected and again taken high into the first heaven to meet Christ coming down from the third heaven to rule Earth for the next thousand years. (I Thessalonians 4:15-18; Revelation 5:10, 20:4-6)

"Elijah is Safe!"

Meanwhile, the fifty men from Jericho hurried to meet Elisha to anxiously inquire what had become of Elijah. Elisha briefly explained that God had taken him up in a whirlwind. He showed them the cape that the prophet had dropped. (II Kings 2:15.)

"That means that you have been given the wisdom and power that Elijah had," one of the men declared as they bowed before Elisha.

"Aren't you concerned about Elijah?" another asked. "Isn't it possible that he has been killed by falling onto some rocky mountain or into some deep valley? Shouldn't we search for his remains?"

"God took him up, and God will take care of him," was Elisha's reply. "There is no reason to look for him."

"But anything could have happened," one of the men insisted. "Even if Elijah comes down safely, he could become lost. All of us are anxious to go out and search. Would you deny us this effort to do something for God's servant?"

"If it's so important to you, go search," Elisha replied, having been made to feel that he was responsible for Elijah's absence. "You'll only be wasting your time. God wouldn't take Elijah for the purpose of dropping him or causing him to become lost."

For the next three days the fifty men searched for miles around for Elijah, but they found no sign of him. They returned to report to Elisha at Jericho, where he was staying for a time.

"I knew that you wouldn't find him," Elisha reminded the weary searchers. "I also knew that you wouldn't be satisfied until you had looked for yourselves. Be assured that wherever Elijah is, he is safe and well, and that God will provide him with all his needs." (II Kings 2:16-18.)

A few days later, while Elisha was still at Jericho, leaders of the city informed him that their source of water, a nearby spring, had become so impure that it was hindering the plant growth and causing ill health to the people. They hoped that Elisha could do something about it.

Elisha did. He asked for a container of salt, which he carried to the spring and dumped therein. The city officials, who had followed him, were quite startled. The water was already bad enough without making it salty.

"Why did you do that?" one of the officials asked. "How can you possibly improve water by putting salt in it?"

"It can't usually be improved," Elisha answered. "But God instructed me to use salt because it is an emblem of purity. The salt itself won't improve the waters. God wants you to know that He has healed these waters, and that from now on they will impart good health to those who consume it and lush growth to all plant life in this area."

Right away the people of Jericho noticed how much better the water tasted. In the months to come they were pleased because of the healthy growth of trees, shrubs, grass and gardens. This was the second outstanding miracle God performed through Elisha. (II Kings 2:19-22.)

Soon afterward, as the prophet was going to Bethel, a group of rude youths -- often mistakenly translated "little children" -- came from Bethel to shout insults.

"Look at baldy walking!" they jeered. "Why doesn't he fly the way he claims old Elijah did?"

"He knows he can't fly!" they taunted him. "He lied about that crackpot Elijah, and a lot of religious idiots believed him!"

"Mocking God's servants is mocking God!" Elisha warned them. "A curse from God should fall on you for acting like this!"

The jeers ceased when angry roars came from a nearby wood. Seconds later, two huge, snarling bears ambled from under the trees and charged straight at the youths!"

Chapter 124

"Because One Man Has Character ..."

A GANG of undisciplined youths had ridiculed Elisha on his way to Bethel, and had spoken scornfully of the prophet Elijah. (II Kings 2:22-23.) Right after Elisha had told them that a divine curse should be on them because of what they had said, two angry bears ran out of a nearby wood and into the startled crowd.

Moab Refuses Tribute

There were screams of terror and pain as the animals snapped and clawed at the darting, leaping, scrambling group. The bears were both females. Possibly their rage came about because their cubs had been molested by those unruly youths. In any event, their anger was so great that they seriously injured forty-two of the youngsters before returning to the forest, growling sullenly.

Some of the screaming youths were able to walk back to Bethel. Those unable to walk were soon attended by people who were attracted by the yells of fright and pain.

Elisha's travels next took him to other places after he had gone to Bethel and he eventually returned to Samaria in God's service. (II Kings 2:24-25.)

Jehoram, the new king of Israel, came to the throne just in time to meet trouble. Ever since Solomon's reign, the nation of Moab, east of the Dead Sea, had paid yearly tribute to Israel by sending a hundred thousand lambs and a hundred thousand shorn rams, whose wool was brought along with them.

Mesha, king of Moab, felt that the time had come to refuse to pay this tribute. When it was long overdue, and when Jehoram had received no answer to his reminders to Mesha that Israel wouldn't allow Moab to be rebellious in the matter, Jehoram decided to take his army to Moab to force that nation into sending the sheep and wool. (II Kings 1:1; 3:1-5.)

But there was something that greatly bothered Jehoram. He was afraid that his army would be chased back to Samaria -- or perhaps even farther -- by the Moabites. He needed help. Just as his father Ahab had done, he went to Jehoshaphat to ask him to send along the army of the nation of Judah to help the ten-tribed nation of Israel.

"If we don't take care of this matter now," Jehoram told Jehoshaphat, "the Moabites will consider us weak and eventually they will invade our countries."

In spite of his doleful experience when he had joined Israel in battle against the Syrians, Judah's King Jehoshaphat seriously considered going with Jehoram against Moab. (Jehoshaphat also had a son named Jehoram.) It wasn't long before he agreed to add his army to that of Jehoram. He suggested to the king of Israel that the best route to Moab would be the route around the Dead Sea at the south end. (II Kings 3:6-8.)

Besides, that would take them through the land of Edom, which was ruled by a deputy who was under the authority of the king of Judah and would help him. (I Kings 22:44-47.) Jehoram had also expected that country to join him and Jehoshaphat against Moab, even though in the past Moab and Edom (sometimes called Seir), had banded together against Judah. (II Chronicles 20:10-11.)

The deputy who was king of Edom, seeking to please the more powerful Jews and Israelites, offered to add his military power to that of the other two kings. With soldiers of three kingdoms moving against Moab, a quick victory over the rebels seemed a certainty.

Three Befuddled Kings

However, misfortune came to the three armies. Their guides got the roads mixed up and led them on a roundabout journey of seven days through the desert. There had been no rain around the southern region of the Dead Sea for many months. The march through here was a miserable one because water rations for both men and animals had to be painfully cut and finally ran out. There was no hope of coming to water until the armies reached the Zered River, which was the boundary line between Edom and Moab. (II Kings 3:8-9.)

It was quite a shock to everyone to arrive at the valley of the Zered River and find that the river bed was completely dry! The soldiers and animals could hardly be expected, in the heat, to carry on with any kind of physical exertion for more than a day or two unless water were found quickly.

"It begins to appear as though God has a plan to get us together so that our combined thousands of men will fall into the hands of the king of Moab," the king of Israel unhappily confided to Jehoshaphat.

"I can't believe that God would have a reason to do such a thing," Jehoshaphat observed. "Perhaps we should try to find out what God's will is. For that, we would have to consult a true prophet. Probably there isn't one within miles of here."

"There is a man who for some reason has come with us from Samaria," one of Jehoram's officers remarked. "He claims to be a prophet of God who has been trained under the prophet Elijah. His name is Elisha." (II Kings 3:10-11.)

"Elisha?" Jehoshaphat echoed with sudden interest. "He is indeed a man of God. Take us to him at once!"

"As you know, we need water very badly," Jehoram reminded Elisha when he and the two kings met with the prophet. "We hope that you can contact God and ask Him where and how we can get enough water to allow us escape from this dry land."

There was an awkward silence as Elisha stared at the king of Israel.

"Why do you come to me to ask for help?" the prophet finally spoke. "Why don't you look to the pagan prophets of Ahab your father and Jezebel your mother? There are still many of them in your employ."

"I'm not asking just for myself and my men," Jehoram continued, intending to be diplomatic. "I'm asking also for the king of Edom and the king of Judah and their armies. If we can't find water, all of us will be taken by the Moabites."

"Should I ask God for help for a ruler who continues to allow idolatry in his land?" Elisha asked. "As for your ally, the king of Edom, he doesn't believe that the God of Israel is the only real God. You know that He is, yet you turn to idols at times and allow your people to do the same."

Jehoram didn't have any more to say. He could have decided then to renounce idols and demand of his people, if he ever got back to his country, that they do the same. But he hesitated to take the step, even in the face of probable defeat and death. He was relieved by the prophet's next words.

"I don't want to see the king of Judah continue in this trouble, inasmuch as he is a man who strives for the right ways. I shall ask God what should be done," Elisha declared. "First, though, bring me a harpist if you have one with you. I must relax from my tensions. Music can help me do that." (II Kings 3:14-15.)

The eager Jehoram lost no time in carrying out the prophet's request. A skilled harpist was available. In those times kings generally took musicians with them wherever they went, including war campaigns. Elisha listened to soothing music for a while then retired to a private place to contact God.

The Answer Comes

Later, he told the three kings God's answer. "BECAUSE ONE MAN -- Jehoshaphat -- HAS CHARACTER, God will deliver you all. He will send plenty of water," concluded Elisha. The prophet told the kings they should instruct their men to start digging ditches immediately from the river outward into the lower places in the narrow valley of the Zered River. And they should build levees around these areas to catch pools of water.

"God has informed me that this valley will soon receive plenty of water for your men, your horses and the animals you have brought with you for food," Elisha explained. "You won't see any wind or rain, but water will come in time to save you. And this is only a small thing. God will also help you overcome the Moabites. You shall take their cities, destroy the valuable trees, plug their wells and ruin their fields as a punishment for their sins." (II Kings 3:16-19.)

The kings were happy when they heard the news. Jehoshaphat thanked God at once. Jehoram hesitantly and somewhat awkwardly joined him. The king of Edom stood silently not far off. He couldn't express thanks to a deity he didn't know. Besides, he wasn't convinced that the prophet knew what he was talking about.

All the rest of that day and that night men worked busily at digging ditches and pools close to and joining the dry river bed. Before dawn arrived, the area was a maze of trenches and pools on the Israelites' side of the channel where the water ordinarily flowed. At sunrise the work was halted so that morning sacrifices could be made to God, according to Jehoshaphat's practice.

When the morning sacrifices were finished, lookouts stationed east of the military camp of the three kings began shouting excitedly something about water.

Water was roaring in muddy turbulence down the dry river bed, and startling the Israelites and Edomites by its sudden presence. It spread far beyond the usual width of the river, quickly filling the trenches and pools. In a little while the flood crested and the amount of water gradually dwindled, leaving millions of gallons of precious water in the depressions the soldiers had dug.

Even before the sediment had fully settled, men rushed in to gulp the water. Then they brought their animals to it, and filled their empty leather water containers. After that, they jumped into the ditches for refreshing baths. By that time they were greatly in need of rest, and so were ordered to their tents to sleep. (II Kings 3:20.)

A Mirage

Meanwhile, off to the north, the Moabite army was on its way south to meet the invaders. Meshah, king of Moab, had long since learned of what was going on. His plan was to let the enemy come into Moab, where his army would be at an advantage as far as the terrain was concerned. His men were familiar with every rise, gully, hill, ravine and wady, and were skilled in the art of ambush and sniping. The Moabite army arrived at the border almost in time to see their enemies camped in the Zered valley.

Next morning, as the sun came up through an unusual haze, the Moabites anxiously looked away to their enemies' camp. They could see no sign of life or movement. They couldn't know that soldiers there were resting after a long night of vigorous work. They considered it unlikely that an army would be sleeping so late. While the Moabites tried to decide what was happening, the sun went higher, appearing quite red because of recent dust storms caused by the drought. At a certain point the redness was reflected in the water-filled ditches and pools.

"The ground down there is covered with blood!" an officer shouted. "Our enemies must have been fighting among themselves!"

Though this was an absurd observation, to the excited Moabites it was the only explanation for the reddish appearance of the area around the camp of their enemies. As the minutes passed, and none could be seen milling about in the distant camp, the Moabites became surer that the invaders had quarreled and had killed one another. Meshah conferred with his officers. They believed that the lack of activity on the part of the Israelites and Edomites couldn't have to do with some kind of trickery.

"Then go to the enemy and seize their arms and belongings," Meshah ordered. (II Kings 3:21-23.)

Knowing that the Israelites, especially, would have left much valuable booty, the Moabite soldiers set off hastily. It developed into a race to determine who would get to the enemy camp first for the best of the spoils.

The nearer the Moabites came, the more they were convinced that only dead men, if any, were within the tents. They whooped and shouted with glee, quite unaware of how foolish they were being.

Israelite and Edomite guards, weary from working all night, were brought to their senses by the shouts. They leaped to their feet and screamed warnings to those deep in sleep in the tents. The half awake occupants came charging out just in time to face the Moabites, who were so surprised that they turned and rushed back toward their country. Many of them lost their lives before they could get out of the Israelite camp. Others were chased far into their home territory.

During the strong pursuit of the Moabites, the Israelites and Edomites swarmed through Moabite towns and villages, destroying buildings, taking spoils, plugging up wells, tossing tons of stones into fertile fields and chopping down the best of the trees of the land, thus carrying out the penalty God had decreed through Elisha. (II Kings 3:24-25.)

A Last Desperate Stand

When the invaders arrived at Kir-haraseth, the capital of Moab, they found matters more difficult. Kir-haraseth was encased by high, solid walls, within which Mesha and the remainder of his army had taken quick refuge. The Israelites and Edomites tightly surrounded the city and began an assault against its walls.

Mesha knew that the Moabites would be lost if they continued. Desperate, he called together seven hundred of his top swordsmen from among his elite guard.

"You will go with me to cut through the enemy just outside the gate and reach the spot not far beyond where the king of Edom is stationed," the Moabite king instructed them. "If we destroy that unfaithful wretch, who used to be my ally, the Edomites might give up. At the same time we'll be getting the attention of the Israelites, so that our men on the wall will have an opportunity to drop stones on the ones who are trying to shatter the wall base."

Mesha and his picked warriors rushed out of Kir-haraseth through suddenly opened gates that clanged shut like a giant trap as soon as the last man was outside. Savage fighting took place at once as the Edomites closed in. Mesha and his men battled furiously, downing many soldiers, but they weren't able to fight their way to where the king of Edom stood in his chariot. Only after most of his warriors had lost their lives did Mesha order what remained of his men back to the gate, which was opened just long enough to admit the retreating Moabites. (II Kings 3:26.)

Personally defeated in battle, and knowing that his enemies would eventually break through the wall of his strongest city, Mesha had only one hope left. He would appeal to Chemosh (Molech), his pagan god of protection. To gain the greatest favor from this imagined deity, a pagan worshipper had to make a great sacrifice. Sacrificing to a non-existent god was foolish and futile. But in this case the sacrifice was terribly tragic. The offered object had to be a human being, and preferably a child!

While the allied invaders were regrouping themselves after the sudden sally by the defenders, the Moabite king and some of his officers appeared on the wall above the main gate. The assault crews were ordered to cease action, because it was expected that Mesha was about to make a declaration or request. (II Kings 3:27.)

To the surprise of the onlookers, wood was quickly piled before Mesha and set on fire. The king of Moab stretched his arms toward the flames and smoke, loudly and passionately uttering something. Then men appeared dragging a struggling young man in bright clothing. Some of the Edomites recognized him as Mesha's oldest son, who apparently was about to be sacrificed!

Chapter 125

When Miracles Made News

THE armies of Israel, Judah and Edom had pursued the Moabite army to the Moabite capital city of Kir-haraseth. The king of that country, Mesha, was desperate. He had a fire built atop that wall for sacrificing his oldest son to the imaginary pagan god Molech, trusting that in return Molech would spare him and what remained of his army. (II Kings 3:21-26.)

Even veteran soldiers shuddered at the manner in which the king of Moab took the life of the heir to his throne and reduced him to ashes before the gaze of thousands. Just how much futile faith Mesha had in Molech can't be known. But here was something else the Moabite king was counting on. He hoped that his awful act would fill his enemies with such sickening dread that they would become too disgusted to continue the siege.

That was what happened. Many Israelites and Edomites wished to destroy Kir-haraseth and Mesha because of the barbarous act, but Jehoshaphat and Jehoram decided to call off the siege and leave the Moabite king to his misery. The allies returned to their respective countries, and Elisha -- God's prophet -- presumably returned to Samaria with Jehoram's army. (II Kings 3:27.)

Wiping Out Old Debts

In that time Israelites who looked to God for the right way of life learned mainly from God's prophets and the students they trained in colleges set up for that purpose. Elisha came to have many students to whom he was a leader and teacher. Some of his college students became so learned and advanced in character that they came to be known as "sons of the prophets." One day the widow of one of these men came to Elisha to tell him that her husband had gone into debt before he died, and that his creditor was about to take her two sons from her to become his servants as payment of the debt. (II Kings 4:1.)

"If you have any property your creditor can use, let him have that," Elisha said.

"My only precious material possession is a pot of fine olive oil," the woman explained. "It wouldn't even begin to pay my debt."

"Oil is valuable," Elisha observed. "If you had a large supply of it, you would be well off. You should borrow from your friends and neighbors every empty pot and jar and crock they can spare. When no one is present but your sons, take your oil and pour into each container until it is full."

The woman followed Elisha's advice, wondering what good could come of using up her oil by pouring so little oil into so many vessels. Finally, when one of her sons had brought her the last empty container, she discovered an amazing thing.

All the containers were FULL of oil!

Eagerly she ran to where Elisha was staying to tell him what had happened. When the prophet smiled at her, she knew that he had been aware of what had taken place before she had told him.

"What shall I do with all that oil?" she excitedly asked Elisha.

"Everyone needs good olive oil for cooking," Elisha reminded her. "Merchants and those from whom you borrowed the containers will be anxious to buy the oil at a fair price. Then you will be able to pay your debt with money. There should be enough left over for you and your sons to live on for a long time." (II Kings 4:2-7.)

This was the fifth major miracle of Elisha recorded in the Bible. The sixth one began when Elisha had come to the town of Shunem, about twenty-five miles north of Samaria. A wealthy woman who was anxious to please God learned that Elisha was there, and invited him to her home to dine. Because the prophet brought them much helpful instruction during the visit, the woman and her husband invited Elisha to stop at their home any time he came to Shunem. He was pleased to take advantage of their hospitality every time he passed that way. (II Kings 4:8.)

After a time the woman suggested to her husband that they add a room to their home, so that the prophet, as well as the man who often accompanied him, could have a place to rest as well as eat.

"Elisha is very close to God," the woman reminded her husband. "The more we associate with him, the closer to God we'll become."

A Son for the Barren

The extra room was built and used to comfortable advantage by Elisha and his servant, Gehazi. During one stop at the home, Elisha decided that this woman who had been so helpful toward him should receive some kind of reward.

"Ask the lady of the house to come to our quarters," Elisha instructed Gehazi. "Tell her that because she has been so kind to us, I would be pleased to ask any favor for her or for her husband from the king or from any other in high authority in Samaria."

When Gehazi spoke to the woman, she told him that she was satisfied with what she had and with her position in life, and didn't want or need any favors from those of high rank. Elisha was impressed by what his servant conveyed to him. It proved that the woman hadn't sought the prophet's company for any purpose besides wanting to know how to be more obedient to God. (II Kings 4:9-13.)

"There must be something that can be done for her," Elisha remarked to Gehazi.

"It's probably too late for her to have what she wants most," Gehazi observed. "She has never had any children, and her husband is quite old."

"Call her," Elisha said, after a short period of thought.

When the woman appeared before his door, the prophet told her that he had a special bit of good news for her.

"Less than a year from now, you will be nursing a son," Elisha announced.

The woman stared at the prophet, wondering why he should say such a thing.

"Why do you, a man of God, trouble me by making such a ridiculous statement?" she asked in an unhappy tone. (II Kings 4:14-16.)

"My statement wasn't ridiculous," Elisha assured her. "Soon you will discover that you are going to become a mother."

The woman turned and walked away, disappointed that this otherwise sensible man would cause her to feel unhappy by referring to her as a mother-to-be, even though he was aware that both she and her husband were well along in years.

Elisha knew that she doubted him, and that his continued presence would only bother her. Accordingly, he left very soon with Gehazi.

Not long afterward, the woman began to realize that she was carrying a child. She knew then that Elisha had intended to make her happy by what he had said, instead of embarrassing her. (II Kings 4:17.)

The boy to whom she later gave birth was a great joy to her and her husband. She realized that this was a miracle God had performed, as Elisha had promised. She was very thankful. When the lad was only a few years old, he walked out in a field where his father was overseeing some reapers. The day was fair and exceptionally warm. After a while the boy suddenly felt weak and faint.

"My head hurts," he complained to his father.

A Trial of Faith

The father knew that his son was suffering from severe sunstroke. He had the boy carried back to his mother at their home. The lad fell into a coma, and died a few hours later in his mother's arms.

The woman became frantic. The only thing she could think to do was place her dead son in Elisha's bed. She hoped that somehow this act would bring him closer to God, whom she felt might restore his life.

Leaving her son there, she sent word to her husband to send from the field one of the young men and one of the burros, so that she could travel to see Elisha.

Not knowing that his son had died, the husband wondered why his wife would suddenly wish to visit Elisha, inasmuch as it wasn't a Sabbath or any of the other special days when the prophet lectured to assembled followers of God. (II Kings 4:18-23.)

Absorbed in his work, and believing that his son would recover very soon, he sent the young worker and the burro to his wife, who had it quickly saddled to carry her as swiftly as possible to Mt. Carmel, about twenty miles to the northwest, where she knew Elisha was staying at an ancient retreat he often occupied.

At the southern tip of the long mountain, where Elisha was resting with Gehazi, the prophet looked out to the southeast to see a woman swiftly approaching on a burro, with a young man running ahead leading it. As they came closer, the prophet recognized the rider.

"The woman of Shunem is coming," he told Gehazi. "She wouldn't come here unless she is in need of help. Run out to meet her and ask if she and her husband and son are well."

"My husband and I are all right," the woman nervously answered Gehazi when he met her.

A little later, when she reached the prophet, who came out to greet her, she prostrated herself before Elisha and sobbingly placed her hands on his feet. Gehazi stepped up to push her away.

"Don't touch her," Elisha told his servant. "Can't you see that she's in a state of great anguish? Something has happened to her that God has not chosen to tell me before now." (II Kings 4:24- 27.)

"I never told you that I wanted a son," the woman tearfully said to Elisha. "I was almost happy until you mentioned that I would have a child. Then I wanted one more than ever before. At first I thought you were trying to give me a false hope, and I didn't understand that."

"Are you telling me that your son is dead, and that you wish he had never been born?" the prophet asked.

"He died hours ago of a sunstroke," the woman sobbed. "If he had to die so young, I wish he hadn't come into this world."

"Go to Shunem at once," Elisha instructed Gehazi, "Don't pause on the way even long enough to speak to anyone. Get to this woman's home as fast as you can run. When you arrive, place my staff on the boy's face." (II Kings 4:28-29.)

"But I want you to go back with me, Elisha," the woman pleaded. "I won't leave here until you do."

Restored to Life

Elisha had little choice except to start out after Gehazi with the woman and her servant. When Gehazi arrived at the woman's home, he found a grieving father sitting beside his dead son. He touched the lifeless face with Elisha's staff, but nothing happened.

"I did as you told me, but the boy is still dead," Gehazi reported to the prophet later when he ran out to meet him.

When Elisha arrived at the home with the woman, he went into his room alone, shut the door and asked God to restore life to the boy. Then he stretched himself out on the corpse to impart warmth to it. At the same time he breathed forcibly into the youngster's mouth to try to revive lung action. After a time he got up and walked vigorously about after which he resumed warming the boy's body and breathing into his lungs. He carried out every natural means possible to help the boy, at the same time praying that God would perform a miracle to give him back the spark of life.

Suddenly the lad started gasping. His breathing had returned. He opened his eyes to stare confusedly about, having come back to life after hours in a state of death. This was a greater miracle than some realize, inasmuch as brain cells die if they are deprived very long of a supply of oxygen. A person so affected often ends up mentally ill, but the boy revived to be in good mental health.

While the prophet watched over the lad, he called Gehazi and told him to ask the mother to come in. When the woman saw her son alive, she was so overcome with joy that she fell down weeping before Elisha.

"Take your son," the prophet said. "He will be all right."

The woman tenderly picked up her boy and slowly walked out, unable to find words to express her gratitude. (II Kings 4:30-37.)

This was the seventh major miracle God performed through the obedient Elisha, whose desires and special abilities were in harmony with his Creator's will. The next miracle occurred when Elisha was in Gilgal teaching some of his college students. Food was scarce in that area then because of a drought, and people were hard put to find enough fresh produce for day-to-day needs.

"I know that many of you are wondering what and where you will eat after this session is over," Elisha told his listeners. "There is no cause to be concerned. I have instructed my servant to prepare lunch for all of you."

Poisoned Stew Made Edible

There were grateful smiles in the audience, but at the same time something was happening that would later bring no smiles to the listeners. Because of a lack of garden plants, Gehazi and some other men were out in the fields searching for edible herbs and wild vegetables for a stew Elisha wanted prepared.

A large pot of water was already boiling close to where the prophet's class was assembled. Ingredients of the stew included several wild gourds plucked from a vine one of Gehazi's helpers had discovered and thought to be a squash vine. No one connected with the preparation of the plants realized that the squash-like gourds were poisonous.

Later, when the contents of the pot were served, there were immediate expressions of discomfort. A few spat it out immediately. Elisha, who intended to be served last, inquired what was wrong.

"It's horribly bitter!" one man exclaimed. "Anything that bitter must surely be poisonous!"(II Kings 4:38-40.)

"Very likely," Elisha remarked after tasting it. "It's too bad that this whole big pot of stew should be spoiled at a time when we're in such need of food. Surely God won't allow us to go hungry. Bring me a small amount of any kind of ground grain."

Someone brought some meal, which Elisha poured into the pot and mixed thoroughly with the stew.

"There should no longer be any unpleasant taste," the prophet said. "Discard what has been served, and serve more in clean dishes."

The first man to be given more of the stew hesitated at first, then bravely took a spoonful. Abruptly his face lighted with pleasure.

"This is delicious!" he muttered between spoonfuls. "How can it taste so good only minutes after tasting so bad?"

"God can make things right if we are obedient and trust in Him," the prophet observed as he watched the crowd contentedly eating. (II Kings 4:41.)

At another place, when the local famine was still being severely felt, Elisha addressed a gathering of more than a hundred men who were anxious to hear what he had to say. As he continued to speak, the prophet became increasingly aware that his audience was very hungry, and that he could better put across his message if his listeners could soon be fed. Unhappily, he had no food for so many people.

Meanwhile, outside the meeting place, a man came with an offering of twenty small barley loaves and some ears of corn. When Elisha heard about it? he was very thankful for the sudden supply of food.

"Give it to the crowd at the end of the meeting," he instructed. (II Kings 4:42.)

"Give a few ears of corn and twenty tiny loaves to more than a hundred hungry men?" Elisha's servant asked. "With that little, you would only whet their appetites for more!"

Chapter 126

"But It's Only a White Lie!"

ELISHA wanted to feed a hungry crowd that had come to hear him lecture. But all he had was a few ears of corn and twenty small loaves of barley bread.

Elisha instructed that these be given to the people. His servant complained that such a small amount of food for so many people would be more annoying than satisfying. (II Kings 4:42-43.)

Not Enough Food?

"Distribute the corn and bread as I asked," Elisha said firmly. "You will find that there will be more than enough."

Grudgingly the servant began passing out the food. But he grumbled to himself that when the people realized only a few were to be favored, they would feel anything but friendly to him and his master. Moments later he became aware that his baskets of bread and corn were no emptier than when he had started to pass out the contents. The servant finally noted with astonishment that the crowd of over a hundred had been served. And bread and corn were still in the baskets.

Almost frantically he started again, this time swiftly handing out food in the attempt to empty the containers. Then he gave up, convinced that every time he took food out, it was somehow replaced. Blinking in wonderment, he set the baskets, still full, down beside Elisha, who gave him a knowing grin. (II Kings 4:44.)

This was the ninth miracle performed through the prophet.

The Case of the Sick Syrian

About this same time, up in the land of Syria, an Israelite girl, captured by a Syrian raiding band, was turned over to the wife of Naaman, commander of the Syrian army. Naaman was highly respected for his ability, bravery and integrity. But all this was overshadowed by the awful fact that he had leprosy. (II Kings 5:1-2.)

Greatly disturbed to learn that such an able leader had such a serious affliction, the Israelite handmaid suggested to her mistress that her husband go to a man in Israel who could cure Naaman of his leprosy.

"This man, whose name is Elisha, has performed some wonderful miracles because he is so close to: God," the girl explained. "If he asked our God to heal your husband, it would be done." (II Kings 5:3.)!

"I don't think your God would be interested in anyone except you, Israelites," Naaman's wife observed indifferently.

"That really isn't so, ma'am," the girl said. "Our God is interested in all people, because He made all people. He wants to help all who try to live honorably, and surely your husband is an honorable man."

Naaman's wife ignored her handmaid's suggestion, but a servant who overheard the conversation told Naaman about it. The general was so interested that he went to the king of Syria to ask his advice.

"Go to this Elisha," the king said. "What can you lose? I have heard that this man has strange powers. I shall give you a letter to the king of Israel to explain your presence in that country."

Accompanied by servants, and supplied with plenty of money and several changes of clothing, Naaman left at once for Samaria. (II Kings 5:4-5.)

Jehoram, Israel's king was pleasantly surprised when he learned that the commander of the Syrian army had come on a peaceful mission. However, his attitude immediately changed when he read the letter from the king of Syria. He jumped to his feet and yanked so violently at his royal coat, in his anger, that he put a long rip in it.

"The king of Syria is trying to start another war!" he bellowed. "He sends me a leper to be healed! Does he think that I'm God, to be able to take or give life? If his general returns unhealed, he'll probably become so vengeful that he'll send an army to attack us!" (II Kings 5:6- 7.)

Jehoram refused to meet Naaman. He wouldn't even let him know where he could find Elisha. Somehow the prophet quickly found out about Jehoram's conduct. He sent word to Jehoram, before Naaman left Samaria, requesting the king of Israel to send the general to him.

"This is a matter for me to take care of," Elisha's message stated. "There is no reason for you to be alarmed. The king of Syria is not trying to make a reason for war. Let his commander learn that there is only one real God, and that there is one of God's ministers in Israel."

A short while later Naaman drove up in his colorful chariot close to the house in which the prophet was staying. The general and his aides, mounted on steeds with fancy trappings, waited for Elisha to come out and greet them. (II Kings 5:8-9.)

Presently a man emerged from the house and walked up to the chariot.

Puncturing the Balloon of Vanity

"Are you Elisha?" Naaman asked.

"No," the man answered. "Elisha sent me to tell you, if you are Naaman that you should go to the Jordan River and immerse yourself seven times. Then you will be free of your leprosy."

The man turned and went back into the house, leaving Naaman puzzled. Then he became irritated.

"This prophet fellow didn't even come out to meet me!" the general bitterly remarked to his aides. "Instead, he sends out a servant to tell me, a general, what to do. I thought he would at least come out personally to me, call on his God for the power to perform a miracle, make appropriate passes over me with his hands and declare me cured. What sense does it make to be told by an underling that I should go dip myself seven times in the Jordan? The high rivers of my own country are cleaner and clearer than any river in Caanan, especially the Jordan. Wouldn't I be better off to immerse myself in them? Let's get out of here and return home!" (II Kings 5:10-12.)

Naaman's party turned back to the north. The way to Syria took them across the Jordan River. At this point Naaman's aides carefully pointed out to him that he might be wise to follow the advice he had been given.

Proof of God

"You expected Elisha to do something grand and dramatic for you," they reminded him. "Instead, he sent word to you to carry out something easy and simple. It was so simple that you ridiculed it. If you had been instructed to do something more complex and difficult, so you could feel that you were important, wouldn't you have been more inclined to carry it out?"

"Probably," Naaman answered. "You fellows are trying so hard to talk me into this thing, that I'll satisfy your desires and curiosity by dipping myself in this river seven times."

After the general had put himself under the water seven times, he walked out on the shore to discover, to his amazement, that the diseased part of his body had become as whole as that of a healthy boy! (II Kings 5:13-14.)

"I am healed!" Naaman shouted. "The decay in my flesh has disappeared!"

The general's aides swarmed around him with curiosity, astounded at what they saw.

"I must go back and thank Elisha!" the overjoyed Syrian told his men.

When they arrived at the house where Elisha was staying, the prophet came out to greet them. He knew that Naaman's return meant that the general had followed his advice. Naaman stepped out of his chariot and strode happily toward Elisha.

"I did as you said, and I have been healed!" he exclaimed. "This proves to me that your God is the only real God on this Earth. All the other so called gods put together could never perform a miracle such as this!"

"That is true," Elisha nodded. "I would be pleased if more Syrians realized that."

"There isn't enough gold in Syria to pay for my healing," Naaman said, motioning to one of his aides to bring him a bag of coins, "but it's my pleasure to give you this as a token of my thanks." (II Kings 5:15.)

"I can't take it," the prophet stated, holding up a refusing hand.

"But surely you can use it in your work for your God," Naaman pointed out. "I want you to accept it."

"Thank you, but I can't," Elisha said firmly, shaking his head.

Naaman stared at the prophet. He realized that it was useless to press the Israelite in this matter. He shrugged his shoulders and passed the bag of gold back to his aide.

"If I can't help this way, I can make offerings to your God," Naaman observed. "Allow me to take with me all that two of my mules can carry of the soil of Israel. From it I could construct an altar to sacrifice to your God." (II Kings 5:16-17.)

"No one should sacrifice to the God of Israel unless he forsakes idols," Elisha remarked.

"From now on I'll worship only the one true God," Naaman answered. "There'll be times, though, when my aged and feeble king will expect me to accompany and assist him to the shrine of Rimmon, the Syrian god of the sky. I trust that God will forgive me if I give the appearance of worshipping when I bow with the king before the altar."

"May God be with you," Elisha said, "and I will pray that you won't bow before a false god just to please your king." (II Kings 5:18-19.)

The Love of Money

The Syrians left, unaware that they were being watched from behind a wall by a man who didn't intend to see the last of them. The man was Elisha's servant, Gehazi. He had overheard the conversation between his master and Naaman. A scheme to obtain some of the Syrians' gold had come to him.

Naaman and his men had gone about three miles when they saw someone on foot wearily trying to overtake them. The general recognized him as the man who had informed him, hours before, what he should do to be healed. He stepped out of his chariot and walked back to meet him.

"I am Elisha's servant," Gehazi panted. "My master sent me to try to catch up with you."

"Is anything wrong?" Naaman asked.

"It was, but I trust it will be all right now," Gehazi answered. "Right after you left, two men came from Mt. Ephraim, where my master teaches a school for prophets, to

inform him that the school would have to be closed unless a talent of silver could be paid on back expenses. Even the two men, who are students, were almost threadbare. Unfortunately, my master had no clothes to give them, and no money to send back for the school. Then he thought of you, and how you had offered to help. He hesitated to send me after you but I persuaded him it should be done." "Say no more," Naaman interrupted. "I welcome this opportunity to assist. In fact, I want you to take TWO talents of silver back to your master, and I'll see that you get the clothing that's needed. Two of my men will take these things back for you. Two talents of silver weigh too much for you to carry." (II Kings 5:20-23.)

Gehazi shook with greedy anticipation at the thought of sudden wealth. Besides the costly clothing, two talents of silver were a great deal of money. But he was worried. If Naaman's men took all this back to where Elisha was staying, Gehazi's lie about Elisha needing money would be exposed, and he would be punished for thievery. The wily servant managed to prevent the two men from reaching Elisha by talking them into leaving their load at the north side of a high boulder, only yards from the house the prophet was in.

"My master is probably praying, and wouldn't want to be disturbed," Gehazi lied. "I'll take the silver and clothing to the house later. I know that you're anxious to rejoin Naaman and be on your way back to your country." (II Kings 5:24.)

The Liar Discovered

As soon as the Syrians departed, Gehazi returned to the house. Elisha said nothing to him about his absence, so the servant assumed that he hadn't been missed. After dark he made several trips out to the boulder to bring in his valuables. The silver alone weighed more than two hundred pounds. He hid the things in the house in a place he felt certain Elisha wouldn't find. His head swam with thoughts of how he would buy orchards, vineyards, cattle, sheep and servants.

"Where have you been today?" Elisha later asked him. "Your sandals look as though you've traveled quite a distance."

"I didn't even go for a walk," the servant answered.

"Then you did a lot of running," Elisha added. "Otherwise you couldn't have overtaken Naaman, who left his chariot to go back to meet you. With what he gave you, it would be possible to purchase the orchards, vineyards, cattle, sheep and servants you've been thinking about."

"How -- how do you know?" stammered Gehazi, backing away in fright.

"God tells me many things," the prophet explained. "He has told me that because you dishonestly took silver and clothing from Naaman, you will also receive something else that was his."

"What do you mean? All I told was a white lie," Gehazi muttered, staring fearfully into Elisha's penetrating eyes.

"You can have his leprosy," was the reply. Gehazi's wild gaze dropped to his hands. His eyes popped even wider as he saw that his flesh had suddenly turned a pasty white! Screaming in anguish, he bolted out of the house and disappeared in the darkness.

Undoubtedly Elisha soon straightened out matters with Naaman, whose healing was the tenth of God's miracles through the prophet. The eleventh miracle was the transfer of the Syrian's leprosy to Gehazi. (II Kings 5:25-27.)

Returning a Borrowed Tool

The twelfth occurred shortly afterward. The school for prophets near Jericho became so crowded in its living quarters that the students suggested to Elisha that they cut their own lumber along the Jordan River and construct buildings there. Elisha favored the move, and went with the men to help where he could.

As one of the men was felling a tree on the bank of the river, his axe head flew off the handle, spun out over the river and fell into a deep hole.

"How terrible! I've lost a borrowed axe," the man unhappily declared to his fellow workers.

Elisha heard about the incident. He went to the despondent man and inquired where the axe had fallen into the river.

"There in that deep part," was the reply. "It was a borrowed tool, and I can't afford to pay for it." (II Kings 6:1-5.)

"You'll get it back," Elisha assured him, cutting a branch from a tree and tossing it into the river where the axe had sunk.

To the amazement of the workman, the axe head came up to appear on the surface of the water, and drifted downstream with the branch!

"Get it while it still floats," Elisha said.

The man ran along the river's edge till the branch came within his reach. There he used it to draw the iron axe head to the bank. Within minutes he fitted the axe more securely back on the handle and happily resumed work. (II Kings 6:6-7.)

Spying Without a Spy

About this time the Syrian army made surprise attacks on certain places in Israel, but the expeditions met with strong resistance. The Israelites seemed to be aware in advance where the attacks would be made. This happened so often that the ambitious, war-minded king of Syria became suspicious and angry. At last he called a special meeting of his army staff. (II Kings 6:8- 11.)

"Someone here is selling information to the enemy!" he thundered. "If the traitor doesn't confess, I'll have no choice but to punish all of you with death!"

Chapter 127

Uncovering Military Secrets

THE Syrian army had been unsuccessful in its relatively small surprise attacks against Israel. The king of Syria therefore charged that one of his top military officers must have been selling information to the Israelite command. He threatened to punish all his top-ranking officers with death if the traitor failed to confess. (II Kings 6:8-11.)

Discovering the Informer

"None of us is a traitor sir," one officer spoke up. "But there must surely be an informer, and that man must be Elisha, the Israelite prophet. Besides being a worker of unbelievable miracles, he has an amazing ability to perceive hidden matters. It's possible for him to know even what you say in the privacy of your bedroom. Undoubtedly he is aware of your plans of war, and gives that information to the king of Israel." (II Kings 6:12.)

"I know about him," the Syrian king said, glancing at Naaman, his general. "If you are right, he can't be allowed to stay in Israel. I want to know as soon as possible where he can be found."

The Syrians were on the right track to find the source of their trouble. Every time they had chosen a place in Israel to attack, God had informed Elisha, Elisha had informed the king of Israel and Israelite soldiers rushed to the defense, or avoided traps.

As soon as it was reported that the prophet was living in the town of Dothan, about twelve miles north of Samaria, the Syrian king dispatched a whole army to that area to capture one man -- Elisha. Residents of Dothan looked out one morning to discover, to their fear and bewilderment, that their town was surrounded by thousands of foot soldiers and mounted soldiers and hundreds of chariots. Among the startled observers was a young man who had succeeded Gehazi as Elisha's servant. He hurried to awake his master, who somehow failed to be dismayed or perturbed. (II Kings 6:13-15.)

"What is to become of us?" the servant fearfully asked. "The soldiers must have come to make prisoners of all in this town!"

"Don't be alarmed," Elisha patiently said. "Those thousands out there might try to harm us, but there are thousands more nearby who will protect us."

"I don't understand," the servant told the prophet. "All I see are the thousands of the enemy."

"Open this young man's eyes to see the things that are invisible to those who don't know you," Elisha asked God.

Elisha then instructed his servant to look up to the top of the hill on which their house was built.

"The hill is on fire!" the young man exclaimed.

"Look closer," Elisha said.

"The fire is made up of what appears to be flaming chariots, horses and drivers!" the servant replied in a shaking voice. To his great alarm, the fiery objects moved down the hill and surrounded the house. Then they faded from his sight, but he knew that they continued to remain. God had temporarily given him the ability to see angelic forces that often surround those who live close to their Creator by obeying all His rules for living rightly. (II Kings 6:16-17.)

Elisha Captures an Army

"Confuse those who besiege the town," Elisha prayed. "Cause them to be uncertain of where they are."

Elisha's prayer was soon answered. Syrian officers came to the house to inquire about how to get to the town of Dothan. Obviously they were not aware that they were in Dothan!

"I can show you how to get to any town around here," Elisha told them. "If you are looking for any certain person, I can direct you to him, too. I know most of the people in this part of the country."

"Then you can help us," one of the officers said. "We're trying to find Elisha, the Israelite prophet."

"I know him well," the prophet told them. "I would be pleased to lead you to the man you want to find."

"There would be a reward for your trouble," the officer said. "Because there is disagreement among us as to where we are and which direction is which, you could be of great value to us."

A little later an unusual scene was viewed by residents of the area south of Dothan. They saw a man riding on a plodding donkey, followed slowly by thousands of soldiers who were blinded to the fact they already had been in Dothan. The man didn't stop riding till he had led the army up to the walls of Samaria. Israelite soldiers poured out of the city to quickly surround the Syrians. But the Syrians seemed indifferent to what was going on, because they were blinded to the fact that they were soldiers. The Syrians made no move to protect themselves.

"Bring these men I have brought here out of their muddled state of mind," Elisha prayed.

Suddenly the Syrians realized, with a shock that they were at Samaria and encompassed by Israelite soldiers. Some of the officers recognized Elisha, the man they had been sent to capture. They weren't angry with the prophet, because they couldn't understand how they had come to Samaria. As for keeping his promise to lead them to himself, Elisha carried out what he had said he would do.

He simply chose another place -- Samaria, not Dothan -- to be revealed to them. (II Kings 6:18-20.)

Threatened by the encircling Israelites, the Syrians feared to seize the prophet, who went on into the city. The king of Israel, greatly excited by the situation, asked Elisha if God expected them to slaughter the Syrians.

"No," the prophet replied. "Your men have them bottled up so securely that they are already your prisoners. As such, they should be fed. God would have you then give them their freedom."

No Little Border Raid

The king of Israel was surprised, but he did as Elisha said. The Syrians were even more surprised, and so was their king when they returned to their country without Elisha. Their ruler was angry because his army had failed, but he decided to cease bothering the Israelites with his marauding bands. He reasoned that it might not be wise to continue troubling a people whose God had such unusual powers. (II Kings 6:21-23.)

However, after about a year had passed, Ben-hadad the Syrian king began to change his mind. He decided to try one more time to conquer Israel -- but not with small raiding bands. For months he mustered and trained the largest fighting force he could squeeze out of his people. His army moved suddenly and swiftly southwestward to surround Samaria before the Israelites could come out to the defense.

After several days of keeping the people of Samaria penned in their city, and chasing off all who tried to enter, Ben-hadad's hope of victory was greatly bolstered. More days passed while the Syrian king saw success coming ever closer. At the same time he momentarily expected some grievous surprise from the enemy whose God filled him with secret awe whenever he was warring with the Israelites. (II Kings 6:24.)

Meanwhile, the situation grew very serious inside Israel's capital, Samaria. Food was so scarce that people ate donkeys, even though the flesh of those animals is unsuitable for food. (Leviticus 11) God had forbidden the Israelites to consume any unclean creature. Even one of the worst parts of the animal, the head, was eagerly bought for what would be equal to many of our dollars or pounds. Other things that ordinarily never would have been used for food sold for equally ridiculous prices. Every day the food problem grew worse. (II Kings 6:25.)

One morning Jehoram, the Israelite king, was walking along Samaria's walls to inspect the defenses when a woman below called out for help.

"If God hasn't helped you, how do you expect me to?" the king sarcastically asked. He was weary of hearing complaints. Then he added, "Probably it would be foolish of me to ask if your trouble concerns food."

"I wouldn't be starving now if another woman had kept her part of a bargain we made," the woman sobbed to Jehoram, whose attention was mostly on the line of Syrian troops extending around Samaria. "Each of us had a baby boy, and both babies died for lack of food. We agreed that if I would prepare my baby to keep us from starving, she would do the same with hers next day. But she didn't. Instead, she hid him." (II Kings 6:26-29.)

By this time the king had wheeled around and was staring down at the woman. He could scarcely believe that the lack of food in the city had begun to turn the inhabitants into cannibals. This was something God had long since foretold would happen to the Israelites from time to time if they served other gods. (Deuteronomy 28:15, 47-53.)

Many of the people of Samaria worshiped Baal. But to Jehoram's way of thinking, the terrible situation was Elisha's fault. The king blamed him because the prophet hadn't brought about some kind of miracle to save the city and its people. Jehoram was so upset by what the woman had told him that he tore his clothes.

The king continued to make his round on top of the walls. His soldiers were surprised to see that underneath his robe he was dressed in sackcloth, a symbol of mourning. They knew that the king was at last aware of how desperate their situation had become. (II Kings 6:30.)

But Jehoram had something else on his mind, too.

"Because he has allowed this evil thing to happen to my capital, I intend to have Elisha beheaded!" Jehoram declared. "If I fail to have it done, then may God have me beheaded!"

God Promises Abundance

Elisha was staying at Samaria, and while the king was starting to carry out his grisly promise, the prophet was meeting in his living quarters with some of the men who were his students.

"I am suddenly aware of a move to take my life," Elisha told them. "The king, who is the son of a murderer, would also become a murderer by sending a man to cut off my head! That man is on his way here now, and will be pounding on the door at any minute! Don't let him in. Hold the door!"

"But he will be accompanied by other soldiers!" one of the frenzied students excitedly observed. "We can't keep soldiers out very long!"

"If you can delay them just a minute or two, that should be long enough," Elisha explained. "The king has changed his mind. He is hurrying to overtake the executioner and prevent him from beheading me."

That was exactly what was happening. After sending soldiers and an executioner to do away with Elisha, Jehoram decided that he had acted too hastily. Accompanied by some of his officers, he rushed off to try to prevent the slaying. (II Kings 6:31-33.)

The executioner arrived with troops who surrounded the house where Elisha was. As predicted, there was a loud pounding on the door, followed by demands to open it and the sounds of men struggling to force it in. The king and his officers hurried up just as the door, temporarily held closed by Elisha's friends on the inside, fell into a mass of splintered boards. Jehoram barked for the executioner and soldiers to stay where they were. He strode past them into the house and up to Elisha.

"Perhaps I should have allowed my executioner more time," Jehoram said to Elisha. "Why haven't you prayed that the enemy would go away, or that fire would come down and burn them up?"

"I have prayed," Elisha answered, "but God is the one who decides what shall be done. He has let calamity come to Samaria because of your disobedience and the actions of others especially in your city, who have followed your example. But now that you and the people have sobered, and are looking to God for help, plenty of food will be available to you by the time another day has passed. There will be so much of it that people will be selling what they don't need, and at very low prices." (II Kings 7:1.)

This was such an unexpected declaration that everyone present stared at Elisha to make certain that he was serious. Then faces began to light up. Jehoram blinked at the prophet and looked as though a great weight had suddenly been lifted from him. But one of his officers, a haughty fellow, glared insolently at Elisha.

"Do you really expect us to swallow such a fantastic statement?" he inquired with a slight sneer. "Are we supposed to believe that God will open windows in heaven and pour down food into Samaria?"

"It won't happen quite that way," Elisha calmly answered. "You will believe it when you see how it happens tomorrow. God isn't pleased with you because of your foolishly doubting His power to provide food for Samaria. Consequently, you'll not get any of it." (II Kings 7:2.)

The officer scowled at Elisha, and would have cursed him, but Jehoram tugged sharply at his arm. The king nodded affably at the prophet, then walked from the house with all his men except those who were instructed to remain and install a new door.

Lepers with a Message

Lest their disease be transmitted to others, lepers weren't allowed to live in Israelite cities. Consequently, lepers often lived in hovels just outside the gates so they could beg from passersby. It was this way at the main gate of Samaria. Four leprous men had lived there for some time. With the city besieged and the gates barred, the four barely managed to live. The evening just after Elisha's close brush with death, the lepers decided they would go out to the Syrian tents and ask for food. They reasoned that if the Syrians killed them, it would spare them the agony of dying of starvation in the next day or two. (II Kings 7:3-4.)

Meanwhile, in the enemy camps around Samaria, a strange thing was happening. The Syrians imagined they could hear a faint and distant thundering sound, like the pounding of the hooves of many horses and the rumbling of the wheels of many chariots. The noise grew louder and louder to them.

"Israel has hired the armies of the Hittites from Asia Minor and the armies of Egypt to attack us!" was the fearful thought that came to the Syrians.

When the sound put into their minds by God had become so loud that attackers seemed very close, the Syrians suddenly panicked. They rushed on foot from their camps, leaving even their horses remaining. (II Kings 7:5-7.)

Later that evening the four lepers cautiously approached a Syrian tent, calling out that they were from Samaria and needed food. Although a light burned by the tent, no one came out. The men moved so close that they could see inside. No one was there, nor did they find anyone in adjoining tents. They crept inside one to find things that at first seemed unreal to them -- bread, cheese, milk, dates, figs, meat and wine.

After gorging themselves till they began to feel ill, they found clothing and articles of silver and gold. These they excitedly took to a hiding place outside the camp then returned to ransack another tent and hide the loot. By this time they had so much food and so many valuables in their possession that they began to be concerned about what would happen if these things were found in their possession by the king's soldiers.

"Instead of taking more things, we should report that the Syrians have gone before anyone else finds out," one leper told the others. "If the king finds out from us, he might reward us."

The others agreed. By tossing stones up on the wall, they gained the attention of a guard to tell him that the Syrians had disappeared, leaving behind their possessions, including their cattle, horses and donkeys.

The excited guard raced off to get word to King Jehoram, who leaped out of bed and summoned his top officers.

Jehoram's report that the Syrians had departed created a noisy sensation among his officers. Some of them were anxious to go out, even while it was yet dark, to look for anything the Syrians might have left behind. (II Kings 7:8-11.)

"No!" the king commanded. "I've been told that they left almost everything behind. When daylight comes, they'll expect us to notice that they're gone. If we go out to investigate," Jehoram reasoned, "they'll charge us from behind boulders and out of ravines and gullies!"

Chapter 128

Elijah's Letter

THE KING of Israel learned that the Syrians had left their camps around besieged Samaria. (II Kings 7:1-11.) He believed that it was a ruse to get the Israelites outside the city so that the enemy, hiding all around, could attack and get through the gates.

"But suppose the Syrians aren't hiding?" one officer remarked. "Suppose they have gone home. Are we then to continue staying here day after day?"

"We'll send scouts out to look for them," another suggested. "Let us take five of the best horses that are left and scour the country around the city. If we don't return within a short time, you will know that the enemy is close by."

Famine Today -- Feast Tomorrow

Jehoram nodded in approval. But only two good horses could be found. The others had been eaten or were too weak from lack of food. The main gates of Samaria were opened to allow two riders to speed off on their mounts to search the low points of the terrain around the city and the Syrian camp for concealed enemy troops. None were found.

The riders turned to the east. Right away they found clothing, weapons and other items scattered over the ground. This was certain evidence that the Syrians had fled toward their home country. The two Israelites followed the trail of dropped articles as far as the Jordan. They were satisfied that their enemies had departed from Israel, though it was a mystery why they had done so in such haste. (II Kings 7:12-15.)

It was early afternoon when the riders reported to Jehoram, who was greatly elated with their news. Not before then did he allow anyone to go out to the Syrian camps. The people had been eagerly staring at the tents, horses, donkeys and cattle all morning. They were anxious to get to the cattle, and they wanted to see if the tents contained food.

So that there would be order at the main gates, Jehoram assigned one of his officers to take charge there. It happened to be the one who had spoken disrespectfully to Elisha just the day before, and who had been told by the prophet that he wouldn't share in the food that would come to the people of Samaria.

The officer took his place at the gates and gave the order to open them. As soon as they swung inward, out rushed the mob of starving people, wildly intent on getting to what the Syrians had left behind. The officer shouted at them to restrain themselves, but no one paid any attention to him. He was knocked down by the running crowd. Hundreds of feet trampled his body into lifelessness within a very few minutes, carrying out Elisha's prophecy that the officer wouldn't share in the food God would supply. (II Kings 7:1-2; 16-17.)

The Israelites swarmed into the Syrian tents, snatching up everything. Within a short time all the enemy's possessions, including animals, were taken inside Samaria. There was great celebrating in the city. People traded Syrian articles. Those who hadn't raided the Syrian camps were able to buy food at reasonable prices from those who had gone after it. Elisha's prediction had come true that plenty of food would come to Samaria within a day. (II Kings 7:18-20.)

For a while the people of Samaria were possibly better off regarding edibles than were many people of Israel. Crops hadn't been plentiful for a long time. The Israelites hadn't had enough to eat, and the situation continued for seven years before plenty of rain and full crops came again to the land.

Elisha knew how long the famine would last. He had suggested to some of his followers that they go to some other nearby country to live until the famine was at an end. Among them was the woman of Shunem whose young son had died of sunstroke, and to whom God, through the prophet, had restored life.

Leaving their home and property rented out, the woman and her family went to Philistia to live. In those years the Philistines weren't troubling Israel with their army. The two nations were never completely at peace, but people of both countries often crossed the indefinite borders without unfriendly incidents. (II Kings 8:1-3.)

Miracles Fascinate the King

Years later, when they heard that food was again plentiful in Israel, the woman and her family returned to their home. To their dismay, the renters treated them as strangers.

"What are you doing back in Israel?" they coldly asked. "We thought you had gone to become loyal subjects of the king of Philistia."

"We had an understanding that we would return as soon as crops became better," the woman reminded them. "You agreed that you would then move out."

"It's been so long ago that we don't remember making any such foolish agreement," the renters answered. "We feel that we have a right to this property. If you want to try to get what is ours, take the matter to the king. For now, you had better start looking for a place to live -- unless you want to return to your Philistine friends."

The woman and her son took the matter to the king. It happened that at that time Jehoram had become especially curious about Elisha's past. He had summoned to his palace Elisha's former servant, Gehazi. Because the fellow had become a leper, conversation between the two took place outside, and at a respectable distance.

"Which one of Elisha's miracles do you consider greatest?" was one of Jehoram's many questions.

"I can't say which was truly the greatest," Gehazi replied, "but the one that impressed me most was his bringing life back to a boy who had died of sunstroke, and who had been dead for several hours."

At that moment an aide approached the king to point out a woman who was anxious to consult Jehoram.

"That's the woman whose son Elisha saved!" Gehazi excitedly exclaimed. "The young man with her is the son Elisha restored to life!"

After Jehoram had heard their complaint, he immediately decided to help them. Possibly he would have decided otherwise if they hadn't had an association with Elisha, whose life fascinated him. He sent police to remove their renters from their property. The evicted people were even required to turn over to the rightful owners all the rent owed for the produce that had been harvested since their leaving for Philistia. (II Kings 8:4-6.)

Meanwhile, the hasty and empty-handed return of his army from Samaria greatly bothered Ben-hadad, the king of Syria. He had a strong feeling that events had some connection with Elisha and the God of Israel. He fell severely ill about that time, and felt that he might die.

Then one day he was told that Elisha had come to Damascus, the capital of Syria. Ben-hadad became excited at this report. His first thought was that the prophet could foretell what would happen to him. He hoped that Elisha might even ask the God of Israel to heal him. He sent forty camels to carry costly jewels, rare food and fine clothing to the prophet. Each of them carried something special so that there would be a great display for Elisha.

"After you give him the gifts, find out from Elisha if and when I shall recover from this sickness," Ben-hadad instructed Hazael, the man next in rank under the king in the government of Syria.

Betrayed by One's Closest Friend

Elisha was impressed and grateful when the camels were paraded before him to display the presents. Most probably the prophet didn't accept them. Taking them back to Israel would have been impossible unless some of the camels could be sent with him.

"As you probably know, the king is quite ill," Hazael told Elisha. "He would like to know from you if he will die of this sickness."

"You can tell him that I know through my God that his illness won't cause his death," Elisha answered. "But something else will soon cause him to die." (II Kings 8:7-10.)

Hazael was puzzled by this statement. He was also puzzled by the prophet's sudden strange behavior. Elisha turned from Hazael to hide his face. It was evident that he was trying to hide tears that had come into his eyes.

"What is the reason for your sorrow?" Hazael asked.

"I am thinking of the terrible things you will do to the people of Israel," Elisha replied. "Forts will be burned, young men will be slaughtered, children will be thrown to their deaths and pregnant women will be ripped open with swords. Syrian soldiers will do these things by your orders!"

"My orders?" Hazael queried in surprise. "I don't understand. How can a man of so little consequence do such great things?"

"When the time comes, you will demand that Syrian soldiers perform such cruel acts," the prophet continued. "Within a few days you will become king of Syria, and you will exert the power of a merciless ruler on Israel." (II Kings 8:11-13.)

Hazael was stunned at this prediction. He was not as concerned with what he might do as king as he was at the sudden news that he would be Syria's next ruler. Now that the probability of it was brought to him, his desire for such a high position was abruptly consuming. Struggling to contain his elation, he showered Elisha with questions. But the prophet would say no more.

When Hazael returned to Ben-hadad, the king was anxious to learn at once what the prophet had said about his future.

"He said you would not die from the illness you have," Hazael told his superior. He mentioned nothing about the king dying soon because of something else.

The answer gave Ben-hadad great satisfaction. That night, instead of going through sleepless hours of concern for his life, he relaxed and fell into deep slumber. It was his last night of sleep. Before dawn Hazael managed to slip into his bedroom and forcefully cover his face with a heavy, wet cloth to suffocate him. The king soon woke up, but he couldn't shout for help and he didn't have the strength to fight off the treacherous Hazael, who was determined to become ruler of Syria as soon as possible.

His new, consuming ambition was shortly realized. As soon as Ben-hadad was buried, Hazael became king, fulfilling the first part of Elisha's prediction. The other dreadful parts were to take place before long. (II Kings 8:14-15.)

Judah Follows Israel

About this time, down in the House of Judah, a son of Jehoshaphat became king. His name was Jehoram, the same as that of the king of the House of Israel. His wife Athaliah was the sister of King Jehoram of Israel and the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, worshippers of Baal. Athaliah strongly influenced her husband toward idol worship in Judah, insomuch that the people were encouraged in the same evil pursuit. If God hadn't promised David that there would always be someone on the throne of Judah from David's family line, the Creator probably would have destroyed Judah at this time. (II Kings 8:16-19; II Chronicles 21:5-7.)

Jehoshaphat, Jehoram's father, died four years after granting co-rulership to Jehoram.

Jehoshaphat had seven sons, six of whom he made governors before he died over as many cities of Judah. Four years after his eldest son became king the new ruler ruthlessly sent men to do away with all six of his brothers, as well as a few other prominent men in Judah. (II Chronicles 21:1-4.) Old Jehoshaphat, now dead, never knew what happened to his six other sons. Besides being a depraved and dangerous man, Jehoram was suspicious of others who had authority. He didn't want to be opposed, and he reasoned that those who might threaten him should be put out of existence.

During Jehoram's reign, the Edomites, who had been paying tribute to Judah ever since Solomon's time, refused to make any more payments. To Jehoram, this was cause for war. He took many foot soldiers, chariots and cavalry to Edom, the rugged country south of the Dead Sea. The Edomites mustered their scattered forces to defend themselves, but without success.

The army of Judah returned triumphantly to Jerusalem, but the victory proved to be a hollow one because the Edomites still refused to send tribute to Judah. This infuriated Jehoram. He wanted to return to Edom and wipe out the inhabitants, but the thought of another miserable march into the rough, arid mountains there kept him at home.

To make matters worse, another nation ceased sending tribute to Judah. It was Libnah, a small city-state close to Edom. No more tribute was ever forthcoming from these two nations. Jehoram never did anything more about the matter except to continue threatening the governments of Edom and Libnah. (II Kings 8:20-22; II Chronicles 21:8-10.)

Elijah Warns the King

One day a messenger came to the palace to deliver a letter to the king, who perused it with a combination of anger and fear. Here is what he read:

"To the king of Judah from Elijah, the prophet of God:

"You have chosen to live like the pagan-loving kings of the House of Israel instead of like the God-fearing kings of the House of Judah. You have caused your people to live in the same manner.

"Because of this, and because you murdered your brothers, who had greater character and ability than yours, terrible trouble and sickness will come on your people. Misery will overtake your wives and children. Your property and possessions will be taken from you. You will become increasingly ill in your intestines. Day after day you will suffer until the insides of your body become so diseased that they will fall out. That is the day you will die, and it is not far off.

"God has told me to inform you of what will happen. Because I am old and unable to come and tell you in person, a capable messenger will bring you this letter." (II Chronicles 21:11-15.)

Jehoram was infuriated.

"Bring to me the man who came to the palace with this paper!" the white-faced king shouted.

Men scurried to obey, but the messenger couldn't be found. Jehoram felt frustrated. From then on he lived in fear of what would happen. He tried to dismiss from his mind the thought that Elijah, who had been miraculously taken up in a whirlwind several years previously (II Kings 2:1-18), was still alive and knew of his wickedness. Regardless of his fears, he made no change in his disreputable way of living.

God's Punishment

His predicted troubles started one day when he received a report from an excited scout that a Philistine army was approaching from the west. While Jehoram tried to decide whether to confront the Philistines or stay within the protection of Jerusalem's walls, another scout arrived to disclose that hordes of mounted Arabians were sweeping toward Jerusalem from the south, and had already plundered several towns in the southern territory of Judah.

Now the king couldn't decide whether to send his army south to oppose the Arabians, order it west to battle back the Philistines, split it and go after both intruding armies, or keep it in Jerusalem and risk a siege. There was more sensible strategy, but Jehoram didn't have the will to plan. He was overcome with the gloomy belief that this was the beginning of the end, and that any military action would be futile.

Jehoram turned matters over to his officers, but by then the Arabians and Philistines had arrived at Jerusalem at the same time. In some manner which God had made possible, they managed to get the gates open and pour inside. The defenders were thrown into confusion and fell in heaps before the fierce invaders. (II Chronicles 21:16-17.)

Terrified, Jehoram fled with his family to his palace. On the way they were overtaken by Arabians on horses. As he ran, the king glanced back to see his screaming wives and children snatched up by powerful riders.