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The Bible Story

Volume 6

Chapter 129

A New King in Israel

JEHORAM, king of the House of Judah, fled with his family toward his palace when Arabians and Philistines broke into Jerusalem. Before they could get inside, the king's frantically racing wives and children were seized by Arabian riders and whisked away. Jehoram reached the palace and ran to a secret hiding place. (II Chronicles 21:1-16).

The End of a Bad Reign

For the next several hours he paced back and forth, miserably wondering what was taking place. Occasionally he could hear muffled shouts and thuds. When finally he cautiously emerged from concealment, he found that the palace had been ransacked. Objects of great value had been taken. What was left had been dashed or pulled to the floor.

There was great excitement among the remaining servants when they found that their king was safe, but they hesitated to talk about his family.

"At least we know that Ahaziah is all right," one spoke up.

This was somewhat comforting to Jehoram, who believed that all his family had been taken. Then he remembered that a part of the letter from Elijah had warned in advance what would befall the king's family. One by one the prophet's predictions were taking place -- just as Jehoram feared they might.

Not long after the invaders had gone with their prisoners and loot, Jehoram's first wife Athalia showed up. This wasn't contrary to Elijah's writing. He had said only that wives would be taken, but he didn't say they all would be forever absent from Jehoram. Somehow Athalia escaped and was able to return. The captors probably couldn't endure her sharp tongue. Except for Ahaziah, all of Jehoram's sons were murdered by their abductors.

People of Judah then began to suffer from a disease that spread quickly from person to person. This, too, was according to what Elijah had warned about. Later, Jehoram started having an irritating soreness in his abdomen. During the next two years it developed into intense pains. Finally, as Elijah had written, the king's intestines became so infected that they dropped out of him, causing an unusually horrible death.

Because of his cruel ways and his indifference to the welfare of his people, Jehoram wasn't popular with his subjects. He was buried in Jerusalem, but not in the burial place of the kings, and not with the usual respectful ceremonies. (II Kings 8:23-24; II Chronicles 21:17-20.)

Ahaziah became king, but he had been reared amid pagan practices, and did nothing to improve conditions in Judah. His mother made sure that any move he made was in accord with her perverse wishes.

At this time Jehoram (not the Jehoram of Judah who had recently died) was king of the House of Israel. He decided to take his army to Ramoth-gilead, a town east of Jordan occupied by Syrian soldiers. This fortified town was in the territory of Gad. The king didn't want the Syrians to continue possessing a stronghold inside Israel, especially that close to Samaria, only about forty miles away. When the young king of Judah heard about this, he added troops to those of Jehoram. Both kings with their combined forces went eastward to surround Ramoth-gilead.

A Revolution Hits Israel

Later, when it appeared that the Israelites might force the besieged Syrian troops to surrender, Jehoram was seriously wounded by an arrow shot from the walls. The king was taken to Jezreel, several miles north of Samaria, to wait until his wound healed. His officers felt that it was wiser for him to go there secretly instead of returning to Samaria in what would be regarded by many as a disgraceful condition. Jehu, the commander of the army in Israel, was left in charge of the continuing siege of Ramoth-gilead.

Rather than wait to find out what the Syrians would do, Ahaziah chose to go to Jezreel to visit Jehoram and learn if he had started to recover. (II Kings 8:25-29; II Chronicles 22:1-6.)

Meanwhile, Elisha the prophet was aware of what was taking place. Through God, he knew that it was time for the family of Ahab, because of disobedience, to come to an end. God instructed the prophet to choose one of his students to prepare for an immediate trip to Ramoth-gilead.

"There you will find Jehu, Jehoram's army commander," Elisha told the young man. "State that you have a private message for him and that you must see him alone."

The prophet gave him a phial of oil and explained how he was to use it and just what he should say. He was warned to leave Jehu the moment his mission was over.

Two days later the young man arrived at Ramoth-gilead. The siege was still going on. Israelite troops were huddled in groups, hoping for the surrender of the Syrians. Jehu and his chief officers were sitting under an awning extending from his tent. When guards saw the stranger, they quickly surrounded him, but took him to Jehu, as he requested, after finding no weapons on him.

"This man claims that he has an important message for you that must be delivered in private," one of the guards reported.

Jehu and his officers looked critically at the stranger. Finally Jehu motioned his guards away and beckoned to the young man to follow him into his tent. Nervously Elisha's student produced the phial of olive oil and quickly poured it over the head of the startled officer.

"By the authority of the God of Israel, I anoint you as the next king of the House of Israel," the young man hastily explained while Jehu listened in growing astonishment. "God wants to make it plain to you that as future king you must avenge the deaths of God's prophets at Samaria in Ahab's time; and the deaths of other servants of God caused by Jezebel. With God's help, you are to end the rule of the family of Ahab. That includes queen Jezebel, whose body will be consumed by dogs, so that there will be little to bury." (II Kings 9:1-10.)

Having accomplished what he was to do, the young man anxiously turned to hurry out. Jehu reached out and seized him by the arm.

"I've been patient with you," Jehu said a little angrily. "Now tell me who sent you, and why they wish to affront me with your disrespectful little act."

"It wasn't an act and it wasn't disrespectful!" the young man exclaimed. "The prophet Elisha sent me to do what I did."

"Oh!" Jehu muttered in surprise. A bit bewildered, he sank into a chair, unaware of the messenger's departure. For a time he sat there in deep thought, then came out of the tent to join his officers.

"I hope that fellow didn't annoy you," one of them remarked. "He was probably some kind of religious crackpot. What was his excuse for coming here?"

"Should I bother to tell you what you have already heard through the tent flap?" Jehu asked. "Obviously you have already decided what kind of man he is and that he came here for no important purpose."

"Whatever he told you, I hope you didn't believe him," another officer remarked.

"But I did," Jehu declared. "He was sent by the prophet Elisha to tell me that I am to be the next king of the House of Israel."

The officers stared silently at their commander, expecting him to momentarily break into a grin at his own absurd statement. But his unusual gaze, continuing steady and sober, caused them to realize that he was serious. Amazed and abashed, they rose as one man, took off their jackets and spread them on the steps leading up to the tent entrance. In this manner, even though they had only the abrupt, brief declaration from their superior, they acknowledged him as their new ruler.

Syrian soldiers on the walls of Ramoth-gilead, only a little over a bowshot away, jumped to an anxious alert when they heard the blast of Israelite trumpets and cheers of soldiers. They didn't know that Jehu's top officers had just announced to their troops that their commander was soon to replace Jehoram. (II Kings 9:11-13.)

Convinced of what he should do according to Elisha, whom he greatly respected, and at the same time excited and elated at the thought of becoming a king, Jehu prepared to leave Ramoth-gilead.

"Continue a tight siege," he instructed his officers. "Don't allow anyone to come outside the walls. And don't let anyone leave our camps except those I pick to accompany me. I don't want anyone to reach Jezreel before I do, or Jehoram might hear about what has happened."

Jehu set off for Jezreel in his chariot, along with some of his best charioteers and cavalry. A few hours later he was in sight of the town where Jehoram was staying, and where his wound had almost healed in recent days. An alert watchman in a lookout tower on the wall noticed that a cloud of dust was rising from across the plain.

"Something that could be cavalry or chariots is approaching from the east," the lookout reported to Jehoram, who was talking with Ahaziah.

"It must be men with word from Ramoth-gilead," Jehoram observed, getting up from his couch. "Send a horseman out to meet them and bring back the news to me as fast as possible."

Jehu Fulfills Prophecy

Minutes later a rider drew up alongside Jehu's clattering chariot and called out above the stomping of hoofs, asking how matters were going at Ramoth-gilead.

"Don't be concerned about that!" Jehu shouted back. "Go fall in at the rear of the cavalry!"

When the rider failed to return within a reasonable time, Jehoram sent another man to meet the oncoming company. Jehu told him, too, to ride at the rear. By this time, although Jehu was three or four miles away, the watchman told Jehoram that the company appeared to be led by a chariot, and that it was being driven so fast that the driver could be Jehu, who had excellent horses and a reputation for speeding in his chariot. (II Kings 9:14-20.)

This bothered Jehoram. He had a feeling that if it were Jehu, he was coming with some troublesome news. Both the kings set out at once, each in his own chariot, to meet Jehu's company. Not far outside Jezreel, where Naboth's vineyard had been taken from him (I Kings 21:1-16), Jehu had to rumble to a stop because Jehoram and Ahaziah pulled up in front of him.

"Are things going well at Ramoth-gilead?" Jehoram anxiously asked.

"How could anything go well in Israel as long as it has a king whose mother deals in adultery, witchcraft and idolatry, and whose son follows in her footsteps?" Jehu scowlingly demanded. (II Kings 9:21-22.)

Jehoram stared at Jehu, stunned by the rebellious and insulting remark. But instead of reprimanding Jehu, he turned to Ahaziah.

"Get out of here!" he shouted to the young king. "These men have become our enemies!"

Jehoram and Ahaziah cracked their whips at their horses, swung their chariots around and rumbled back toward Jezreel. Jehu seized his bow and hastily fitted an arrow to the string. Seconds later Jehoram was dead on the floor of his chariot, whose horses pulled it off into some roadside boulders. (II Kings 9:23-24.)

"Take Jehoram's body and throw it into the field where Naboth the grape-grower was stoned to death," Jehu said to Bidkar, his cavalry captain. "Do you remember when we were young horse soldiers under Ahab, how Ahab's wife Jezebel had Naboth unjustly killed? Now let her dead son be food for wild dogs on the same spot where she had Naboth murdered." (II Kings 9:25-26; I Kings 21:17-22.)

Jehu realized that by his order to Bidkar he was carrying out part of a prophecy made to Ahab by Elijah. The prophet had told that king about fifteen years previously that his blood would be licked up by dogs at the same place dogs had licked up Naboth's blood. In this event it was Ahab's son's blood, which was the same as his in a lineage sense.

No Place to Hide

From his speeding chariot Ahaziah looked toward the other vehicle just in time to see Jehoram fall with Jehu's arrow protruding from his back. Expecting an arrow at any moment through his own back, the young king of Judah whipped his horses to their utmost speed. Had he looked behind, he would have known that Jehu and his company had come to a stop. Ahaziah rumbled into Jezreel, but he knew he wouldn't be safe there if Jehu meant to find him. He would have to keep on traveling, but there was something he wanted to do before he left Jezreel.

Jezebel, Jehoram's mother and Ahaziah's grandmother, had come to Jezreel to confer with her son. Ahaziah wanted to speak with her, but he had not time to leave his chariot and go to where she was staying. But he did pull up at the place and hastily speak to a servant.

"Tell my grandmother that Jehu has turned against us!" Ahaziah excitedly said. "Tell her at once that he has killed my uncle Jehoram, and that he is on his way here to get me! I'm riding on to Samaria, but tell her that I want her to try to stop Jehu when he gets here!"

Ahaziah lost no time in riding to Jezreel's south gate, where he turned out and raced off toward the capital of the House of Israel.

A short while later Jehu and his men clattered into the town. From windows and doorways people fearfully peered out at them, not knowing what to expect. Most of them didn't know who the mounted visitors were or why they had come. When he came to the main street, the army commander rode slowly.

He and his men were hungry and thirsty, and he glanced about in search of an inn. Besides, the horses needed rest and water.

"Hello, Jehu!" a female voice called from somewhere above. "Do you feel like Zimri, the servant who murdered a king of Israel years ago?"

Jehu halted his horses and looked around. Up in a window of one of the taller buildings a woman was leaning over the sill and smiling down at him. She was attired in fine clothing and her hair was beautifully arranged, but her face was so excessively painted that it wasn't easy to determine her approximate age or real appearance.

"I admire you, Jehu," the woman continued. "Success is bound to come to those who have the courage to rid themselves of those who stand in the way of their ambitions."

"Jezebel!" Jehu muttered, after finally recognizing Jehoram's mother.

It wasn't clear to him whether Jezebel was meaning to show her queenly disdain for him or whether she was trying to delay him from his intended purpose.

"Who is on my side?" Jehu asked.

"Why don't you send your men to the inn up the street and then come up here and find out," Jezebel answered with even a broader smile.

At this point Jehu spied some effeminate-appearing men peeking out of an adjoining window. He recognized them as the kind of persons who were servants in harems and certain kinds of public houses. That was enough for the army commander.

"You fellows up there!" he shouted to the men at the window. "Throw that woman down!"

Terrified at the threatening command, the men seized the screaming Jezebel and shoved her over the window sill. (II Kings 9:30-33.)

Chapter 130

Jezebel, Chaos and a Boy King

JEHU HAD come into the Israelite town of Jezreel after putting an end to King Jehoram of Israel, according to God's instructions through Elisha. (II Kings 9:1-26.) Jehu was met there by Jezebel, the idolatrous queen mother of Jehoram. At Jehu's command, she was pushed from a high window by her men attendants. (II Kings 9:30-33.)

No Memorial for Jezebel

If Jezebel didn't die instantly when she struck the street, she didn't live long afterward. Jehu signaled his men to move on. They did, and right over Jezebel's mangled body. The company drew up at a nearby inn to eat while the horses rested and were fed and watered.

"The people have viewed the remains of the wicked woman long enough," Jehu told his men after their meal. "Jezebel doesn't deserve an honorable funeral, but she was the daughter of a king, the wife of a king, the mother-in-law of a king and the grandmother of a king. She shouldn't be left unburied. Take her off the street and prepare a grave for her."

Jehu's men went to the place where they had last seen the body, but hungry dogs had already been there. Only the skull, feet and hands remained. The men returned to their commander to tell him what had happened. (II Kings 9:34-35.)

"This is according to God's will," Jehu informed them. "Elijah the prophet foretold that dogs would consume this woman close to the wall of Jezreel. Not enough is left of her to even be buried. She will become only waste matter on the ground. She'll never have a monument or even a tombstone with her name on it." (II Kings 9:36-37; I Kings 21:1-26.)

This was the wretched end of a woman who was probably the most infamous in Bible history. Her evil, idolatrous life strongly influenced and infected all Israel, resulting in misery and unhappiness for many people. Probably a large part of them didn't deserve anything better, and so God allowed this woman to affect their lives in a step toward the destiny of all Israel.

To qualify as king of the House of Israel, Jehu's task was far from accomplished. Through him God purposed to destroy all of Ahab's family. Ahaziah was still free, and seventy of his young uncles, Ahab's sons, lived in Samaria, the capital of Israel. Jehu wanted to move promptly against them before they could flee and hide in distant places.

From Jezreel Jehu sent a message to close friends of Ahab, who cared for his younger sons, and to the head men of Samaria. He suggested that they immediately choose one of the seventy sons of Ahab to lead them, using the equipment of war available in the city, in defending themselves against Jehu and his cavalry. This frightened the men in Samaria.

They knew it would be futile to try to stand against Jehu. All they could do was send back a reply promising to cooperate in any way except to fight. (II Kings 10:1-5.)

A little later an answer came from Jehu. The men of Samaria were shocked and even more fearful when they read it.

Idolatrous Family Perishes

"You can carry out your promise to cooperate," the message read, "by sending me the heads of the seventy sons of Ahab living in Samaria. I'll expect to receive them before sunrise tomorrow. If I don't, there'll be more than seventy heads fall when my men reach your city."

Before dawn the next day men from Samaria brought the seventy heads of Ahab's sons in baskets. Jehu instructed to pile them in two heaps at the sides of the main gate of Jezreel. These were meant as grisly reminders to any who might consider resisting the new king.

Jehu came out to the gate next morning to find a silent crowd assembled there. When the people saw him, some glared at him accusingly. Others eyed him with fear and began to disperse.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asked them irritably. "I didn't cut off those heads. I took Jehoram's life, and that was according to God's will. It's also God's will that all of Ahab's sons should die, according to the prophets Elijah and Elisha." (II Kings 10:6-10; I Kings 21:17-19; II Kings 9:1-10.)

In the next hours Jehu and his men combed Jezreel and nearby regions for those related to Ahab, and put an end to their lives. They also did away with all pagan priests they could find. They then started for Samaria to continue their purpose, but stopped on the way at a shearing place where people were gathered. Jehu didn't recognize anyone there and no one seemed to recognize him.

"Who are all these?" he asked one man.

"We are relatives of Ahaziah, king of Judah," the man proudly replied. "We are on our way to visit other relatives, Jehoram and Jezebel. We stopped here to take in the annual shearing event."

The speaker was unaware that the king and queen were dead and that he had just pronounced a death sentence on himself and his relatives. Jehu and his men acted at once. (II Kings 10:11-14.)

Right after the carnage had taken place, a chariot came up from the direction of Samaria, rumbled past the shearing place and turned off on a road to the northeast. Some of Jehu's men excitedly shouted to him that Ahaziah was in the chariot.

"If it is Ahaziah, then we'll be spared the trouble of looking for him," the new king remarked. "He must have heard that we're moving south and he doesn't intend to be caught in Samaria or Jerusalem. After him!"

By this time the chariot was out of sight behind a rise, but Jehu's cavalry had only to follow the dust cloud stirred up by racing horses and heavy wheels. Ahaziah was in the vehicle with a driver who ignored the pursuers' shouts to halt. In the jostling chariot Ahaziah's shield couldn't protect him from the arrows coming from behind. One found its intended mark. The young king of Judah collapsed on the chariot floor. Savagely whipping his horses, the driver continued to race on.

"Let him go!" Jehu shouted from his chariot a short distance behind the riders. "He'll not live long with an arrow in him. We'll only waste time chasing him farther."

A Plot against Baal

He was right. Ahaziah died at Megiddo, a town a few miles to the northwest. His body was later taken by servants down to Jerusalem for burial in the royal vault. (II Kings 9:27-29; II Chronicles 22:1-9.)

Again Jehu and his cavalry turned back for Samaria. On the way they met a group of mounted men led by Jehonadab, an influential leader highly respected in Israel. He was descended from Moses' relatives the Kenites, who had settled in southern Palestine. (Numbers 10:29-32; Judges 1:16; I Chronicles 2:55.) Jehu knew of Jehonadab, and wondered as the two parties approached if Jehonadab intended to oppose him.

"Do you disapprove of what I have been doing?" Jehu asked after greetings had been exchanged.

"I am in favor of it," Jehonadab replied. "I know that it's according to the will of God."

"Then go with me in my chariot to Samaria, if you wish, and help us find the remaining kin of Ahab," Jehu said, holding out his hand to the other man. (II Kings 10:15.)

Jehonadab agreed and rode with Jehu, who was pleased to have this prominent person seen with him on the streets of the capital. People who might not approve of Jehu's violent purging actions would possibly change their minds, the new king reasoned, on seeing that he and Jehonadab were friends. Jehonadab had made a lasting name for himself by strict adherence to God's Law and by training his children so well they followed him. (Jeremiah 35)

During the next few days Jehu carried out what he had come to Samaria to do. This marked an end to the expanded family of Ahab. If that king had been obedient to God, his descendants wouldn't have been slaughtered, and would have continued to rule as long as they lived and ruled wisely. (II Kings 10:16-17.)

After Jehu had established himself at Samaria, he made a surprising public proclamation that he had decided to become a follower of Baal, even though he had put an end to some pagan priests in Jezreel. To make up for it, he declared that he would worship Baal with much more zeal than did Ahab, who sometimes was swayed to consider the God of Israel as more powerful.

This was good news to the many followers of Baal in Israel, and especially to the priests of Baal, of whom there were hundreds in the land.

"I have chosen a day on which to offer the first sacrifices to Baal," Jehu announced. "Every loyal priest of that god should be present at the temple to participate in the ceremonies. Any priest who fails to show up will be subject to death."

When the special day came, so many priests attended that the building was packed. Many worshippers also showed up, but there wasn't room for all of them inside.

"See that all the priests are properly clothed in the proper vestments for the rituals," Jehu told those in charge of such matters. "No priests should have a part in the services unless he is attired rightly."

Pagan Splendor Becomes a Privy

To Jehonadab and his men he gave instructions that no follower of God should be allowed as a spectator in the temple. Then the sacrificing started. With attention focused on the altar, it was a shocking surprise when the Priests and worshippers realized that the doors had been opened and that soldiers were rushing in on them.

Eighty soldiers with drawn swords squeezed quickly into the temple. Then the doors were slammed shut to prevent any of the crowd from escaping the slaughter that followed.

Jehu hadn't become a Baal worshipper after all. This was his deceitful scheme to get the priests of Baal together so that he could rid Israel of them all at once. (II Kings 10:18-25.)

After they had dragged the bodies out, the soldiers broke down the altar and smashed the temple furnishings. They pulled down the image of Baal, uncovered many small images hidden in a secret place, hauled everything into the street and burned it there.

The temple building was ruined. Its rooms were used as public waste rooms for hundreds of years. (II Kings 10:26-28.)

Jehu had obediently and zealously performed for God, but he wasn't inclined toward obedience toward God in other ways. Though he had fanatically wiped out the worship of Baal in Israel, he later promoted and encouraged the worship of the golden calves in shrines at Bethel near Jerusalem and at Dan near Mt. Hermon.

These animal images set up by King Jeroboam more than ninety years previously, were supposedly intended as substitutes for God, so that the people of the northern tribes wouldn't have to go all the way to Jerusalem to worship and sacrifice. The fact was that Jeroboam didn't want his subjects to go into Judah, lest they find freedom of worship there and decide to stay. His spurious priests convinced many that God was pleased with this arrangement. In this matter Jehu followed to a great extent in Jeroboam's footsteps.

Through a prophet or priest or perhaps by means of a dream, the information was conveyed to Jehu that because he had carried out God's will in putting an end to Ahab's family, his descendants for the next four generations would rule ten tribes of Israel. At the same time it was made plain to him that if he continued condoning calf-image worship, trouble would come to his nation.

Jehu was a man who depended on his power and influence and the strength of armed men. He saw no need to change his ways for the sake of his country. Nevertheless, because he had been zealous in the beginning, God allowed him to be king for twenty-eight years. (II Kings 10:29- 36.)

Jezebel's Daughter

Athaliah, mother of King Ahaziah of Judah, reacted in a terrible manner after her son was brought back dead to Jerusalem. Instead of grieving, she regarded the loss as an opportunity to become the queen ruler of Judah. She was determined that if her son couldn't continue as king, none of the sons of her dead husband's other wives would succeed Ahaziah. Besides, she relished the idea of David's posterity coming to an end.

Only a daughter of that infamous couple, Ahab and Jezebel, might have been capable of what Athaliah caused to be done. (II Kings 8:16-18.) All the young sons of Ahaziah were found dead except little Jehoash, the infant son of Ahaziah. His grandmother intended to do away with him, too, but through some oversight he was spared. Jehosheba, Ahaziah's sister, found the child alive and temporarily hid him and his nurse in a bedroom closet. Later she managed to take him secretly to the temple. There he was reared for the next six years by Jehosheba and her husband, Jehoiada, who was the high priest.

Meanwhile Athaliah ruled Judah, unaware that there was a male descendant of David living only a few blocks from her palace. (II Kings 11:1-3; II Chronicles 22:10-12.)

When Jehoash (also called Joash) was seven years old, Jehoiada the high priest instructed five trusted military captains to visit leaders throughout the territories of Judah and Benjamin to determine which of the clan chiefs were in strong favor of removing Athaliah from the throne.

Using tact and caution, lest their mission be discovered by Athaliah's followers, the five officers found that almost all the men contacted were eager to get rid of Jezebel's daughter, who for six years had proved that her lust for power and her desire to promote the worship of Baal in Judah was far greater than her interest in the welfare of the people.

After this encouraging report had been made to Jehoiada, leaders who were against Athaliah were invited to come to a special secret meeting at the temple. Great care was taken to make certain that no one loyal to the queen or connected with her activities was there.

"I want a vow from every man here that he will not disclose what he is about to see until the matter is made public," Jehoiada told those assembled.

The Boy King

All the men spoke out in hearty compliance. Jehoiada was pleased with the demonstration of loyalty, but he warned the men that God would deal harshly with any who broke the vow. Then his wife Jehosheba appeared before them, bringing with her a boy of about seven years of age.

"This is Jehoash, son of Ahaziah," the high priest announced to his startled audience. "He is the rightful successor to the throne of the kingdom of Judah! He wasn't murdered with Jehoram's sons six years ago. My wife rescued him and brought him to our living quarters here at the temple, where we have kept him since without Athaliah's knowledge. Now, with your help, he will become ruler of Judah, as only a descendant of David should be!"

After the excitement had somewhat subsided, Jehoiada disclosed his plans to declare Jehoash king on the next Sabbath. He divided the men into three groups, each of which was to be armed with weapons David had put in the temple treasury years before. This was a precaution against a possible attack on the temple and Jehoash by the royal guard. The queen was expected to be in a rage when she found out what was taking place.

On the Sabbath the men returned to the temple to arm themselves and take up their positions. When all was ready, Jehoash was brought close to the altar and anointed king by Jehoiada and his sons. Trumpets blared and people applauded happily as a crown was placed on the boy's head.

"God save the king!" Jehoiada and his sons exclaimed, and the audience joined in. (II Kings 11:412; II Chronicles 23:1-11.)

Over at the palace, Athaliah, who didn't worship at the temple of God, couldn't help hearing the shouts and music, which made her both irritable and curious.

"Send in my sedan chair!" she snapped at a servant. "I'll go over there myself and find out what all that noise is all about!"

Chapter 131

When a Nation Turns to Idols

QUEEN mother Athaliah, having ruled Judah for six years after usurping the throne, was one Sabbath morning bothered by music and shouts from the temple. Surrounded by a few of the royal guard and carried by four husky men in her curtained sedan chair, she was taken to the temple to see for herself what was happening. (II Kings 11:1-13; II Chronicles 22:10-12; 23:1- 12.)

When she saw the unusually large, vocal crowd, and the temple surrounded by army commanders and armed clan chiefs, she became suspicious and angry.

"Stop here!" she commanded, and quickly stepped out of the lowered sedan chair before anyone could aid her.

End of an Evil Reign

As she set out up the steps to the crowded temple porch, guards leaped to her sides. She waved them disdainfully back and went on by herself. As soon as she reached the porch she took in the figures by the altar -- especially the boy with the crown on his head and the armed priests all around him. The scene had a shocking meaning for her. Furious, she shoved and elbowed her way into the crowd.

"This is treason!" she shrieked. "Who is responsible for trying to crown some child as king behind my back?"

By now all eyes were on the angry queen, including those of the high priest, who held up his hands to quiet the murmuring congregation.

"This child is your grandson Jehoash!" Jehoiada, the high priest, called out to Athaliah. "He escaped your murderous hands six years ago! He is the rightful ruler of Judah! There isn't room on the throne for more than one!"

The queen flew into a rage, tearing wildly at her clothing. Screaming madly, she ripped her costly tunic to shreds.

"Take her out of here!" the high priest ordered. "Don't let her die in the temple of God! And execute anyone who tries to stop you!"

Many hands closed on the screeching woman, forcing her back down the temple steps. Her guards, seeing the stalwart officers of the army and chiefs of the clans arrayed against them, held their peace.

"Go call the rest of the guards!" Athaliah screamed at them. "Summon the army!"

But the guards saw it was too late to carry any messages. The fiercely remonstrating queen was half dragged and half carried to a back street by which horses, mules and donkeys conveyed people to and from the palace. There Athaliah was slain. (II Kings 11:14-16; II Chronicles 23:13- 15.)

While the people were still at the temple, Jehoiada told them that then was the time for looking fervently to God for the right way of living. He enjoined them to be obedient to the Creator and loyal to their new king.

An End to Baalism

During her reign, Athaliah had caused a temple to be built for the worship of Baal in Jerusalem. Gold bowls, basins and other valuable utensils and furnishings had been stolen from God's temple and taken to the pagan temple to be used in the worship of Baal.

Soon after Athaliah's death, a crowd swarmed eagerly into the pagan temple. Mattan, the overbearing head priest, reluctantly emerged from the private quarters of the temple women to perform the repetitious rituals and mumble and chant invocations for his visitors. When he saw their expressions, he knew that they hadn't come to worship.

"We have come to take back the things that were stolen from the temple of God," one of the crowd firmly informed Mattan.

"Think twice before you attempt to desecrate this temple," Mattan said, furtively signaling one of his priests to call the royal guard. "Any who stir the great god Baal to wrath shall surely suffer for it!"

"If you won't give us the things we came for, we'll get them for ourselves!" another man in the crowd shouted. "If that makes Baal angry, we'll pull him down and scorch his nose on his own altar!"

"Sacrilege!" Mattan exclaimed angrily. "Leave before the royal guard gets here!"

At a word from the leader of the crowd there was a scramble for the doors, but not to those leading outside. Men broke into every room to ferret out what had been taken from God's temple.

The haughty head priest glared as the articles were carried away. His glare turned to abrupt fright when he glanced up to see the main image of Baal toppling toward him. It crashed down on the altar and from there smashed to bits on the floor moments after the priest had leaped back.

The men who had tipped over the image then threw all the smaller Baal replicas to the floor and went around the interior of the building to tear down and smash everything they could reach. Mattan and his priests and women fled outside, only to be seized by Jehoiada's men.

Mattan was put to death. There was no royal guard to save him because there was no longer a queen to use the guard for the defense of the priests of Baal. Jehoiada's men left nothing untouched in the pagan temple. They didn't stop until even the walls were pulled down and the building and its contents were a mass of rubble. This was the end of the evil thing Athaliah had brought to Judah. (II Kings 11:17-18; II Chronicles 23:16-17.)

Worship of God at the temple Solomon had built had declined during Athaliah's reign. Now, with none to interfere, people began to return. Jehoiada put more priests into service and stepped up activity at the temple of Solomon. He even reorganized the royal guard. Accompanied by these soldiers and marching bands, Jehoash was paraded from the temple to the palace, where he was to live for many years. (II Kings 11:19-21; II Chronicles 23:18-21.)

Restoring the Faith

Under the priest's influence, Jehoash grew up to be a just and capable ruler. Although he followed God most of his life, he did little to abolish the sacrificing that occasionally took place in other places besides the temple, which had been vandalized by Athaliah's sons. (II Chronicles 24:7.) It was Jehoash's ambition, as he matured, to have it repaired, even though it would be costly to restore it close to its original condition. To raise the money, Jehoash suggested to Jehoiada and his priests that some of them travel around Judah and ask for contributions, as God had commanded through Moses. (Exodus 35:4-10.) The priests didn't succeed in collecting very much money, nor did they try very diligently. Jehoiada was a courageous and righteous high priest. But in this case he was somewhat slack in asking others to do their duty. (II Kings 12:1-8; II Chronicles 24:1-6.)

Jehoash was disappointed. But he did not lose faith in God or confidence in his high priest. He spoke to Jehoiada again about the matter a long time later, telling the priest to have a large chest placed at the gate of the temple by the right side of the altar. This heavy chest had a small opening at the top through which coins and gold and silver in other forms could be dropped by those who visited the temple or went by. It was announced throughout the country what the chest was for.

After a few days the chest was brought to the palace and opened. Both Jehoash and Jehoiada were surprised to find a great amount of coins, gold and silver in it. They were pleased at this display of generosity by the people. For weeks the wooden chest was put by the altar every morning and emptied every night. Enough money was taken in to finally start repair of the temple on a large scale. (II Kings 12:9-10; II Chronicles 24:8-11.)

For many months, skilled masons, carpenters, and metal-smiths worked on the temple. Together with their helpers and laborers, the work force was considerable. Thousands of stones were replaced, much new woodwork and many beams put in and metal decorations restored. When the work was finished there was more than enough money to pay for labor and materials. Jehoiada used most of what remained to fashion gold and silver bowls and utensils to be used by the priests in their functions.

With the beauty and equipment of the temple restored, more and more people came to worship. It was an era when the right kind of rulership resulted in greater welfare for the people, because so many of them, including the priest and honest workmen, followed their king's good example. (II Kings 12:11-16; II Chronicles 24:12-14.)

Thus conditions in Judah were much better, for two or three decades, than they had been since Jehoshaphat's time. Then an unfortunate event took place. It was Jehoiada's death at the age of a hundred and thirty years. For a long time this exceptional priest, aided by a wonderful wife, had exerted the power of a king, and to the country's advantage. He was considered so close to being a ruler that he was honored by being buried among the kings of Judah at Jerusalem. (II Chronicles 24:15-16.)

Idolatry Creeps In

From then on, without the wise influence of Jehoiada, matters in Judah took a turn in the wrong direction. The change started when leaders from all parts of the nation came to bring gifts to the king and to praise and flatter him. They also came to ask a favor of him. (Deuteronomy 16:18- 20; II Chronicles 24:17.)

"Our people have been offering sacrifices at the temple in great numbers," one of the leaders told Jehoash. "They have been coming here so often that many are becoming needy because of the time and expense required to make the round trip to Jerusalem. They want to continue being obedient, but they have no choice but to remain at home. Would it not be better to allow them to worship and sacrifice at nearer altars built at several more convenient locations in Judah?"

The king pondered. He knew what it would mean if the people were allowed to worship at other altars in places of their own choosing. Jehoash felt that this situation was somewhat exaggerated. The matter had been brought to him before. He had agreed with Jehoiada that there should be one place of worship -- Jerusalem. But now, with Jehoiada gone, the king could gain a great measure of popularity by acceding to the desires of these influential men who had brought him such costly gifts in a deliberate attempt to wrongly influence his judgment.

"I wish everyone in Judah could come often to the temple," Jehoash observed, "but rather than have some miss the opportunity to make their offerings, now that the situation is growing worse, I think that it should be made possible for them to go to locations nearer their homes."

If he had studied God's law as required, he would have known it was prohibited to make sacrifices and offerings at altars in other places, and that God didn't expect the people to do more than they were able to afford. (Deuteronomy 10:12-13; 12:1-7; 16:16-17; 17:18-20; I Kings 14:21)

The visitors were elated at the king's decision, which meant that the idolatry they secretly favored would have more freedom to spread in Judah. At first, when the people learned they weren't required to go to Jerusalem, they sacrificed only to God on their various altars.

Influenced by so-called priests who wanted to substitute other gods for the God of Israel, they were soon back to worshipping idols, including images of Baal and other hideous likenesses of animals.

This turn of events displeased God, but instead of immediately punishing the idolaters, He sent prophets to warn of disaster to come unless the idol worship ceased. The warnings were ignored. (II Chronicles 24:18-19.)

Jehoiada's sons took over management of the temple functions after the death of the high priest. Because of the influence of exceptional parents, they were very faithful to their responsibilities. One of them, Zechariah, one day was inspired to give his audience the same kind of warning the prophets had been delivering.

An Evil King's Verdict

"Our king and many lesser leaders of Judah are breaking God's commandments by encouraging our people to follow pagan gods," Zechariah declared. "Neither they nor the people seem concerned about the terrible price they will have to pay for this corruption. They have forsaken God. Now God will forsake them. They will have no protection when calamity comes, and it's coming soon."

Zechariah's words were immediately reported to Jehoash, who was far from happy to learn that he had been referred to in any but a complimentary manner. Even though Zechariah's aged father and mother had saved Jehoash from being murdered when he was a child, King Jehoash, now influenced by evil younger leaders, callously issued a shocking order.

"I'm weary of prophets and priests nagging and advising me," Jehoash muttered angrily. "I'm going to make an example of Zechariah. Have people stone him. Use people who will appear to be a cross-section of the public, so that observers will receive the impression that many inhabitants of Judah don't approve of what he says."

An unusually large crowd gathered at the temple. Men and women throughout the congregation surged toward the priest and hurled stones at him. Most of the missiles missed Zechariah, but the few that found their mark fatally injured him. There was much shouting, running and confusion.

"Don't be too concerned about my attackers," Zechariah told those who tried to help him just before he died. "God will deal with them just as He will deal with whoever told them to do this thing." (II Chronicles 24:20-22.)

Meanwhile in Samaria...

Before this, up in Samaria, King Jehu had begun to be troubled by invasions of Arameans in Syria under the command of Hazael, as Elisha predicted would happen. After Jehu died, his son Jehoahaz became king of the ten tribes of Israel. (II Kings 10:30-36.)

At first he wasn't much of an improvement over his father, but after struggling through a miserable period of war with the Arameans, he decided to look to God for help.

By this time the Arameans had taken over Israel's territory east of the Jordan river, which was land belonging to the tribes of Manasseh, Reuben and Gad. The invaders moved westward slaughtering most of Jehoahaz' army. They brought most of the people of the ten tribes under subjection, and it was at this point that the king of Israel desperately appealed to God to spare the nation.

God intended to bring Israel out of the grip of the Arameans, but not through Jehoahaz or because of his prayers for help. The king of Israel did nothing to put idolatry out of his nation or even out of Samaria.

Worship of the goddess Astarte or Ishtar, who was supposed to have come from an egg, had become almost as popular as that of Baal. Most people today believe we have no part in pagan practices. We do in many ways, however. Many observe Easter (the word came from the name Ishtar or Astarte) with displays of colored eggs that are rolled, given away in baskets, hidden for children to find, etc.

Anxious to push on to further conquest, the Arameans left Samaria and moved southward, leaving Jehoahaz with only fifty horsemen, ten chariots and ten thousand foot soldiers left alive - - a small fighting force for most of the tribes of Israel. (II Kings 13:1-8.)

The coming of the invaders into Judah was a shock to Jehoash, who had vainly hoped that Hazael would be content with overrunning only the northern nation of Israel. As the hordes of Arameans neared Jerusalem, the king became increasingly frantic. He was convinced that it would be the same as suicide to pit his army against that of the enemy. He could see only one possible way of avoiding an attack on Jerusalem and its capture, and that possibility seemed very slim.

King Hazael, riding at the head of his army, was puzzled when he met a number of soldiers carrying boxes instead of arms and equipment. Through interpreters he learned that they had come up from Jerusalem to meet him.

"King Jehoash wishes you to know that he wants to remain at peace with you," the officer in charge explained. "To prove his sincerity, he has sent you gifts."

The men put containers before Hazael, who told his officers to open a few of them. When the Arameans saw the beautiful gold vessels, silver trumpets and ornaments set with precious stones, they grinned with pleasure. (II Kings 12:17-18.)

"If all the gifts are this valuable, there is a great fortune here," one of Hazael's officers whispered to him.

"I know," Hazael replied in a low voice. "What I'd also like to know is whether this is to pay us to stay out of Judah or whether it's bait to make certain that we go directly to Jerusalem for more -- and fall into some kind of trap."

"Your army is too big to trap, sir" the officer said.

"The God of Judah is supposed to live at Jerusalem," Hazael said. "He has done some unbelievable things to Judah's enemies."

The king of Syria was trying to decide whether to go on to attack Jerusalem or turn around and return to his native country.

Chapter 132

Face to Face With Reality

KING Hazael of Syria was approaching Jerusalem with his army, intending to attack the city, when he received very valuable gifts sent by Jehoash, king of Judah. Hazael was sure that the gifts were either to pay him to leave Judah or were to lure him to Jerusalem for more wealth -- and into some kind of ambush. He had to decide at once which course to take.

A Temporary Lull

"Why should we risk anything by going against Jerusalem, the high walls of which are probably crawling with many thousands of defenders?" Hazael asked his officers. "If these gifts are meant to pay us to return home, we can do well to accept them without losing even one man. Then we can always return another time to see how matters will develop." (II Kings 12:17-18.)

Jehoash was almost delirious with relief when he heard what had happened. He had been spared from certain disaster, for which he had given up most of the valuable objects in his palace that were portable. But the greatest part of what he had paid had come from another source. The king had ruthlessly stripped the temple of its hallowed treasures to buy his way out of an enemy attack!

Jehoash's first surge of elation, shared by thousands later when they heard about it, subsided considerably after he became troubled with the notion that Hazael might swing his army around and come to Jerusalem after all. He felt safe only after reports were brought to him that the Syrians had crossed the Jordan and were well on their way up the east side of the river.

But security didn't last long. About a year later Jehoash received the staggering news that Syrian soldiers were streaming westward across the Jordan river and were marching directly toward Jerusalem. The king fell into a greater state of frenzy than he had gone through the previous year. This time he didn't have enough left to pay his way out of war. While he hastily made defense plans with his officers, another report came that the Syrians numbered only a few hundred.

Everyone's mood especially that of Jehoash, abruptly changed. Filled with confidence, the king told his officers to forget about defending Jerusalem and go out and slaughter the intruders.

The two armies came within view of each other only a few miles north of the capital. The sight of thousands of oncoming soldiers didn't deter the Syrians, who soon came face to face with these men of Judah.

"Which of you is Hazael?" Jehoash asked through an interpreter.

"King Hazael is not with us," a Syrian officer replied. "I am commander of these men."

"How can your king be so foolish as to believe that you can war against us with so few soldiers?" Jehoash inquired, staring disdainfully at the Syrian troops.

Payoff Multiplies Greed

"We're not here to fight," the Syrian commander explained. "A year ago King Hazael accepted tribute from you for not invading Judah. He expects tribute every year. We have come to collect it."

"This is ridiculous!" Jehoash barked. "There is no such understanding! None of you will return to take back anything to your king!"

"See the men on horses on that north rise?" the Syrian officer asked, pointing. "At least they'll take news back to King Hazael. If we are destroyed, so will you be when the whole army of Syria comes to ravage Judah!"

In his anger Jehoash was more inclined toward action than caution. Minutes later a battle was in progress. It didn't go the way Jehoash was sure it would. Perhaps the soldiers of Judah were troubled by the notion that the rest of the Syrian army was just over the horizon. Whatever the problem, they were in no mood to fight. Their desire was to hastily retreat.

It was incredible, but Hazael's hundreds triumphed over Jehoash's thousands. God permitted the Syrians to punish Judah for idolatry. (II Chronicles 24:23-24.)

Jehoash fled to his palace, but there was no safety there. The victorious Syrians came on to Jerusalem, forced their way inside the walls and seized many things of value that they could carry, including objects from the king's palace. When the invaders finally left, days later, the army of Judah was almost nonexistent and Jehoash had become very ill from the pressures and distress of his worrisome situation. He was forced to spend days in bed, during which he was attended, among others, by two servants who had been in his service for considerable time.

They had overheard Jehoash give the order to have the priest Zechariah stoned, and they hated their master for it. Now that he was at their mercy they saw to it, in their misguided sense of justice, that the king didn't leave his bed until he was lifeless.

Jehoash was buried in Jerusalem, but because he hadn't earned much respect as a ruler, he wasn't buried in the tombs of the kings of Judah. (II Kings 12:19-21; II Chronicles 24:25-27.)

Amaziah, Jehoash's son, became the next king of Judah. He was only twenty-five years of age at the time, but he used more wisdom as king than his father had used in the latter years of his reign. He didn't manage to stop his people from false worship at various places, but he reestablished greater worship at the temple. Meanwhile, he tracked down the murderers of his father, and had them executed. (II Kings 14:1-6; II Chronicles 25:1-4.)

One of Amaziah's ambitions was to organize a new, large army to replace the one that had been devastated by the Syrians. The king succeeded by building it of choice young men of twenty years and up from the nation of Judah. It reached three hundred thousand.

But Amaziah wasn't satisfied with that figure. He wanted a larger army so that he could go to Edom and be certain of exacting the tribute the Edomites had refused to pay since King Jehoram's time.

Amaziah couldn't find more men in his kingdom who could be developed into superior fighting men, but he managed to draw a hundred thousand men of Ephraim out of the ten-tribed nation of Israel by offering a thousand pounds of silver in payment.

No Mercenaries Needed

With a well-trained force of four hundred thousand men, Amaziah felt that he was ready for certain victory over the Edomites. Just as he was about to take his army on the planned conquest, a man of God came to talk to him.

"God has sent me to warn you not to use the hundred thousand men you bought into your army. They are not the kind of men to fight your battles. If you take them with you, you will be defeated by the Edomites. It is God who determines the outcome of a battle, and not the number of men involved."

"But I've already paid a fortune to these men to be a part of my army," Amaziah pointed out, irritated by the intrusion of the man of God into his affairs.

"If you're concerned about a loss, God can more than make up for it by giving you great spoils," the prophet said.

Amaziah was troubled. To relinquish a fourth of his army seemed a mad thing to do. At first he was determined not to do it, but his fear of losing to the Edomites changed his mind. Reluctantly he gave orders to his astonished top officers to separate from the army of Judah the Ephraimite mercenaries from Israel.

When the men from the northern tribes were told to return to their homes, they made little effort to hide their anger. To them, mostly experienced soldiers, it was an insult to learn that they were unwanted in a war venture. There was nothing to be gained by telling them why they were being discharged. They would not have understood. (II Chronicles 25:5-10.)

Amaziah departed with his three hundred thousand men to the south, regretting that he was leaving behind a hundred thousand soldiers in an ugly mood. As soon as the army of Judah was well on its way, that hundred thousand decided to take from Judah what they might have earned if they could have stayed in Amaziah's army. And at the same time to take back several towns a former king of Judah had taken from Israel in battle. (II Chronicles 13:13-20.) So, on their way to the north they vengefully attacked those towns now in northern Judah, killing three thousand men and taking everything of value they could carry. (II Chronicles 25:13.)

The arrival of the army of Judah didn't surprise the Edomites, whose spies and lookouts kept them posted. They were ready for battle in the Valley of Salt, directly south of the Dead Sea. When the fighting was over, ten thousand Edomites were dead and ten thousand more had been captured. From there Amaziah moved southward to conquer the fortress city of Selah – later known as Petra -- the Edomite capital built in a rocky area in the Mt. Seir range. There, from one of the many high cliffs, the ten thousand captives were thrown into a gorge. (II Kings 14:7; II Chronicles 25:11-12.)

Having whipped Edom into a state of subjection, Amaziah and his army returned home in triumph. But when the king learned what the hundred thousand soldiers who had been discharged had done, he was infuriated.

"That king at Samaria is protecting those murderers!" Amaziah, king of Judah, stormed. "I must go up there and demand that they be punished or turned over to me!"

Meanwhile, in Israel...

The king in Samaria to whom Amaziah referred was the son of Jehoahaz, the ruler the Syrians had left with such a small army. (II Kings 13:1-7.) After King Jehoahaz was slain, his son Joash had become king of the ten tribes. He wasn't any more obedient to God than his father, although when he heard that Elisha was seriously ill he went to visit him because he believed that Elisha could prevail upon God to help Israel. By that time Joash had built up a much larger army by which he hoped to release Israel from obeisance to the Syrians. Elisha told him that he would triumph over the Syrians in three battles. (II Kings 13:14-19.) Israel's freedom from the Syrians would thus be accomplished to fulfill the promise God had made to King Jehoahaz years previously. (II Kings 13:4.) That was the aging prophet's last prediction. Joash saw to it that the prophet Elisha was honorably entombed in a crypt not far from Samaria.

Later, when another body was brought to the crypt for burial, the bearers saw a mounted band of Moabite marauders coming across the plain. Eager to get the burial over so that they could get out of sight, they jerked the crypt door back and dumped the corpse inside. As they crouched behind some boulders out of sight of the Moabites, they were terrified to see the one whom they threw into the crypt crawl out of the crypt and gaze around in bewilderment. It was no longer a corpse but a living man. The body had come in contact with the swathed remains of Elisha, and life had been restored to the man who was dropped into the tomb. Fifteen major recorded miracles had been performed through the prophet while he lived. The sixteenth occurred even after his death, to help Israel learn the lesson of what God's power can do. (II Kings 13:20-21.)

Elisha's prediction that Joash would triumph over the Syrians was fulfilled not long after the prophet's death. The Israelites won the three battles Elisha mentioned and regained the towns the Syrians had captured. By this time King Hazael had died. His son, Ben-hadad, led the Syrian troops against Joash's army without success. Israel's victory wasn't because of the obedience of the Israelites.

It came about because of Jehoahaz' prayer and because God had promised Abraham that He would not entirely cast away His people Israel. (Genesis 13:15; 28:13-15.)

An Idolater Warned

Meanwhile, Amaziah, king of Judah, had increasingly vengeful feelings about what the soldiers from Israel had done to so many people in Judah. At first he was intent on going up to Samaria with his army and demanding that King Joash round up the hundred thousand offenders for punishment. Before he could get around to making this rash move, he was visited again by the same man of God who had told him that if he used the hundred thousand men in his army, the Edomites would defeat him.

"If you take your army to Samaria, you will end up in a battle in which you will be ingloriously routed," the man of God warned Amaziah.

"Why must you always bring bad news to me?" Amaziah asked irritably.

"You can hardly expect good news under the circumstances," the man of God replied. "God is not pleased because you have brought back images of pagan gods from Edom. He is even less pleased because you have been worshipping those same images." (II Chronicles 25:14-15.)

Amaziah was embarrassed and angered by this accusation. The images had some strange fascination for him. He had gone so far as to burn incense before some of them and ask for protection and triumph in future battles -- despite the fact that he knew those gods didn't save Edom when he himself conquered them!

"I hire a staff of advisers," Amaziah indignantly informed the man of God, "but I don't recall that you are among them. Keep your advice to yourself or you could find yourself on the sharp end of a spear."

"I won't say more than to repeat that God will destroy you because you have turned to idolatry," the man of God said, walking away shaking his head. "The course of events could be different if you would do what is right." (II Chronicles 25:16.)

Amaziah was again troubled. He feared that the man of God was right, but at the same time he wanted satisfaction from King Joash. Finally, after conferring with advisers, he decided that instead of making a lightning thrust at Samaria, he would send a challenge to the king of the ten tribes of Israel. A few hours later, riders from Jerusalem brought a message to Joash.

Face to Face

"You are aware of what men of your nation have done to Judah, and yet you have remained strangely silent about it," the message read. "It's your responsibility to seek out and punish the offenders. If you refuse or fail, I shall come up with my army to meet you face to face to settle the matter." (II Chronicles 25:17.)

The messengers returned to Judah with a stinging reply from Joash that caused Amaziah to regret that he had wasted time with a letter to the ruler of the ten tribes. The letter began by comparing Amaziah to a thistle and Joash to a cedar tree. Out of the forest in which the cedar grew came a fierce animal. The animal trampled the thistle because it made a ridiculous demand of the cedar.

"I have heard that you are boasting of how you conquered the Edomites," Joash's reply went on. "That victory has obviously swelled both your confidence and your head. At the same time your wisdom has shrunk, or you would have the good sense to remain in Jerusalem. Why should you meddle in something that will result in harm to you, your army and your nation?"

These words sent Amaziah into a rage. He summoned his top officers to prepare for an immediate invasion of the territory north of Judah. This was all in accordance with God's plan. The infuriating letter roused the king of Judah to unwise action because he had become a follower of Edomite idols and had advocated their worship to many in Judah. Amaziah had his opportunity to give up idolatry and spare himself when the prophet warned him.

Led by Amaziah, a host of Judah's warriors marched out from Jerusalem, bound for a showdown at Samaria. After moving about ten miles, the king and his army came to an unexpected obstruction. That obstruction consisted of Joash and his troops, who had already reached Judah. (II Chronicles 25:18-21.)

As Amaziah had requested, the two kings were now face to face.

Chapter 133

Jonah and the "Whale"

KING AMAZIAH of Judah and King Joash of the ten-tribed nation of Israel, accompanied by their respective armies, had a surprise meeting about ten miles from Jerusalem. (II Kings 14:1- 11; II Chronicles 25:17-21.)

"Why have you brought your men to the soil of Judah?" asked Amaziah haughtily.

The Jews Fight Israel

"To keep your army off the soil of my kingdom," Joash sternly replied.

The inevitable battle was only minutes old when it was evident which side would win. The soldiers of Judah lacked the desire to fight. What started as a large fray ended in a massive rout of Amaziah's men, many of whom escaped to the south. Amaziah and his top officers had no choice but to hastily follow.

But escape, if any, wasn't going to be that simple. Amaziah's speeding chariot was surrounded by Joash's cavalry and forced to a halt. (II Kings 14:12; II Chronicles 25:22.) As he was taken prisoner, the king of Judah bitterly recalled the warnings of the prophet. (II Chronicles 25:14 -16.)

Joash and his army moved on to Jerusalem, which he planned to invade. He found the barred gates were very strong and the walls unusually high, but he didn't allow these conditions to deter him. He displayed the captive king of Judah before the guards on the walls.

"Order your guards to open the gates," Joash told Amaziah.

Shackled in his chariot, Amaziah refused to say anything.

"Don't you recognize your king in shackles?" one of Joash's officers shouted up to the guards. "Open the gates and we won't kill him!"

The guards moved nervously about, but the gates remained closed.

"There has been enough delay!" Joash barked. "A gate isn't the only way into this city! Break down the wall!"

The high, thick wall was an irksome challenge to Joash. He wanted to prove that it could be penetrated. By the use of heavy battering rams propelled by a line of soldiers, a section of the wall about seven hundred feet long was gradually and painfully cracked into sections that thundered down into a state of rubble. (II Kings 14:13; II Chronicles 25:23.)

Many men lost their lives in this rash operation. Those atop the wall hurled all kinds of missiles down on the invaders. It would have been simpler, faster and safer to ram through the gates, but Joash was stubbornly determined to go through the wall.

A path was cleared through the debris. The attackers poured inside the city, battling Amaziah's guards into submission. Then Joash, king of Israel triumphantly rode over the rubble in his chariot, followed by his officers and the shackled Amaziah, king of Judah.

For hours Joash's men ransacked Jerusalem. The temple and the royal palace provided most of the spoils. Just before the invaders left, they released Amaziah, who expected death any moment as he watched his palace being looted.

"How do you know that I won't muster another army and come up to besiege Samaria?" Amaziah asked Joash.

"I don't," Joash answered. "But if you do, members of your family will be the first to die. I'm taking most of them with me!" (II Kings 14:14; II Chronicles 25:24.)

God Strengthens Israel

Although he had been defeated in war, had lost most of his personal wealth, had been humiliated and disgraced and had become unpopular with a great part of his people, Amaziah managed, with difficulty, to stay in power in Judah. Joash, ruler of the ten tribes, died not long after invading Jerusalem, but Amaziah no longer had any interest in war or in taking advantage of the loss of Joash's firm leadership. For fifteen more years he remained the ruler of Judah, but with increasing opposition.

One day he was informed that there was a plot to assassinate him by certain men who wanted to come into power in Judah. Amaziah was so troubled by this report that he fled from Jerusalem to the town of Lachish, about forty miles southwest of the capital of Judah. It was very close to Philistia, and only about seven miles from the east shore of the Great Sea. By means of watchful agents and high rewards, Amaziah's residence was found and reported to his opponents, who sent assassins to Lachish to carry out their murderous orders. Amaziah's body was carried back to Jerusalem, where he was buried with the former kings of Judah. (II Kings 14:17-20; II Chronicles 25:25-28.)

Years before Amaziah's death, the king of Israel, Joash, had been succeeded by a son, Jeroboam, who followed in the ways of the other King Jeroboam who had begun his reign a hundred and twenty-eight years previously. (II Kings 14:15-16, 23-24).

After the death of Joash, who had triumphed over the Syrians, those ancient enemies again returned from the east to reduce the northern nation Israel to a weakened state. God inspired Jeroboam, in spite of his wrong pursuits, with the desire to shake off the control of the Syrians and restore the boundaries of Israel to where Joshua had proclaimed, according to God's instruction, they should be.

This inspiration started out as a desire for power and revenge. Jeroboam's ambition was greatly strengthened when a prophet named Jonah disclosed to him that he, the king, was destined by God to bring Israel out of its wretched state and expand it once more almost to the size it was when Solomon reigned.

Believing that the God of Israel would protect him in whatever he did to develop Israel, Jeroboam's confidence was increased. Like so many people of that time -- and this -- he respected and even believed God, but at the same time he chose to worship only the gods he could see.

Over the years, through many surprise attacks and battles, Jeroboam took back all the cities, towns and land that had been captured by Syria. He freed the Israelite prisoners, took the Syrian capital, Damascus, and recaptured the city of Hamath, far to the north. From there southward to the east coast of the Dead Sea he reclaimed all territory that God had given to the whole of Israel in Joshua's time. (II Kings 14:25-27.)

Prosperity and Idolatry

Jeroboam became the most powerful ruler of the ten tribes since Israel had become divided. The larger and more prosperous the northern kingdom became, unfortunately, the more careless the people became in their attitude toward God. Many reasoned that the growing prosperity was due to an increase in religious activity.

However, this often consisted of a strange, contrived worship of images that were supposed to represent a composite of God and pagan deities. This would mean breaking the first three Commandments. God did not -- and does not -- reward such worship with prosperity.

This was the last time the northern kingdom, the House of Israel, was to experience such national welfare and strength. The years of that kingdom were numbered. Jonah, the prophet who had predicted that Jeroboam would beat Israel's enemies back, probably knew what Israel's future would be, and that God was allowing the nation to be strong for a time before it would cease to be a nation unless the people turned from idolatry.

Jonah must also have known that one way God was making the Syrians conquerable was by allowing Assyria, a nation to the east, to war with the Syrians. This growing country was gradually swallowing up surrounding regions and becoming powerful at the same time Israel was gaining strength.

Like the people of Israel, the people of Assyria became more corrupt as the nation became more prosperous. The inhabitants of Nineveh, the sprawling capital of Assyria on the Tigris river, were especially lawless and reprobate. God was so displeased with them that he decided to destroy the city, but not without first warning the inhabitants so that any innocent people would have a chance to escape.

Jonah was surprised when God told him that he should make the long trip to Nineveh to warn the Assyrian people what would soon happen, but the more Jonah thought about it, the less enthusiasm he had for the task. He reasoned that if the people repented after his warning them, God might spare them and he, Jonah, would be branded a false prophet and lose his life. Besides, he hoped that Nineveh would be wiped out. Otherwise, the Assyrians would probably triumph over the Syrians and come westward to attack Israel.

This prospect was part of God's plan. Through Jonah God had warned the Israelites about their idolatry. They had refused to heed. Now God intended to warn a Gentile people. If they were to heed and be spared, it would be a sobering warning for Israel.

The prophet knew that he couldn't escape from God, but he reasoned that if he could quickly get out of Israel, God might choose another prophet there to go to Nineveh. He made a hurried trip to the seaport of Joppa on the coast of Dan. There he found a sailing vessel about to set out for another port close to what is now known as the Rock of Gibraltar in Spain. That point was about as far as he could get from Israel as fast as possible. Jonah hoped God would forget about him. Furthermore, it was in the opposite direction from Nineveh. (Jonah 1:1-3.)

Having paid his passage, Jonah went below deck to rest. After his hasty trip to Joppa he was so weary that he fell asleep at once. Later he awakened to find the ship's captain roughly shaking him. He was aware of a howling wind, pounding waves and violent rocking of the vessel.

Divine Fury Stops the Runaway

"Wake up, man!" the captain shouted. "How can you sleep through this storm? If it gets any worse, we'll capsize! Whoever your God is, pray to Him for your life! We've already had to throw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship!"

Jonah struggled to his feet, crawled up the hatchway and stared out at the billowing, spray-shrouded water crashing every few seconds over the deck of the vessel.

"Someone on this ship is causing a curse on us!" the superstitious sailors complained to the captain. "We must draw lots to find out who it is!"

The captain agreed, not knowing how right the sailors were. Jonah drew the lot, through God's influence, to point out that he was the cause of the trouble. The crew swarmed accusingly around him. (Jonah 1:4-7.)

"Who are you?" the sailors asked. "Where did you come from? Why do you want to go across the Great Sea?"

"I am from Israel and I am a prophet of the God of Israel," Jonah answered. "I was foolishly trying to escape from Him because of a difficult thing He required of me. Now I know that my God has caused this storm to prevent my running away."

"We have heard of how terrible your God can be!" one of the frightened sailors exclaimed. "What must be done to quell His anger?"

"Throw me off the ship!" Jonah shouted above the noise of the storm. "The wind will abate as soon as I am gone!"

The crew struggled stubbornly to move the ship shoreward, but the east wind blowing from the land was too much for them. These heathen sailors, who had gods of their own, surprisingly raised their voices to Jonah's God to spare them and forgive them for what they were reluctantly about to do. Only then did they take hold of the repentant, praying prophet, lift him off his knees and swing him over the leeward rail. The last they saw of him, he was valiantly trying to keep his head above water, though he knew he couldn't continue doing so much longer.

The sailors were amazed at how suddenly the wind abated. They were so shaken by this miracle that they built a small altar on the deck, offered a sacrifice and vowed loyalty to God before sailing on westward over a calm sea. (Jonah 1:8-16.)

After being swept away from the ship, Jonah kept afloat for a short time. Just when he became too weary to paddle and tread any longer, he had the dreadful sensation of being sucked under the water by some great force. From then on, for quite some time, he wasn't certain what was happening. Vaguely he felt that he had been drawn into some sort of soft, dark, cramped area. After that he had the feeling of considerable movement about him, as though his container could be moving about with many twists and turns.

The Miracle Fish

Hours went by. Jonah was certain that he was under the surface of the sea, yet he was able to breathe. Eventually he arrived at the fantastic conclusion that he had been swallowed by a very large fish. Earnestly he prayed that he would be delivered from his captor before he was consumed by its digestive process.

After what seemed a very long time, the prophet was startled by a violent motion, as though he was being shot like an arrow from a giant bow. After recovering from his confusion, he realized that he was on a beach. Only a few feet away, in shallow water, was a very large fish whose broad mouth, directed toward Jonah, was slowly opening and closing as it gasped for oxygen it could get only through water. From the fish's teeth hung shreds of Jonah's torn coat. The prophet knew then that he hadn't just imagined things.

The fish had swallowed him, carried him to some shore unfamiliar to him, and had disgorged him on the beach! As Jonah pondered these startling facts and how much he had to be thankful for, the fish twisted violently to and fro. Finally it managed to get back into deep water, where it disappeared. (Jonah 1:17; 2:1-10.)

Abruptly Jonah was aware that he wasn't alone. He was surprised to see several men staring silently at him from only a short distance away.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here," they demanded to know. Jonah called out in Assyrian, "I am a prophet of the God of Israel, and I am sent by Him with a warning message for your king and your people!"

From a brief conversation with these men he was amazed to learn that he had been three full days and nights inside the fish, and that he was now standing on the south shore of what later was called the Black Sea! God had brought him all the way up through the Aegean Sea and had deposited him just north of Assyria.

About eight and a half centuries later, Jesus pointed out that there would be only one sign that He was the Son of God. That sign was that He would be in the grave for three days and three nights, just before being resurrected, just as Jonah was held inside the fish for three days and three nights before being freed. (Matthew 12:38-41.)

The Great City Nineveh

It was painfully clear to Jonah that God had brought him close to Assyria in spite of his efforts to evade doing the thing God told him to do. He realized, at last, that it was futile to go against God's will. This was even plainer to him when the men insisted on taking him to Nineveh. God's purpose was to use them in getting the prophet to Nineveh to warn that city of impending destruction.

From the town of Sinope, near where Jonah had landed, it was about five hundred miles south to Assyria's sprawling capital. There, on the streets teeming with thousands of people, Jonah was pointed out as the man brought to Assyria by a huge fish. Excited, curious Assyrians gathered to stare. Jonah was irked and embarrassed at being put on display, but he realized that this situation was created for what he must do.

Taking advantage of all the attention, Jonah repeatedly shouted his message. "I have been sent by the God of Israel to warn you that Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days!" (Jonah 3:1-4.)

The surprised crowd was silent for a few seconds. Then the people began to mutter, many of them in anger.

Chapter 134

Even Prophets and Kings Must Repent

ON THE crowded streets of Nineveh, Jonah the prophet proclaimed that destruction was coming to that city in forty days. (Jonah 3:1-4.) Some of his startled hearers moved menacingly toward him. Others advised them to use caution.

A Gentile King Listens

News of this strange man with his disturbing message quickly spread through the city. As the crowd increased, Jonah repeated his warning, which was having an increasingly troublesome effect.

There were jeers and angry retorts, but most of the people refrained from speaking out because of the miraculous report of Jonah's coming out of a fish's mouth!

Suddenly two stern-faced officers emerged from the crowd, strode up to Jonah and informed him that they had orders to take him to the king of Assyria for questioning. The prophet was dismayed. He reasoned that if he weren't put to death, he would probably be imprisoned and die in the destruction of Nineveh.

Matters appeared grim for Jonah, but he was about to learn that his fears were unfounded and that the Assyrian ruler was considerably different from what he imagined him to be.

"I know about what you've been telling the people," the king said to Jonah after the prophet had been escorted to the palace. "Now I want to learn from you what this is all about."

Jonah explained who he was, why he was in Nineveh and that he completely believed what he had been telling the people.

"Many reports about the great power of the God of Israel have come to me over the years," the king observed. "I have heard what happened to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah a thousand years ago. Perhaps I am foolish to believe that it happened, but I want no part of the wrath of your God. I can't change the ways of my people overnight, but I can decree that they fast for the next few days and cry to your God to change His mind and spare us."

"How can you force people to be repentant?" Jonah asked the king.

"I can't," was the reply. "My people may be a wicked lot, but they do have a certain respect for authority and usually follow their leader's example. My mistake has been in not exerting enough authority and good influence over them. Therefore I shall be the first to put aside my robes, dress myself in sackcloth and pray to your God in public to spare us. Those who refuse to follow my example will surely be the first to die."

The People Repent

Jonah was surprised that the king of this pagan nation was affected so strongly by the prophet's warning. The ruler of Assyria immediately ordered that all the Ninevites, including their animals, refrain from eating and drinking.

Furthermore, animals as well as people were to be dressed in sackcloth. The Ninevites were also commanded to forego their regular pursuits and spend their time seriously calling on the Great God of Israel, possessor of Heaven and Earth, not to destroy Nineveh.

The people willingly obeyed the king's orders because they were fearful of what would happen to them. Within hours the tempo, mood and outlook of the people of this vast Gentile city were abruptly altered. The people had changed from their wicked ways. (Jonah 3:5-9.)

By this time the forty days Jonah had mentioned had almost expired. Tension and fear mounted rapidly.

Jonah was free to go where he pleased. He left, but only to go a mile or so from the east wall to take up a temporary residence with his burro in a rocky spot from which he could command a good view of Nineveh but could take safety behind boulders if the annihilation of the city came about by some exceedingly violent means. (Jonah 4:5.)

An ominous, nerve-racking silence came over Nineveh as the hours dragged by. The fortieth day dawned. Thousands fearfully wondered if the end would come through an earthquake, a hurricane or by fire from the sky.

As the day drew to a close, Jonah stared from behind a boulder, waiting in wearing apprehension for the terrible thing he hoped for God to do. He firmly held the tether of his burro, lest the animal bolt and run at some sudden loud noise or light. The prophet shivered with suspense as the sun disappeared behind Nineveh's walls and sank beyond the horizon of the distant western desert -- the fortieth day was over and God had not sent the evil Jonah so expected.

Those were supposed to be the fatal moments, but nothing happened except the advent of darkness. Jonah was puzzled. All night he kept a vigil beside the boulder. By the time the sun came up over the eastern mountains, the prophet's perplexity had turned to disappointment. He was resentful and even angry because God had failed to do what He had threatened to do. (Jonah 3:10.)

"Back when you first told me to go to Nineveh I was afraid that this thing would happen," Jonah said aloud irritably, intending that God would hear his opinion. "That's why I took a ship to the west. I knew that You are merciful, kind and slow to anger, and that You very likely would decide to spare the Ninevites if they showed any desire to repent. They did and You changed Your mind. Now the Assyrians will think of me only as one who has deceived them. When they find me, they'll kill me. I want You to take my life.

I would rather die by Your hand than by the bloody weapons of Ninevites who are angry because I caused them so much fear and terror." (Jonah 4:1-3.)

Jonah's Resentment

Jonah continued to kneel for a time, expecting God to snatch his life from him at any moment. But as in the case of Nineveh, nothing happened. Instead, the prophet was startled to hear a distinct voice. He looked quickly around him, but the only living thing he could see was his burro. It obviously heard nothing.

"You are angry with Me, your God," the voice uttered. "Do you consider that wise? Why are you disappointed because the people of Nineveh are still alive? Do you think that they are more concerned with you than with knowing that they have been allowed to live?" (Jonah 4:4.)

"I dare not show myself to these men who will become the enemies of Israel as soon as they conquer the Syrians," was Jonah's bitter answer.

"The Israelites have refused to repent after I warned them through you what would happen to them if they continued in idolatry," God pointed out. (II Kings 14:25.) "They don't have as much respect for their Creator as do the Assyrians. Then why should I not use the Assyrians to punish them?"

Jonah was miserable. Besides his mental distress, a physical problem was rapidly developing. As the sun went higher, the heat became very intense. Jonah tried to produce some shade by constructing a kind of booth out from the boulder. All he had to use were rocks and dried weeds and branches, and he wasn't very successful. He feared to move elsewhere lest he be discovered and attacked, though his fears were ungrounded. All he could do was sit with his coat over his head and hope that he would survive the almost unbearable rays of the blazing sun.

Next morning Jonah was startled to find that he was in the shade of a large plant that overnight had sprung out of the ground. Broad, green leaves were spreading themselves between him and the sky, shielding him from the hot solar rays that had plagued him earlier. He realized that this was something that God had miraculously prepared for his relief. He was pleased and thankful, but his unhappy attitude concerning Nineveh continued to gnaw at his mind. (Jonah 4:6.)

Next day dawned hot again, but Jonah remained comfortable under the wide leaves of the unusual plant. Then as suddenly as it had come up, the plant withered and its leaves shriveled. Again the prophet was exposed to the almost unbearable heat. As he sat staring at the remains of the plant, he even felt sorrow for it because it had lived for such a short period of time. He was concerned mainly about his comfort, but besides that he regretted to see the beautiful plant die. He didn't know that God had purposely caused a large, voracious worm to consume the vine's roots.

A hot wind came up from the east to add to the prophet's distress. That and his gnawing resentment were too much for him. He fell into a state of unconsciousness.

When he regained his senses he was even more miserable than he had been before. He desperately wished (for the third time) that his life would come to an abrupt and merciful end. That was when the voice came again to him.

Jonah Learns His Lesson

"Do you feel that you have good reason to be troubled because of the gourd plant?" the voice asked.

"I have plenty of reasons to be troubled," Jonah answered. "I'll be troubled until the day I die, and I hope it's soon!" (Jonah 4:7-9.)

"You had nothing to do with causing the plant to grow," the voice said, "but you had a feeling of sorrow for it because its life was so brief. You believe that I was unmerciful in allowing the plant to die so soon. If I should have spared that plant, shouldn't I also have spared the great city of Nineveh, with its thousands upon thousands of men, women, innocent children and helpless animals?" (Jonah 4:10-11.)

There is no record in the Scriptures of what happened next to Jonah. There is strong evidence that a monument uncovered in the ruins of Nineveh in recent years had been built to honor this prophet. Evidently he turned out to be a national hero or at least an object of great respect by the Assyrians of that time.

Eventually, in later years, as Jonah feared and as God indicated would happen, the Assyrians did come against Israel because the Israelites wouldn't turn from idolatry. That invasion meant the end, for many centuries, to the combined nationality of ten tribes of Israel, most of the people God had chosen for a profound purpose in this world and the world to come. (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 14:2; 26:18-19; I Peter 2:9.)

Results of Justice

During the reign of Jeroboam, king of the ten northern tribes of Israel, the son of Amaziah began to rule the kingdom of Judah. His name was Uzziah, also known as Azariah. (II Kings 14:16-21; II Chronicles 26:1.) He was only sixteen years old when he became king, but because he looked to God for direction, through Zechariah the prophet, he developed into a wise, courageous ruler whose ambition was to strengthen his kingdom and improve the welfare of the people.

God prospered Uzziah and gave him success in battle. Even with his relatively small army the king overcame the Philistines, who had been a growing threat to Judah since the invasion of the ten tribes of Israel. The fortifications of Philistia's major cities were destroyed, including those of Gath, Ashdod and Jabneh. Uzziah's men then built towns near those cities, so that the Philistines could be kept under control through garrisons established in the new towns.

Before long the king's army had grown to 307,500 stalwart, well-trained, splendidly equipped troops under the command of 2,600 able clan chiefs. (II Chronicles 26:11-15.)

To prevent trouble from the south, Uzziah's growing army swept over territory as far as the border of Egypt, depriving hostile Arabians of the means of making serious attacks on the towns of Judah bordering the desert of the Sinai Peninsula.

Many miles to the southeast, at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea, Uzziah's men took over the seaport town of Elath, which had formerly belonged to Judah. The port was rebuilt and equipped for a continuance of the sea commerce Solomon had started from that gulf on the east side of the Sinai Peninsula. (II Chronicles 26:2-7; II Kings 14:22.)

Moving in separate bands spread over wide areas, Uzziah's army marched to the southeast and up around the south end of the Dead Sea. There was little resistance until reaching the country of the Ammonites, who met the invaders and were defeated. Instead of destroying his victims, Uzziah demanded that they bring a regular tribute to Jerusalem. (II Chronicles 26:8.)

Convinced that his nation was at least, temporarily safe from attack from three directions, Uzziah set about improving conditions for raising sheep and cattle. Large flocks and herds were raised on the plains bordering the Paran desert in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula. In this lonely region shepherds and herdsmen had often lost their lives and their animals in surprise attacks by Arabians. To prevent this, fortifications were established at various places throughout the grazing frontier. These included high towers from which watchmen could see for miles over the plains and spot approaching marauders in time to prepare for defense. Wells were dug as close as possible to the fortified shelters and towers, so that men and animals wouldn't have to move long distances for water, previously available at considerably fewer locations.

Wells were also dug in areas where farming could be developed and expanded. Although he had made war and defense first in the order of things, Uzziah was far more interested in agriculture. He felt that everything possible should be done to balance agriculture and to get the most good out of the soil of all regions -- mountains, valleys and plains. (II Chronicles 26:10.)

Having established strong projects of food production and commerce, the king of Judah turned his attention to repairing the aging walls of Jerusalem. Towers were built at various locations along the walls. Special movable platforms were constructed on the wall tops for the placement of extraordinary defense machines, some to shoot clusters of giant arrows and others to hurl heavy stones with tremendous force.

Such outstanding devices, never known before, were invented and built by men who were very skillful, ingenious mechanics. These unusual engines of war, generally powered by the sudden release of tension in cables and springy planks, were objects of wonder to all who saw them or heard of them. (II Chronicles 26:9, 15.)

Luxury Breeds Conceit

Over the years Uzziah became powerful, prosperous and quite respected because he had honored and obeyed God. Unhappily, there came a time when he began to

think of himself as a very special person. In spite of the wisdom he had used for so long, good judgment began to fade the more he thought of himself as greatly superior to other men.

One day when there were special services at the temple and many worshippers were present, Uzziah decided that the congregation would take more interest in the ceremonies if he were to take over some of the functions of the priests. After making a dramatic entrance up the steps to the temple, he turned to the crowd.

"Inasmuch as this is a special day, your king will assume the responsibility of burning incense on the incense altar," he announced.

There was a murmur of approval from those in the audience who weren't aware that only a priest was to burn incense at the temple. (Exodus 30:7-8; Numbers 16:1-40; 18:1-7.) Those who were aware of it only stared and probably thought that Uzziah had made some special arrangement with Azariah the high priest. But Azariah, standing off to one side, was surprised by the king's words. His surprise gave way to grave concern as Uzziah strode into the temple and toward the sanctuary.

"He must be stopped!" Azariah exclaimed in a low voice to one of his assistants. "Bring all the priests to me at the entrance of the sanctuary immediately!"

Moments later the priests gathered around Azariah, who hastily walked into the sanctuary with his men.

"Leave this room at once!" the high priest firmly called out to the king, who was standing by the incense altar.

Uzziah, holding a smoking censer, slowly turned and glared at Azariah.

"The king of Judah does not jump at the command of a priest!" he muttered angrily.

"Then I beg you to leave here before God shows His displeasure!" the high priest implored Uzziah. (II Chronicles 26:16-18.)

Chapter 135

Israel Goes To War With The Jews

UZZIAH, KING OF JUDAH, changed by his growing attitude of self-importance, unwisely started to take over a priestly function at the temple. (II Chronicles 26:1-16.) Warned by Azariah the high priest that the king would displease God by this act, Uzziah was so angered that he was hardly aware of a sudden quivering in the floor.

A King Not Above God

"It would take more than all of you to get me out of here before I choose to leave!" Uzziah snapped. "And why should God be displeased with me?"

"None but a son of Aaron the Levite should burn incense in this sanctuary," Azariah pointed out. "You will surely bring down the wrath of God for disobeying His laws!" (II Chronicles 26:17- 18.)

The priests, moving toward Uzziah, nodded in assent. This made the angry king even more upset.

Undaunted by a king, the priests continued approaching Uzziah, who indignantly held his ground. Just as the priests were about to reach him, they halted. Their expressions of determination turned to those of surprise and dread as they peered intently at him.

"A white spot has just appeared on your forehead," Azariah informed the king. "I think it's leprosy!"

Although Uzziah instantly considered the high priest's remark a trick, his free hand went to his forehead. The censer he was holding crashed to the floor. He was horrified to feel an area of soft, puffy, moist skin above his eyes. It was like pressing his fingers into something dead, cold and mushy.

"Get him out of here before something worse happens!" Azariah instructed the priests.

The foremost men seized the king and whisked him toward the door, but Uzziah was so anxious to get out of the sanctuary that he broke away from them and raced ahead. The congregation outside was amazed and bewildered to see the king rush out of the temple in such an undignified manner, and dart out of sight into a group of aides and attendants. (II Chronicles 26:19-20.)

Azariah and his priests emerged just as another rumble, this time very strong, came from the quaking ground. The earth shook violently and the temple trembled. Screams of fear went up from the congregation, which fled away. (Zechariah 14:5; Amos 1:1.) This earthquake, one of the most severe in history, was a token of God's anger because of what Uzziah had done.

It did great damage to the earth's surface for many miles around, but God didn't allow a vast destruction of cities and lives because of what happened at the temple. Nevertheless, thousands of people had to race for their lives when huge fissures cracked open in the ground. The Bible compares the earthquake to a terrifying one that will occur when Christ returns to the earth only a few years from the time this present-day account is written. (Zechariah 14:4; Matthew 24:29.)

Uzziah, also called Azariah, remained leprous until his death several years later at the age of sixty-eight. (II Kings 15:1-7.) Until then, because of his contagious disease, he had to live apart from others except devoted servants who chose to stay with him. Even under these conditions he continued to be regarded as the ruler of Judah, although others, including his young son Jotham, performed most of the regal functions.

Having died a leper, Uzziah wasn't entombed in a royal sepulchre, but was buried in a field near the regal tombs.

Unlike some other kings of Judah who had followed God and had later fallen into idolatry, Uzziah worshipped only the one true God all his life. His deplorable downfall came from believing that he was above the Law and that he was too great a man to have to observe certain special rules God had established for deportment at the temple. (II Chronicles 26:21-23.)

Meanwhile, in Israel

For six months, during Judah's prosperity under Uzziah, Jeroboam's son Zachariah ruled the ten tribes, called the House of Israel. He continued the idol-worship his father had followed. He was so indifferent to the welfare of the people that he was very unpopular with them. He was murdered before a public gathering by a man of high rank named Shallum, who had already persuaded high officials and the guard to support him. No one tried to arrest Shallum for this brazen act. He made himself king immediately. (II Kings 15:8-12.)

Zachariah's death ended the reign of the descendants of Jehu, king of Israel over a hundred years previously. God told Jehu that because he had been obedient in destroying the family of disobedient Ahab, his descendants for four generations would rule Israel. (II Kings 9:1-10; II Kings 10:30-31.) Zachariah was of the fourth and last generation. More generations from Jehu probably would have reigned if Jehu hadn't allowed the customs of Jeroboam to remain the established religion.

Menahem, commander of the army of Israel, had started out to the northeast to recapture towns and cities taken by the Syrians. When he heard that Shallum had become king by doing away with Zachariah, he was so angry and envious that he returned to Samaria and put an end to Shallum after that king had been in power only a month. (II Kings 15:13-15.)

Menahem proclaimed himself ruler, then set out again on his military mission. He went back to Tirzah, a former capital of northern Israel and the city he had been besieging when he returned to Samaria. Menahem took over Tirzah and other cities to the northeast.

His goal was the strongly fortified city of Tiphseh on the Euphrates river. He reasoned that capturing it would be necessary for a stronghold against westward military movements by Assyria. Besides, it would be an important garrison against Syria.

When Menahem arrived at Tiphseh, he didn't surprise the inhabitants, who had been informed of the Israelites' approach hours before. The Israelite army commander demanded that heavy barricading be removed and the gates opened. He promised that he would spare the inhabitants if they would surrender, but any who resisted would die.

Menahem Grasps another City

Before long Menahem found that he wasn't yet in a position to make demands or carry out threats. The people of Tiphseh stubbornly refused to do anything except wait. As the hours passed the commander grew furiously impatient.

"These stupid foreigners are asking to starve or die of thirst through a siege!" Menahem stormed. "I don't have time for a siege, but I'm not leaving here until I take this city!"

Menahem's angry determination cost him many men in his wild attack on Tiphseh. There were repeated attempts to scale the walls, timed with the efforts of archers who shot their arrows from fatally short distances. Finally, after what appeared to be a fruitless struggle, a contingent of Israelites managed to get over the walls, push back the defenders, pull down the barricades and open the gates to allow the rest of the Israelite army to pour into the city.

"Make the infidels pay for our losses!" Menahem ordered his officers. "Slaughter those who hide as well as those who resist! And do away with every pregnant woman you can find!"

The king's commands were carried out. Many were slain, and Tiphseh fell to Israel. This was an example of the violence and cruelty that characterized Menahem's rule during the next ten years. Besides being murderously vengeful, the king maliciously insisted on the worship of idols, even though he had knowledge of God. (II Kings 15:16-18.)

One day Menahem received a report that an army from distant Assyria had crossed the Jordan river and was marching toward Samaria. Within hours the bristling, excited king was leading his army eastward to meet the invaders. When they came within view and he saw that their numbers extended for miles across the plain, his liking for war suddenly deserted him.

The king of Israel hastily arranged for a party of his officers to go ahead with a flag of truce to meet the Assyrians while he and his troops waited at a distance. This resulted, a little later, in his being invited by Pul, the Assyrian king, to ride forward for an exchange of words.

"I am surprised that a military man of your hostile reputation would come to meet me in peace," Pul commented dryly, critically eyeing the other ruler.

"If you come in peace, I welcome you in peace," Menahem replied.

"Peace between Assyria and Israel depends on what you do to make amends for what you did to Tiphseh," Pul bluntly stated. "Many of the murdered inhabitants were my people!"

The usually barbarous and unfriendly Menahem struggled to conceal his sudden fear and maintain diplomatic composure.

"Such a grave matter shouldn't be discussed in the middle of a desert," he observed. "If you will be my guest at my palace in Samaria, we can talk there in comfort."

The Cost of Land-Grabbing

Weeks later, while Pul and his top officers enjoyed themselves in Samaria and the nearby Assyrian army occasionally feasted on special food supplied by the Israelites, the two kings came to an agreement.

Meanwhile, the distraught Menahem, gambling on the hope that Pul could be appeased by a sum of money, decreed that those who were prosperous among the Israelites should pay a special tax. In spite of the sins of Israel, about 60,000 families still enjoyed God's blessing of prosperity. Through the hurried efforts of collectors, the tax money poured in. Equal to about two million dollars, it was promptly turned over to the king of Assyria, who took his army back to his home nation. He saw no reason to lose any of his soldiers against the Israelites if their king chose to buy his way out of a war. (II Kings 15:19-20.)

There were Israelites who were highly critical of Menahem for taxing the people to escape trouble, but if the king had chosen to stand against the invaders, Israel probably would have been defeated. It was a matter of disaster being postponed to the time God had picked to bring the Assyrians again to Samaria.

Menahem died shortly after this event. He was succeeded by his son Pekahiah, who continued in the idolatry of his forebears. His rule was cut short, after only two years, when one of his captains burst into his palace, along with fifty men, and assassinated Pekahiah.

This captain, Pekah, whose name was much like that of his victim, seized the throne to hold control of the ten tribes of Israel for the next twenty years, during which he carried on in the idolatry of the rulers who had preceded him. (II Kings 15:21-28.)

But while the Israelites were having all this trouble, the Jews fared much better because they had better leaders.

In the second year of Pekah's reign over Israel in Samaria, Uzziah's son Jotham, twenty-five years of age, came into full rulership of Judah. Happily for his kingdom, he lived and ruled by God's laws during his sixteen years as king.

Although he worked to clean out idolatry from Judah, it was so deeply ingrained in many of the people that he never succeeded in removing it. (II Kings 15:32-35; II Chronicles 27:1.)

Jotham remembered his father's lesson and didn't go into the temple. Like Uzziah in his better years, Jotham built fortifications and observation towers in places where they were needed. He continued to improve Jerusalem's walls, as well as part of the temple. His ambition was to maintain and improve the projects his father had started.

Because of his loyalty to God, most of the years of Jotham's reign weren't marred by war. The king's first battle was with the Ammonites, whom the army of Judah defeated. As vassals, the Ammonites paid tribute in silver equal to about \$200,000 as well as over 90,000 bushels of wheat and the same amount of barley.

For three years they made the same payment to Judah. (II Chronicles 27:2-6.) After that they rebelled against bringing it. Jotham was so engrossed in a more serious matter that he didn't have time to send an army to demand the tribute. The army of Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, was overrunning much of the territory of the kingdom of Israel. This was no small concern to Jotham, who any day expected to learn that the Assyrians were heading toward Judah, also.

The Assyrian Threat

The unwelcome report eventually came. Jotham's soldiers prepared to defend Jerusalem. The war machines built in Uzziah's time were set for action. What was more important, Jotham asked God to spare his nation from the Assyrians.

According to ancient Assyrian records, the invaders went almost to the northeastern border of Egypt, by-passing the towns and cities of Judah and Philistia. They returned, but the only places they spoiled were in the territory of the ten tribes of Israel. Jotham's prayers had been answered. The Jews were spared, but so were the Philistines. God possibly spared the Philistines so that they could be used to trouble Judah during the reign of the next evil king.

The Assyrians finally left Israel, but not without taking thousands of Israelites as captives and leaving Pekah with only half his territory. All the land east of the Jordan river was taken, never to be regained by any king of Israel. The Assyrians also took over many of the towns and cities of Syria. (II Kings 15:29; I Chronicles 5:25-26.) Thus Assyria became the common enemy of Israel and Syria; and Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the king of Israel, became allies in a plan to regain the wealth and strength they needed.

Israel Plots with Syria to Fight the Jews

That plan was to capture Judah's capital, Jerusalem. If that could be done, all of Judah could be theirs. But both Israel and Syria had become so weakened in manpower that the forces they sent against Judah were not strong enough to make inroads. (II Kings 15:37.) Even if the armies had been twice as large, they wouldn't have succeeded until the time God chose to allow them to succeed.

Jotham died at the relatively young age of forty-one to leave the leadership of the nation of Judah to his son Ahaz, twenty years old. (II Kings 15:38; II Chronicles 27:6-9.) From then on conditions grew worse in Judah. Ahaz, following the bad example of all the kings of Israel, believed that it was foolish to worship a God he couldn't see. He chose to worship objects that were visible, no matter how lifeless. He saw to it that images of Baal were produced and made available to his subjects to worship. He was a base example to his people by putting his children through fiery rites associated with heathen gods. (II Kings 16:1-4; II Chronicles 28:1-4.)

The armies of Israel and Syria again came against Judah, this time to successfully converge on Jerusalem. But the high, thick walls and unusual protective devices were too much for the attackers. (II Kings 16:5.)

The soldiers of Israel returned to Samaria. The Syrian forces moved southward to the northeastern tip of the Red Sea, where they drove out the Jews and captured the port of Elath, which until then belonged to Judah. This is the first time the people of Judah are called Jews in the Bible. (II Kings 16:6.)

The departure of the Syrians and Pekah's army didn't mean the end of trouble for Ahaz. The Philistines had learned that the army of Judah had been weakened by recent attacks. Their army moved eastward to capture towns and villages in southwestern Judah. About the same time the Edomites invaded Judah from the southeast by bands of mounted soldiers who captured and carried away people from the small towns. (II Chronicles 28:17-19.)

This was frustrating to Ahaz, whose army couldn't be everywhere at once. He didn't want to break it up into too many parts, lest there be another siege of Jerusalem. He needed help. The only possible source was from distant Assyria, whose king had no friendly attitude toward Syria. Ahaz sent messengers to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, to ask for military aid to ward off the Jews' enemies, the Syrians, Israelites, Philistines and Edomites. As payment for the help he hoped to receive, Ahaz stripped the temple of most of its gold and silver and special treasures and sent them to the king of Assyria. For good measure Ahaz added some of the valuable objects from his palace. (II Kings 16:7-8; II Chronicles 28:20-25.)

The next few days were difficult and trying ones for the king of Judah. He was filled with anxiety over what the Assyrian king would choose to do. If he made the decision to help Judah, Ahaz desperately hoped that the help would come before the Israelites decided to return and attack again.

Finally a special messenger came to speak to the king, who impatiently demanded to know what the king of Assyria had to tell him.

"But I am not from Assyria," the messenger said. "I've come from southern Judah to report that the Syrian army is approaching from Elath!"

Chapter 136

Judah Is Strong, Israel Is Weak

HAVING sent to the king of Assyria for help against his enemies, Ahaz the king of Judah expected to learn that troops were coming from the north to assist him. (II Kings 16:7-8.) Instead, a messenger brought a discouraging report that the army of Syria was approaching Jerusalem from the south.

A Hired Friend

Again the best warriors of Judah readied themselves to defend their capital. But Rezin, the Syrian king, had no intention of repeating a futile attack against such strong fortifications. His army moved safely on past Jerusalem, then struck some nearby towns. By the time troops could spill out of Jerusalem and start pursuing the attackers, the Syrians were well on their way north with thousands of captives and loot, leaving the towns in ruins.

The soldiers of Judah were too late to overtake the attackers, who returned victoriously to Damascus, the Syrian capital, where their captives became slaves. (II Chronicles 28:1-5.) Even this tragedy for Judah failed to move Ahaz to turn from idolatry. But just when he was most discouraged and fearful, he received the exciting report, that the Assyrians had attacked and captured Damascus, and that Rezin, king of the Syrians, had been killed (II Kings 16:9.)

Ahaz was jubilant. He was convinced that his costly gifts to Tiglath-pileser, the Assyrian king, had proved to be a worthwhile bribe. He planned an immediate trip to Damascus, which was occupied by the Assyrian king. Ahaz hoped to talk Tiglath-pileser into moving westward and besieging Samaria.

The king of Judah went to Damascus and talked with the Assyrian king, who had made his own plans and was indifferent to those of Ahaz. He made it plain that he had already carried out any obligation having to do with gifts Ahaz had given him.

Ahaz returned to Jerusalem with the bleak outlook of having to deal with several enemies particularly that of King Pekah of Israel, without the aid of a strong ally. He needed help desperately, but he preferred not to look to God for it. Instead he foolishly reasoned that the pagan Syrian gods disliked him and so had given the Syrians victory over Judah. He decided to sacrifice to the Syrian gods in an effort to appease them and win them over to helping him. (II Chronicles 28:23.)

Ahaz was so obsessed with this ridiculous idea that before he left Damascus he sent orders to Urijah, high priest at the temple at Jerusalem, to build an altar like one he had seen in Damascus and to set it in front of God's altar toward the temple gate. Messengers brought drawn plans for the altar to Urijah. Although Urijah was a high-ranking servant of God, he gave orders that the altar should be constructed and should replace the sacred one that had long been in use. (II Kings 16:10.)

Urijah feared that Ahaz would demand his life if he failed to do this abominable thing that was contrary to God's commands. (Exodus 20:22-25; 25:40; 26:30; 27:1-8; 38:1-7.) Obviously the high priest wasn't dedicated to the duty of his high office. Otherwise, he would have refused to build the pagan altar, and would have relied on God for safety. It had always been common knowledge among the Israelites that they should not make sacrifices on any altar other than God's altar, even if it were made after the same pattern. (Joshua 22:11-30.)

As soon as Ahaz returned to Jerusalem, one of the first things he did was to go to the temple and look at the new altar. Satisfied that it was like the Syrian altar he had seen, he proceeded to use it for the first time by making sacrifices to Syrian gods. This, in front of the temple, was an act of contempt for God. (II Kings 16:11-13.)

Israel and Judah at War

There followed other brazen deeds by Ahaz. He gave orders to the high priest that the main objects that had to do with ceremonial worship of God should be moved to different locations around the temple area. (II Kings 16:14.) This was contrary to the way God had established their positions. (Exodus 40:6-7.) Most of the remaining gold or silver articles and furnishings both inside and outside the temple were removed and melted down for reuse due to their metallic value. In spite of this desecration, faithful followers of God still came in dwindling numbers to worship at the temple. Ahaz put a stop to that by closing the temple and forbidding any sacrificing except to pagan gods. (II Kings 16:15-18; II Chronicles 28:24.)

This was a tragic time in the history of man. God's patience, much greater than that of the most enduring human being was tried to an extreme. To add to what he had done at the temple, the king of Judah decreed that altars should be constructed in the major cities and towns of the land to establish national worship of Syrian gods. (II Chronicles 28:25.)

Ahaz hoped that these pagan idols would be so pleased by another nation turning to them that they would not only protect Judah from surrounding enemies, but would somehow release Ahaz from having to pay regular tribute to Assyria, something Tiglath-pileser had demanded of Ahaz when the king of Judah was in Damascus. He was anxious not to let his subjects learn that the kingdom had fallen into such serious debt to the nation he had hoped would remain an ally.

Growing idolatry in Judah might not have been quite so abominable in God's sight if Ahaz and the people had never known of the only real God. With most of them it was a matter of choosing between their Creator and lifeless idols. This wasn't much of a compliment to the One who had given them life. As Ahaz constantly feared would happen, the report finally came that King Pekah of Israel and his army had left Samaria and were headed southward. Ahaz had to decide whether to keep the army in Jerusalem and risk attacks on other towns in Judah, or send his troops out to meet Pekah's. He decided to meet the enemy, just as the angry God of Israel intended.

On a plain north of Jerusalem the two armies of Israel and Judah came against each other in tragic strife, inasmuch as the participants came from all twelve tribes of the whole of Israel.

Some of the first men to be slain were of high rank in the government of Judah, including the prime minister, the governor of the royal palace and an officer who was a close relative of Ahaz. The quick loss of men like these threw fear into the foremost ranks of the soldiers of Judah. That fear was obvious to Pekah's troops, who waded in among them with growing fervor and ferocity.

All day long the sound and fury of bloody battle continued. By nightfall one hundred and twenty thousand soldiers of Judah were dead on the wide field of fighting. (II Chronicles 28:5-7.)

Most of what was left of the army of Judah fled back to Jerusalem, leaving Pekah's victorious troops to plunder nearby towns and capture the inhabitants. When the pillagers left for Samaria, they took with them two hundred thousand men, women and children, as well as a huge amount of loot.

Israel Relents – Somewhat

Herded along by its captors, this great crowd was almost within sight of Samaria when a group of prominent men of Israel met the returning army. The group's spokesman was a prophet named Oded, who addressed the top officers of the soldiers of Israel.

"Who are these people with you?" the prophet asked. "They are captives we took in Judah," the army commander replied proudly. "Probably you already heard that we all but destroyed the army of Ahaz. Then we captured these people to become servants in our nation."

"This is against God's will," Oded firmly stated after glancing over the foremost of the miserable captives. "You didn't win a victory over Judah because you were more righteous or more battle-wise. God gave you the ability to defeat Judah in war to punish them for their sins. But capturing these people was a cruel and unnecessary deed. They are our brothers and sisters because of our common ancestors who came out of Egypt. To regard them as servants is wrong. If you keep them in bondage, God's wrath will come on Samaria. The sins of Israel are already too great and too many to have this thing added." (II Chronicles 28:8-11.)

"Then what do you suggest we do with these prisoners?" the commander asked in an irritable tone.

"Release them so that they can return to Judah," was Oded's simple answer.

"Let them go after all the trouble we've taken to get them here?" the commander sputtered angrily. "Do you actually think that just because you are a prophet anyone is going to take you seriously in this matter?"

By now a growing crowd from Samaria had come up behind the leaders of Israel, who drew closer around Oded and the army officers.

"All of us here agree with Oded," one of the leaders answered the startled commander. "We of Israel have done many things to anger God."

If we take these people as servants, who knows what punishment will come to us? Do not move them one step farther into Israel! And don't take for yourselves any of the booty you forced them to carry with them!"

The officers stared at those around them. The commander wasn't accustomed to being told by a civilian what to do, but not knowing how the king stood on the matter, he hesitated to take a stand against Oded and these men of high position. After a few moments of glaring at his opposers, he barked a command to his officers and aides and strode angrily away. The crowd from Samaria watched in silence as the army of Israel solemnly filed by on its way to the capital. (II Chronicles 28:12-14.)

Aided by the crowd that had joined them, the leaders of Israel started the task of taking stock of the loot from Judah. From it they obtained clothing and shoes for that part of the captives who had been seized at night while in bed, and had been given no time to properly dress.

From the food taken from Judah the captives were given a meal that was long overdue. Then they were accompanied back toward Judah as far as the city of Jericho, which had been built on a different site from the Jericho that had been destroyed. Donkeys carried the elderly people and cripples, who had suffered from being forced to march toward Samaria.

From Jericho it was only a few miles to the various towns of northern Judah from which the people had been taken. Having delivered them to their country, the men of Israel returned to Samaria and their hometowns to the north, hopeful that God would be merciful to the ten tribes because of what had been done for the captives from Judah. (II Chronicles 28:15.)

Ahaz, brooding over the defeat of his army by that of northern Israel, was relieved to learn that his captured people had been returned. But instead of thanking God, who had made it possible through His followers in Israel, he continued in idolatry throughout the remaining years of his life. He was buried in Jerusalem, but not in the royal tombs of the kings of Judah. Obviously God decided which kings, because of their obedience to Him, should be buried in the royal sepulchers, and caused those who had charge of the burials to make the proper decisions. (II Chronicles 28:26-27.)

Meanwhile...

Years before the death of Ahaz, King Pekah of Israel was murdered according to the plan of a man named Hoshea, who had schemed to do away with Pekah so that he could become ruler. (II Kings 15:30; 17:1.) Civil war followed. Hoshea had to ask the Assyrians for help to restore him to the throne.

Hoshea followed in the evil ways of the preceding kings, but not with the idolatrous fervor most of the others had practiced.

During his reign the Assyrians, led by King Shalmaneser, again came to Samaria. Hoshea didn't have the military strength to resist tribute. He submitted to Shalmaneser and gave him costly gifts and the promise of regular tribute and even allegiance. (II Kings 17:2-3.)

Satisfied with how matters had turned out, the Assyrians went on to further conquests, leaving Hoshea as little more than a puppet king whose conduct would have to favor Assyrian interests if Hoshea wanted to retain rulership of the ten tribes of Israel. Hoshea tried to squirm out of his miserable situation by seeking a strong ally. He sent messengers to the king of Egypt, who was a powerful ruler at that time, to suggest that both nations should unite against Assyria to prevent the invader out of the north from taking them over one by one.

The king of Egypt took measures for the defense of his nation, but did little to help Israel. Hoshea, meanwhile, was so certain that Egypt would unite with his nation against Assyria that he refused to pay the regular tribute. At the same time, someone in Hoshea's employ sold information to the king of Assyria that Hoshea was planning an alliance with Egypt. Shalmaneser was angered to learn that the ruler of Israel would dare scheme against him. He immediately sent a small part of his army to Samaria, where Hoshea was questioned by Assyrian officers.

"Why haven't we received the regular tribute?" they asked.

The Result of Godlessness

"If you didn't receive it, those who took it to Assyria must have been robbed and killed," Hoshea untruthfully stated. "I have been meaning to contact your king to ask if they stayed in Assyria after delivering their valuable cargo."

"Why do you waste words?" one of the officers asked. "We have sources of information right here in Samaria. We know that the tribute wasn't sent."

"You question the word of the king of Israel?" Hoshea indignantly sputtered.

"We do," the officer replied. "And we know that you are guilty of conspiring with King So of Egypt against Assyria!"

Hoshea's forced indignant expression faded to one of genuine panic as Assyrian soldiers closed in on him. The royal guard was powerless to help because it had been outnumbered and removed by the Assyrians. The Israelite soldiers realized that any opposition to their enemies would bring the entire Assyrian army down on Samaria.

"You are under arrest for plotting against King Shalmaneser!" the ashen-faced Hoshea was told.

Stunned beyond argument or resistance, Hoshea quietly went with his captors, who took him to his own dungeon in Samaria and clapped him in chains. He was released after the delayed tribute was paid, plus a heavy bail. This happened in the sixth year of Hoshea's reign, which continued for three more years. (II Kings 17:4.)

The Bible doesn't mention Hoshea much after that. Whatever his final fate, the fate of his kingdom, comprised of the ten tribes of Israel, was worse. Shortly after Hoshea was imprisoned, Shalmaneser again came westward with his entire army to overrun parts of Syria and Israel. (II Kings 18:9.)

His goal was Samaria, which he surrounded by thousands of his troops. The outnumbered army of Israel, mostly bottled up in the capital, dared not come out to attack. As long as the invaders stayed, the people in the capital remained prisoners. Meanwhile, Samaria's walls proved to be so strong and well manned that the Assyrians had to be content with waiting till the besieged Israelites would become so short of food and water that they had to surrender.

A week passed, but there was no sign of distress from Samaria. Then a month passed. Two months went by, then a third. Shalmaneser had come west prepared for several weeks of stay in Israel, but now his food was running low and water was a problem. It had to be hauled from towns near Samaria to the Assyrian camps that had been set up around the capital. To increase the food supply, Assyrian troops combed the nearby territory and towns to take their needs.

The weeks went on, but there was no sign of weakening from Samaria. From time to time the Assyrians attacked the city, but always were driven back by showers of arrows, spears and stones. This didn't greatly discourage Shalmaneser, who believed that each time was the final effort of the Israelites to defend Samaria before hunger and thirst forced surrender. But the city was so well supplied that the siege dragged on for two years!

Chapter 137

Israel Conquered, Judah Spared

AFTER beginning the siege of Samaria, King Shalmaneser of Assyria returned to his country, leaving only part of his army to continue to bottle up the soldiers and civilians in the capital of the ten tribes of Israel.

The Israelites were discouraged when they saw that enough of the Assyrian army had been left behind to surround the city, but they had hopes of overcoming the lesser numbers of Assyrians and breaking the siege. (II Kings 17:1-5; 18:9.)

Samaria under Siege

This they tried to do by withdrawing the guards from the walls for a few days, so that it would appear that they no longer had the strength to carry on. This, plus the fact that no smoke was coming up from the city, caused the hopeful enemy troops to cautiously close in at night toward the walls with the intention of battering in the gates or scaling the walls with hooks and ropes. Unhampered, they eagerly set to work, but only minutes afterward all sorts of deadly objects descended on them. There was a noisy, mad scramble to get away from the wall and the Israelite soldiers who had suddenly appeared atop it.

If the Israelites could have repeated this strategy, in which more than a few Assyrians lost their lives, Samaria might have been freed. But the Assyrians weren't to be fooled again in that manner. There was no other possible way for the Israelites to exhaust their enemies except to go out and meet them in battle. Plans were made for that, but the Israelites postponed this last measure too long. The main part of the Assyrian army suddenly returned. The approaching thousands spread out around Samaria, causing all hope to be lost by the Israelites.

The Israelites kept on holding out week after week. Finally Assyrian patience came to an end. The Assyrian kings were ambitious men, and they didn't intend for the army of Assyria to be tied up any longer in the siege. They ordered an assault on the main gates of Samaria, using only a small number of soldiers at a time to man a battering ram.

There was opposition from the wall, but as fast as the Assyrians carrying the ram were cut down, others raced in to replace them. At the same time Assyrian archers kept rushing up to send volleys of arrows up to the top of the wall.

This continued for hours. Many men on both sides lost their lives while the gates were being pounded to splinters. Behind the gates were stone blocks. More men died as the stones were laboriously removed. The soldiers of both nations met in hand-to-hand combat. Weakened by lack of food, the Israelite troops were no match for the greater number of Assyrians, who poured inside the city and had civilians and soldiers under their control within a short time.

The Almost-Lost Ten Tribes

The occupants of Samaria expected to be slaughtered, and many were, as God had warned. (Hosea 13:16.) But total annihilation wasn't according to the Assyrians' plan, which had to do with the value of slaves. The Israelites were rounded up like so many cattle, along with others from other towns and villages of the ten tribes, and forced to march to Assyria with the victors. (II Kings 17:6; 18:11) Later, Assyrians returned to herd more thousands of Israelites, scattered throughout the countryside, out of their land.

Thus, two hundred fifty-three years after the twelve tribes had divided into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the kingdom of Israel abruptly ceased to exist. The people had again and again rejected God's rules for the best way of living and had turned to idolatry. (Judges 2:11-13; Psalms 106:34-41; 78:56-66.) God had repeatedly warned them, through priests and prophets, what would happen if they continued in idolatry. (II Kings 17:7-13; Jeremiah 7:24-26.) But most of the Israelites wouldn't heed. (Daniel 9:6.)

Now, at last, the Israelites were dragged away from their homes and into slavery in foreign lands even beyond Assyria. (II Kings 17:18, 20-23; 18:11-12.) God had long been patient. (Psalms 78:25-41; 86:15.) But at last His patience gave way to anger because this part of the people He had chosen to be the greatest of nations had broken their promise to the Creator to keep His Commandments. (Exodus 19:6; 24:7; Joshua 24:20-22; II Kings 17:14-17.)

Scattered across hundreds of miles of territory and mingling with people of heathen nations, and later wandering through many lands, the people of Israel eventually lost their identity as Israelites and Sabbath observers, and in time came to be regarded by others as Gentiles. What had once been a great nation was swallowed up, to be known for a very long time only as the "Lost Ten Tribes."

Hundreds of years previously, after the Israelites had come out of Egypt, God promised them that if they would worship only the Creator and observe all His laws, they would receive all the promises made to Abraham because of his obedience, and would become the most prosperous and powerful of nations. (Leviticus 26:1-13; Deuteronomy 28:1-14; Jeremiah 7:22-23.) At the same time God warned them that if they rebelled, they would fall into slavery to their enemies, and would remain a scattered, landless people for a period of seven prophetic times (Leviticus 26:14-35; Deuteronomy 28:15-29; Joshua 24:13-20.)

A time in this case was a year of twelve thirty-day months. Seven times, or 2,520 days, was equal to 2,520 prophetic years -- a day for a year. (Numbers 14:34) So 2,520 years passed after Israel was taken captive in 721-718 B.C., before the Israelites regained their freedom and wealth. By then, in A.D. 1800-1803, they had completely lost their identity. They had migrated or had been taken to distant islands and continents. Most of them became the inhabitants of the United States and Great Britain, and didn't realize that they were largely descendants of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim.

Some peoples in various regions of the British Isles, however, still regarded themselves as Israelites until recent centuries. And some groups of people brought that knowledge to America with them. Even now, however, close to the year A.D. 2010, relatively few Britons and Americans realize that they are descendants of the ancient, ten-tribed House of Israel, whom they think of only as Jews.

The Jews were only of the House of Judah, and not nationally of the House of Israel, although racially they are Israelites in the sense that they were once a part of ancient Israel before the twelve tribes split into two kingdoms. In the same sense many Americans speak of themselves racially as being Irish, Scottish, English, or German, not knowing their ancestry. As for the people of the kingdom of Israel, they are erroneously regarded as Gentiles, inasmuch as most people think of Earth's inhabitants as either Jews or Gentiles.

God's promise of prosperity for Israel, headed by Ephraim and Manasseh, was made to Abraham because of his obedience. (Genesis 26:1-5.) The fulfillment of that promise ceased when Israel was taken captive and wasn't again carried out until Israel's period of punishment was ended. It didn't come about because the Israelites were great, or worthy of it, but because God always keeps His promises. (Deuteronomy 7:6-8.)

Modern Israelites, having become rich and powerful nations since A.D. 1800-1803, have attributed their blessings to their own resourcefulness and even to their being "Christian" nations. Their resources and resourcefulness have come from God especially to carry out His promise. Actually, they are far from being true Christian nations. Wrong use of their wealth and power, because they lack the wisdom and obedience that God wants them to have, is draining them of the very strength that they have been given by their Creator. (Deuteronomy 28:15, 32- 33; Jeremiah 10:23-25.)

Israel's Land Desolate

The emptied cities of Israel didn't remain unoccupied long. The kings of Assyria immediately ordered that they should be filled with people from other conquered nations and surrounding vassal territories. (II Kings 17:24.) There were few routes between countries. Therefore it was likely that columns of miserable Israelite prisoners trudged within yards of Assyrian subjects moving in the opposite direction, who probably were not eager to leave their own land and go to the empty homes of the vanquished. If the Israelites learned what was happening, their desire to escape was lessened, inasmuch as there was nothing for them to return to, and the whole region was carefully watched over by well-organized Assyrians.

When the first colonists from other conquered places were moved in, they were dismayed to find that hostile lions were roaming about. Some of the lions even established themselves in empty city buildings. Dislodging them cost a number of lives. The new colonists began to think that some god of that region had sent the beasts to trouble them because they had failed to worship him according to Israelite customs they didn't know about. They believed that there were many gods, most of whom had dominion over certain territories.

Deaths from the lions increased. Finally the new peoples sent messengers to the king at Nineveh to ask that some Israelite priest be returned to his native country to instruct them how to appease the local god, so that he would remove the ferocious animals.

The king of Nineveh agreed, and a priest was sent back to the land of Israel. At Bethel, a city that had been a center of worship, the priest took up residence to start teaching the Assyrians. Although some knowledge of the Creator spread among them in the months to follow, the Assyrians couldn't believe that there was only one God. They still preferred to worship their own gods, accompanying it with a limited deference or acknowledgment and lip service to the God of Israel, hoping that their occasional sacrifices and prayers would earn them protection from the lions. (II Kings 17:25-41.)

Eventually most of these beasts were slain or dispersed. By that time the religious practices of many of the inhabitants were deplorable combinations of idol worship and weak observance of a few of God's laws. The pagan part, naturally, was predominant. Although the colonist who was afraid of the power of God more than his idols wasn't difficult to find, pagan worship was easier and more agreeable to the Assyrian mind, which had been smothered for centuries in looking to animal-type idols for shallow and often wanton religious expression.

Among these idols were those which resembled fish, horses, bulls, eagles, and combinations of animals and men -- a god for every whim. Readers of this story will agree that it was abysmally ignorant of men to look to animal images for supernatural help. But could it be that some readers know people who believe that a rabbit's foot in one's pocket or a horseshoe over a doorway brings "good luck" to the possessors? The sobering fact is that many people still believe that certain lifeless tokens, symbols and images have mysterious powers, and go so far as to kneel and pray to some of those images.

Judah More Obedient Than Israel

Back in the third year of the reign of Hoshea, last of the kings of Israel, a son of evil King Ahaz began to rule Judah. He was Hezekiah, an astute young man of twenty-five years. Strange as it seems, he was much the opposite of his dissolute father. (II Kings 18:1-3; II Chronicles 28:27; 29:1-2.)

One of Hezekiah's first important acts, carried out in the first year of his reign, was to reopen the temple at Jerusalem. It had been closed about sixteen years previously because Ahaz had turned to idolatry and had stripped the temple of its valuables to pay the king of Assyria for help against Judah's enemies.

"God's house must be cleaned up," Hezekiah informed the Levites and priests. "Cleanse yourselves so that you will be fit for this task."

Hezekiah made it known that because of the sins of his father and many others in the nation, Judah had come into years filled with all kinds of trouble. He declared that it was time to turn to God and renew the covenant all of Israel had made with the Creator years before.

"The temple must be ready for use as soon as possible," he continued in his talk to the Levites and priests. "There is much to be done before functions can be reestablished. Cleaning is the first thing. It must be thorough and complete." (II Chronicles 29:3-11.)

This was good news to the priests, who had long been thwarted in their duties because of idolatry in Judah. At last, because of God's working through Hezekiah, the opportunity had come for them to continue the work that had been forced to stop.

Fourteen leaders of the tribe of Levi rounded up the required Levite workers. On the first day of the first month of the year, Nisan, the cleaning of the temple started. Shovels, mops, brooms, scrub brushes, scrapers and tubs of water went into action. While their helpers cleaned other parts of the buildings, the priests scrubbed and polished the sacred inner part of the temple and its furnishings. Rubble, dirt and grimy water were brought out and dumped into Kidron brook, a nearby stream that was swift and strong in the spring. It carried the refuse on to the Dead Sea.

The Temple Rededicated

By the end of the sixteenth day the whole temple had been cleaned. (II Chronicles 29:12-17.) Floors, walls and even ceilings had been scrubbed and mopped. The priests came to Hezekiah to report that the altar had been made like new, and that the vessels that Ahaz had rejected as not being good enough for the king of Assyria had been repaired, and polished, and that the missing equipment had been replaced by substitutes that should at least temporarily suffice. (II Chronicles 29:18-19.)

Hezekiah was pleased at what had been accomplished, although he had strongly hoped that the temple would be ready for use at Passover time, which was to be observed on the fourteenth day of Nisan. It was two days too late to begin at the proper date. Besides, the temple should be rededicated, and not all the priests were fully prepared ceremonially to resume their duties.

Hezekiah didn't waste any time. He wanted to be certain that the temple, the priests and all their helpers would be ready a month later for observance of the Passover. By announcing the date to be the same day of the next month, the king wouldn't be acting contrary to God, who had instructed Moses that the Passover should be observed the fourteenth day of the second month (Iyar) if circumstances made it impossible to observe it in the first month. (Numbers 9:9-12.)

Early next morning Hezekiah informed the leaders in and around Jerusalem that there should be ceremonies that same day to institute the use of the temple and establish again the functions of the priests and their helpers. (II Chronicles 29:20.)

It turned out to be a most eventful day. Many inhabitants of Jerusalem and its environs flocked to the temple. Cattle, sheep and goats were brought for sin offerings to make atonement not only for Judah, but for all Israel. While the sacrifices were being made, the Levites sang songs composed by David, accompanying themselves with trumpets and other kinds of instruments David and the prophets had employed for making music at the house of God.

After making sacrifices and musical praise to the Creator, Hezekiah announced that the priests and their helpers had well demonstrated that they were consecrated to their work. Then he invited the people attending to bring their sacrifices to make thank offerings.

The response was so great that the priests fell behind in dressing the animals. Ordinarily they were to be the only ones to prepare the sacrifices, but in this case they had to call on their helpers for aid. There was a total of seventy bullocks, a hundred rams, two hundred lambs, six hundred bulls and three thousand sheep. (II Chronicles 29:21-36.)

Israel Still Unrepentant

Hezekiah next sent messengers to most cities and towns of Judah and Israel to proclaim that the Passover would soon be observed in the second month at the newly opened temple.

"Return to your God, and He will return to you," the king of Judah wrote on the proclamation. "You who are still free from Assyria should especially thank your Creator at this time of worship. Don't go the way of your fathers and brothers who gave in to idolatry and were left helpless. Yield yourselves to God and escape His anger. If you turn to Him now, He will preserve you from your enemies, sickness and want and will bring your captive brethren back home. Join us at God's house in Jerusalem." (II Chronicles 30:1-10.)

Hezekiah's messengers were careful to avoid the Assyrian soldiers who occupied part of Israel, particularly Samaria. Even many Israelites, mostly of Manasseh, Ephraim and Zebulun, laughed threateningly when they read the message from Judah.

"You have a lot of nerve to come up here and tell us which god to worship!" some of the Israelites scoffed. "Get back inside those walls at Jerusalem while you're able. We and the Assyrian soldiers have only one thing in common. We don't like preachers!"

Chapter 138

A Righteous King

HEZEKIAH'S messengers were sent throughout Israel and Judah to spread the news of the reopening of the temple at Jerusalem. But they were scoffed at and threatened by idol-worshippers, especially in the territories of Manasseh, Ephraim and Zebulun. (II Chronicles 30:1-10.)

Greatest Passover Since Solomon

"Don't try to convince us we should worship someone we can't see!" the messengers were told. "Go back to your temple and prostrate yourselves, or you might find yourselves prostrate here in Israel for reasons you don't like!"

But not all the Israelites laughed at or ridiculed the messengers. Many of Manasseh, Ephraim, Asher, Issachar and Zebulun welcomed the news from Judah. Most of these, among many others, managed to get to Jerusalem before the appointed time. The city swarmed with people eager to observe the Passover.

Filled with zeal, bands of them roamed through streets and buildings, ferreting out hidden altars and pagan images that had been used during the reign of idolatrous Ahaz. The altars were torn down and thrown into the gushing stream called Kidron, to be washed far from Jerusalem by the spring torrent.

The king of Judah was elated at the way the Passover turned out. It proved to be the greatest in attendance, as well as the most joyous, since the time of Solomon! There was only one temporarily adverse note. A few of the people, even including some priests, had failed to properly prepare themselves, ceremonially and mentally, for a fitting observation of the Passover.

When Hezekiah discerned this, he asked God to pardon the careless ones. Because he was obedient to God, his prayer was answered, and for a week there was joyous worship in the Days of Unleavened Bread, a time that God's Church still observes by praising the Creator in word and music, but not through meat sacrifices on altars.

The people were so enthusiastic that the government and church leaders took counsel and decided to continue worship services for another week. Hezekiah and the princes gladly arranged for two thousand bullocks and seventeen thousand sheep to be brought in to make more feasting possible. On the last day the priests asked God's blessing on those present, who dispersed with thankfulness that they had been able to come and enjoy the occasion. (II Chronicles 30:11-27.)

After leaving the temple, all the people didn't return to their homes immediately. Most of the men traveled throughout Judah, seeking idols and idol-worshipping places as they had done in Jerusalem. Zealously they smashed the images, cut down sacred groves and tore apart the altars. Those few who still favored these objects offered no resistance, not wishing to be recognized as idolaters.

The horde of idol-destroyers then swept northward into Israel to successfully continue the purge, but not without opposition. Some of the owners of images there tried to defend them, but failed because of the inspired eagerness of the followers of God. Ultimately they cleaned most of the pagan objects out of all Israel. Then they returned to their homes. (II Chronicles 31:1.)

Meanwhile, Hezekiah set about reestablishing a more permanent order of matters at the temple, including the specific ranks, courses and duties of the priests and other Levites. He planned how functions could be improved by more closely conforming to the manner in which they were carried out when the temple was new. (I Chronicles 23:1-6.)

Hezekiah also decided how much the king should contribute for offerings. (II Chronicles 31:3.) David, Solomon and other conscientious kings of Judah had furnished much for special offerings. Hezekiah wanted to follow their good example. (II Samuel 8:9-12; I Kings 8:5, 63; I Chronicles 22:2-4, 14-16; II Chronicles 7:4-5, etc.)

It Pays to Tithe

Also, in the times of the kings who followed God, the people supplied the needs of the Levites and the temple by paying tithes. Hezekiah reminded the people of this tithe. The response was more than enough. During the months that followed, there was such a surplus of animals, grain, wine, oil, honey and valuables that places had to be prepared to store or keep them.

The overabundance from the people reflected God's blessing on Judah because of the obedience of the king and his example and influence. (II Chronicles 31:2-12, 20-21.)

This change for the better didn't mean that there would be no trouble in the nation from then on. Judah was still under the burden of paying regular tribute to Assyria because of the heavy commitment made by King Ahaz. Besides, the Philistines were a constant threat from the west.

At that time the army of Judah wasn't very powerful, but in time Hezekiah patiently brought it up to much greater strength. A surprise attack on the Philistines pushed them back westward to the city of Gaza, their capital, only a few miles from the Great Sea (Mediterranean). Thus were regained some of the towns that had formerly belonged to Judah. (II Kings 18:1-8.)

Encouraged by this triumph over one ancient enemy nation, Hezekiah continued to build up his army. About twelve years after he had become king, he at last felt that his fighting force was strong enough to repel invasion by the most formidable army of that time -- that of Assyria.

Hezekiah then did something he had long wanted to do. It was time for paying the regular tribute to the king of Assyria.

Instead of paying it, the king of Judah sent a message to Sennacherib, king of Assyria, informing him that Judah could no longer be considered one of Assyria's vassal nations, and therefore it owed no tribute. (II Kings 18:7.)

This was a bold act against such a powerful leader, but Hezekiah felt that it was a necessary step. He wasn't overly concerned about Sennacherib's reaction. As a matter of further preparedness, however, he heightened Jerusalem's walls and strengthened the fortifications. He believed in doing all that he could to prepare for the worst. Whatever he couldn't do for Judah would have to come as protection from God. (II Chronicles 32:5-8.)

The Conquering Assyrians

A few months after Hezekiah's message was sent to Sennacherib, a startling report was speedily carried into Jerusalem.

"Hordes of Assyrian soldiers are swarming southward west of Samaria, and are invading us through western Judah!" Hezekiah was informed. "They're swallowing up all our towns that are in their path!" (II Chronicles 32:1; II Kings 18:13.)

"It would be foolish to pursue them," one of Hezekiah's officers observed. "Perhaps they're going to invade Egypt. If they plan a full-scale attack against Judah, why would they travel so far beyond Jerusalem?"

"That's what I want to know," Hezekiah said. "Send scouts and lookouts to find out all they can and report as soon as possible."

When the scouts sent messengers back to Jerusalem, it was with the discouraging news that the Assyrians had thoroughly plundered the towns in their path, and had made captives of the citizens. They had halted at the walled city of Lachish on the main highway to Egypt. They were besieging Lachish, which could indicate that Lachish was as far west as they planned to go.

The king of Judah was troubled. It was evident to him that this invasion was the result of his refusal to pay tribute to Sennacherib. A showdown at Jerusalem obviously wasn't very far away. Hezekiah called an immediate meeting of his advisors to determine what should be done next for the defense of the capital.

They decided that the most effective thing they could do, in the probable event the Assyrians came to Jerusalem, was to cut off the water supply by plugging up wells and springs outside the city. This was done after rural residents had stored much water in hidden places, although this measure was certain to bring hardship to farmers and stockmen. A crew of many workers even managed to divert and cover the stream called Kidron, so that it wouldn't be recognizable or easily accessible.

The king carried out every possible emergency measure. More shields and weapons were hastily produced, including machines that would loose showers of arrows and spears. Officers and leaders were assigned to various areas to keep people organized for resistance to invasion. (II Chronicles 32:2-6.)

By this time a large part of the citizens of Jerusalem and its environs were filled with fear, having heard that a gigantic Assyrian army was about to swallow up the whole nation of Judah and take the people into slavery as the invaders had done with the unrepentant inhabitants of the kingdom of Israel. (II Kings 18:9-12.)

Hezekiah was troubled by this fearful mood of his subjects. Now that so many of them had turned back to God, he had hoped that their faith in God would be stronger. But at the same time he realized that it was difficult to be calm with multiple thousands of enemy soldiers not many miles away. He tried to encourage them by going to the main gates of the city, where he could contact the largest crowds and speak directly to them.

"Don't be dismayed by what you have heard of the Assyrians," he told the people, who gathered in large numbers to hear him. "The army of the invaders is truly a powerful one. But our power can be even greater if we trust in God to strengthen us. Remain obedient to Him, and there will be no reason to be afraid."

The king's remarks soon spread to others who hadn't been present, giving them assurance and greater will to prepare and to resist if necessary. (II Chronicles 32:7-8.)

The King Wavers

Later, alone in his quarters, the king paced the floor. It wasn't that his faith in God's protection had suddenly vanished. It was that he was wondering how much more hardship and loss of life God would allow in Judah before rescuing the nation from the Assyrians.

"Perhaps I have been too stubborn," Hezekiah thought. "Perhaps my refusal to pay tribute will cost the lives of many of my people."

The king of Judah thereupon made a decision that changed matters somewhat, though not necessarily for the better. Messengers shortly afterward delivered a message to the Assyrians at Lachish. (II Kings 18:14.) It was for Sennacherib. Hezekiah trusted that it would be forwarded to the Assyrian emperor, wherever he was.

The message reached Sennacherib, whose face broke into a satisfied grin as he heard these words interpreted for him in his native tongue:

"It is obvious that my decision not to pay tribute to you has caused you great offense, for which I am regretful and ask your pardon. My nation does not want to indulge in war. Advise me what you require of Judah for the departure of your entire army without warfare. Whatever you ask will be paid." (Signed) Hezekiah, King of Judah

Not long afterward Hezekiah received this reply from the king of Assyria:

"Deliver to me three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Then I will take my army back to Assyria in peace." (Signed) Sennacherib, King of Assyria and the World

Hezekiah was stunned by this demand, which today would be equal to several millions of our dollars. Nevertheless, the king of Judah had promised to pay it, and he was determined to do so in spite of a difficult situation. That situation was that he didn't have the required amount of gold and silver. His personal finances and palace treasures couldn't meet such a demand. Taxing the people, even locally, would require too much time. Besides, such a measure wouldn't be good for the morale of his subjects, to whom he had recently spoken concerning faith in God for their protection.

There was only one resort -- the temple.

Much as he regretted having to do it, Hezekiah gave confidential orders to the Levites that the gold and silver of the temple, including the precious metal that had been applied to the doors and pillars, should be removed and brought to the palace. This, with what Hezekiah could supply from palace treasures, added up to the amount Sennacherib had demanded. The total treasure, intended to insure Judah against war with the invaders, was dispatched to the Lachish area and turned over to Sennacherib's officers, who had it conveyed to their emperor. (II Kings 18:13-16.)

The Insolence of Plunderers

Anxious days passed for Hezekiah. He constantly hoped to hear that the Assyrians were starting to clear out of Judah. Instead of receiving encouraging news, he was shocked by the report that thousands of Assyrian troops and cavalry were heading toward Jerusalem.

At first Hezekiah tried to calm himself with the thought that the Assyrians were simply going to pass by the capital of Judah on their way to their home country. Perhaps Sennacherib was going to stop and thank him for the gold and silver. This wishful thinking came to an end when he saw the first columns of the tremendous army come over a rise and soon spread out around the city.

Thousands of soldiers and civilians flocked to the broad wall top to watch the invaders mass before them. Three Assyrian officers and their aides took up a position from where they could command the best attention of the onlookers. (II Kings 18:17.)

"I am Tartan, King Sennacherib's treasurer and general!" one of the richly uniformed men loudly shouted. "My king has sent us to give a message to your king! Send him out on the wall to hear it!"

"Sennacherib's general has a message from his king for you, sire," an excited servant quickly informed Hezekiah.

"I know," Hezekiah nodded. "I heard his raucous voice and his insolent tone. I don't intend to jump at his command. If the king of Assyria must use representatives, so shall I."

A little later three of Hezekiah's men of top rank appeared on the wall.

They were Eliakim, Shebna and Joah. These were the steward of the royal household, the king's chief secretary and his official recorder and keeper of the archives. After they were introduced, another of the three Assyrian officers waved for attention.

"I am Rab-shakeh, chief of the wine cellar and cupbearer to the world's greatest king!" he called out in Hebrew. "We didn't think your king would dare expose himself to us! My king wants to know how the faint-hearted Hezekiah can protect his nation from destruction by locking himself and his army inside high walls! Surely he wasn't foolish enough to believe that the miserable bribe he recently sent would buy freedom from us!" (II Kings 18:18-20.)

Standing by a window where he could hear every spiteful word, the king of Judah suddenly felt very ill when he learned that he had made the tribute payment in vain. The treacherous Sennacherib's promise to leave Judah without more war was merely a ruse to bring reproach on Hezekiah before the mighty Assyrian army moved to strike at Jerusalem!

Chapter 139

A Tyrant's Boast and Divine Justice

HEZEKIAH soon learned that the king of Assyria had accepted the special tribute from Judah without honoring the promise to cease war. The humiliation and distress of Hezekiah, king of Judah, wasn't easy to bear. (II Kings 18:13-17.)

But there wasn't time to brood. Rab-shakeh, one of the Assyrian officers, was addressing the people of Judah who were standing on top of the wall. He continued his loud tirade against Hezekiah.

An Officer's Boast

"Where is the military power of your king, who is so foolish as to rebel against the powerful Sennacherib?" Rab-shakeh roared. "Could it be that your Hezekiah is waiting for the Pharaoh of Egypt to come galloping to his rescue on his overrated horses? If that's the way it is, your king is due for disappointment, because Pharaoh is about as dependable as a broken reed in the Nile River!

"And don't ask us to believe that it will do your king any good for him to rely on his God! Hezekiah forced you to stop sacrificing to your God in your favorite high places and made you crowd in before only one altar in only one temple! How can help be expected from a God who was thus offended?

"Why are you people willing to face death by famine merely because your king tells you that your God wants to save you from Sennacherib? Don't you know that for generations the Assyrians have crushed other nations whose gods were never able to protect them? Your God isn't even as powerful as those other gods!

"Since Pharaoh won't help you, we will make a wager. We'll give you two thousand horses that are superior to any you could find in Egypt! Then you can send your army out to fight if you dare. Or do you think you could scrape up anywhere near two thousand riders from among all of you?

"Now listen to this, which will surprise you! Because your God doesn't care for you anymore, He has asked us to destroy you if you resist." (II Kings 18:18-25.)

With this, Rab-shakeh stepped aside for Rabsaris, the chief of Sennacherib's attendants. He continued in the same blasphemous vein.

By the time he finished, the audience was somewhat stunned by all the loud bragging and lying. Then Eliakim, Hezekiah's chamberlain, held up his arms to get the attention of the Assyrian officers.

"If you have more to say," he called down to them in the Assyrian language, "considerately talk in your native language instead of Hebrew. The three of us understand Assyrian, and we'll pass on your remarks to our king. No good will come of our people hearing what you have to say."

"King Sennacherib didn't send us to speak just to you and your king!" Rab-shakeh bellowed back in Hebrew. "We came here to tell all of you that unless you come out to us peacefully, you'll soon have nothing to eat or drink except what comes from your own starving bodies!" (II Kings 18:26-27.)

Rab-shakeh continued: "Now hear me, you people of Judah! The mighty Sennacherib warns you not to believe your king when he tells you that your God has the power to save this city! It is a lie! Your only hope is to come out to us! Then you will be free instead of prisoners inside those walls, and you will be given farms to live on in comfort. Many of you will be favored by being taken to a bigger and a richer land where there is an oversupply of grain, grapes, olives and honey! Do you have the wisdom to choose these good things, or do you choose to foolishly follow your fanatical king to your death?" (II Kings 18:28-35.)

The King Appeals to God

There wasn't a sound of reaction from the people of Judah, who had been instructed to remain silent regardless of what they heard. This was disappointing to the Assyrian leaders, who had hoped that there would be some in the crowd who would become so fearful and frantic that they would start clamoring for immediate surrender. He should have realized that when people have strong, concerned leadership, they obey their leaders. Many of the people quietly left the walls, while the more curious stayed to see what the Assyrian leaders would do next. Eliakim, Shebna and Joah were so upset by the situation that they tore their coats in the ancient manner of Israelites who were greatly grieved. (II Kings 18:36-37.)

Hezekiah had retired to where he couldn't hear the loud shouting of the Assyrians, but when Eliakim told him all that had been said, he, too, was so overwhelmed by grief that he ripped his coat. Then he removed his royal attire and dressed himself in sackcloth, an Israelite custom of expressing extreme sorrow. He went to the temple to pray.

"We must take this matter of impending attack to God through the prophet Isaiah," Hezekiah later told Eliakim. "You know where Isaiah lives. Take Shebna and some of the leading priests with you. Request the prophet to ask God what we should do." (II Kings 19:1-2.)

Isaiah had lived a long time in Judah. Back in the last days of King Uzziah he had become a faithful and obedient follower of God's laws. (Isaiah 1:1.) One time when he was in the temple, he was startled to see God sitting on a high throne surrounded by shining, six-winged creatures known as seraphim, who were moving about in a haze of smoke and calling out in praise of the Creator. (Isaiah 6:1-4.)

"I am going to die!" Isaiah muttered fearfully to himself. "I am not worthy to see God and live! I am one of a nation of people with unclean lips!"

The vision was so real to Isaiah that it was as if he were actually before God's throne.

To add to his fright, one of the seraphim flew to a fiery altar, picked up a glowing coal with tongs, and headed straight for Isaiah as though to deliberately burn him. Isaiah couldn't move. The coal was pressed against his mouth, but there was no pain.

"Now that this has touched your lips, you have been purged of sin," the seraph said, and flew off to leave Isaiah puzzled and trembling. (Isaiah 6:5-7.)

"Whom shall I send to warn the people of Judah of what they will face in the future?" a voice thundered.

Isaiah's Commission

Isaiah looked up to see the God of Israel gazing expectantly down on him.

"Send me!" Isaiah called out, surprising himself with his readiness to volunteer for something he didn't yet know about.

"So be it," God nodded. "You are chosen to tell the people of the misery to come to them unless they turn from their idolatry. They won't listen and they therefore won't understand, but they won't be able to say that I didn't warn them. I shall instruct you from time to time what to say to them. Your warnings will only cause them to become more blind and deaf and have less understanding because they will refuse to change their ways. Nevertheless, continue warning them."

"But if they won't listen, how long must I continue doing this thing?" Isaiah asked.

"Until the people have been herded from their cities and fields and have been forced to go to other parts of the world," God answered. "Long after that, a tenth part of them shall return, like a planted tree seed, to start a new national growth." (Isaiah 6:8-13.)

Like one coming out of unconsciousness, Isaiah slowly realized that he was in the temple, and not in heaven, and that he had seen only a vision of God and the seraphim. He understood that it was a commission from God, and that for the rest of his life it would be his duty to prophesy as God would direct.

Down through the reigns of Uzziah and Jotham, Isaiah came to public and royal attention because of his predictions. But in Ahaz's day he was generally ignored. Before the predictions came true, he was usually ridiculed. But by Hezekiah's time, because so many in Judah had turned back to God, Isaiah gained national respect. Hezekiah considered him the man closest to God in Judah. That is why Eliakim and Shebna were sent to him. (II Kings 19:2.)

Isaiah wasn't surprised when he saw the two officials at his door. They were dressed in sackcloth, as were the priests who accompanied them. Having been given a strong sense of discernment, Isaiah was aware of why his visitors had come.

"I know the king is dismayed by the close presence of the enemy," the graying prophet told them, "but God has already made it known to me that there is nothing to fear. Tell the king that Rab-shakeh has left to ask Sennacherib what to do next.

Tell him that bad news will come to the king of Assyria and cause him to change his plans. He will return to his country, where God will cause him to be murdered." (II Kings 19:3-7.)

Meanwhile, to the southwest toward the border of Egypt, Sennacherib had ended his siege of Lachish. He decided, next, to move his army northeastward toward Jerusalem, to another walled city, Libnah. This is where Rab-shakeh found him. (II Kings 19:8.) Sennacherib then received a troublesome report that the king of Ethiopia, a nation also known then as Upper Egypt, was on his way north with an army to help the soldiers of Lower Egypt push back the Assyrians. (II Kings 19:9.) Sennacherib immediately decided to pit all his troops against Judah's capital. If he could take Jerusalem, he was certain that the whole nation would be his and that Ethiopians would be defeated. However, he still had hopes of sparing his army from a costly battle by frightening Hezekiah into surrender without any fighting.

Sennacherib's Blasphemy

The king of Judah soon received this letter from the king of Assyria:

"I, Sennacherib, king of the world's most powerful nation, herewith advise you that I am moving the main part of my army to Jerusalem to join my troops who are already there. When all my troops and all my battering rams are put into action, they will reduce the walls of your city to rubble. But I am as fair as I am powerful. I do not war for the sake of war. I liberate men from their attachments to weak and deceptive gods. No god has yet been able to protect his people from me. Neither will your God. It would please me and save thousands of the lives of your people if you would arrange to surrender to my troops who are already there. Then, when I arrive with the part of my army that is with me, we can calmly and reasonably discuss a good future for your people.

"But if you are so foolish as to trust in your God, who has deceived you by boasting of His ability to protect Jerusalem, your future will be short and bloody! I shall smash and plunder your city and drag away as slaves any who escape my spears, arrows and swords! Your fanciful God won't be able to do any more for you than the gods of other nations did for their people whom I killed or captured!" (II Kings 19:10-13; II Chronicles 32:9-19.)

Hezekiah was so perturbed by this letter, delivered directly by Sennacherib's messengers that he went at once to the Temple. There he spread the letter out before God and knelt down to pray.

"God of Israel, Creator of the universe," Hezekiah began, "please listen to me. See in this letter the blasphemous words of the king of Assyria and how he has tried to belittle you. He boasts that the gods of other nations have failed to save those nations from his invasions. To brag about being more powerful than lifeless idols of wood, stone and metal is nothing. The troublesome part is that he has swallowed up one nation after another because they trusted in idols instead of trusting in your supreme power. Rescue us from this pagan scourge, I beseech you. Then people everywhere will learn that you are the one and only true God." (II Kings 19:14-19; II Chronicles 32:20.)

When Hezekiah returned to his palace, Eliakim and Shebna were waiting for him with the encouraging message from Isaiah.

They informed the king of Judah that God had heard and would answer the prayer he had uttered at the temple, asking for help against the Assyrians.

God's Justice

"With God as your strength, there is no reason for you to be fearful or discouraged," Isaiah's message read. "Even the young women of Jerusalem hold Sennacherib in such contempt that they laugh at the mention of his name, though his troops are just outside the city. God has been greatly angered by his blasphemy and his boasting about the nations he has conquered.

"This swaggering tyrant, suffocating in his egotism, would be shocked out of his shirt if he could know that he never would have become king of Assyria or won even one small battle if the God of Israel hadn't allowed it. Any success he had in conquering other nations was because the Creator chose to use him to carry out a small bit of a plan formed centuries ago.

"Now God is through with him, and because of his despicable acts and words against our God and against you, God will send him back to his country. Then the fields and orchards the Assyrians have ravaged will produce of themselves, in spite of their mutilated condition – a miraculous sign of God's power and willingness to help Judah. Those who have been driven off their farms, and are taking refuge in Jerusalem, shall return safely to find fruits, grains and vegetables starting to grow without attendance.

"As for Sennacherib, he shall not set foot inside this city. Not one arrow shall be shot against it from an Assyrian bow. No enemy soldier shall approach the wall with his shield in front of him. The Assyrians shall not put even a shovelful of dirt against the wall to start building a bank from which to attack you. God will protect Jerusalem because He wants to, and because of the covenant He made with King David more than three hundred years ago. All this, God has made known to me so that I should inform you." (II Kings 19:20-34.)

Calmed and comforted by Isaiah's message, Hezekiah couldn't help but feel shame and regret for having fallen into doubt, especially after trying to strengthen and encourage his people by telling them there was nothing to fear as long as they obeyed and trusted God. When the inhabitants of Jerusalem heard what Isaiah had to say to their king, most of them felt almost jubilant.

By this time the sun was setting. Darkness came. It was the eve of the Passover, the 14th of Nisan -- the first month of the spring of the year. That night (II Kings 19:35), all that could be learned of the Assyrians was that they were very busy, judging from the shouted orders and the clatter of arms and equipment. This was followed by the sounds of obvious revelry for the next two or three hours. That was followed at midnight by an ominous silence. Either the Assyrians had decided to sleep for the night -- or they were silently carrying out some plan of attack.

Chapter 140

The Sundial of Ahaz

IN SPITE of the Prophet Isaiah's declaration that no harm would be done to Jerusalem by the Assyrians, there was tension and fear among some of the citizens. (II Chronicles 32:9-10, 18-20; II Kings 19:32-34.)

It was a dark night, and thousands upon thousands of enemy soldiers were out there where they couldn't be watched. The people of the city could only guess what the Assyrians were doing or preparing to do. Jewish records say this night was the evening of the Passover Festival, in the first spring month of the year.

A Fantastic Promise!

"Not one arrow shall be shot against Jerusalem from an Assyrian bow."

That bit of prophecy from Isaiah's encouraging message kept running through Hezekiah's mind. Before dawn he arose and went up to one of the wall towers to see what the enemy would be doing when daylight came.

With the first gray light there was an odd but relieving discovery. There were no Assyrian soldiers in sight around the city. All that could be seen, when the sun rose, were many rows of pitched tents and some horses and chariots in the distant campsite.

"Perhaps it's a trick to try to draw some of our troops outside the wall," an officer observed. "All of them couldn't be sleeping this late."

The apparent absence of men in the vast Assyrian camp was a real puzzle. One guess was that the enemy troops were hiding in their tents.

Suddenly another army came into view in the southwest. Their banners soon proved them to be Assyrian. They marched into the quiet camp and a few of their number were seen to go scurrying about. Then they quickly reassembled and speedily departed northward. But still no one came out of the tents. Was this all some sort of trick?

"We have to learn what's going on, and the only way is to go out there and find out," Hezekiah told his officers. "But I don't want anyone ordered to go to the enemy camp to investigate. The fairest way would be to call for a few volunteers."

So many bold soldiers were curious about the Assyrians that there were far more volunteers than the number needed for the scout patrol outside Jerusalem's walls. Hezekiah and his officers, as well as many others on the wall top, watched the eager volunteers intently as they warily advanced toward the mass of tents.

The intrepid little band of investigators reached the enemy camp safely and cautiously approached the nearest tent.

On peering inside, they saw only a pile of army blankets. A closer look, however, revealed dead Assyrian soldiers sprawled under the blankets!

The next few minutes were almost beyond the belief of the soldiers of Judah. They rushed from tent to tent to find corpses in every shelter. Tens of thousands of Assyrian soldiers had apparently died in their sleep of some mysterious cause! The whole besieging army was dead. This explained why Sennacherib and his other army had so suddenly departed northward.

When news of the death of the enemy was taken to Jerusalem, Hezekiah and the people were as dumbfounded as they were relieved. God had passed over His people and had punished the Assyrians just as He had done in Egypt under Moses on the first Passover.

A part of the army was sent out to seize anything of value left behind by the Assyrians. Later that day thousands of soldiers of Judah buried and counted the corpses, whose number came to one hundred and eighty-five thousand. (II Kings 19:35.)

A Pagan's Dilemma

There was celebrating in Judah the next day, especially in Jerusalem. There was more than just music, dancing and feasting. The temple porch was packed with people who came that day, the 15th of the month, for the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, commemorating deliverance out of Egypt. Now they added praises to God and gave thanks for the great and mysterious miracle that had kept the Assyrians from Jerusalem. Probably there wasn't anyone more thankful than the king, who felt as though his nation had suddenly been freed from a deadly noose.

While the people returned to their farms and regular occupations and started repairing cities and towns damaged by the invaders, King Sennacherib and his other army moved on to Assyria without delay. Many months before, the arrogant Assyrian ruler had swept ruthlessly westward from his nation to the Great Sea and then southward to Egypt, cutting a wide path of conquests by virtue of the vast size of his army. To return to Nineveh with only a fraction of his fighting force was one of the most humiliating things that could happen to this profane and boastful man. But he couldn't stay away to avoid his disgraceful situation and yet continue to share the kingship. There were others who were anxious and ready to replace him. He was on the verge of regretting the statements he had made about the Creator. The strange annihilation of one of his two armies was something he couldn't help but connect with the God of Israel.

Nevertheless, after he returned to his capital he continued for years to worship in the shrine of the pagan god Nisroch, whom he regularly asked for help in holding the conquests he had made. As the years passed this didn't look very hopeful unless he could continually muster and train new armies, even though he had left many men in these cities and nations to try to keep them subject. (II Kings 19:36.)

If Sennacherib expected swift and powerful results because of his prayers and sacrifices to Nisroch, there was, of course, only disappointment. Nearly 29 years passed.

"Why is it that my god never performs any miracles for me?" he one day asked his advisors. "There are many reports that the God of Judah has done and still does great things for His people. Is there some secret way of really gaining the help of a god? If there is, I want to know!"

The scowling king accented his demand with a loud blow of his fist on the arm of his chair. There was a strained silence until one of the advisors hesitantly spoke up.

The Tables Are Turned

"You have spoken of something difficult to discuss, sire," the man began. "Have you not heard how the Syrians, Moabites and certain other people make their most effective appeals to their gods?"

"I'll ask the questions," Sennacherib shouted impatiently. "Just tell me what you're talking about."

"I'm referring to the sacrificing of human beings," the advisor replied uneasily, "especially a firstborn son."

"Of course I've heard of that," the king snapped. "Do the people of Judah follow that custom?" "I know of no recent instance," was the answer. "But there is a legend that hundreds of years ago a Hebrew patriarch by the name of Abraham was commanded by God to kill his firstborn son and burn him on an altar. The legend goes that Abraham started to carry out his God's will, but at the last moment was prevented from causing his son's death. However, he had proved his willingness to obey his God. And God was so pleased that He not only rewarded Abraham, but also promised protection and prosperity to Abraham's descendants." (Genesis 22)

The scriptural record of what happened to Sennacherib at that time is limited. Other records, though less dependable, tell about the Assyrian king's plan to gain help from his god Nisroch by going to greater extremes than those of the Syrians and Moabites. He was particularly impressed by the story of Abraham, even though Abraham hadn't been required to carry out God's original instructions. Sennacherib reasoned that if a god could be pleased by the sacrifice of a son, that god would be doubly pleased by the sacrilege of two sons.

The two sons he had in mind were Adrammelech and Sharezer, both of whom he was aware were strongly ambitious to succeed him as ruler of Assyria. He believed that if he could win Nisroch's favor, he would be given the power and success he needed to reestablish himself as what he had long claimed to be the greatest king in the world.

To carry out his diabolical plan, Sennacherib needed the help of trusted servants, at least one of whom turned out to be trustworthy to his sons instead of to him.

When the sons heard what the king intended to do, they reversed matters by hiding in the pagan temple and slaying their father while he was bowed before the image of Nisroch. (II Kings 19:37; II Chronicles 32:21.)

With the king disposed of, it could have been a matter of which son would dispose of the other to gain the throne. But neither was to become a ruler. Even though their crime had been committed in secret, they were so strongly suspected that they realized it would mean death to remain in Nineveh or even anywhere in Assyria. They managed to slip out of the city and escape to Armenia, a nation to the north in whose land were the mountains on which Noah's ark came to rest after the flooding of the earth. (Genesis 8:4.)

The throne of Assyria was immediately taken over by a third son of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, who inherited his father's ability for arrogant boasting. Eventually he referred to himself as powerful, heroic, gigantic, colossal and the king of kings of Egypt, where his army won a major battle.

When news of Sennacherib's death reached the surrounding nations, the people of Judah and many in other countries felt that the God of Israel had caused the Assyrian king to die disgracefully before a pagan idol because of his insulting the true God, his attacks on Judah and his deceitfulness and threats. This resulted in increasing respect for Judah's God.

Hezekiah's Illness

Meanwhile, we return to another part of the story 29 years before. Just when Hezekiah was at the peak of his power and usefulness and when Judah was reeling from Sennacherib's invasion, the king's health began to wane. The wearing pressures of months and years were taking their toll. Hezekiah's illness became so serious that he was soon confined to bed. Fearing that his life could be near its end, the king sent to the prophet Isaiah for help.

"There is nothing I can do for you," the prophet told the king, "except, advise you to wind up all personal and state affairs that need your attention, especially those having to do with choosing your successor. God has purposed to take your life very soon."

Even though he realized that he was facing death, Hezekiah was shocked and dismayed to learn that God was going to let him die, obviously without answering a prayer from the prophet. On further thought, he realized that even the prayers of a man very close to God, such as Isaiah, couldn't always be expected to alter the purpose of the Creator of the universe.

Perhaps God had told Isaiah that his exhortation would be useless in this matter of when the king was to die. The situation didn't lessen Hezekiah's esteem for the value of prayer. He knew this was the time to do his own intense petitioning, regardless of the presence of his attendants and Isaiah. Twisting around so that he could hide his face toward the head of his bed, which was against a wall, he silently but fervently called on God.

"I beseech you not to take my life now," Hezekiah prayed. "Except for the times I have made foolish blunders, you know I have kept your laws. You promised long lives to the kings of Judah who would be obedient. If I have been useful until now, would I not continue to be useful over more years? Let me continue to be of service to you and your people. Extend my life long enough for me to bring a son into the world to take my place. Don't let the grave swallow me. From there how can I praise you or lead your people? At least don't take me until I can be sure that the Assyrians won't return to trouble our nation!" (II Kings 20:1-3.)

Hearing muffled sobs coming from the king's bed, Isaiah sadly turned and quietly left the room, whispering for the attendants to do the same for a while. As he passed through one of the palace court gardens on his way out, a clear voice came to him.

A Promise and a Miracle

"Go back to the king, Isaiah. Tell him that I have heard the prayer that he has just uttered, and that I am aware of the causes of his tears. Tell him that I shall heal him. Three days from now he will be able to walk to the temple and give thanks. (II Kings 20:5.) I shall add fifteen more years to his life. Hezekiah soon shall have the son he desires and time to carry out plans for the nation's continued prosperity. During the rest of his life I shall continue to protect Jerusalem for my own sake and that of my servant David. These blessings shall come to Hezekiah because of his obedience."

When Hezekiah heard Isaiah's surprising news, he was overjoyed. At the same time it was difficult for him to fully believe that God had so suddenly dropped His intention to take his life.

"You have given me great hope," he told the prophet, "but how can I be certain that I shall be healed in three days and be able to go to the temple? Is there any kind of unusual sign by which you can prove these things?"

Isaiah pondered for a few moments then pointed through a window to an object in the adjoining court.

"There is the massive sundial of your father, Ahaz," the prophet observed. "The shadow cast by its gnomon on its steps clearly indicates the time of day. If God will promptly move that shadow backward or forward by ten steps, will you believe you will be healed? It's up to you to decide which way the shadow should be moved."

"It wouldn't be a great thing for the shadow to go forward supernaturally as it did when my father died," Hezekiah replied. "I'll believe I'll be healed if the shadow moves BACKWARD ten steps, which would be an even greater miracle."

In spite of the pain caused by inflammation in his body, especially when he moved, the king asked his attendants to prop him up so that he could distinctly see the shadow cast by the sundial pole across one of the steps that indicated the hours. After Hezekiah was fairly comfortable, Isaiah gestured for silence. (II Kings 20:8-11; II Chronicles 32:24.)

"I implore you, God of Israel," the prophet spoke out, "to set back the sundial shadow ten steps, so that the king of Judah shall witness your intent to heal him!"

Hezekiah, Isaiah and the attendants watched the heavens in intense fascination as the sundial shadow began to move **BACKWARD!**

Chapter 141

The Decline of Judah

AILING King Hezekiah was speechless to see the shadow of his giant sundial gnomon moving BACKWARD at a rapid rate. Whether or not the king realized it, it required a most awesome situation to cause such an unusual sight -- a sudden reversal in the earth's direction of rotation! But it was no more difficult for God to alter the earth's rotation temporarily than for a pilot to stop a modern jet that travels hundreds of miles per hour. The surface of the earth travels about 1000 miles an hour around its axis. So it need not have taken more than several minutes to slow down the earth, reverse rotation and then start it going again as before.

Miraculous Recovery

A miracle is a supernatural occurrence having to do with God temporarily suspending or canceling certain of His physical laws. In addition He often uses natural means which people don't always understand.

In any event, Hezekiah was shown exciting proof that God would heal him, and he was very grateful. Whatever means God used to do the healing, He first wanted the poisons out of the king's body. Isaiah instructed servants to apply a special fig poultice to the most painful and swollen area of the inflammation, so that the accumulated toxins would be drawn out. True to the prophet's prophecy, Hezekiah was so improved by the third day that he had the strength to go to the temple to thank God for His help and the promise of fifteen more years of life. (II Kings 20:1-11; II Chronicles 32:24; Isaiah 38.)

Royal Visitors from Babylon

Judah continued recovering from the Assyrian assault. Prosperity increased. Believing that his nation faced a trouble-free future as long as idolatry was kept down, Hezekiah began to amass treasures. Every valuable gift that came to him from men of other lands added to the collection. Besides, he sent men afar to acquire objects of gold, silver and rare stones. They obtained costly spices, precious ointments and many unique items of unusual value. (II Chronicles 32:27.)

Among the worthy presents the king received was one from Baladan [Merodach-baladan], ruler of Babylon, a city-state in the country of Babylonia, south of Assyria. Babylon had been a province of Assyria for several years, and long before Sennacherib's disastrous army loss in Judah, Baladan moved without success to free Babylon from Assyria. Having heard of the unusual powers of Judah's God, as well of Judah's growing wealth and power, Baladan was anxious to establish friendly relations with Hezekiah. It was his desire to use that friendship, however, for personal advantage.

To impress the king of Judah, Baladan sent his gift by ambassadors instead of by regular messengers.

These men also brought a letter for Hezekiah, who was as surprised at its contents as he was at the arrival of the men from distant Babylon, the ancient city near which men once tried to reach the sky by building a high tower. (Genesis 11)

King Baladan wrote that the bearers of the gift were men of high rank and that he knew the officials of Judah would treat them accordingly. He mentioned the mysterious destruction of Sennacherib's troops in Judah and Hezekiah's miraculous recovery from what was regarded as a fatal illness.

Baladan wrote that he would like to know more about the powerful God of Judah, the growing prosperity of the nation and Hezekiah's treasures. Before the letter ended, there was a strong suggestion that Judah and Babylon should plan to unite against Assyria if that nation should threaten either of them again.

Hezekiah should have been suspicious of these overly curious ambassadors, but he wasn't. He was pleased by this attention from another king, even though Baladan's kingdom was small. Hoping to enhance his prestige and gain the favor of a ruler who later might prove to be of value to him, he showed the alert Babylonians all his personal treasures, special costly army equipment and the wealth of the temple. Gullible Hezekiah even took them on a tour of the nation to let them see the outstanding farms, ranches, quarries, mines and other features of the land. (Isaiah 39:1-2; II Kings 20:12-13.)

Days later, when the Babylonians left, there was little they didn't know about Judah's economy and manpower. Shortly after their departure, Isaiah came to talk to the king.

"At the risk of your considering me overly curious," the prophet told Hezekiah, "I would like to know the identity of your recent guests."

"That should be no secret to you," Hezekiah replied in a respectful tone, realizing that the prophet possibly knew about them even before they arrived. "They were special ambassadors from Babylon. Their king, Baladan, sent me a gift and a letter by them."

"What did this king have to say?" Isaiah asked. For answer, Hezekiah produced Baladan's letter, written in Hebrew. As the prophet read it he scowled a little and shook his head.

"Did you disclose anything to these men?" he queried.

"I showed them everything they asked to see," the king hesitantly answered. "I have so much to be proud of here in Judah. Is it unwise for me to take pleasure in displaying to foreigners the good things God has allowed us to have?" (II Kings 20:14-15; Isaiah 39:3-4.)

Isaiah stood up and thoughtfully gazed out a window for a short time.

"Didn't it occur to you that what these Babylonians learned here could be used against Judah some day?" the prophet asked. "Haven't you considered what God thinks of your growing pride in your increased possessions?"

A surprised reaction welled up in the king toward the prophet for speaking to him so bluntly, but before words could come out, he had a sudden awareness of a vanity that had been growing in him without his recognizing it before.

"Perhaps I have been thinking about material things more than I should," Hezekiah admitted.

Result of Trusting Enemies

"That's more than possible," Isaiah remarked. "Obviously you were favorably impressed by the Babylonians, but God wants you to know that you should have no league with these pagan people. Those emissaries were allowed to test you, to see how you would react to their flattery and also to see how much of a display you would make of your possessions. Remember this, because God has spoken it: There will come a time when an army will come from Babylon to seize all that is in this palace. The invaders will ransack the city, ruin the temple and plunder the land. They'll herd our people to Babylon and surrounding nations, where they'll become slaves. Your descendants will become SPECIAL slaves -- keepers of the bedrooms of the king of Babylon!"

Hezekiah was stunned. For a few moments he paced about the room, occasionally glancing at Isaiah as though he wanted to question the prophet.

"If that's the way God says it will be, then it's certain to happen," Hezekiah finally remarked in a resigned tone. "I am thankful that it won't happen in the peaceful years I have left." (II Kings 20:16-19; II Chronicles 32:31; Isaiah 39:5-8.)

"I, too," Isaiah answered, "am thankful that these terrible things won't occur in your time."

After the prophet had gone, the full impact of his words reached Hezekiah's understanding. Isaiah wasn't talking only about an enemy victory from which Judah would recover. He was talking about the end of Judah as a nation!

In his years that remained, Hezekiah dedicated himself to the best interests of his country. He saw to it that large supplies of grain, wine and oil were maintained. He continued to promote farming and to increase the raising of sheep and cattle.

The greatest engineering project during Hezekiah's reign was the laborious cutting of a tunnel 1,177 feet through solid rock under Jerusalem. Through the tunnel water was conveyed from a spring outside the city to a large pool inside. Previous to the filling of the pool area, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had to get their water by lowering buckets forty feet into a well. (II Chronicles 32:27-30.)

Hezekiah's greatest accomplishment, of course, was the stopping of most idolatry in Judah and restoring proper worship at the temple.

The son Hezekiah had wanted when he was so ill was born to him three years after his recovery. Having been given fifteen more years of life, the king was succeeded by a boy only twelve years old. His name was Manasseh. (II Chronicles 32:32-33; II Kings 20:20-21; 21:1.)

In his last years and months, the king must have been painfully conscious of the approaching date of his death, although probably he didn't know the exact day. He died at the age of fifty-four, after about twenty-nine years as ruler of Judah. Hezekiah was buried in one of the main sepulchers reserved for the descendant kings of David.

A Swing to Religious License

Unfortunately for Judah, young Manasseh was guided and influenced by profane men who were in favor of returning to idolatry. It wasn't long before Hezekiah's headway against pagan religions in the nation was offset by a decline in the worship of God and a revival of permissiveness and an interest in neighboring religions.

As Manasseh grew older, there seemed to be no limit to the heathen practices he allowed and even promoted. At first he favored reestablishing private and public places for idol worship. Then he decreed that altars should be built throughout the nation for sacrificing to the god Baal, one of the chief pagan deities of the Canaanites. His next move was to prepare special shrines for worshipping the goddess Astarte, whose rituals were disgustingly lewd. These swift plunges into idolatry were more than enough to rouse the Creator's scourging anger. But Manasseh didn't stop there. He deliberately defied God by setting up these pagan altars, idols, images and obscene symbols in the holy temple!

Of course, God's priests were driven from the temple first. Then their quarters were changed into a chapel for the worship of stars and planets. Even Molech made a comeback in Judah when followers were invited to build places of worship in the Valley of the Dram or Tophet – known in New Testament times as Gehenna.

The metal idol was heated to red-hot by fires built inside the belly. To the thunderous accompaniment of drums, the parents placed their own babies into the glowing hands of the idol in worship of their horrid god. The purpose of the drums was to drown the agonizing screams of helpless infants, sacrificed by their very own parents.

How different from the worship of the Living Creator God who says that this kind of worship is so awful that he couldn't imagine the children of Israel ever doing it. (Jeremiah 32:35.)

Faith was replaced by superstition. Like vultures the wizards, witches, sorcerers, and mediums returned to feed on that superstition.

Convinced that worshipping and relying on Israel's God was foolish, Manasseh did more to turn his nation to idolatry than did the pagan nations God had destroyed. He was even worse than blasphemous King Ahab, because he required his people to worship the idols he brought to Judah.

Those who were loyal to God and refused to have part in pagan religious rites were arrested and tortured. If they still refused, they were put to death. (II Kings 21:1-9; II Chronicles 33:1-9.)

Because of the misused power of one man, Jerusalem, the city of peace, became a city of despair, terror and death. Those who tried to obey God lived in constant fear of criminals and of Manasseh's soldiers. Those who became idolaters became debased and miserable.

Manasseh apparently began to doubt that Israel's God existed. Manasseh was one of the most foolish kings who ever lived for deliberately antagonizing his long-suffering Creator, who began to act by giving instructions to the prophets who were hiding in Judah.

Chapter 142

Manasseh Repents!

As KING Manasseh grew more powerful, he began to force the people to follow him more and more deeply into pagan practices. Because of his evil deeds, God began to act by sending His prophets with warnings for the people of Judah.

God's Warning

"Warn Manasseh and the people," God told them, "that because the king has stooped to abominations greater than those of surrounding nations of the past, whom I have destroyed, and has forced his subjects to do the same by torturing and murdering the faithful, I will bring terrible times on Judah. If people could hear what their fate will be, their ears would almost burn at listening to the fearful facts.

"As Samaria fell, so shall Jerusalem. I shall wipe out the city as one wipes out a dirty dish by turning it upside down and scooping out the leftovers. I shall forsake this nation. The inhabitants will fall into the hands of their enemies, to become slaves just as the people of Samaria and the northern tribes of national Israel went into captivity.

"Ever since I brought my people out of Egypt more than eight hundred years ago, they have troubled me and tried my patience. Their king has now become one of the basest offenders by conducting himself like an insane man. He won't be allowed to continue in his murderous manner much longer." (II Kings 21:10-16; II Chronicles 33:10.)

The prophets who received this message were Joel, Nahum, Habakkuk and Isaiah. And they wrote down God's warnings in their books which are now part of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament. At great personal risk, these men managed to make public what God had told them. When reports reached Manasseh, he laughed derisively, but the more he thought about these men having the boldness to give him warnings, supposedly from the God he loathed, the more irritated he became.

"The doomsday dolts are at it again!" he scoffed. "I want them brought here to explain just how their God plans to stop me from doing what I please!"

Some, if not all, of the prophets were arrested at this time. Scriptural and secular references indicate that the elderly Isaiah was one of them. Tradition says that because Manasseh was angered by Isaiah's loyalty to God and his warnings, he had the prophet sawn in two. These religious persecutions are described in the New Testament "faith chapter," Hebrews 11, especially verses 36 to 38.

It was an unusual thing, even in ancient times, for a nation to be surprised by large enemy forces that had already penetrated its borders. There were generally spies and frontier lookouts on duty to pass back information even on small bands of strangers.

But because God willed it, this early warning system failed to work for Judah shortly after Isaiah's horrible death. The people of Judah had a sudden, sickening awareness that Assyrian troops were moving swiftly through the land. The sentries on Jerusalem's walls knew nothing of what was happening till they saw the enemy soldiers swarming toward the city's main gate. (II Chronicles 33:11.)

"Your king is our prisoner!" an Assyrian officer called out when the invaders were just beyond an arrow's range of the walls. "If you want him back, open the gates and send your citizens out to us! If you send soldiers, your king will die right here!"

Leaders of Judah under Manasseh were shocked when they saw that their king was indeed a prisoner of the Assyrians. Obviously he had been captured while on a trip outside Jerusalem. The leaders of Judah decided to send out a few hundred citizens in exchange for Manasseh.

The unfortunate ones, mainly women and children, were roughly herded outside through gates that were briefly opened then slammed shut before enemy troops could try to force an entrance. Those thrust out of their city immediately became captives of the Assyrians, who expressed their anger at the small number of citizens given them.

King Manasseh in Captivity

"More! More!" roared the invaders. "Isn't your king's life worth more than this paltry few?"

The officers of Judah had no choice but to quickly force more people out through a gate opened only a minute or so. Again, as before, soldiers of Judah remained inside where they could be more effective in the defense of the city. Again the Assyrians pounced on their prey and bellowed for more. This convinced those in authority in Jerusalem that the Assyrians had no intention of releasing Manasseh. They refused to send out any more people.

Having taken other captives from other undefended areas of Judah, and not wishing to carry on a long siege of well-defended Jerusalem, the Assyrians departed with their prisoners. They didn't take Manasseh's life as they had threatened. Instead they took him with them, forcing him to walk in heavy loops of clanking chains. This cruel man who had challenged his Creator could scarcely believe that he was in the hands of his enemies. It was much easier for him to believe almost two months and hundreds of long miles later when he was led disgracefully through the streets of the city of Babylon. (II Chronicles 33:9-11.)

"Can this actually be the mighty king of Judah? He lacks the apparel of one of royalty. He doesn't even have the bearing and dignity of a ruler!"

The contemptuous speaker was Esarhaddon, king of Assyria and son of the murdered Sennacherib. The setting was his palace in Babylon, the city-state he had forced back under Assyrian domination. Manasseh, weighted down with his metal fetters, could only stare back with undisguised hatred as his conqueror belittled him before the Assyrian notables who were present.

"This man must learn that Judah shall at last become a vassal nation," Esarhaddon continued arrogantly. "Obviously he isn't yet convinced. Put him in the lower dungeon, and keep him there until he surrenders his nation!"

Thus started months of miserable confinement for Manasseh, who did not believe that he would long remain in prison because his many pagan gods would come to his rescue. As the weeks went by, Manasseh exhorted these false gods and goddesses one by one to deliver him from the Assyrians. Stunned because nothing occurred in his favor, Manasseh began to doubt the powers of the gods to whom he had been faithful for years. Doubting the powers of these false deities, he began to wonder if it could be possible that the God his father had worshipped could possibly exist and have the tremendous power that was claimed in ancient Israelite records.

Manasseh Finally Repents

Miserable and desperate, the king of Judah finally concluded that it might be worth the effort to pray to the God of Israel for help.

There was no response.

But there was a strange awareness that belief in pagan gods was a futile and foolish pursuit. With this start toward wisdom, and through continued fervent prayer to God, Manasseh was encouraged by a growing assurance that he was at last beginning to contact the one real Supreme Power. From then on he began to strongly regret all the things he had done to lead Judah back into idolatry which his father, Hezekiah, had worked to remove from the nation.

Regret turned into genuine repentance, which God always recognizes. Manasseh's repentance was so intense and genuine that God caused the king of Assyria to change his plans about Judah and Manasseh.

God always blesses ANYONE who sincerely repents. Manasseh's repentance (II Chronicles 33:12-13) was one of the most profound in all the Bible. The record of it serves to show that our God is so filled with compassion that He will honor the sincere repentance of anyone, no matter how black his deeds have been. Surely no king of Israel or Judah ever provoked God's wrath more with his blatant idolatry even to the point of bringing an idol into God's very own temple. II Kings 21 chronicles the record of his rotten deeds. Only the unregenerate Ahab could begin to rival Manasseh in wickedness. (II Kings 21:3.) Yet our God is so brimful of mercy that He honored even Ahab's humility even though he never really repented. (I Kings 21:29.)

God will forgive any person who makes a full surrender to Him without any reservations – no matter how terrible, or how many, have been his sins. God will forgive them all. (Matthew 12:31.)

The Apostle Paul himself said that BEFORE conversion he was "a blasphemer and a persecutor, and injurious." He actually counted himself the "chief of sinners." Yet he obtained mercy, that in him first Jesus Christ "might shew forth ALL LONG-SUFFERING, FOR A PATTERN to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." (I Timothy 1:13-16.)

God made sure that His Word was replete with examples of the real repentance of grievous sinners. So no one should ever say, "My sins are so bad that God couldn't possibly forgive me." And no matter how you may feel about your personal sins, that same merciful God stands ready TO FORGIVE YOU upon genuine repentance. (Psalm 86:5.)

Manasseh Released From Captivity

"This stubborn king of Judah will never willingly surrender his nation to us," Esarhaddon told his officers and leaders. "Even if he did, his people would put up a resistance I can't afford. It would be wiser to send Manasseh back to Jerusalem. His nation would then become a stronger buffer state between us and our troublesome Egyptian enemies. At the same time, we can always demand tribute from these Israelites, and one we can continue to exact. Is this not better than paying many Assyrian lives to overcome Judah? The nation can be of greater benefit to us if it remains strong and productive."

Naturally there was no evident opposition to the king's wish, although there must have been military men present who were disappointed to learn that their commander had decided not to wage a mad, bloody war on the kingdom of Judah.

Shortly after Esarhaddon's statement, a prison attendant came to free the astonished king of Judah from his dismal cell and escort him to comfortable quarters where he could bathe and be dressed in fine apparel. Servants were present to wait on him, but at his first moment of privacy Manasseh threw himself on the floor and poured out thanks to God for this startling miracle of release from a dark dungeon. He was more surprised and thankful when he learned that he was about to be escorted by Assyrian soldiers back to Jerusalem. (II Chronicles 33:12-13.)

There was much celebrating in Judah -- and especially in the capital -- when Manasseh returned to his kingship. At the same time there was surprise and gloom among the king's former ranking favorites when they learned of the great change in their leader.

"He keeps talking about the 'God of Israel' instead of our gods," an officer remarked concernedly to others. "Something must have happened to his mind while he was in prison!"

"There is no doubt of it," another agreed. "I heard that he intends to try to restrain the people from worshipping any god except the God his father worshipped. That will take some doing, because not many people will want to be tied down to observing the harsh laws of the old God of Israel."

The Struggle to Change

Unhappily for many, that was exactly what Manasseh set out to do. He removed the pagan images from the temple, cleaned and repaired the altar, reinstated Levite priests to reestablish offerings to God and began a systematic movement to comb out idols and pagan altars from all of Judah. At the same time he sent out a royal decree that the God of Israel was the only deity to be worshipped in the nation.

Most of the surprised people obeyed, by simply sacrificing to God at the places where they had formerly sacrificed to idols. This was a step in the right direction, but God expected sacrifices to be made only at His temple in Jerusalem. Manasseh soon learned that turning a whole nation from paganism to the only true God would be a long and next-to-impossible undertaking.

Meanwhile, he expanded the size of Jerusalem and strengthened and heightened a large part of Jerusalem's walls. He then appointed capable and trusted officers to take charge of Judah's other walled cities, which were subject to possible attack from Egypt or Philistia, and to probable attack from Assyria if the regular tribute to that nation failed to be paid on time. (II Chronicles 33:14-17.)

Manasseh didn't live to see his nation receive the protection and prosperity that would have resulted from the people turning wholeheartedly to God. He was entombed in a family burial place on his own property instead of being buried with most of the kings of Judah. In his time Manasseh caused great trouble in his nation, but he was the only idolatrous king who sought to make such an extreme change for the better in his way of living.

At Manasseh's death his son, Amon, immediately became king of Judah at the age of twenty- two. (II Kings 21:17-18; II Chronicles 33:18-20)

Again it was the old story -- a new, young king going just the opposite of his father's intentions. Amon followed almost exactly the example of his father Manasseh's first years of reign. He even managed to recover many of the hidden carved images his father had caused to be made, and set them up again to be worshipped. Judah was again steered back into perilous, mad idolatry.

Chapter 143

Josiah's Crusade against Idolatry

AFTER King Manasseh had repented, he started leading Judah back to the worship of God. But he died before he completed the gigantic task of reforming the nation. His son and successor, Amon, did not follow the good example of Manasseh's later years, but followed, instead, the bad example of his earlier years.

Idolatry Breeds Violence

Historians have pointed out, with good reason, that most of the successors of idolatrous Israelite kings had very short periods of rulership. So it was with Amon, whose servants plotted against him and murdered him by the time he had ruled only two years. The people of Judah, however, were so angry because of their leader's assassination that they succeeded in finding all those connected with the act and put them to death. (II Kings 21:19-26; II Chronicles 33:21-25.)

By this time, Amon had been buried close to his father in the family burial place near the royal palace.

Josiah's Crusade against Idolatry

Although only eight years old, Amon's son Josiah was the next ruler of Judah. Even though he was first guided by his advisors with various beliefs and ambitions, by the time he was about sixteen he had a growing desire to really follow the ways of his ancestor David, whose accomplishments greatly interested him.

By the time he was twenty years old, Josiah began to rid his kingdom of idols by outlawing the presence of pagan altars and images. At the same time he sent out crews of men to tear down and destroy any objects connected with idolatry. They went throughout Judah and even into the land from which most of Israel had been removed. The last use of heathen altars, just before they were wrecked, was for burning the bones of the profane priests. Their bones were found buried near the altars at which they had officiated when sacrifices had been made to idols. (II Kings 22:1-2; II Chronicles 34:1-7.)

During the years those changes were being made, proper activities were restored at the temple, which again required repairing because of rough usage while careless and rowdy idol worshippers held their profane ceremonies there. Worshippers of God came from far and near, even from the tribes of Israel; and they brought offerings. At last there was a considerable collection of silver at the temple given as offerings by God's worshippers. When Josiah was about twenty-six, he ordered officials to use the silver to buy new timber and stone and to pay the wages of carpenters, builders and masons for mending the worn and broken parts of the temple. (II Kings 22:3-7; II Chronicles 34:8-13.)

Meanwhile, Hilkiah the high priest excitedly reported to his friend Shaphan, the king's secretary, that he had found the Book of the Law in the temple. (II Kings 22:8; II Chronicles 34:14-15.)

This Law on the original scroll of sheepskin, comprising the first five books of the Old Testament, had for a long time been at the side of the ark. (Deuteronomy 31:24-26.) And Jehoshaphat in his time had copies made for the teaching of the Law all over the nation. (II Chronicles 17:7-9.) Later, during some time when the temple was overrun by idol-worshippers, most copies of the Law were destroyed. This official temple master copy was missed by the destroyers, probably because some astute and faithful priest concealed it rather than have it destroyed by those who wanted to do away with God's laws.

When Shaphan, Hilkiah and others presented the ancient but well-preserved sheepskin scroll to the king, his excitement was no less than that of Hilkiah. Josiah was so interested that he immediately asked that Shaphan read some original scriptures aloud, so that they might know what God requires of men and nations. (II Kings 22:9-10; II Chronicles 34:16-18.)

The Laws of Peace

Shaphan read aloud certain chapters from the book of Deuteronomy -- that part having to do with God's promises of blessings for obedience and the curses that would follow disobedience. (Deuteronomy 28) Josiah became so perturbed that he violently tore his robe. In those times that was an action that indicated great distress. (II Kings 22:11; II Chronicles 34:19.)

"According to what you just read, as Moses wrote it," Josiah exclaimed, "this nation is overdue for a terrible time of God's wrath! I want you to go at once and inquire of God if anything special can be done to cause God to be merciful to us!"

"There is a true prophetess here in the city by the name of Huldah," Hilkiah said in a desperate tone.

"Seek her out," Josiah ordered. "Ask her, what will happen and what we should do."

Hilkiah, Shaphan and three other men of rank left right away to find the prophetess Huldah, to whom God had given special ability to understand some of His intentions. (II Kings 22:12-14; II Chronicles 34:20-22.)

God must have previously given Huldah understanding for Josiah's benefit, because she had an immediate answer for her visitors.

"Tell the man who sent you that God will indeed bring deep misery to the people of Judah because of their turning to false gods," Huldah said. "God's warnings, like His promises, never fail. There is nothing that can be done now to alter God's plans. But He wants the king of Judah to know that he, Josiah, won't go through the soon-coming time of curses and desolation for his nation.

Because Josiah has repented and has faithfully worked to turn his people back to the right way, he will be mercifully taken to his grave and will be spared the evil to come." (II Kings 22:15-20; II Chronicles 34:23-28.)

When Josiah learned what Huldah had to say, he was disappointed that his people would not COMPLETELY repent. As a result there wasn't much he could do to prevent God's wrath from eventually falling on Judah. Nevertheless, the king determined to make the most of the time he had left. He called for the people -- especially the leaders -- to meet with him at the temple to hear a reading from the Book of the Law. He hoped that all who heard would be sobered and anxious to seek God. After the reading, probably by Hilkiah the high priest, Josiah stood up before the crowd.

The People Follow Josiah

"God of Israel, we have heard your laws read just as you gave them to your servant Moses," the king called out in prayer. "We know that your laws are just and good, and that only by living by them can we be happy, healthy, prosperous and safe. We realize now, more than ever, that disobedience toward you will surely result in misery, sickness, poverty and trouble. We would like to declare to you that it is our desire and intention, with your help, to put aside ways that aren't good for us or pleasing to you, and wholeheartedly live by your rules only!"

A loud murmur of approval came from the people and their leaders. (II Kings 23:1-3.)

"We can get off to a good start by seeking out and destroying all idolatrous things that still remain in Judah," Josiah told the people. "I daresay there yet remain even in the temple articles that have to do with idolatry. I request the high priest and those under him to look closely again for such things. If any are found, let them be removed at once from the temple!"

Obviously someone had been careless in this matter. Many pots, bowls and other equipment used in pagan ceremonies in the temple were hastily rounded up and carried out. Later they were tossed into a huge fire outside the city. The ashes of wooden objects and the fragments of metal things were taken to be dumped at the site of the city of Bethel. This place had been an important seat of activities for God's servants, but later became defiled by pagan priests who claimed they represented God.

Josiah doggedly set out to remove every vestige of idolatry from Judah and even part of the land of Israel north to Samaria. Hiding pagan priests were found and punished. The dwellings of those who had been pagan temple prostitutes, both male and female, were burned or torn down. (II Kings 23:4-20; II Chronicles 34:29-33.)

At Bethel, Josiah's men even dug up the remains of heathen priests and burned them on the altar there, thus carrying out the prophecy made three hundred and fifty years before, when God inspired one of his servants to declare that one day a man named Josiah would burn the bones of the pagan priests on that altar. (I Kings 13:1-3, 26-32.) However, the bones of the true prophet who had spoken this weren't touched. (II Kings 23:17-18.)

God's Purpose Stands

After these things had been accomplished, the time came for the Passover, which many observed with special fervor because of Josiah's success against idolatry. Josiah had worked diligently to wipe out idolatry and sorcery from his nation and from territory of the Israelite tribes to the north. He fervently hoped God would spare his country from the curses the people bring on themselves when they forsake the God of Israel for pagan gods and demons. (II Chronicles 34:1- 7.)

Josiah also knew that God would be pleased because the Book of the Law had been found and much of it read to the people. To add to all this, the king saw to it that the Passover that year was observed with unusual solemnity and great ceremony. Many thousands of animals were sacrificed, thirty-three thousand of which Josiah contributed from his flocks and herds. (II Kings 23:1-28; II Chronicles 34:8-33; 35:1-19.)

But the king's good works didn't alter God's intention to punish the nation because of their turning from Him. (II Kings 23:21-27.) Sometime later Josiah was one morning informed by an excited officer: "Thousands of Egyptian troops are pouring into our land!"

Josiah's Political Dilemma

The king's hopes for continued protection for Judah were dependent on his being careful not to endanger his life. But Josiah, and the nation, got smug and careless. Josiah's hopes were almost wiped out when he learned that an Egyptian army with thousands of troops and cavalry and hundreds of chariots was moving along the coastal area of western Judah. (II Chronicles 35:20.) This, Josiah reasoned, was the beginning of God's punishment of Judah, come in the form of a mighty fighting force that could devastate the whole nation in less than a week. However, the next report to reach the king gave him some comfort.

"The Egyptians are continuing northward on the plains by the sea. No troops or chariots have turned inland."

Though relieved at the news, Josiah remained perturbed because a foreign army was on his soil. He wanted an explanation, as soon as possible, for its being there. Even before he could send emissaries to the Egyptians, representatives came from none less than Necho, the Egyptian king, who was with his army.

The spokesmen told Josiah: "Our King Necho wants to assure you and your people that there is no reason for concern, because we have no intention of war or any harm to your people or their possessions. We wish only to pass harmlessly through your land on the way to Carchemish on the Euphrates river. Our king intends to free that city from the king of Babylon, who has no right to it.

"Our king trusts that you will have no desire to interfere with his plans. Otherwise, Judah shall surely suffer heavily, inasmuch as God has told him that we should go against the Chaldeans at Carchemish. Any who interfere with God's will shall surely be dealt with in a terribly harsh manner!" (II Chronicles 35:21.)

"So be it," Josiah said after the Egyptians had departed. "Let them kill each other off. I don't intend to become embroiled in a war, though not because of being threatened by some pagan who claims to speak for God. If the Egyptians win, we'll no longer be vassals to the Chaldeans. Their victory over the Assyrians didn't rightfully mean that we should switch allegiance to the king of Babylon."

"If the Egyptians don't win, we'll suffer for it" an officer reminded the king. "As long as we are vassals to the Chaldeans, we will be expected to serve as a buffer between Babylonia and Egypt. If we fail to confront the Egyptians, we'll probably pay a higher price in lives if the Chaldeans demand an accounting from us."

Josiah Picks a Fight

"But the latest report is that the Egyptians have already passed through Judah and are moving along the plain of Sharon," Josiah pointed out. "How could we possibly overtake them?"

"There's still time," the officer explained. "Probably they'll be turning eastward at the valley of Jezreel to take the highway to Damascus for the benefit of their chariots. We could rush an army northward past Samaria and intercept them after they've changed directions!"

Josiah acted at once, though with mixed feelings. (II Chronicles 35:22.) He didn't want to start a battle, but neither did he want reprisals from Babylon for standing idly by.

The two armies came within sight of each other in the valley of Megiddo, near where the most terrible battle in the history of man will take place in the lifetime of many now reading these words (Revelation 11:14-19; 16:15-17.)

"I went to the trouble of warning that stubborn king of Judah," Necho muttered angrily to his officers when he saw the approaching army. "Perhaps we can save time and effort by first removing him from the scene. Instruct the archers to close in at a reasonable distance from these Jews' chariots. Tell them to watch carefully for the royal chariot and make certain that their arrows reach both passenger and driver."

The Egyptians supposed that the king of Judah would be easily distinguishable in a special chariot, but Josiah had considered that, and came into battle in an ordinary cavalry chariot. During the first careful pass the two forces made at each other, the Egyptian archers couldn't find what they were looking for. They finally discharged clouds of arrows at all the chariots of Judah. One of those arrows landed, as if by chance, deep in Josiah's body.

"Put me in another chariot and get me out of here before the Egyptians discover they have wounded me," Josiah muttered weakly. (II Chronicles 35:23.)

The king was quickly transferred to another chariot and carried back to Jerusalem, where he soon died. (II Kings 23:29.) Perhaps the king of Egypt was a long time learning that one of his archers had fatally wounded the king of Judah.

There was a sudden retreat of the army of Judah, and that was what mainly mattered to the Egyptians, whatever the cause. Having shoved the army of Judah aside, Necho moved on unhindered toward the northeast.

Because Josiah was so greatly respected and because his death foreshadowed the death of the nation, there was great mourning upon his death, even by many who didn't care for his staunch stand against idolatry. Asked to speak at the king's funeral was the young prophet Jeremiah. He was a friend of Ahikam, an intimate of Josiah and son of Josiah's confidential secretary Shaphan. (Jeremiah 26:24; II Kings 22:8-12; II Chronicles 34:20-21.) Jeremiah delivered a most unusual eulogy because of Josiah's accomplishments for God. His observations were later set to music and sung and played for centuries to come on special occasions. (II Chronicles 35:24-25; Lamentations.)

Josiah was buried in one of the sepulchers of the kings of Judah. He was the last king of that nation who followed God, and God promised he would die without having to go through the misery that was to come to Judah. Although Josiah died of a battle wound, the nation was at peace, and he died in a peaceful state of mind far from the battlefield. (II Kings 23:30; II Chronicles 35:26-27.)

Chapter 144

Jeremiah Warns Judah

ACCORDING to Josiah's wish, his grandson, then eight years old, was to succeed him. But he was removed from any opportunity to reign after ten days' time. Neither did Josiah's eldest son, Eliakim, succeed his father because the people of Judah believed he would regard the king of Egypt as their master. Instead, they put Eliakim's younger half-brother Jehoahaz on the throne.

Meanwhile, the Egyptians were not victorious over the Babylonian king as they had hoped to be.

The Chaldeans pursued the Egyptians southwestward for hundreds of miles. Later, with the Chaldeans on their way back home, Necho had freedom to demand of Jerusalem that Eliakim should be made king. Jehoahaz was therefore king only three months because King Necho of Egypt considered Judah his vassal nation and thought only he should have the right to decide who should be made king. As a gesture to prove that his will should be carried out in every respect, the king of Egypt decreed that from then on Eliakim should be known as Jehoiakim.

Jehoiakim continued to rule Judah for the next eleven years, even though he wasn't the choice of the people who followed God. During those years, there was an unhappy return to idolatry and a constant heavy tribute, mostly in gold and silver, to the king of Egypt.

A Reluctant Prophet

As for Jehoahaz, he was taken by the Egyptians to their country, where he died. (II Kings 23:31- 34; II Chronicles 36:1-4.)

As a result of allowing his nation to fall back into idolatry, Jehoiakim had his share of troubles. One of his sources of worry was the prophet Jeremiah, who had been around in Josiah's time, but who because of his youth didn't earn much respect until he had spoken at Josiah's funeral.

Jeremiah was probably only in his late teens when God first contacted him, telling him that long before he was born God had chosen him to be a prophet to warn many nations of their wrong ways and what would come to pass unless they turned to observing God's laws.

"But how can I speak to nations?" Jeremiah asked. "I would have to talk to kings, and kings wouldn't listen to me because I am only a boy."

"You shall grow in wisdom," God told him. "Besides, I shall tell you what to say in every situation. You are not to fear anyone, regardless of his rank or his fierce or scornful expressions. I won't allow harm to come to you."

Obviously in a vision, Jeremiah felt his lips being touched by God's hand.

"This day I have put words in your mouth," the Creator said. "I am setting you over the nations and kingdoms with the power to root out and destroy, but I shall also give you the power to plant and build."

This meant that Jeremiah was to do far more than warn Judah and other nations of calamities to come. God would also reveal, through Jeremiah, where the captive and scattered House of Israel would again be started as nations, eventually, in other parts of the world. (Jeremiah 1:1-19.)

In time, with the passing of generations, many Israelites forgot their identity. Migrating among other nations, ever-increasing numbers came to regard themselves as Gentiles. Most of them, as this is written still do. Through Jeremiah and others of God's servants who would be born much later, the Creator planned that the Israelites of the ten-tribed House of Israel would eventually recognize themselves and no longer be lost, and would remember the commission their ancient ancestors had been given and the covenant between their people and God.

Jeremiah spent his early years in the priests' town of Anathoth, only a few miles north of Jerusalem. Because of being bothered by people who despised and troubled him, he moved to Jerusalem. There he could be lost in the nonreligious capital crowd instead of being conspicuous in a small ministerial town where many priests were growing lukewarm and didn't like to have a zealous prophet around. Jeremiah became respected in Jerusalem after having much to say at Josiah's funeral and having already gained the friendship of some of the more upright men of King Josiah's acquaintance.

Jeremiah's first major trouble during Jehoiakim's reign came about when he was told by God to go to the temple and warn all who came there that unless they would live by God's laws, God would cause Jerusalem to become as ravaged as the ancient town of Shiloh, the town where the tabernacle was set up when Israel first came into the land of Canaan. (Joshua 18: 1; Psalm 78:60; Jeremiah 26:6.) Shiloh had been destroyed by the Philistines hundreds of years before Jeremiah's time. (I Samuel 4:10-12.)

"God has told me that unless the people of Judah repent of their evil ways and wholeheartedly return to obeying Him, this city will soon become a place that will be spoken of only with scorn, ridicule and contempt!" Jeremiah shouted to the crowds who came to the temple to try to make themselves right with God by making token offerings and pausing for what would appear to be periods of prayer or religious reflection.

Who Believes a Prophet?

This was too much for many in authority who had long tired of what they called "Jeremiah's prophecies of doom." Self-styled prophets of God and many of the people, and even priests at the temple, joined in seizing Jeremiah and accusing him before the multitude.

"You have uttered curses against Jerusalem and the temple of God!" they shouted angrily. "For this reason you deserve to die!"

When the king's counselors heard about Jeremiah being held by the priests and others, they immediately arranged for a quick trial. (Jeremiah 26:1-10.)

"Why should we delay, what should be done by holding an unnecessary trial?" Jeremiah's accusers heatedly asked. "It's plainly evident what he has done and what the penalty should be!"

"Why should any of you speak against God?" Jeremiah asked in his own defense. "It was God who sent me to the temple to warn of trouble to come. Why not obey God and thus avoid the evil things that will otherwise come to you? Do what you will with me, but if you kill me you will bring greater calamity on yourselves and the people of Jerusalem because of unjust treatment of one of God's chosen servants."

There was a noisy babble of voices as the priests and their supporters derided Jeremiah's remarks. Some were still demanding the prophet's life. Hastily the princes and the king's counselors conferred with the representatives of the people, the chiefs of the clans.

"We can't agree with you that this man should be punished by death because of prophesying," the king's counselors and the princes told the prophets and the priests. Then certain respected older men reminded the crowd: "Other prophets have made dire predictions and they weren't executed for their remarks. Why should Jeremiah be the exception? When King Hezekiah heeded the warning of the prophet Micah, and called on God, remember how God spared Hezekiah and the nation? Wouldn't it be wise for us to do as Hezekiah did?" The most influential man speaking for Jeremiah was Ahikam, the son of Shaphan who was a friend of Hilkiyah, Jeremiah's father. (Jeremiah 26:11-19, 24.) Reluctantly the envious priests and self-appointed prophets bowed to the will of the counselors, and Jeremiah was released.

At the same time a prophet named Urijah had publicly declared essentially the same things Jeremiah had stated. He, too, was being sought to be punished by death for making gloomy remarks about what would happen to Jerusalem and the temple. Having heard that Jeremiah had been arrested, and that he would share Jeremiah's fate, Urijah lacked faith that God would protect him, and managed to escape from Jerusalem and reach Egypt, where he succeeded in hiding for a time. Jehoiakim, king of Judah, was so angered that a prophet he disliked should evade a trial that he sent men to Egypt to ask King Necho to find Urijah and turn him over to the emissaries from Judah. Necho cooperated. Urijah was found, given over to the men of Judah, and slain as soon as he was brought back to Jerusalem. If he had joined Jeremiah to face his accusers, probably his life would have been spared. (Jeremiah 26:20-23.)

In those days King Jehoiakim heavily taxed his people to enable him to pay the high tribute demanded regularly by the king of Egypt. (II Kings 23:31-35.) Meanwhile, Jeremiah continued his warnings. Some people considered him a traitor to his country because he spoke of Babylon as a greater power than Egypt, and therefore a greater menace to Judah. This greatly irritated the king, who owed his office to the ruler of Egypt, whom the Jews were expected to look up to as the most powerful of rulers.

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, God told Jeremiah that he should write down all the warnings He had given Jeremiah to speak to the public and declare them all again at one time to the people at the temple. Jeremiah dictated them to his secretary, a man named Baruch, who wrote them on a heavy scroll.

"Perhaps when people hear at one time all of the calamity I plan to bring on them, they will be sobered," God observed to Jeremiah. (Jeremiah 36:1-3.)

God didn't require that Jeremiah should be the one to again warn the people at the temple. The prophet was relieved. He knew that the scheming priests and false prophets, especially those from Anathoth, his home town, would seek his life if he appeared again at the temple. (Jeremiah 11:21.) God had told Jeremiah not to fear anyone, but he had been staying out of sight, knowing it would be unwise to deliberately go about and tempt his enemies.

A Crisis Approaches

"If I again proclaim all that is on your scroll," Jeremiah told his secretary, "the priests and prophets will again try to have me killed. You they probably would ignore just because you aren't me. Be my spokesman. Go to the temple on the special fast day that has been set for a few days from now, and read aloud all you have written. On such a solemn day some might repent and be spared from the misery God is going to bring on Judah."

Baruch was at first uneasy at carrying out the prophet's wishes, but he complied without complaining. He faced a large audience on the day when people were fasting because they believed that might appease God and cause Him to protect them from their enemies. Many concerned people listened attentively, but there was no way for Baruch to determine how much they were affected.

One young man, Michaiah, a grandson of Shaphan, who had been King Josiah's secretary, and was friendly toward Jeremiah, was greatly impressed. He ran to the king's house, where there was a meeting of Judah's princes and counselors of Jehoiakim. Michaiah excitedly told them about the terrible things Baruch had said would come on the nation.

Chapter 145

Jehoiakim Buys Trouble

AT THE TEMPLE young Michaiah heard Baruch read the scroll that he had written for Jeremiah. In it were dire warnings of trouble to fall on Judah just as had already fallen on Israel. Michaiah, grandson of the Levite prince Shaphan, who had been King Josiah's secretary and was friendly toward Jeremiah, ran to the palace and reported what he had heard. His audience was the assembled princes, that is, the chiefs from the tribes of Judah and Levi who had been chosen as the king's counselors. They were impressed.

"Right or wrong, this man is risking death and deserves an honorable hearing," one of the princes spoke out. "He should come here to read his scroll to us so we can hear all he has to say."

The princes agreed. Baruch was brought to them to read his scroll. They were so alarmed at what he read that they took the scroll and told Baruch to leave at once.

"Get back to Jeremiah and tell him to hide himself or get out of Jerusalem," they warned Baruch. "And go with him. The king may be very angry when he hears what you have written from the prophet's mouth!" They knew the false prophets and some priests would be angered by Baruch's reading all of Jeremiah's warning prophecies to the people at the temple. (Jeremiah 36:1-19.)

Scroll of Jeremiah Burned

While Baruch hurried back to Jeremiah, the officials went to the king, hoping they could persuade him to prevent Jeremiah's enemies from seizing the prophet, whom most of them believed was a spokesman from God. On their way, they left Baruch's scroll in the office of Elishama, the king's secretary.

"This Jeremiah is too intent upon upsetting my people!" Jehoiakim muttered angrily after he heard what his visitors had to say. "I want that scroll brought here and read to me! Then I'll decide what to do, and I don't want any of you men trying to talk me into helping this troublemaker!"

A little later one of Jehoiakim's men started reading aloud from the scroll. The king sat glumly on a couch by a blazing open hearth fire, necessary to offset the chill of a winter day. The princes stood uncomfortably about, waiting to see how the king would react to what he was hearing.

The reader had gone through only three or four columns of Jeremiah's dreadful warnings when Jehoiakim sprang up and snatched the scroll from the surprised aide. With his other hand the king grabbed up the scribe's razor from a nearby table and angrily cut the scroll to throw it into the fire. Then three of the startled princes tried in vain to persuade the king not to burn the scroll.

"You could be burning the very words of God!" one of the three remonstrated.

The king wouldn't listen.

"I said no!" he scowled. "This dismal thing deserves to be burned!"

The whole scroll was burned. (Jeremiah 36:20-25.)

The three officials who were concerned about the scroll were Elnathan the son of Achbor and Gemariah the son of Shaphan (Achbor and Shaphan were conscientious officials whom good King Josiah had sent to confer with the prophetess Huldah -- Jeremiah 36:12, 25; II Kings 22:12-14) and Delaiah the son of Shemaiah, who was probably the same Shemaiah who had contributed many cattle to Josiah's great Passover sixteen years earlier. (II Chronicles 35:9.) These men illustrate the importance of good parental example and training.

Disappointed, all the princes departed. Then Jehoiakim sent three of his officers to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch. But the two were nowhere to be found. God had caused them to be warned through the princes and had provided a secret place for hiding. (Jeremiah 36:26.)

While more and more men futilely searched for the prophet and his secretary, the king paced impatiently back and forth past the ashes of the scroll. By then he was more troubled than angry. He had heard read a prediction that the Babylonians (Chaldeans) would soon attack Jerusalem. This was the startling statement that had caused him to slash and burn the parchment.

Jeremiah and Baruch didn't waste their time while in hiding. At God's command they began to prepare another scroll. This one contained more details and added predictions, including one that had to do with Jehoiakim.

Jehoiakim's Penalty

"Because the king of Judah has followed idolatry and has spurned my warnings, he shall soon become a victim of the Babylonians," God told Jeremiah. "Later, he shall come to a shameful death. For him there will be no royal burial. His body shall lie outside the walls to be covered by frost at night and bloated by festering heat in the daytime. I shall also punish his descendants, his servants and all the people of Judah who have refused to listen to me." (Jeremiah 36:27-32.)

For a long time the prophet and his secretary managed to remain concealed from the king's police. When the added prophecy concerning his death eventually reached Jehoiakim, he was angrier than ever and sent his men even outside of Jerusalem to seek for Jeremiah and Baruch.

God had said it would happen. So it occurred one day that part of the army of Babylon, commanded by one of King Nebuchadnezzar's generals, set out for Judah.

When Jehoiakim heard that troops, chariots and cavalry were pouring across the Jordan River in the region of Jericho, he became undignifiedly excited.

"Send every man to his station on the wall fortifications!" he shakily ordered his officers. "These pagan impostors can perhaps overrun other cities of Judah, but don't let them take Jerusalem!"

Jehoiakim didn't attempt any defense of the towns, villages and farms in the path of the approaching enemy. He feared that Judah's army would be defeated, leaving Jerusalem without enough soldiers to fully man the gates and walls.

From the vantage point of the walls, the king and his men could see the Babylonians long before they arrived. As they spread out around the city, it appeared that their numbers were less than had been reported crossing the Jordan.

"This is their whole army?" Jehoiakim asked.

"Surely not, sir," one of the officers answered. "Most of it is probably still in Babylon. And there could be many thousands of them concealed behind the hills off to the north."

Just as Jehoiakim was thinking that his army could probably defeat the Babylonians who were within sight, a group of enemy officers rode up perilously close to the archer-lined wall in which were the main gates.

"We bring a message from the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon!" one of them yelled in Hebrew. "Our king has ordered us to deliver it directly to Jehoiakim, your king! Either open the gates immediately to let us in or send out your king with any and all he wishes to accompany him!"

"Our king has nothing to discuss with invaders!" a Jewish spokesman shouted back from the wall a few minutes later.

"By that you are admitting your king is a coward who is a king over a nation of cowards!" the Babylonian bellowed back.

"We should have gone out to meet these dogs before they reached Judah!" Jehoiakim angrily muttered to his officers.

To Jehoiakim's growing frustration, the Babylonian continued his insults. Even people of the city who were out of range of his voice learned what he was saying almost as soon as he said it.

Foolish Bravado

"Call my best warriors to accompany me!" the king of Judah growled wrathfully. "I'll show my people that I have a few words to say to these heathen!"

"Your words will CERTAINLY be few if you do that!" an officer warned him. "Surely you aren't about to fall for their scheme to get the gates open or capture you!"

"Just do as I tell you!" Jehoiakim snapped, glaring. "I'll go out only a short way. If they dare approach, my archers and lancers will bury them in spears and arrows!"

In spite of reminders from other officers that Jerusalem might be lost if the gates were opened, Jehoiakim was intent on having his way. To the gratification and surprise of the enemy, the main gates of Jerusalem swung inward. Out rode Jehoiakim on a handsome charger surrounded closely by soldiers bristling with bows, spears and swords. The moment they were outside the wall, the gates slammed shut behind them and the huge bars thudded into place.

Instantly Jehoiakim experienced a frantic feeling of being cut off from safety. He was more aware of it when he heard the swiftly increasing sound of horses' hoofs. Suddenly all was confusion as he was knocked off his mount when his men, grouped too closely around him, wildly struggled for room in which to wield their weapons on the Babylonian cavalymen who rushed them.

As the king of Judah regained his senses, he gradually realized that he was among strangers. There were voices babbling in a language he couldn't understand, and the painful pressure of chains around his wrists, ankles and neck. Smirking, unfriendly faces were poised over him.

"You are fortunate to be alive -- perhaps," one of the faces told him in Hebrew. "Some of the soldiers with you were killed by your own archers and spearmen on the wall. Some of my men lost their lives too, but you owe your life to my men who managed to bring you to this tent."

"Don't assume that I'm thankful to be your prisoner," Jehoiakim muttered bitterly. "Whatever it is that you require of Judah can be discussed after I'm freed from these chains and returned safely inside Jerusalem. Otherwise, my city will disgorge a horde of fighting men who will wipe you out!"

"I can't believe that," the Babylonian general answered, while his officers grinned knowingly. "While you were unconscious, we threatened to kill you unless Jerusalem's gates were opened to us. There was no response. Those chains will remain on you during our trip back to Babylon. There you can explain to our king why you've been paying tribute to a lesser nation like Egypt instead of to Babylon. You'll have about two months and hundreds of miles to think up some good answers."

That night the misery from his chains convinced Jehoiakim that he wouldn't be able to bear weeks of such discomfort. Next morning he asked for a chance to talk to the Babylonian commander, who received him coldly. (II Chronicles 36:5-6.)

"If you're here to waste my time asking for some favor, forget it," the Babylonian advised.

False Peace Purchased

"I'm here to suggest that we exchange favors," the king said. "If you will release me to return safely inside Jerusalem, I will give you any tribute for as long as you demand it."

"In that event, there would be no more tribute to Egypt," the commander finally replied. "You would have to swear full allegiance to Babylon!"

This Jehoiakim eagerly did, but his eagerness faded when the commander stated what Babylon would require as a regular tribute. The king doubted that he would be able to meet such heavy demands for very long, but he promised to comply because his life was at stake.

"You have made your solemn commitments," the commander reminded Jehoiakim. "Be warned now that if you fail in this matter, my king will come to Judah to exact payment in the form of ravaged cities and many Jewish lives! I shall carry out our first part of the agreement by freeing you of your shackles."

At a signal from their commander, Jehoiakim's guards cut his chains. As they rattled to the floor, the king felt that he could breathe freely for the first time in many hours.

"And now for our next part of the agreement," the Babylonian continued. "That is to depart from your land and allow you to return inside your city. That we shall do as soon as you arrange to get together the first tribute payment and have it delivered to us here where our tents are pitched."

Jehoiakim was stunned. He had believed that Judah would deliver the first payment by caravan some days later. Getting the required items together on such short notice was impossible.

"Why do you look so startled?" the Babylonian inquired, grinning slightly because of Jehoiakim's obvious misery. "Aren't you prepared to deliver it?"

"Not right now. It would take several days to obtain some of the items from scattered towns and farms," Jehoiakim explained.

"Then for this time we'll overlook things such as cattle and sheep and foodstuffs and take the total amount in gold, silver and brass. Surely you can easily obtain those items in your great city."

"Let me return there safely, and I'll see that the required amount is brought out to you." Jehoiakim said shakily, knowing that he was in for much more trouble if the commander wouldn't agree.

"If it isn't here by noon, my men will spread over your land and we'll take it for ourselves by the sword!" the commander warned, motioning for his prisoner to leave.

Tremendously relieved, but smarting under the indignity of having to hike, unescorted, back to Jerusalem's gates, Jehoiakim was further humiliated when he had to go to some length to identify himself to guards before thousands of his people on the walls. Once he was safely inside, there was cheering and applause because of his return. But the people showed little enthusiasm when Jehoiakim told them of his problem.

Chapter 146

Tyrannized By Babylon

THERE was loud cheering when the Babylonians released King Jehoiakim and allowed him to re-enter Jerusalem. It would have been much louder and more enthusiastic if Jehoiakim had been more popular with his subjects and his soldiers, many of whom didn't have much respect or admiration for him. Right away he called together his officers and advisers. They all congratulated him on his return, but few of them appeared overjoyed. Nor did they show much enthusiasm when he told them of his problem.

The Temple Looted

"I want this thing done right now, even if you have to strip the temple of its valuable utensils!" Jehoiakim roared, suddenly angered by the situation. "Then I intend to find out who is responsible for the decision that I should die by the hands of the enemy while everyone else remained safely here!"

Long before noon the valuables from the temple were borne out to the Babylonians, who would have been foolish to try to charge through the gates while they were open. Shortly after the tribute was delivered, the triumphant invaders took down their tents and moved away to the north. (II Chronicles 36:5-7; Daniel 1:1-2.)

To all appearances it looked as though Judah -- and Jehoiakim -- had come through another crisis. But there was greater trouble and misery ahead, as the prophet Jeremiah was still foretelling.

Jehoiakim was busy for months trying to weed out from his government those in high offices who opposed him. At the same time he tried to convince his people that he had done his part in saving Judah from the Babylonians, and that from then on it was their responsibility, if they wanted to remain free, to contribute willingly all that was asked of them.

Two years dragged by, during which there were disturbing reports that the king of Egypt was furious when he learned that Jehoiakim had disavowed Egypt and had declared loyalty to Babylon. There were also rumors that the Egyptians were mustering and training an army superior to any they had raised before. These things gave heavy concern to Jehoiakim, whose weakened nation lay in a perilous location between the two great competing powers. And because they had forsaken God for idols, God was not helping Jehoiakim and his people. (Jeremiah 22:1-19.)

During those two years and for quite a while afterward, Jeremiah remained concealed, except to reliable friends. Several old family friends had repeatedly befriended Jeremiah -- Delaiah the son of Shemaiah, Elnathan the son of Achbor, and several sons and grandsons of Shaphan the Scribe. (II Kings 22:8-13; Jeremiah 26:24; 29:1-3; 36:11-13, 25.) The king's police no longer sought Jeremiah with their former fervor, although if any had come face to face with the prophet, they would have arrested him.

Another Crisis

When it was about time to start equipping the caravans for bearing the third year's tribute to Babylon, Jehoiakim realized that he would have to make a decision. If he continued the heavy payments, he would be making even more enemies in Judah. He would also be running the risk of attack from the Egyptians, to whom he preferred to give allegiance. But if he withheld the promised tribute to the Babylonians, he could expect the threatened ravaging of his nation.

Jehoiakim decided to withhold the payment. He hoped that he could make a reconciliation with Egypt before the Babylonians would bother to send an army to collect their dues. Mostly he hoped that his overlords would consider the trip too costly, and give it up.

Time passed. Babylon and Egypt were so busy sparring with each other for supremacy that neither bothered to invade Judah for a while. There was no word from Babylon, and no report from Jewish spies in the Euphrates River region that any great number of Babylonian troops had been seen moving west. The king of Judah happily began to think that he had made the right move.

Then the unexpected happened. Fierce bands of well-armed Syrians, Moabites and Ammonites, mounted on fine steeds, began to make surprise night attacks on Judah's towns and villages. Murder and looting grew by leaps and bounds. These attackers were too fast and wily to be captured. Almost overnight much of Judah fell into the power of the savage invaders, whose numbers increased steadily. (II Kings 24:1-4.)

One morning, guards on Jerusalem's walls were startled to see, with the first light, a large number of mounted soldiers at a safe distance from the gate. They were being joined by many other horsemen who resembled the raiding Syrians, Moabites and Ammonites.

"Look at those cavalymen they're joining!" a guard exclaimed. "They're holding the flag of Babylon!"

The large Babylonian cavalry force was joined by many Syrian, Moabite and Ammonite troops. Except for the Babylonians, these were the soldiers who had been terrorizing people in many small towns and villages in Judah. The Jews learned later that these soldiers had been hired by Babylonians, and had gradually left their homeland in such small bands that they weren't at first considered a menace. Collectively, they comprised a sizeable threat even to Jerusalem. Although they had no catapults or battering rams, there were enough of them to bottle up the city. (II Kings 24:1-4.)

A Desperate Plight

The sight of the invaders struck fear into Jehoiakim. This was Nebuchadnezzar's stark answer to Jehoiakim's unwise decision to hold back tribute. Now he would have to pay dearly for it. The only possible way out was to rush troops against the invaders at the risk of losing the city.

"We have urgent business with your king!" a Babylonian officer bellowed in Hebrew. "Send him out to us -- NOW! Otherwise, we'll rip through every unprotected village and farm that hasn't already felt our swords!"

In the special wall lookout with his officers, Jehoiakim heard and shuddered.

"If they do as they threaten, at least we'll get them away from here," Jehoiakim observed unfeelingly.

Most of his officers -- the ones who had relatives and property elsewhere in Judah -- openly glared at him.

"After they're out of sight, we could send troops after them," a leading officer suggested.

"No!" Jehoiakim snapped. "I don't want any trouble with the Babylonians!"

"No trouble?" the staff officer inquired incredulously. "We've had nothing but trouble with them for weeks!"

"You know what I mean," the king answered irritably. "I don't want to antagonize them. I don't even want the gates closed against them. Go see that they're opened so that our visitors, however warlike, won't consider Jerusalem an armed fort that has to be besieged. I'll be in my quarters in the event our visitors insist on coming inside to make their demands."

As Jehoiakim walked shakily out of the lookout, his officers stared at him as though he had suddenly gone mad. Nevertheless, the king's orders were carried out. The gates were opened to the Babylonians, who soon took advantage of this surprising opportunity to get inside the city.

"Before we go in, be sure that the gates are securely fixed to remain wide open," the Babylonian commander instructed his men. "We can't risk any part of us being trapped."

The King's Ignoble End

A small number of the invaders cautiously rode inside, while hundreds of cavalymen swarmed close to the gates, ready to dash inside in the event of any resistance. The first thing the Babylonian commander and his picked men intended to do was to seize the king of Judah and hold him prisoner under threat of death as an example of what would happen to anyone who failed to pay tribute to the Babylonians.

But Jehoiakim, who had now realized that Jeremiah was right about it being wise to cooperate with the Babylonians, was so frightened that he hid himself. Only a few hours later he was discovered.

The Babylonian commander was so irked by the time and trouble used in ferreting out the king that he had Jehoiakim tossed from one of the highest parts of the wall.

They then dragged his broken body outside the gates like a dead beast without allowing a funeral to be held, much less a royal interment.

"Let no one move or bury that carcass!" the Babylonian commander shouted to his men.

For several warm days and cold nights the body of the king of Judah lay outside Jerusalem, just as the prophet Jeremiah had predicted. (Jeremiah 22:1-19; 36:27-31.) There were those in Judah who wanted to give their king a royal burial, but the invaders didn't allow Jehoiakim's body to be touched except by insects, animals and vultures. Thus ended, at age thirty-six, the life of a king who chose to ignore God and live according to his cruel, selfish and pagan desires. (II Kings 24:5-6; II Chronicles 36:5-8.)

This was far from the end of trouble from the Babylonians, who didn't feel that matters could be settled simply by a king's death. Many Jewish nobles and men of high rank and ability were also put to death. More than three thousand others were taken captive and forced to march to Babylon, hundreds of miles distant. (Jeremiah 52:24-28.) The stronger ones were made to help carry valuable items plundered from the temple. Among the prisoners was a young man by the name of Ezekiel.

Jehoiachin, eighteen-year old son of the late king, was immediately made the next ruler of Judah. The Babylonians impressed the young new king with the necessity of his regarding them as absolute conquerors of Judah, and himself completely subject to the will of the king of Babylon.

In spite of the circumstances, Jehoiachin followed in his father's idolatrous ways and showed only disdain for Jeremiah's warnings and advice. To make matters worse, he showed little inclination to bow to the Babylonians, whose commander was so incensed that he seriously considered doing away with the young king of Judah. To add to his troubles, Nebuchadnezzar began to fear that Jehoiachin might feel so strongly about his father's death that he would lead his nation in a serious revolt against the Babylonians.

A Woebegone Young King

Much to the surprise of Jehoiachin, the Babylonians descended upon Jerusalem again and demanded its surrender. Jehoiachin hoping to avoid bloodshed, had the gates opened and led his mother and his officials out in surrender. But the Babylonians were not in a kindhearted mood. They quickly rounded up and chained about ten thousand of the men of influence, priests, leading craftsmen and best soldiers of Judah.

Jehoiachin's main cause of surprise was that he, his mother, government dignitaries and his close friends were added to those thousands. Oblivious to wails of complaint and shouts for mercy, enemy soldiers herded the captives outside the city. Stunned at this sudden, dismaying turn of events, the young king dropped his youthful dignity and loudly demanded to talk to the Babylonian commander, who eventually rode to him on his richly outfitted mount.

"When I was seized and put in chains, I was so surprised that I was speechless!" Jehoiachin shouted indignantly, struggling to hide his fear. "The least you can do, failing to show due respect for a king, is explain what you intend to do with us."

"We didn't explain because we wanted to spare your being perturbed if you knew the facts," the Babylonian grinned. "Like your father, you have failed to show the cooperation we expected. You've been king for three months and ten days, yet you've made no move to make the tribute payments your father withheld from us. Our patience is at an end. The matter will be resolved by taking you and these people of yours to our land, where we intend to put all of you to good use. Besides, we'll take a fair amount of your valuables."

Jehoiachin stared in disbelief. Finally he managed to express himself.

"The king of Egypt will avenge this inhuman treatment!" was the only thing he could think to say to try to impress the commander.

"The king of Babylon would welcome the king of Egypt to try it," the commander smiled. "If your father hadn't relied on Egypt, but on Babylon instead, he would be safe on the throne of Judah right now, and we wouldn't be here to take tribute from you."

Jehoiachin continued staring, finally finding his voice for the second time.

"You mentioned taking valuables," he said. "How can you take valuables from us when you have already bled us dry of such things?"

"There are still some items of great worth in your God's temple," was the reply. "We won't leave here empty-handed."

What the unhappy Jehoiachin didn't know was that many bundles of loot from the temple were already being packaged, to be tossed over the wall and picked up by soldiers surrounding the city. Much of this loot included gold stripped from the walls of the temple.

Unwilling to talk any more with the frantic young king, the Babylonian commander turned his horse about and rode off, shouting orders to his men in their native tongue. Guards passed among the prisoners, removing the heavy chains so that they could carry items they were forced to bear.

The outlook of tramping over hundreds of miles of rough and barren ground was a bleak one for Jehoiachin and his people, but there was nothing to do now but comply. Even with proper leadership and arms, the Jews wouldn't have dared move against the Babylonians and their well-armed, superior numbers.

Babylonian Captivity

Only a fraction of the invaders were needed to take the Jews east. The others, including most of the Babylonians, stayed in their camps close to Jerusalem, where they still had unfinished business.

It was to direct the Jews in deciding what man would be the next king. The Babylonians insisted that it should be Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle.

"You will make him your king right away," the Babylonian commander told the Jews. "If there is any delay, we shall take more of you to Babylon. And because your new king will be controlled by us, we shall start by changing his name. From now on he is to be known as Zedekiah." (II Kings 24:8-13; II Chronicles 36:9-10; Ezekiel 1:1-3.)

The dignitaries of Jerusalem and the representatives from other areas solemnly and obediently carried out the ceremonies of making Zedekiah king. The Babylonians were satisfied, having investigated Zedekiah's political beliefs, and having been informed that he wasn't in favor of any trade or diplomatic ties with Egypt.

Zedekiah was fully aware why the Babylonians had chosen him to be the next ruler of Judah. Actually he wasn't so much against allying with Egypt as the Babylonians had been informed, but in the weeks while the invaders still stayed around, he was very careful to give them the impression that he would faithfully please his master in all matters.

Convinced that Judah would turn out to be a profitable vassal nation under Zedekiah's rule, the Babylonians and their allies disappeared as abruptly as they had appeared many weeks previously.

With the enemy obviously gone, people began moving in and out of Jerusalem again. At last it was possible to learn the extent of loss of people and property to the invaders. At least eight thousand men and about two thousand women and children had been taken captive. Seven thousand of the men were husky young soldiers who could be used at hard labor. A thousand were skilled workers in many crafts, especially smiths, so they couldn't make more armaments for Judah. The Babylonians had purposely chosen these capable men to deprive Judah of leadership in order to better please King Nebuchadnezzar. (II Kings 24:14-17; Jeremiah 29:1-2.)

Soon a few neighboring nations, including Egypt, heard what had happened to Judah. Their leaders were quite concerned that Judah's army hadn't been used effectively. They sent representatives to Jerusalem to try to convince Zedekiah that their nations intended to stand fast against Babylon and that if Judah would join them, the combined forces of the western nations could successfully hold out against any attacks by Babylon.

Jeremiah's Warning Ignored

Despite what had occurred in his country, Zedekiah began to seriously consider what these men had to say. It was so difficult for him to come to a decision that he sent for his prophets to ask their advice. He knew about Jeremiah, but because he continued in idolatry practiced by the kings preceding him, he didn't want anything to do with a prophet of God.

"Egypt is growing in strength," the false prophets reminded their king. "So is the other nearby nations. It would be wiser to be friendly with neighboring nations than try to please one so distant."

Jeremiah was perturbed when he heard how the king's prophets had advised him, and how Zedekiah had decided to stop sending tribute to Babylon. He sent a message to the king, telling him that his prophets were wrong, and that it would be a fatal move for Judah to break the agreement with the Babylonians. (Jeremiah 27:1-22.) The king's prophets were naturally angered at Jeremiah's warning to Zedekiah, even though Jeremiah was ignored. One of them, Hananiah, publicly declared at the temple that God had spoken to him there assuring him that Babylon had passed the peak of power, would rapidly weaken from then on, and within two years wouldn't have enough strength to ward off nations that attacked. Hananiah furthermore contended that God had told him that Jehoiachin and all the Jewish prisoners would be returned to Judah, along with all the treasures that had been taken from the temple. (Jeremiah 28:1-4.)

"Under these circumstances, what foolishness it would be to continue sending our much-needed wealth to a pagan nation hundreds of miles away!" Hananiah shouted to the crowd. "If Jeremiah, who calls himself a prophet, wants to be a subject of King Nebuchadnezzar, we'll not prevent him from walking to Babylon!"

Now that Jehoiakim was dead and Jehoiachin taken captive, Jeremiah was again free to come and go as he wished. God had instructed him to make wooden yokes, or collars, symbolical of servitude, to send to the heads of the nations which wished to rebel against Babylon. They were to be reminders that they were going to remain as vassals to Babylon or be punished by God through the Babylonians. Jeremiah was told to wear one of the collars as a reminder to everyone who saw him. (Jeremiah 27:2.)

Jeremiah Ridiculed

Jeremiah was in the temple when Hananiah made his speech. In spite of his being the object of laughter caused by the false prophet's snide closing remark, he walked up to speak to Hananiah.

"I wish you were right. It would be good if our people could return and the temple properties were restored. A prophet will prove to be a true one if he teaches what is in Scripture and if he warns of an event and the event comes to pass at the given time. I say that Babylon won't fall for many years, but will in fact once again take Jerusalem. As for our people who have been taken away, they shall remain slaves for many more years!" (Jeremiah 28:5-9, 13, 14.)

Hananiah glared at Jeremiah then reached out to vigorously yank the wooden collar from the prophet's neck and smash it on the floor.

"Nebuchadnezzar's yoke of bondage on all nations will be broken like that within two years!" he called out to the crowd as Jeremiah walked away.

At another time when Hananiah was at the temple trying to convince more people that God had revealed the future to him, Jeremiah stood up and accused him of lying. He declared that God would punish him by taking his life within a year. Hananiah made a great display of indignation to try to hide his embarrassment and fright. Within less than two months Hananiah was dead. Many people, including the king, were sobered by this event. (Jeremiah 28:1, 10-17.)

Nevertheless, Zedekiah persisted in turning against Babylon and in continuing in idolatry. Meanwhile, Jeremiah faithfully kept on informing the people of dire warnings from God. He also wrote letters to the Jewish captives in Babylonia, encouraging them to keep up family life and bring up children for a time when liberation would come. (Jeremiah 29:1-14.) Among the captives who were happy to hear from Jeremiah was Ezekiel, later chosen by God as one of the great prophetic writers.

The beginning of the end started for Judah with a paralyzing report to Zedekiah that a massive army was crossing the Jordan above the Dead Sea with King Nebuchadnezzar as commander! (Jeremiah 39:1.)

Chapter 147

Seige -- Warning -- Defiance --Grief!

KING ZEDEKIAH of Judah trembled with a fear he had never known before when he heard that a mighty Babylonian army was approaching his nation. About all he could do, outside of barking out a few frantic commands, was to regret his unwise decision to rebel against the king of Babylon and to curse all who had influenced him to make it. (II Kings 24:20; 25:1; II Chronicles 36:9-13.)

Besieged!

The people of Jerusalem were fearfully amazed at the numbers of troops and cavalry that moved in around the city. There were also many chariots and a few formidably huge catapults and battering rams on wheels. All this proved that Nebuchadnezzar intended to make every effort and use every means to take the capital. If he should succeed, it would mean a quick end to the whole nation.

Days passed and there was no attack. There was only a strong voice from the Babylonian camp, occasionally exhorting the Jews to open the gates and come out peaceably to save themselves or eventually die from lack of food.

Lack of food, however, wasn't a matter of great concern to the Jews. There were vast stores of foodstuffs in the city -- enough to last for months. And as long as the enemy remained unaware of the source of their underground water supply, there would be no problem there.

Days added up to weeks, and weeks turned into months. From time to time the Babylonians tried to get their hooks and rope ladders fastened to the wall tops under cover of darkness, but showers of arrows, spears and rocks always wiped out the would-be intruders.

The enemy also tried using the battering rams, but those who manned them died by Jewish weapons before the rams could reach the gates. To try to even the score, the invaders hurled boulders over the walls with their catapults. But this was done only with a heavy loss of men, because the catapults had to be moved within the Jews' arrow range. Otherwise, the boulders merely smashed ineffectively low against the walls.

As the tempo of these exchanges was stepped up over the months, it became alarmingly obvious to the Jews that their food supply was diminishing much faster than they had thought it would. In the first place, they hadn't believed that the Babylonians would stay so long.

The enemy needed food and water, too, but it was available simply by raiding nearby farms and villages. Outside of unforeseen circumstances, it was possible for the Babylonians to stay for years. Comfortable in his huge, elaborately furnished tent, Nebuchadnezzar had no intention of moving until the Jews were starved into submission.

Now that food, finally had to be severely rationed, Jeremiah made another appeal to Zedekiah to save himself and his people by going out and surrendering to Nebuchadnezzar.

"God has told me that if you do this thing," Jeremiah wrote to the king, "the Babylonians will spare our lives. But if you wait until they have to force their way in, there will be much bloodshed because you have broken your promise to the Babylonians and are refusing even to ask for mercy." (Jeremiah 21:8-14.)

Of course this angered Zedekiah, even though he was almost convinced that the prophet was right. There were moments when he was on the verge of taking Jeremiah's advice.

To add to the miseries of Jerusalem's inhabitants, a contagious sickness developed. As usual, the poorer people and refugees living in squalid conditions suffered most, though few of any class escaped the weakening illness. Even Zedekiah suffered because of his profound personal troubles.

"Whoever failed to lay in a larger supply of my favorite wines isn't going unpunished!" he warned complainingly.

Is the Siege Lifted?

Conditions rapidly became more serious. Soldiers were given the largest rations, but the limited amount of food wasn't sufficient to keep them fit. The immediate future appeared so dismal that many people began to repent of their wrong ways and to try to make up for them at the last moment. One matter that especially reached the Jewish conscience was the over-holding of servants. One of God's laws was that bondservants should have their freedom after six years of service. (Deuteronomy 15:12-15.) Many masters had held their servants well past the release time, even though Zedekiah had made a public reminder that they should be given their freedom in the seventh year, which was in progress at that time. Almost overnight there was much relinquishing of servants, who were given the legally required money, valuables and property to get them started on their own just when their futures appeared impossible.

With the city on the brink of disaster, God once again instructed Jeremiah to warn Zedekiah of what would soon happen. This time the prophet was to give the warning in person. The king was surprised that Jeremiah had the courage to come to his palace and trouble him with more disturbing pronouncements.

"God has sent me to you with more reminders of what is about to occur," Jeremiah began. "He wants you to be convinced that because of our national sins, the Babylonians will succeed in entering and burning this city and slaughtering many. You shall attempt to escape, but you shall be captured and taken by King Nebuchadnezzar, who shall send you to Babylon to die. Perhaps you will be relieved to learn that you shall be afforded an honorable and ceremonious funeral -- in Babylon. It would be wise to consider these things. There is still time to save many lives by surrendering to the Babylonians." (Jeremiah 34:1-7.)

If Zedekiah hadn't had a deep secret fear of God he preferred to conceal, he might have signaled his guards, to seize the prophet. Instead, he motioned them to escort Jeremiah safely from the palace.

Things became so intolerable in Jerusalem that many were considering joining together to force open the gates and rush out to the besiegers. This would probably have been at least attempted had it not been for a puzzling turn of events. One morning it was noted that there was a great stir in the Babylonian camps. Tents came down. Within a short while troops, cavalry and chariots were moving off to the south! (Jeremiah 37:5.)

The Jews couldn't believe their eyes, or ears, because the huge army created quite a clatter as it departed. Greatly perplexed, weakly jubilant but very suspicious, they reasoned that this might be a ruse to lure them out in search of food, and that the enemy might suddenly return to slaughter any who left the city. Hours passed. Finally bands of Jewish soldiers ventured out to hurry to nearby farms and villages to try to find food. One might imagine that there would be a mass rush to get out of Jerusalem, but most were afraid to leave and many were too ill or too weak.

The End of Repentance

The sudden change of events caused some changes in Zedekiah's attitude. The miserable, subdued feeling that had been growing on him almost fell away. He was relieved to be able to more freely believe that Jeremiah's gloomy prophecies weren't necessarily going to take place.

There were other changes in the attitudes of some other people in Jerusalem. Now that it appeared that the crisis had passed, most of those who had freed their servants rounded them up and put them back at their menial work. Besides, they took back the money, valuables and property they had given them at a time when it appeared that these things might not have any future value to the givers. (Jeremiah 34:8-11.)

There had been much praying and repenting taking place in Jerusalem in recent days, but now much of this came to a halt with those who assumed that the city was again free and that food would soon be available.

Everyone was intensely curious about what had caused the Babylonians to leave and where they had gone. Zedekiah was anxious to know the answers. He sent scouts to follow the plain path of the moving army. The scouts' failure to return was evidence that the invaders didn't wish to allow themselves to be followed. Though the king's belief in Jeremiah had been shaken, he was certain that the prophet would know more about what was going on than anyone else.

"I want you to go to Jeremiah and tell him that I would like him to pray for the safety of Jerusalem and the people," Zedekiah instructed two men of high rank and reputation. "When he learns that I'm asking for his help, he might give encouraging information without your having to ask, whereas if you question him, he'll likely say nothing or start giving nothing but horrible predictions." (Jeremiah 37:1-3.)

"I am surprised that our king has sent you to ask me to pray for Jerusalem," Jeremiah told Zedekiah's representatives after they announced the reason for their call. "My prayers wouldn't be very effective while the people of Jerusalem and the king prefer not to do things God's way.

"What Zedekiah really wants right now is to learn where the Babylonians have gone and if they're coming back. He would also be pleased to hear that I have been wrong in my predictions. I have not been wrong. Everything I have mentioned will come to pass.

"The Babylonians have gone to meet the Egyptian army, which set out days ago for Jerusalem with the intention of driving off the besiegers. Even now the two armies are confronting each other. The Egyptians shall flee back to their nation, and the Babylonians shall return at once to again surround Jerusalem.

"This time they'll enter and burn the city. God has told me that even if Judah's soldiers should severely wound every enemy soldier, He would still see to it that the Babylonians would miraculously rise up and carry out the divine intention that Jerusalem should be destroyed!" (Jeremiah 37:4-10.)

Zedekiah was surprised, troubled and angered when he heard what Jeremiah had to say. He had no trouble believing that the Babylonians had gone to meet the Egyptians in battle, but he wanted to doubt that the Egyptians would be defeated.

False Accusations

In those few days of respite from the besiegers, there was heavy traffic through Jerusalem's gates, even though most of the inhabitants feared to venture out. Those who came and went were mostly those searching desperately for food. Only a small amount was brought in, because the enemy had already scoured nearby regions for it.

Jeremiah was among those headed out of the city. He had important business to take care of in a small town close by. He would have preferred to go there and stay, inasmuch as he believed there would be greater safety there than in Jerusalem, but he didn't plan to leave his friends and Baruch his secretary. As he approached the gates, an officer stepped out to block his way.

"I know you are Jeremiah," the officer said. "I also know that you are deserting to the Babylonians. You're probably going to them right now with some kind of information!"

"Not at all," Jeremiah calmly explained. "I am on my way to the town of Anathoth to take care of some personal business."

"Sure you are!" the officer exclaimed mockingly. "That personal business is with the enemy, but I'm going to spoil your plan. Come with me!"

With a sharp sword pointing toward his ribs, the prophet didn't have much choice of directions in which to go. In a few minutes he realized that he was being taken to the king's palace.

"I think I know you," Jeremiah observed as he strode briskly along in front of his captor. "Aren't you Irijah, a grandson of one of the king's prophets, Hananiah?"

"I am," the officer replied with a grim grin. "I'm sure you remember predicting my grandfather's death. Obviously, you begged your God to bring this about so that you could gain the king's trust. Now I'm going to even the score by turning you in as a traitor to Judah, caught in the act of sneaking off to the enemy!"

In a courtroom in the royal palace, Jeremiah was taken before some of the princes of Judah, who were angry with him because he was advocating that Judah should surrender to Babylon instead of relying on Egypt. They displayed their feelings by taking turns viciously slapping him in the face. Irijah stood by, greatly enjoying the cruel performance. Finally he walked into the milling group and seized the prophet.

"This man is ill!" he quipped. "He needs a long rest. I know just the place for him. It's in the home of Jonathan the court secretary next door -- in the dungeon!" (Jeremiah 37:11-15.)

Jeremiah was jailed there. It was a cold, dank, rodent-infested cell with barely enough light to see by, and only in the daytime. The prophet endured the misery of this filthy place until the king heard what had happened to him, which was several days later. Zedekiah was irked because this thing had been done without his knowledge. The possibility that Jeremiah's God would be angered worried him. A short while later the prophet was enjoying warmth and food in the king's private quarters.

Temporary Relief

"This doesn't mean that I'm releasing you from prison," the king said. "It could depend on what you have to tell me. Has your God had anything more to tell about the Babylonians?"

"He has," Jeremiah replied, thankfully masticating one of the few bits of food before him.

"Then tell me, man!" Zedekiah impatiently commanded, hoping that there might be some encouraging predictions for a change.

"God told me again that the Babylonians shall surely capture you!"

Zedekiah clapped his hands to his head and frowned at Jeremiah, who stood up and faced him.

"What great offense have I committed against you or anyone in Judah that I should be imprisoned?" the prophet asked. "Was it wrong of me to stand against your lying prophets, who insisted that Nebuchadnezzar would never come against Judah? Because I have tried to help Judah by proclaiming God's warnings, why should I die in the filth of the dungeon below the house of Jonathan the court scribe? I've not asked for any favors before, my king, but now I'm entreating you to spare me from being sent back to a place where a human being can't live very long!"

Jeremiah was risking stirring up the king's ire by what Zedekiah might consider complaint and criticism, but the prophet knew that it would probably be his only opportunity to speak out on his own behalf. The king said nothing for a few moments. Then he called to a guard.

"Take this man back to prison!" he instructed.

The guard motioned curtly to Jeremiah, whose hopes for a few more days of life sank with the king's orders.

"Don't return him to the dungeon where he was," Zedekiah added, "Put him in the main prison in a cell adjoining the jail court so he can have a daily walk. And tell the jailer that I want this man to receive clean water and a piece of bread every day as long as it is available." (Jeremiah 37:16- 21)

Although Jeremiah was very grateful for the better cell with more light, as well as more hope for living, it was still miserable to be cooped up.

From Terrible to Worse

As Zedekiah expected, the princes of Judah who had hoped for Jeremiah's slow death in the dungeon were quite irritated on learning what the king had done. They came to him to complain that the prophet's continued statements about a Babylonian victory were spoiling the Jewish soldiers' will to fight.

"This man is a valuable tool of the enemy," they told the king. "As long as he is alive, whether in or out of prison he'll have an undermining effect on the morale of our army. But once it becomes known that he no longer lives, the soldiers will conclude that his God didn't care enough about his rantings to back them up by sparing his life. A dead prophet doesn't have much influence."

Zedekiah had enough worries without being at odds with his counselors, the princes. He wanted to spare Jeremiah because he secretly feared God, but at the same time he wanted to avoid trouble by not offending the princes.

"I am not convinced that Jeremiah deserves death," Zedekiah told the princes, "but I am weary of this conflict you are having with him. Whatever you do now, I won't oppose. It's up to you if you want his blood on your heads."

Only a little later Jeremiah saw his jailer approaching, presumably to bring his daily ration of bread and water. But instead of passing food to his inmate, he unchained the door bar, pulled the heavy door back and motioned to Jeremiah to step out. Another man appeared carrying a coil of rope. Jeremiah walked along between them, as he was ordered, through several dismal passages and down some stone steps. They stopped at last in a dingy stone room with a wide, dark hole in the floor. It was so dark in the hole that Jeremiah couldn't see anything but blackness in it. With no word of explanation, the men tied the rope around Jeremiah's chest and pushed him into the dark hole. Little by little he was lowered into the gloom. Suddenly he felt the chill of cold mud oozing up around his feet and legs. The rope slackened, allowing him to sink gradually into the slimy mire! (Jeremiah 38:1-6.)

Chapter 148

Ordeal by Seige

FORCIBLY LOWERED into the deep mire of a dungeon pit in the prison at Jerusalem, Jeremiah could feel himself gradually sinking. The more he struggled, the deeper he sank. His shouts for help were futile. (Jeremiah 38:1-6.) Now that his eyes had become adjusted to the gloom, he could see that the men, who had brought him there, at the orders of the princes, had departed and left him helpless in a stinking cesspool.

A Noble Ethiopian

One of King Zedekiah's trusted attendants, an Ethiopian by the name of Ebed-melech, happened to learn what had happened to Jeremiah through men who were discussing the prophet's plight and were greatly amused by it. This black man was one of the king's favorite officials because he was alert, intelligent, conscientious and had proved himself trustworthy. Being a fervent follower of God, he was shocked that God's servant should be treated so cruelly. He hurried and reported the incident to his master, even though he realized that the king, an idolater, might not wish to be bothered by the matter.

"Those responsible have done an evil thing that could cause more misery to fall on Jerusalem," Ebed-melech respectfully suggested to Zedekiah. "There is no more bread left to keep Jeremiah from starving, but unless he is rescued soon, he could die in a much shorter time by smothering in the mire of the cesspool!"

Although Zedekiah had told the princes that he wouldn't interfere with their depraved treatment of Jeremiah, he was so angered by the way they were trying to cause the prophet's death that he decided to step in again to save him.

"Do what you can to rescue that man and bring him back to the cell where he was," the king instructed that trusted aide. "Just don't try anything by yourself. I'll give you thirty palace guards to help protect you from any trouble you run into."

The first thing Ebed-melech did was obtain ropes and an armful of old rags. When he and the thirty men arrived at the pit, they let the ends of the ropes down to Jeremiah and tried to pull the prophet up. But he had sunk up to his shoulders, and pulling him created a suction that held him so firmly that the pressure under his arms was quite painful. The Ethiopian had expected this difficulty. Tossing the rags to Jeremiah, he called down to him to stuff them between his arms and the ropes, so that the men could pull harder without hurting him too seriously.

After the prisoner was lifted to freedom from the miry trap, Ebed-melech saw to it that he had an opportunity to bathe and put on clean clothes before being taken back to his cell. He also managed to bring him a little food. (Jeremiah 38:7-13.)

Following a rest, the prophet was surprised to be taken to a room in the temple, where Zedekiah was waiting to talk privately with him.

"You've told me before what you believe will take place here soon," the king said. "Now I'm asking you to tell me again, including anything that's new or anything you've withheld, and what I should do."

"I've angered you many times by what I've said," Jeremiah observed, shaking his head. "If I say anymore, you'll become so angry that you'll have me beheaded? As for advice, you won't accept any from me."

Zedekiah's Half-Strong Promise

Zedekiah wanted to be thought of as strong and a doer of good. But he had refused to repent and he was afraid of his political advisers. He glanced quickly around to make sure that he and Jeremiah were alone then moved a step closer to the prophet.

"I swear that no matter what you have to say, I will not put you to death," the king earnestly declared. "Neither will I turn you over to anyone who seeks your life. May God end mine if there is no truth in what I say."

Zedekiah's sincerity was evident to Jeremiah, who decided to give the king a complete account of what would soon happen.

"What I have to say isn't anything I've made up," the prophet explained. "This is what the one and only God has revealed to me. To begin, King Nebuchadnezzar is no longer in Judah. He and part of his army have gone to the city of Riblah in Syria. The whole Babylonian army has defeated the Egyptians, who have fled back to their country. The victors haven't pursued them because they are anxious to return here and continue the siege of Jerusalem.

"You would be wise to go out and surrender to Nebuchadnezzar's generals. If you do, you will save your life and the lives of many others, and the city won't be burned. If you don't, the enemy will break down the walls, pour into Jerusalem and set fire to it. Many people will be slaughtered. Many will be captured -- including you and your family!"

"Months ago I turned against the Babylonians," Zedekiah said after a period of thought. "Now if I suddenly surrender, and have to join my countrymen who are already prisoners in Babylonia, they will never cease mocking me." (Jeremiah 38:14-19.)

"If you surrender, that won't happen," the prophet pointed out. "It could happen if you are captured, but I doubt the Babylonians would let you live that long. I implore you, sir, to bury your pride and save yourself and your people! If you refuse, you will be mocked by the women of your harem, who will seek safety by willingly turning themselves over to Babylonian officers. The children you have had by these women will become slaves to the enemy!" (Jeremiah 38:20-23.)

Zedekiah swallowed nervously, still afraid to trust God, although he wanted to help God's prophet. He glanced cautiously about then stared earnestly at the prophet.

"Don't tell anyone else what you have told me today," he warned. "Keep silent about these things, and I'll keep my promise that you won't die by my order or at the order of the princes. If they ask you if you talked to me, and tell you that they'll see that you live if you tell them what we talked about, tell them that you wanted me to spare your life, and I promised that you wouldn't be taken back to that dungeon under Jonathan's house."

Evil Princes Outsmarted

At a gesture by the king, Jeremiah's guards, waiting at a respectful distance, approached and escorted the prophet back to his cell. It wasn't long before he was visited by the princes, who had been informed of his meeting with Zedekiah, and who hoped to learn if he had made any kind of contact with the Babylonians through Jeremiah.

"Tell us about the conversation you had with the king at the temple, and we'll do what we can to see that you are freed from this place," one of them told Jeremiah.

"I told the king that I don't deserve to be put back in a dungeon where it isn't possible to keep on living," Jeremiah answered. "He assured me that I wouldn't die by his hand or yours."

This reply didn't tell the prophet's visitors much, but it caused them to confer among themselves.

"The king must have a good reason for sticking up so staunchly for this fellow," one of them remarked.

"Whatever it is," another said, "I don't think this miserable prophet has the ability to be a spy for the Babylonians or a secret messenger for the king -- especially as long as he's behind bars. Let's leave him where he is and, for the present, forget about him."

Jeremiah drew a breath of relief as he watched his visitors stride away. (Jeremiah 38:24-28.)

Just as the prophet had told Zedekiah, most of the mighty Babylonian army soon returned to Jerusalem, whose inhabitants fearfully realized that they were woefully unprepared for another siege -- even a short one. Food had been difficult to obtain. There was never enough to stock for the future. In spite of the many days the siege had been lifted, many people were on the verge of starvation. Besides, sickness was still taking its toll.

Frenzy and dismay settled on the inhabitants. Even while the enemy was still miles away, excited men slammed the gates shut and barred and reinforced them with huge props. Anyone who happened to be on the outside was cut off from returning.

"Let no one in from now on!" was the order. "They could be Babylonian spies or soldiers disguised as Jewish food deliverymen or even as our troops!"

As for the king, he knew that he didn't have long to make up his mind what to do, though probably his decision would be simply determined by what he wanted to do, regardless of the consequences. For the time being, he was busily conferring with his officers who were frantically organizing their soldiers for defense.

The Ethiopian Honored

Again the Babylonians spread out around the city, pitching tents at a safe distance. They built corrals for their horses and for the livestock they had taken on their way back from their victorious encounter with the Egyptians. It was obvious that they were determined to take up where they had left off, and were prepared to stay for a longer period than the city could hold out.

When Jeremiah heard of the return of the enemy, he managed to get word to Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian, to come to his cell. The black man came at once, wondering if the prophet needed his help again, but he received a more pleasant surprise.

"I have some good news for you from God," Jeremiah told him. "He has asked me to inform you that because you have put your trust in Him and have obeyed His laws, there is no need for you to fear the Babylonians. You won't be wounded or killed by them." (Jeremiah 39:15-18.)

Thankful for this encouraging information, Ebed-melech went back to his duties, one of the few people in Jerusalem who could harbor any hope under the fearful threat of the Babylonians.

Within only a few days many of the city's inhabitants were so desperate for food that they were forced to consume animals that weren't meant for man to eat. Horses, donkeys, cats, dogs and even rats and mice became common fare. When these items were exhausted and the final stages of starvation set in, a few people secretly resorted to the horrible, grisly pursuit of cannibalism. Possibly these miserable humans would have preferred to give themselves up to the Babylonians, but no one was allowed outside the walls. The misery and death could have been prevented if one man, the king, had walked through the gates and given himself up to the besiegers. (Jeremiah 21:1-10; 32:23-24; 38:17.)

While matters were worsening inside the city, things were changing on the outside. Using teams of chariot horses, the Babylonians brought load after load of soil as close to the wall as they could safely come under cover of their own shielding. As the days passed, the loads of soil grew into rising mounds that eventually became as high as the walls they faced.

Under cover of careful but difficult shielding, the invaders dumped much more soil over the mounds on the wall side, thus extending the mounds closer and closer to the walls. Fortifications were built atop some of the higher mounds so that it was possible for Babylonian soldiers to face Jewish wall guards at the same height, and well within range of spears and arrows. Huge catapults were pushed up other mounds, making it possible for boulders to be easily hurled to the wall tops and even beyond.

Final Phase of Siege

After some months of struggling under the lethal handicap of soaring spears, hissing arrows and catapulted hot boulders, the Babylonians managed to finish the fortified mounds that were part of their plan of attack. Early one morning, the Jews on the wall tops were startled to see that the mounds were fully manned. More ominous was the sight of battering rams on wheels, soon surrounded by burly troops with especially wide shields.

The Babylonians had obviously been prepared to attack with the first sufficient light of day. The shrill blowing of horns and loud shouting caused much excitement and stir among the men on the walls. They didn't know exactly what to expect, but when they saw the huge battering rams rapidly advancing toward the walls, they realized that this wasn't going to be a matter of simply killing off one Babylonian ram crew after another.

Jewish archers and spearmen swarmed to the wall edge to discharge their weapons down on the troops rushing forward with the weighty rams, only to find themselves the targets of spears and arrows from the nearby Babylonian fortifications. After their one fusillade, which wasn't very effective against the wide, horizontally held shields of the enemy ram crews, the Jewish archers and spearmen were forced to dodge for shelter.

To add to their peril, Babylonian catapults bombarded the wall tops with smashing boulders, some of them nearly red hot. The conflict had hardly begun, but it was obvious that the Jews were going to have a difficult struggle in defending their capital.

The long heavy rams, pushed by the running Babylonians, slammed noisily against the walls, cracking the stone and mortar. As quickly as possible the crews dragged their mammoth weapons back out of spear and arrow range, where fresh crews took over and aimed the rams into the cracked areas. This time, sizeable chunks of stone fell away under the crashing blows of the iron noses of the log shaped hammers. The walls were being pierced!

It was yet a long way through the walls, but the encouraged invaders kept the rams in action. With each thunderous blow, more of the stones cracked and fell away, constantly enlarging the openings. This limited success cost many Babylonian lives. Comrades on the mound fortifications weren't able to entirely prevent the Jews from hurling or shooting their share of missiles.

Killed and wounded on both sides were immediately dragged off and replaced, inasmuch as there was only limited space for soldiers, and neither side could afford to lessen its efforts. The frantic struggle was made grimmer by screams and groans of men in pain, the hissing of arrows and boulders, the thuds of spears against wood, stone and flesh, the pounding of the rams, the shouts of excited officers and the general clatter of this unusual kind of battle.

The frantic pace had to lessen when twilight came, and stop completely when darkness set in. This was to the advantage of both sides.

They could rest and prepare to continue the battle next morning. Neither side could gain much of an advantage during darkness.

The Walls Breached!

It was almost impossible for Jewish officers to tell how much damage had been done to the walls. They couldn't look down and determine the size or depth of the gouged-out holes, although several soldiers on the wall top claimed that the rams' metal noses had appeared to penetrate several yards during the last attacks.

When Zedekiah heard this report, he was gripped with fear. For a time he considered a personal surrender to the enemy as soon as morning came. Then he reasoned that it would be the same as suicide to expose himself during a continued battle, and decided that the wisest course would be to gather his family together, if worst came to worst, and try to escape from the city by a secret exit known only to a few.

At dawn the attack and defense were resumed with greater fury. For a while the Babylonians greatly deepened the breaches in the walls. Progress was later slowed when some of the ram trucks began to fall apart from rough usage. Some of them had to be withdrawn. Others were put to work in teams, so that the deepening breaches would become wider. One of the rams was finally applied to a gate. The unshatterable hardwood proved to be tougher than stone. However, when bolts and iron straps started to shake loose, the attackers decided to continue.

That afternoon, despite their reverses, the Babylonians completely broke through the wall at one point. About the same time, the battered gate began to fall loose. The invaders kept up the hammering because they wanted the openings to be wide enough to admit several men at once. They knew that if they tried to enter single file, the Jews could easily pick them off.

The King Deserts

When Zedekiah learned that the enemy was about to try to get troops into the city, he excitedly ordered some officials, attendants and servants to prepare to accompany certain members of his family in swift departure. All his wives and children weren't included because there were some with whom he didn't care to be burdened. The more in the party, the less chances of escape there would be.

Accompanied by picked guards, the king and the chosen part of his family rushed to a secret passage which took them under the north wall of the city. It emerged in a bouldery area uncomfortably close to a part of the line of Babylonians encircling Jerusalem. Darkness was coming on, making it possible for the escapers to quietly move from boulder to boulder until all reached a ravine out of sight of the enemy. Just then the sound of many voices welled up from the city, indicating that the invaders were inside and clashing with the defenders. (II Kings 25:1- 4; Jeremiah 29:1-4.)

For a few moments the king paused to listen to the frenzied sounds of battle then turned on his intended way to safety in Egypt. He was resigned to the painful loss of his nation and city, but he exulted in having escaped from the enemy.

Terror would have replaced exultation if he could have known what would happen in the next few hours.

Chapter 149

Judah Falls Apart

KING ZEDEKIAH of Judah escaped from Jerusalem just before the Babylonians broke into the city. The king and part of his immediate family, accompanied by a remnant of his army, hurried on through the darkness on their intended way to safety in Egypt. (II Kings 25:1-4.)

Zedekiah's Flight Ends

"We can't go on walking like this," Zedekiah complained to an aide. "We need animals to ride on, especially for the women and small children."

"I'm sorry, sir, but it would be most unwise to allow anyone to see us," the troubled aide explained, "for if we tried to obtain horses or donkeys from anyone living around here we would be seen. If we leave as much as one small clue to show the direction which we have escaped, we would be inviting the enemy to swiftly overtake us."

The king didn't like to be corrected in this manner, though he knew the aide was right. There was no choice but to move on through the darkness as quickly and quietly, as possible.

Back in Jerusalem, the Babylonians streamed through the breach in the wall and through the broken gate in such numbers that most of the would-be defenders fled and hid themselves wherever they could. They were ferreted out and slain, though not without casualties to the invaders, who blundered into ambushes. Even the temple was searched, where only priests, their helpers and a small crowd of fearful worshippers were found. Zedekiah's palace had already been overrun. Of course the king and his royal guard weren't found there. This was disappointing to the Babylonians, whose search then became doubly intense. Every building, room, passage, corridor and stairway they could find was combed.

"We've searched even down in the prison dungeons," an officer soon reported to one of Nebuchadnezzar's generals.

"My guess is that the king of Judah and part of his army, have somehow escaped from the city," one general told another.

"If that's so, it had to be through some underground means," another officer observed. "We'll have to keep looking till we locate it and find this Zedekiah. It would be better for us never to return to Nebuchadnezzar than to do so without the king of Judah!"

The Babylonian general had guessed well. Someone -- probably a servant -- had earlier informed frantic Jewish soldiers of the secret entrance to the underground passage by which the king's entourage had already departed. The soldiers had hurried through it, scattering in all directions when they reached the open.

Meanwhile, the invaders were unable to find anyone, even through threats of lingering tortures, who knew anything about the passage. All who knew its location had already used it.

It was almost daybreak when some Babylonian soldiers finally stumbled across the entrance. On finding how far the passage extended, it was clear how the escapers had managed to elude the human ring around the city.

The faint light of dawn plainly showed many footprints leading off confusingly in all directions. However, expert trackers soon discovered a profusion of tracks left by a group that had obviously stayed together. A Babylonian cavalry squadron raced off to follow the distinct trail.

A few miles ahead of them to the east, Zedekiah and his group still plodded along. With daylight, the king was relieved to learn that they had already trudged all the way to the plains of Jericho. He intended that they should cross the Jordan and swing around to the right on a curve toward Egypt.

Suddenly there were shouts of alarm from several who pointed excitedly to the west. Zedekiah and the others turned to see the mounts of a few hundred cavalymen pounding down the road. Within minutes the king of Judah and his company were captives of the Babylonians!

Jeremiah Befriended

The Babylonian officers were elated when Zedekiah was brought before them.

"You've caused us much trouble in finding YOU but we couldn't give up, because our king is anxious to meet you," one of the generals remarked, grinning heartlessly. "In fact, he is so anxious to meet you that we will break camp and personally escort you to Riblah in Syria, where he presently is staying.

In the meantime enemy troops were rounding up the inhabitants. The healthier and more capable ones became captives. The elderly, weak, sick and those incapable of any trade, craft or profession were simply ignored. (Jeremiah 39:9-10.) Even prison inmates were checked over. Those who were at least capable of manual labor were freed from prison in Judah to become prisoners of Babylonia. The prophet Jeremiah was among them.

All able captives were put in chains and herded to the city of Ramah, a few miles north of Jerusalem. While this was taking place, other enemy troops were moving about in other cities, capturing thousands more Jews and moving them to Ramah also. This was to be the starting point of the march for the combined captives of all Judah. From there, long lines of thousands would go on the miserable march to Babylonia. (II Chronicles 36:11-21.)

While this was being arranged by the Babylonians, Nebuzar-adan, captain of the guard, was informed that Jeremiah was among the prisoners.

Because the prophet was favorably regarded by Babylonian leaders for his trying to convince his countrymen that they should regard Babylonia as their master, Nebuzar-adan was perturbed.

"Release him at once and bring him to my tent!" he ordered. "He should never have been taken prisoner!"

Jeremiah's Wise Decision

A little later an aide appeared with Jeremiah, now free from his chains.

"We didn't intend that this should happen to you," Nebuzar-adan explained in a conciliatory tone. "King Nebuchadnezzar and many of us realize that through you, your God warned your people what would happen unless they followed your God's instructions. Now it's happening. You aren't to be taken along with the others, although you are free to accompany your countrymen to Babylon if that's your wish. For you there will be no chains and no labor. After you arrive at Babylon, I'll see to it that you will be well taken care of. On the other hand, if you prefer to stay in Judah, so be it."

For a moment Jeremiah was tempted to say he would go to Babylon. There he would have his needs supplied. If he remained in Judah, it would be a struggle to find enough to eat. Besides, his own people could continue to treat him as a bothersome eccentric. But thinking his position through made it plain to him that his place was in his own nation. There God might still have some use for him.

"It would please God if I stayed," the prophet announced.

"That's good," Nebuzar-adan grinned. "You can go just as soon as I have some food prepared for you to take. And here's something to partly pay for the trouble we've caused you."

The prophet blinked at the gold pieces Nebuzar-adan pressed into his hand. No reward was expected or necessary. He expressed his gratitude to the captain and greater gratitude to God when he arrived at a lonely spot southeast of Ramah.

"One more thing," Nebuzar-adan added. "To replace King Zedekiah, we have chosen a man to govern Judah we can depend upon. His name is -- is -- "

"Gedaliah," Jeremiah smoothly interrupted.

"Why, yes!" Nebuzar-adan said, surprised. "No announcement has been made of his appointment. How did you know?"

"God tells me many things," the prophet smiled.

"I believe you are indeed the prophet of a powerful God," the captain observed. "As such, with the welfare of your nation at heart, you should probably be close to the seat of government. Gedaliah's administration will be from Mizpah instead of Jerusalem." (Jeremiah 39:11-14; 40:1-6.)

Jeremiah was pleased with Gedaliah's appointment because he was a grandson of Shaphan, whose family had repeatedly befriended Jeremiah. (Jeremiah 26:24; 36:11, 25.)

The Babylonian soldiers and their allies now turned north toward Syria, taking with them Zedekiah, his family and some foremost army officers and leaders of Judah.

Turmoil and Intrigue

Meanwhile, the scattered remnant of the army of Judah that had escaped from Jerusalem gathered at Mizpah to find out if Gedaliah wished to reorganize the military force. Mizpah also became crowded with Jews who had fled to nearby nations when the Babylonians came. Having heard that the invaders had left, they returned to their nation and came to the new seat of government to inquire about the status of their country.

Gedaliah proclaimed to all that they should make a special effort to produce from the land as much as possible to try to make up for what the enemy had taken.

"We must also work diligently to prepare for the time when the Babylonians will return to take tribute," Gedaliah told them. "We are a captive nation, and we are bound to give the conquerors whatever they demand." (Jeremiah 40:7-12.)

Shortly after Gedaliah's advice to the people, several military leaders came to Gedaliah to inform him that they had heard that Ishmael, a man they all knew who was of royal stock in Judah (Jeremiah 41:1 and I Chronicles 2:41), had returned from the land of the Ammonites. He had fled there for safety when the Babylonians had come.

"We have learned that Ishmael is bitter and envious because you have been appointed governor by the Babylonians," the captains told Gedaliah. "We overheard some workers who knew that Baalis, king of the Ammonites, has talked Ishmael into taking your office."

"That's ridiculous!" Gedaliah exclaimed, after several moments of staring skeptically at his informers. "I can't believe Ishmael would try to do that. Besides, HOW could he do it?"

"He has promised Baalis that he'll murder you!" was the startling reply.

"If this is supposed to be a joke, I fail to appreciate it," Gedaliah frowned. "I suggest that you refrain from eavesdropping on your harvest hands, who obviously have used you to start an evil rumor."

The men's faces fell as Gedaliah strode away. Because they were concerned for the governor's life, it was disappointing not to be believed. One of the men, Johanan, later came alone to see Gedaliah, and asked to speak privately to him.

"If you're here to apologize for that accusation made earlier, it isn't necessary," Gedaliah said. "Ishmael is the one who deserves the apology."

"I came back to make an important suggestion," Johanan said, ignoring the governor's remark. "Conditions are bad enough in Judah without allowing them to become worse. People are looking to you for leadership. If something should happen to you, what remains of our nation will probably fall apart."

"Are you talking about Ishmael again?" Gedaliah asked sternly.

"Let me dispose of him before he disposes of you!" Johanan earnestly urged. "No one except the two of us will know anything about it! I'll be doing Judah a favor!"

"How can you be so wrong about someone?" Gedaliah angrily asked. "If anything happens to Ishmael, I'll hold you responsible and deal with you accordingly!"

Johanan gave up and left, realizing that there was little he could do to prevent any trouble from Ishmael. (Jeremiah 40:13-16.)

Ishmael's Rampage

About two months after the Babylonians had departed, Gedaliah invited Ishmael to a state dinner. He believed that if this man felt any envy toward him, this friendly gesture would probably dispel any ill feelings. Other guests included several Jewish leaders under Gedaliah, military men and the few Babylonians who had stayed as representatives of Nebuchadnezzar. The governor had assumed that Ishmael would bring an acquaintance or two. He was surprised when he showed up with ten burly, grim-faced men who were referred to only as close friends.

After all were seated and served, Gedaliah was pleased to note Ishmael's sociability. The governor thought how unfortunate it would have been to have believed and acted on the negative reports about Ishmael.

Suddenly Ishmael and his ten men leaped up, whipped short swords from under their clothing and swiftly attacked every other man in the room. In a very brief moment Gedaliah and his guests -- except the murderous eleven -- were dead or dying. (Jeremiah 41:1-3.)

Ishmael's next move was to prevent all servants from fleeing from the building simply by cutting them down. For two days the assassins held the governor's house without outsiders knowing what had happened. Then it was reported that a group of eighty men from the territory of Israel wished to confer with Gedaliah.

"They want to burn incense at the temple ruins to show their sorrow because of the state of affairs," Ishmael was told. "They've shaved their beards, torn their clothes and slashed themselves."

"Then it's only a group of religious fanatics," Ishmael observed. "But we'll have to get rid of them. We can take care of them as soon as they're inside."

Ishmael walked out of the building to see the men solemnly approaching, heads down, as though they were in a funeral march.

He assumed the same gait. He even managed to effect tears, to pretend that he was deeply moved and sympathized with their interests.

"We are here to ask permission to go to the site of the burned temple, that we may make our offerings there," one of the men told Ishmael.

"As spokesman for the governor, I can tell you that you will be welcome there," Ishmael said in a hushed, solemn tone. "But first why not come into the house? You must be thirsty after your walk."

The moment the visitors were inside, the fiendish eleven charged at them with swords poised. When the terrified men realized what was happening, those who weren't immediately attacked fell on their knees and begged to be spared.

"We have great quantities of precious food hidden underground!" they wailed. "There's a fortune in oil, honey, wheat and barley! It's all yours if you let us go free!"

By this time seventy were dead or dying. Ishmael decided to spare ten of them, at least temporarily, for turning over their food to him. First the corpses had to be hidden. This was no great problem, inasmuch as they were added to the other victims who had been dropped into a nearby pit that had been made as a water reservoir more than three hundred and forty years previously.

Help at Last?

Ishmael's bloody accomplishments caused him to become even madder and more daring. He and his men ventured into the streets of Mizpah to seize people and hold them in Gedaliah's house. Faced with death unless they cooperated, certain male captives agreed to join Ishmael in his insane cause. His purpose was to stamp out the frail government of Judah and seize the inhabitants of Mizpah to sell them as slaves to the king of the Ammonites. Before long almost all in the little city were bound together in small groups. They could walk but had little use of their arms. Ishmael and his men worked swiftly, knowing that Jews from nearby regions would probably band together to resist as soon as they heard what was happening.

Fortunately, the news reached Johanan, a friend of murdered Gedaliah, who wasn't in Mizpah. He quickly gathered and armed men to rush in pursuit of the bloody kidnapers, who by then were desperately herding their captives northward toward the road to Ammonite territory.

Not far from the city of Gibeon, about eight miles northwest of Jerusalem, the captives were overjoyed to see Johanan and his men hurrying toward them. Ishmael, however, didn't share their sudden hope. (Jeremiah 41:4-13.)

"Get them moving faster!" he roared at his men. "Beat them with the flat sides of your swords! We can't let anyone stop us now!"

Chapter 150

No Safety in Egypt

ISHMAEL and his ten men were attempting to herd a group of their Jewish countrymen to the land of the Ammonites. The captives had been forced to walk only a few miles when Johanan, a friend of the murdered governor of Judah, began to catch up with the mounted assassins and their prisoners.

Men Request God's Counsel

Ishmael realized that he would surely be overtaken by Johanan and his superior number of charging men. He suddenly decided to give up his captives and large supply of food and make a dash for safety. Without even taking time for any instructions to his men, he spurred his horse into a frantic gallop to the east.

Seeing their leader leaving, the other ten attempted to follow. Eight of them escaped Johanan's onslaught. The other two were left lifeless on the ground as the rescued captives were escorted back to Mizpah by Johanan and his men. Meanwhile, Ishmael and his eight remaining murderers rode on, eventually to report to King Baalis that the leadership of Judah had been destroyed.

There was a growing concern among the Jews over what would happen when Nebuchadnezzar learned that his puppet governor and several Babylonian representatives had been murdered. Johanan, especially, was worried.

"The king of Babylon will be so angry that he is likely to send his army to wipe out what little is left of Judah," Johanan told his men. "We wouldn't be safe in our own country. It might be wise for us to get out of Judah while there's still time."

"But where is there to go?" asked one.

"To Egypt!" was Johanan's surprising answer. "The king there would probably help any he considers as being at odds with the Babylonians. Surely the Babylonians wouldn't go so far as to try to war against a powerful nation merely to avenge a few deaths."

Johanan's suggestion was spread swiftly among the Jews. But some of them, including Johanan, belatedly decided that it would be wise to try to find out what God's will was in the matter. To do this, they went to Jeremiah. The prophet had left Mizpah with the Jews because he wished to stay with the remnant of his people, and especially with King Zedekiah's daughters, who were his special charge. Jeremiah didn't think the time had come that they should leave their country.

"We can't decide whether to stay here and risk being killed by the Babylonians or give up our land and go to Egypt," they explained to the prophet. "We would be pleased if you would ask God what we should do."

"My God is your God," Jeremiah told them. "I will pray to Him. Whenever and whatever He answers, I'll report it to you."

"We will do whatever our God says," they promised Jeremiah. "We are anxious to obey His will." Most of the Jews expected to hear from the prophet almost right away, but it was ten days before he sent word for them to assemble for an answer. (Jeremiah 42:1-7.)

But Speedily Reject It

"Hear what our God has revealed!" the prophet called out to them. "He wants you to know that you should stay in your land. You who have homes in Mizpah should return there without fear of the Babylonians, whom God won't allow to harm you. Because you have looked to God for guidance, He will not punish you as most of your countrymen are being punished. As long as you remain in Judah, your numbers will increase and there will be plenty to live on. On the other hand, if you ignore God's advice and refuse His help by insisting on going to Egypt, you won't find safety there. Neither will you find enough to eat to keep you alive. If you aren't slaughtered by the sword or if you don't starve to death, you will die in Egypt by horrible diseases. You may leave here if you choose, but be warned that those who insist on going to Egypt will never return!" (Jeremiah 42:8-22.)

To learn that they could have God's protection without having to leave their homes and their nation should have been good news to the Jews. Their reaction, however, was anything but joyful. There was only an awkward silence. Most of them appeared uncomfortable. Some even scowled with obvious irritation.

"You should happily welcome God's promise to take care of you as long as you stay here in your country," the prophet continued. "It's easy to see that you aren't pleased. That's no surprise to me. You promised to go by what God directed, but you never intended to do so unless He approved of what you still plan to do, which is to go to Egypt. Idle curiosity was your only reason to ask me to contact God for you. And regardless of God's warning, you still believe that if you go to Egypt, you can come back any time you choose. That will be quite an accomplishment after you are corpses."

These were antagonizing words to the people, especially to Johanan, who had suggested that they go to Egypt, and to a man named Azariah, who was the one who had originally suggested the idea to Johanan. These two, followed by a group of leading men under them, strode up to Jeremiah.

"Why do you talk to us this way?" they loudly demanded. "God surely wouldn't forbid us to go to Egypt, yet you declare that He did! Isn't it a fact that your friend Baruch, who secretly wishes the Babylonians to destroy us, talked you into lying to us in this matter?"

"You are the ones who speak an untruth," Jeremiah contended. "Baruch, my secretary, has proved his loyalty to Judah by helping me declare God's warnings to our people."

"You and Baruch have been friendly with the Babylonians, and that's proof of why you don't fear them!" Azariah muttered.

"We're only wasting time talking!" someone shouted. "Let's get started so that we can reach Egypt before the Babylonians get here!"

There was much to be done, but before dawn the Jews were on their way, walking beside their burros or trudging under their own loads. As Jeremiah and Baruch stood gloomily watching the long line move by, Johanan and Azariah walked up to them.

"Aren't you taking any belongings with you?" Johanan asked them.

"We're not going," Jeremiah replied. "God has warned us to stay out of Egypt, and we intend to obey."

"And we don't intend to leave you behind!" Azariah snapped. "If you're important to God, surely He'll spare you wherever you are. And as long as you're with us, we can look forward to protection for all. I'll send some men with you to help you pick up your belongings."

Regardless of their firm intentions, the two had no choice but to join the exodus.

Warnings in Egypt

Journeying southwest past the south tip of Philistia and across the Shur desert in the upper part of the Sinai peninsula, the Jews came to the Egyptian city of Tahpanhes, about fifty miles east of the east mouth of the Nile River. There they stayed for a time, awaiting permission to go farther into the nation, which they weren't allowed to do unless and until they could prove they weren't enemies. (Jeremiah 43:1-7.)

While in Tahpanhes, where Egyptian workmen were building a summer house for the king, Jeremiah was told to again remind the Jews that being in Egypt would give them no safety. God instructed the prophet how to explain it to his countrymen. There was a brick kiln only a few yards from the nearly finished building. Choosing a time when many of the leading Jews were grouped together gazing at the new structure, and when workmen weren't present, Jeremiah and Baruch carried several heavy stones to the kiln and placed them in the clay.

"God wants me to tell you," Jeremiah explained, "that these same stones will soon be used on this very spot in building a foundation for a throne room for King Nebuchadnezzar." (Jeremiah 43:8-13.) "How ridiculous!" scoffed Azariah. "What would the king of Babylon be doing with a throne room in Egypt? Pharaoh wouldn't allow it to be built anywhere here, and certainly not right next to a house of his!"

"Pharaoh won't have anything to say about it because the Babylonians are going to invade this nation," Jeremiah patiently continued. "They will kill many Egyptians. Many more will starve. Part of them will die of disease. Others will be taken captive. The Babylonians will burn the temples of the Egyptian idols, as well as the gods of wood. The idols will be smashed, and their gold taken to Babylon. Egypt's wealth will all be taken.

Nebuchadnezzar will accomplish this as easily as a shepherd puts on his coat. The Egyptians won't have the strength to stop him. When he leaves at the time he chooses, he will have broken their will to fight."

"I'm not convinced that you're right about coming here to Egypt," Johanan said in a low voice to Azariah. "If Jeremiah is a true prophet of God, we aren't going to have much of a future."

Zedekiah's Doom

By this time part of the Babylonian army and its special captives, still in chains, had long since reached the city of Riblah in Syria, where King Nebuchadnezzar had temporarily retired after personally leading his army against Egypt and Judah. There, more than two hundred miles northeast of Jerusalem, Zedekiah, most of his family and officers were brought before Nebuchadnezzar, who eyed them critically. (Jeremiah 39:4-5)

"That is Zedekiah, king of Judah," an aide informed the Babylonian king as guards brought Zedekiah out of the crowd of captives. For long, awkward moments Nebuchadnezzar stared at Zedekiah, who stood in discomfort and humiliation, which he now expected to be followed by death.

"Months ago I decided that you would pay with your life because of breaking your sworn allegiance to me," Nebuchadnezzar addressed Zedekiah. "Now that I see you, I'm going to change that decision and spare your life."

Zedekiah's hopes soared on hearing this, but before long he had reason to harbor much more hatred and fear of the Babylonian ruler. At a word from Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah and his sons were separated from the other captives and led outside to an enclosure.

"My king suggests that you carefully watch what is about to happen here," a Babylonian officer told Zedekiah. "It is the last event you will see."

The former king was puzzled by this ominous statement. Then, almost before he could realize what was going on, his sons were lined up and slaughtered by Babylonian soldiers. Even while Zedekiah stood gasping in horror, he was bound tightly to a post and his eyes brutally seared out by a hot iron.

Not long after this shocking event, Nebuchadnezzar started back to Babylon, about five hundred miles to the southeast. Zedekiah and the other captives, bound and guarded, had to make the long, rough trip by foot far behind the triumphant Babylonian king.

As soon as they arrived at Babylon, Zedekiah was imprisoned, where he later died. (Jeremiah 39:6-8.)

Many True Warnings

As God had repeatedly warned through prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and many others, Judah's idolatry resulted in a scattering of the people in almost the same way in which the Ten Tribes had been scattered about one hundred and thirty-three years previously. Rebellion against God had resulted in the shattering of both kingdoms, although Judah wasn't swallowed up and lost in surrounding nations as the Ten Tribes of Israel were. If these kingdoms had obeyed God, the people would have remained safe and prosperous in their own land. (Jeremiah 34) Now the prisoners, slaves and outcasts learned that food and shelter were difficult to find. Meanwhile, the homes from which they had been driven were taken over by wild animals and their fields and orchards were choked with weeds and brush.

While two kings of Judah -- Jehoiachin and Zedekiah -- languished in Babylonian prison cells, many Jews captured previously by the Babylonians were living as exiles in colonies along the Chebar River about two hundred miles north of Babylon. Among these exiles was a young man named Ezekiel. (Ezekiel 1:1-3.) He had a most unusual vision in which he was told by God to tell his people, who still followed idolatry that they should give up the worship of false gods and turn to the only true God or suffer even greater miseries than they had gone through.

Ezekiel obeyed, but few paid much attention to him. Along with his strong warnings from God, he made many predictions that paralleled some made by Jeremiah. He even foretold Zedekiah's attempted escape from the Babylonians at Jerusalem, and about his loss of sight and being brought to Babylon. (Ezekiel 12:10-13.) Even after Ezekiel's countrymen along the Chebar River heard that these things had come about just as Ezekiel said they would, most of them doubted that God had chosen him to be a prophet. This was as God told Ezekiel it would be. Nevertheless, because he was obedient and had a special concern for the exiles, the prophet faithfully continued to repeat God's warnings and prophecies to the people.

So did Jeremiah. Before the fall of Jerusalem, he wrote letters to the people Ezekiel was with, encouraging them to keep up their family lives and look forward to a time when their children could return to their homeland after the Babylonians would fall from power. (Jeremiah 29:132.)

Ezekiel predicted many things, including the victorious invasion of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezekiel 32:1-18) and the fate of the Jews who had gone there contrary to God's warning through Jeremiah. Meanwhile, Ezekiel married and established a home in one of the Jewish communities north of Babylon. Although the Jews generally ignored his prophecies and admonitions, they had unusual respect for him and often came to him for advice. In spite of their stubbornness in ignoring many of the warnings he passed on from God, they believed that God had endowed him with good judgment and the power to foresee the future.

No Escape

Ezekiel was meant to be more than a prophet to the Jews. He kept the people informed and comforted, and he encouraged all who sought wisdom and tried to forsake their wrong ways.

Many of them, naturally, failed to appreciate what he did for them for twenty-two years. Little did they guess that his writings, many of which were quite puzzling, would eventually be read all over the world for centuries and be interpreted in many different ways, mostly erroneous.

One of the things Ezekiel wrote about had to do with the future of Israel after the Messiah's second coming to earth from heaven. (Ezekiel 36) Another matter, among many others, was how people would be resurrected and what tomorrow's world would be like when David would again rule Israel and all the nations of the earth under the Messiah. (Ezekiel 37)

Inasmuch as both Ezekiel and Jeremiah were inspired by God, their prophecies agreed, proving that they were indeed the Creator's true servants. Among the subjects, in which they both spoke was the prediction that God would certainly provide a successor to the throne Zedekiah had lost. God had already promised David that He would forever establish David's kingdom, but one might wonder how that would be accomplished after the murder of Zedekiah's sons and later the death of Zedekiah.

At that time Jehoiachin, former king of Judah who had been taken captive by the Babylonians, was still alive but was spending his time in a Babylonian dungeon. He had sons who, were of the royal line, but they were prisoners and none of them while in prison could become king of a nation that had ceased to exist. After its restoration, one of Jehoiachin's grandsons was made governor by the king of Persia, but he was never crowned king. There were indeed men of the royal line who were qualified to become king decades later at Jerusalem, but that didn't happen, because it wasn't according to God's plan. God had decreed that his line would never again sit in Judah on the throne of David. (Jeremiah 22:24-30.)

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel stated that the throne would be established elsewhere. (Jeremiah 21:11-12; Ezekiel 17:1-6, 22-24.) They also foretold the invasion of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar, to occur a few years after the fall of Jerusalem. By that time, the Jews were scattered throughout Egypt. As might be expected, many of them fell in with worshipping Egyptian idols. That danger was one of the reasons God had told them not to leave Judah.

Jeremiah was still warning his people that if they continued in any kind of idolatry they would be killed or captured when Nebuchadnezzar would surely come to overrun Egypt. (Jeremiah 44:1- 30) Most of the Jews still believed that the prophet was somehow in league with the Babylonians, and didn't take him seriously. A few, including Baruch and the daughters of Zedekiah, regarded Jeremiah as God's spokesman and their leader and remained faithful to God.

It was a fearful shock to those who disdained Jeremiah when they learned that the Babylonian army was indeed moving into Egypt!

Chapter 151

David's Throne Re-Established

THE ARRIVAL of Nebuchadnezzar's army at Egypt's northeastern border was perhaps even more dismaying to the self-exiled Jews than it was to the Egyptians. They began to realize that what the prophet Jeremiah had told them really would happen. (Jeremiah 44:24-30; 46:13-26.) Having treated God's prophet without respect, they now began to fear both God and the Babylonians.

No Safety in Egypt

The arrival of the invaders at this time was due to unusual circumstances in Egypt, as reported in ancient histories. For a long time the citizens had been increasingly unhappy with their ruler, Pharaoh Apries. When Apries learned that his people were on the verge of a national revolution, he sent one of his generals, Amasis, on a tour of the nation to try to calm the people down with so-called goodwill speeches intended to paint Pharaoh as a ruler they should learn to appreciate.

To the surprise of both Pharaoh and Amasis, the citizens were so impressed by Amasis' oratory and manner that a large crowd of them forcibly insisted that Amasis become their leader and seize the throne from Apries. Amasis couldn't resist this doubtful opportunity to become the ruler of a powerful nation. He became the champion of the revolution.

Apries organized enough of an army to make a feeble attempt against Amasis' army, but he was defeated in an initial battle.

News of this came to Nebuchadnezzar, who decided that this was the opportune time to invade Egypt, and punish the nation for its many attempts to bring Judah into rebellion against the Babylonians.

Nebuchadnezzar picked his time well. Even Pharaoh's army rebelled and refused to fight for him. Within days Egypt fell victim to the Babylonians and Apries was killed. Nebuchadnezzar naturally proclaimed Amasis as the new ruler and returned to Babylon. He took most of the Jews and many Egyptians with him. Thus more of Jeremiah's prophecies were carried out, including the one that Nebuchadnezzar would overcome Egypt as easily as a shepherd puts on his coat. (Jeremiah 43:8-12.)

Before the Babylonians started rounding up their captives, Jeremiah and Baruch safeguarded Zedekiah's daughters and a few loyal Jews who had been taken into Egypt against their will. All were miraculously spared by the invaders. All other Jews were killed or captured and herded off toward Babylon. The hopeless captives miserably remembered that Jeremiah had told them they would deeply regret leaving their land against God's instruction.

The Babylonians departed with their spoils and apparently took Jeremiah and his little group with them.

A few days later they arrived in Judah but not to stay long in a place that had become so utterly desolate. Ravaged cities had turned into the habitations of animals and birds. Fields and orchards were full of weeds.

Royal Family Transplanted

Jeremiah and his little band might well have survived there, but God had instructed the prophet to take Baruch and Zedekiah's daughters and go elsewhere. Jeremiah obeyed God and, taking leave of Nebuchadnezzar's army, led Baruch and Zedekiah's daughters to a seaport on the Great Sea, possibly Joppa. There they embarked on a sailing ship to the far country of Spain, about two thousand miles to the west. Irish and Celtic-European annals have preserved the record that a young Irish prince, who was in Jerusalem when the city was taken, stayed with Jeremiah in all these travels and married one of the Jewish princesses in Jeremiah's care.

To learn where Jeremiah and his companions went after going to Spain, it's necessary to flash back almost twelve centuries to the time of Judah. Judah, remember, was the father of the Jews, one tribe among the twelve tribes of Israel. Through that small part of Israel God planned to carry on the "scepter," or reigning line of His chosen people (Genesis 49:10).

But the birthright line of Israel was given to Ephraim and Manasseh. (I Chronicles 5:1, 2.) These latter two tribes and their descendants by the millions were to receive the material blessings promised because Abraham had obeyed God, even to the extent of being willing to sacrifice his only son. (Genesis 26:1-5.)

Judah, one of Abraham's great-grandsons, was the father of twin sons, Zarah and Pharez. Just before they were delivered, when the midwife realized there were twins, she was especially careful to note which would be born first. That one would be the royal seed through whom the reigning line, or "scepter," would be carried on.

As it happened, a hand emerged first, whereupon the midwife tied a red thread around the little wrist to show which child was the first to start from the mother. However, that baby drew its hand back and the other twin emerged. (Genesis 38:27-30.) Zarah, with the red thread around one wrist, was rightfully first from his mother, but only in part.

The other child, Pharez, was the one through whom the reigning line in Judah was first passed on, though generations later God combined it with the line of Zarah. David, Zedekiah and Christ were of the Pharez line. But Zedekiah's daughter was destined to marry into the Zarah line.

God used the prophet Jeremiah in re-establishing the throne of David by sending him and his group by ship via Spain to the island known later as "Ireland".

There, long before King David's time, a colony of Israelites called the "Tuatha De Danaan" arrived and subdued the people called "Firbolgs" who had inhabited the island before them and ruled for hundreds of years. Later more Israelites, called "Milesians," arrived from Scythia, this time of the line of Zarah.

One of Zedekiah's daughters who came with Jeremiah married a prince who was a descendant of Zarah. This prince became king at his father's death. Inasmuch as his wife was a princess of the Pharez line, the Pharez and Zarah lines were united and David's throne was re-established in Ireland to continue as God promised.

People of Israel Relocated

There are many detailed facts about this fascinating matter. Most of them have been uncovered in the last few decades along with surprising revelation of what happened to the supposedly "Lost Ten Tribes" of Israel, an absorbing story in itself. Jeremiah and Ezekiel had much to say about it, but the key to understanding much of what these two prophets wrote about is to realize that the Jews were not included in the ten-tribed House of Israel, although the Jews were Israelites.

Ezekiel wrote that Zedekiah's throne would be overturned three times. (Ezekiel 21:25-27.) The first overturn was accomplished when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Israelite prince who married one of Zedekiah's daughters became king, and the throne was transplanted thousands of miles away. The dynasty that resulted lasted down through many generations in Ireland.

Eventually, the throne was overturned a second time when it was removed from Ireland and established in Scotland. The third overturn was much later when it was removed by Edward I to London, where it exists today. As this is written, Queen Elizabeth II occupies the throne that came down all the way from King David! Christ will occupy that same throne after the third prophesied overturn and its final re-establishment in Jerusalem.

While the seat of Israelite rulership was being changed from place to place, more and more Israelites were migrating to Europe. Having escaped over the centuries from their Assyrian captors, in the area of the Black Sea, they moved northward and westward to flourish in many regions -- even across the Atlantic Ocean to North America, where their numbers compounded.

God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were steadily carried out insomuch that the descendants of Ephraim under the rule of Davidic kings became large, wealthy and powerful, culminating in the British Empire and the Commonwealth. The descendants of Manasseh developed into the most powerful single nation on earth -- the United States in North America. Both fulfilled the prophecy of Israel, their father. (Genesis 48:14-20.)

Careful study of the Bible and history together shows that descendants of the tribe of Manasseh, the elder son of Joseph, are the principal inhabitants of the United States. But most Bible scholars refuse to accept this fact.

Most of the people of the British Commonwealth are descended from the tribe of Ephraim, the youngest son of Joseph. In both nations are also people of many lands who have come to share in the wealth and freedom. Relatively few citizens of both nations know themselves to be Israelites, although it was a fairly common belief a few centuries ago. Today most consider themselves Gentiles.

This error makes understanding Bible prophecy almost impossible for them. It's a matter of God giving special understanding to those who choose to be obedient to His laws. Most refuse to recognize the vital importance of these permanently living laws because they consider them "Jewish" and assume they were discarded and cancelled by Christ.

The Seventy Years' Captivity

About the time Jeremiah was still trying to convince Judah to shun any alliance with the Egyptians, there was living in the Babylonian capital a young lad named Daniel. Daniel had been taken captive from Judah in the time of King Jehoiakim. Many other Jews shared Daniel's circumstances, in which their captors sought to determine which of the captives could be of the most value in contributing to a superior culture.

Nebuchadnezzar's nobles were particularly pleased with Daniel's abilities, given to him because God had long since chosen him to be a prophet and to find favor with his captors. With three other young princes who also proved to be unusually intelligent, Daniel went through a three- year period of intensive training in the knowledge of Babylonia's most learned men. (Daniel 1:1- 7)

Because Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah had grown up as followers of God, even when almost all the rest of the royal family, were turning against God, they weren't swayed by the pagan philosophy of the Babylonians. Of course, their instructors naturally hoped and tried to influence their religious beliefs.

Their names were changed. Daniel was to be known as "Belteshazzar"; Hananiah was altered to "Shadrach"; Mishael was given the name of "Meshach"; Azariah was renamed "Abed-nego." Their original names had to do with God, whereas their new names had pagan meanings. When the period of instruction was at an end, these four close friends stood out as the topmost among the trainees.

It was the custom that the same kind of food that was served at the king's table was also served to the youths in special training. This meant that unclean foods and such as were previously offered to idols would often be brought to the young men. The four friends agreed that they wouldn't follow such a diet but would remain faithful to God and be at their best physically and mentally. (Leviticus 3:17; 7:22-27; 11:1-47.)

"We must take a stand on this matter," Daniel observed. "Even if meat hasn't been offered to idols, we can't know if it has been properly drained of blood, which we know should not be eaten. As for liquids, we're given more wine than water. If we continue this way, we'll make little headway. We'll have to try to have our food changed."

The next time Melzar, the man in charge of them, came to bring scrolls to study, Daniel diplomatically reminded him that they were there for the purpose of developing physically and mentally but that they couldn't make much progress if they ate food prepared mainly for epicurean appetites and not necessarily for nourishment.

"But Nebuchadnezzar himself chooses what you should eat," Daniel's overseer informed him. "He eats the same kinds of food, and he is convinced that it is the best food available anywhere. Perhaps you don't appreciate this rare and costly fare because you don't know that much of it comes from distant lands, even at the expense of human lives. You four fellows didn't eat the oysters that were brought at great expense all the way from the Persian Gulf. And you didn't touch the special stew made of squirrels brought from the mountains. Nor the exquisite papyrus wine from Egypt. And you didn't even taste the...."

"We truly appreciate being offered these specialties," Daniel interrupted. "My point is that the health-giving qualities of food are more important than unusual flavors and costliness. We can't speak for others of our countrymen in training, but we prefer cereal grains, vegetables and water for the time of our training."

Melzar stared in disbelief.

"You'd soon starve on only those things!" he exclaimed impatiently.

"My superiors would demand to know why you had become so thin and weak. If they found out how poorly I had been feeding you, Nebuchadnezzar would have me beheaded!"

"I assure you we would never starve," Daniel told Melzar. "If you could manage to provide us with only vegetables, cereal grains and water for the next ten days, we'll prove to you that we'll be healthier than the men who gorge themselves with the king's favorite foods."

Melzar blinked worriedly, unable to understand that Daniel's simple choice of food and drink could do anything but enfeeble the four young men. (Daniel 1:8-13.)

"At the risk of losing my life, I'll do as you ask for ten days at the most," Melzar reluctantly agreed. "Meanwhile, if I notice that you are failing, I'll start giving you only the richest foods to build you back up before your lack of nourishment is discovered."

For the full ten days Melzar managed to bring Daniel and his companions the food they wanted. Even in that short time the four youths developed a healthier appearance than that of the other trainees who ate unclean meats and drank so much wine. Melzar was amazed. (Daniel 1:8-16.) Of course, he didn't understand that the God of Israel had a hand in the matter because the four young Jewish men were obedient to Him in the matter of avoiding food that was unclean in the Creator's sight.

At the same time, because of that obedience, God gave them special wisdom and good judgment. Added to that, Daniel was given unusual understanding in interpreting visions and dreams. This ISN'T to say that Daniel was a psychiatrist. Visions and dreams by certain people sometimes have special meanings from God. Daniel was given the ability to know if visions and dreams had important meanings and what those meanings were. With God's help, he had a great advantage over "wise" men and magicians, who often were influenced by demons.

At the end of the three years of training, Daniel and his three close friends were adjudged the healthiest and most learned and intelligent of all the trainees. Nebuchadnezzar himself tested their knowledge and decided that they were far more mentally keen than any of the others whom the Babylonians had chosen to train. (Daniel 1:17-20.)

Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

Not long after this happened, the king of Babylon had a dream that greatly troubled him because it was so sharp and clear at the time and seemed to have strong bearing on the future. By the next morning, as dreams usually do, it had mostly faded from remembrance. Still it bothered him. He called in his magicians, astrologers and Chaldean philosophers, hoping that there was someone among all these who could tell him the meaning of his unusual dream.

"May you live forever," these men gravely and dutifully announced, according to the manner of greeting a king in those times. "We understand that you have had a very unusual dream whose meaning you would like to know. Tell us about it, and we shall interpret it for you." (Daniel 2:-1-4)

"I can't tell you about the dream because it has gone from my mind," Nebuchadnezzar explained. "You will have to use your powers to find out what the dream was about as well as its meaning. If you fail, you will be put to death and your homes will be knocked down and used as places for manure piles."

This chilling statement brought deep fear into the so-called "wise" men. Every one of them knew he was incapable of knowing or even guessing what the king's dream was about, unless possibly with the help of demons. But it was their job to try to create the impression that they had supernatural knowledge and powers.

"On the other hand," continued Nebuchadnezzar, "anyone who is able to tell me my dream and the meaning of it shall be highly rewarded and honored. Now speak out. Your lives depend on what you have to say!" (Daniel 2:5-9.)

There was a hurried, hushed consultation of the astrologers, magicians and philosophers while Nebuchadnezzar looked on impatiently. At last the group broke up. A spokesman approached the king, bowing low and smiling hopefully.

"Please try to remember what you dreamed, O mighty ruler," he begged. "Then we will tell you what the dream means."

"I've already told you that I've forgotten!" Nebuchadnezzar snapped. "It's obvious that you're all stalling because you don't know what to say! It's also obvious that you got your heads together just now to agree on some kind of lie!"

"I humbly remind you, sire, that your request is most unusual," the spokesman hesitantly mumbled. "No man, not even an astrologer, magician or philosopher, should reasonably be expected to have an answer to such a difficult question. Only the gods are capable of knowing such things and they rarely communicate with man."

Of course, this was quite the wrong thing to say to Nebuchadnezzar. It was an act of desperation, done with the hope that the king would appreciate a frank approach and would reconsider his drastic threats of punishment. It didn't turn out that way.

"Out!" Nebuchadnezzar bellowed. "I want all of you out of my palace immediately! All sorcerers, magicians, philosophers and astrologers are to die!"

Unhappily, this included Daniel and his three close friends.

Chapter 152

Adviser To Nebuchadnezzar Angered

BECAUSE the so-called "wise" men of Babylon failed to guess the content of the dream he had forgotten, King Nebuchadnezzar rashly ordered all of Babylon's magicians, sorcerers and philosophers to be slain.

The king even included the top scholars who had been rigorously educated over a period of three years. That meant that Daniel and his three close friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were on the list to be executed, even though they hadn't been among those summoned to tell and interpret the king's dream. (Daniel 2:1-13.)

Daniel's Bold Chance

Daniel was naturally quite startled and dismayed when he was approached by Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, and was told that he and his three friends were to be taken to prison for execution because no one was wise enough to tell and explain Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

"This is incredible!" Daniel exclaimed. "We had no part in failing the king. If he had called on us to help, we would have given him the answers. If he still wants to know them and has the patience to postpone the executions he has ordered, I will make the matter known to him."

Arioch stared at Daniel, thankful that there might be a reason for Nebuchadnezzar to cancel or at least postpone the executions, which the captain of the guard deplored.

"If you can explain the king's dream, I'll take you to him," Arioch declared. "Meanwhile, I'll postpone your friends' arrest as long as I can."

Arioch then hastened to see the king, but soon returned to Daniel and told him:

"Nebuchadnezzar wants you to carry out your claim to tell and interpret his dream," Arioch told Daniel. "He promised that he would hold off the executions until he hears what you have to say. Frankly, he doubts your ability. His anger will mount even higher if you fail!"

A little later Daniel stood before Nebuchadnezzar, who eyed him critically.

"This is the young man of the captives of Judah who can tell you about your dream," Arioch nervously introduced Daniel.

"Then tell me now!" the Babylonian king commanded, staring at Daniel. "If you fail, many heads will roll before this day is over!"

"But God hasn't yet told me about your dream," Daniel told the king. "I'll need time to contact Him."

"I'll give you one day," the king promised. (Daniel 2:14-16.)

Daniel went immediately to his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, to tell them what had happened. He requested that they ask God to reveal Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its meaning so that they and all the others would be spared from execution.

The four men prayed fervently about the matter. God answered by causing Daniel to dream a very clear dream revealing the one that Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten and its meaning. Daniel was so thankful that he gave a special prayer of praise for their deliverance, though the four young Jews and the Babylonian "wise" men were still subject to death. Then Daniel hurried to Arioch, who was anxious to see him. Arioch took him directly to Nebuchadnezzar.

"The men you summoned to tell and interpret your dream were given an impossible task," Daniel began, noting that the king was visibly irritated by those first few words. "The task was impossible because they didn't have the help of the God of Israel, who wishes to make known to the king of Babylon what will happen in the future. Your dream and its meaning haven't come to me through any special ability of my own, but only because my God has made these things known to me to pass on to you for your special benefit." (Daniel 2:17-28.)

Nebuchadnezzar Needs Daniel

"Then if you have this special knowledge from your God, disclose it!" Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed impatiently, leaning forward in expectation.

"You dreamed that there was a colossal human image before you," Daniel began. "It was bright and terrible. His head appeared to be made of polished gold. His chest and arms were like silver, his belly and thighs of brass, his legs of iron and his feet part of iron and part of clay."

Nebuchadnezzar's glum expression abruptly turned to one of intense interest.

"That was what I dreamed about!" he interrupted, getting to his feet. "Now I remember! Then something happened to the image, but I don't recall what it was."

"You dreamed that a large stone, symmetrical, yet uncut by human hands, fell from the sky and crashed with great impact on the feet of the image," Daniel continued. "It shattered the feet and pulverized the legs of iron. Then the thighs and belly of brass crumbled under the impact; the chest and arms of silver fell apart and the head of gold toppled over to smash into tiny fragments. A strong wind came up to blow away the pulverized pieces of the fallen image as though they were chaff from a threshing floor. Meanwhile, the stone that struck the image became larger and larger until it became a gigantic mountain that filled the whole earth." (Daniel 2:29-35.)

"That's exactly what I dreamed!" Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed. "I forgot it, even though it was clear at the time. It bothered me afterward because I believed it had some special meaning."

"Indeed it does," Daniel agreed. "The God of Israel wants you to know that He has given you your great power so that you are above all other rulers in the world. You have been given power over most men and your power extends even to the animals in the world because man is ruler over them. The head of gold on the image you dreamed about refers to you and your powerful kingdom. As the most powerful king in the world at this time, it is fitting, according to the Eternal God's wish, that you should know what the future holds. That was the reason for the dream you were given.

"The chest and arms of silver mean that another kingdom, inferior to yours, will rise to power after your nation declines in strength. The belly and thighs of brass indicate that a third kingdom will replace the second kingdom in strength, and it will have rulership over other nations. The legs of iron mean that a fourth strong kingdom will eventually follow, but because iron and clay can't be fused together for lasting strength, that kingdom won't be well united.

"During the lifetime of that kingdom, the one and only true God will set up a Kingdom that will replace all others and last forever. In your dream His Kingdom was the stone that struck the image on the feet, smashing the whole body, and growing swiftly into a mountain that encompassed the entire world. Now you know what will come to pass. This knowledge has come to me from my God, who is incapable of any untruth." (Daniel 2:36-45; Titus 1:2.)

Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed that he humbly prostrated himself before Daniel in a sincere, but awkward, attempt in the worship of God by bowing to a servant of God.

"The best way to worship God is to obey Him," Daniel pointed out. "Then you will receive the blessings and protection that can't possibly come from any other source."

Nebuchadnezzar's Image

Daniel's strong advice didn't dampen the king's enthusiasm. He loudly declared to all present that Daniel's God was the God of gods and the Head of all kings, and he made it known that he wanted the fact published abroad. Furthermore, he heaped gifts on Daniel and made him chief of the governors of the "wise" men of Babylon, an office of doubtful importance in Daniel's estimation.

On the more practical side, Daniel was made ruler of the province of Babylon, the city-state capital of Babylonia, where he would be one of the king's chief officials. Because Daniel's three close Jewish friends had great ability and knowledge and had helped him with their prayers, Daniel suggested that they also be given high positions. Nebuchadnezzar was pleased to place Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego (Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) in offices of high rank under Daniel in the province of Babylon. (Daniel 2:46-49.)

Nebuchadnezzar's recognition of God's greatness was a step in the right direction, but he still had a long way to go. The more Nebuchadnezzar thought about his power, the more he thought all the world's leaders should pay special honor to his kingdom. So he made plans for building a high statue.

It was built on the Babylonian plain of Dura so that it could be surrounded by great throngs of people. Including the pedestal, the image towered nearly a hundred feet above the plain. On a sunny day its bright and shimmering golden surface could be seen from many miles away.

The king went to great lengths to inform people about the image. Dedication ceremonies were announced. Important men of Babylonia were commanded to be present. Those included princes, governors, high army officers and all high government officials. (Daniel 3:1-3.)

On the chosen day of the dedication, a vast crowd assembled around the towering figure. The commanded dignitaries included only a small fraction of the throng, made up mostly of thousands of average Babylonians and many people of surrounding satellite nations. Some came merely from curiosity. Others felt it necessary to be present at an unusual event during which a king's idol would be dedicated.

There was the usual activity and excitement in a large crowd of those times. Following the throngs of people were yelling peddlers with carts or shoulder bags of food. Other hawkers worked slyly to extract money from parents by promoting cheap merchandise made to appeal especially to small children. It was as good a day for thieves and pickpockets as it was a miserable day for mothers, who had no place to take their whimpering, bawling, needful offspring.

About noon heralds appeared on the base of the gold-plated image. There was much raucous horn-blowing to get the attention of the people. After ceremonies of a shallow nature, there was an announcement by a person with an exceptionally powerful voice.

"Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon and king over kings everywhere, wants you to know what is required of you who hear these words," the herald bellowed. "When you hear music from the orchestra that will soon play from the base of this pedestal, every one of you is to bow before this great image! Any who fail or refuse to do so will be seized by the king's guards and thrown into a large, roaring furnace prepared especially for criminals and those who fail to conform to the king's will!"

People hadn't expected to hear anything like this. Most of them had their favorite idols, toward which they had varying degrees of loyalty. But because it was the custom to worship more than one idol -- inasmuch as each was believed to give his special benefits -- the edict from the herald posed no great problem for most of the hearers. And the special benefit of worshipping Nebuchadnezzar's idol was very plain. It was the difference between living or being burned to death!

When the large orchestra by the pedestal broke out into strains of music in the minor key, the crowd went to its knees. Many tried to demonstrate special deep humility by dropping their foreheads to the soil, hoping that these extreme actions would somehow win them special favor. (Daniel 3:4-7.)

Acres of bowed human backs shone in the noonday sun. Some, who didn't understand, such as small children, remained standing or simply sat down.

(It must have been difficult for Nebuchadnezzar's guards to decide who the disobedient were, especially since they, too, had their foreheads pressed to the ground.) As for Daniel and his three close friends, they simply waited for the music finally to end and signal the close of the period of worship.

Nebuchadnezzar was pleased with the way matters turned out. He was even exuberant – until some high-ranking Babylonians appeared before him to flatter him on his efforts to launch a new deity and then to inform him that there were those in his own government who had deliberately refused to bow down before his image.

"There must be some mistake," the king smiled indulgently, looking away to show indifference. "No sane, responsible person in my organization would dare defy my orders."

"The three foreigners, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego certainly did!" the envious Babylonians quickly informed him. Besides refusing to bow when they were told to yesterday, we happen to know that they've never paid respect to any of our gods! You have shown respect for their God. Should they not show deference for at least one of yours?" (Daniel 3:8-12.)

"I'll take care of the matter," the king muttered, irritably waving his informers away.

They triumphantly departed, convinced that action would be taken against the three Jews. They had carefully omitted Daniel from the charges because they knew that the king regarded him so highly that speaking against him might bring down royal wrath on their heads.

The Punishment

Nebuchadnezzar wasn't used to being disobeyed. The mere thought of anyone ignoring his wishes gave him great displeasure. So he called for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. By the time they had been brought before him, the king had developed his anger into full bloom.

"I have been told that you, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, failed to bow before my golden image," the king declared testily. "I have also been told that in all the years you have enjoyed the good things of my kingdom you have never shown your appreciation by thanking any of my gods. Are these things true?"

"They are," one of them answered. "We are thankful for many things, but we thank and worship only the one true God, the God of Israel."

Previously, Nebuchadnezzar had threatened to have anyone hacked into pieces who refused to regard the God of Israel as God above all gods. But the men's answer so infuriated him that he lost all regard he might have had for God.

"You were told that any who refused to bow down to my golden image would be thrown into a hot furnace!" the king shouted. "That's where you're going from here! Who is the God who is going to step in and save you from THAT?"

"Our God is able to!" they answered. "But whether or not He chooses to save us, we have no intention of worshipping other gods or bowing down before that lifeless image you have set up!" (Daniel 3:13-18.)

"Get men in here at once to bind these three!" Nebuchadnezzar bellowed, his face livid with rage. "And go tell the furnace foreman to get the furnace as hot as he can possibly get it!"

Servants scrambled to obey. Moments later powerful soldiers strode into the room to roughly seize and tie up the three Jews, who were soon prone and helpless on the floor.

"Now drag these infidels to the furnace and shove them into it when it's at its hottest!" the king roared.

Strong arms pulled Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah across the floor, down stone steps and through the courtyard. A little later at the smoke-belching furnace, they were propped up so that they could watch men feverishly tossing large pieces of pitchy wood into the massive metal and stone firebox, which began to glow dully when the roaring flames from the crackling wood were at their hottest. Great surges of searing heat billowed forth, reddening the skin of the stokers.

Nebuchadnezzar was on hand to gloat over the event, as were the informers who had started it. While the heat was increasing, so was the crowd of curious, morbid onlookers. Some ventured so close to the furnace door that they were scorched by bursts of heat, and they ran howling for safety.

At a signal from the king, the three victims were grabbed by the men who had tied them and dragged them as close to the furnace door as their handlers could stand to go. They were then tossed through the door into the raging flames. (Daniel 3:19-23.)

This was the last act of the soldiers. Tongues of flame leaped at them. They collapsed the next instant and fell to the ground. Their clothing and skin broke into flames. They burned to death in the torrid gusts of air outside the range of the huge flames. None dared risk his life in an attempt to rescue them.

King Nebuchadnezzar quickly turned his glance back to the bottom of the flaming pit. What he saw shocked him. Never in his life had he seen such a thing.

Chapter 153

Nebuchadnezzar Goes Insane

SHADRACH Meshach and Abed-nego (whose Jewish names were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) had just been thrown into the special, great furnace in Babylon because of their refusal to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image. (Daniel 3:1-20.)

God Rules Furnaces, Too!

The king was disappointed in the satisfaction he imagined he would receive by seeing the three Jews consumed by the flames. To start, they had spoiled his sadistic fun by failing to scream for mercy. On top of that, he had lost some of his best soldiers, famous in his kingdom for their physical strength, when they burned to death upon hurling the Jews into the furnace.

"If only I could see their ashy, scorched skeletons lying in there in the embers," Nebuchadnezzar thought.

By now the horrible heat of the giant furnace was diminishing, as no further fuel had been added. Morbidly curious to learn if anything could be seen through the wide furnace door, the king inched forward as close as the heat would allow him, and stared inside.

It was almost impossible, through the eyeball-drying, torrid gusts, to make out the heat-distorted embers glowing in a blinding fusion, but for some reason the king stood resolutely against the heat, his attention riveted by something unusual.

"Weren't there only three men thrown into the furnace?" Nebuchadnezzar asked, blinking in bewilderment and pain.

"That's right," aides answered.

"But I can make out four people in there!" the king exclaimed excitedly. "And they're walking around!"

"The heat distorts things and makes them unrecognizable," the aides answered concernedly. "You should leave this place now, sire, and return to the comforts of your palace!"

"Don't try to cause me to lose sight of what I'm seeing!" Nebuchadnezzar snapped angrily, carefully backing up a few steps. "I tell you I see four men walking around in there as easily and calmly as I would walk around in my palace! And the appearance of the fourth one is similar to a Son of God! Look in there for yourselves!" (Daniel 3:21-25.)

The king's nearest aides, along with many bystanders, carefully peered at where Nebuchadnezzar's excited finger was pointing.

"I see them! I see them!" several people started loudly exclaiming at once.

As more and more bystanders witnessed the miraculous scene of men walking about in a sea of withering flame, gasps of disbelief and even cheers filled the air. The most moved and enthusiastic witness was the king himself.

"Come out, come out, you servants of the Most High!" Nebuchadnezzar yelled, wildly waving his arms.

There were more gasps of surprise and wonder as the three men obediently strode out of the furnace door and walked up to Nebuchadnezzar. The king stared in wonderment, noting that the hair and clothing of the victims hadn't been touched by the flames. Nor was there even the smell of smoke on them. High-ranking Babylonians crowded around to gaze in disbelief, but none were more amazed and impressed than Nebuchadnezzar.

Praise for God -- But No Repentance!

"The God of these men has shown His great power!" the king of Babylon loudly announced to all who stood about. "The God of the Jews is so powerful that He has swept aside my decree that all people should worship my golden image! Therefore I now decree that all people over whom I have dominion must show respect to the God of these men above any other god! Any who refuse to worship Him or speak against Him shall be hacked into small pieces and their homes shall be turned into dumps for barnyard refuse!" But Nebuchadnezzar was still far from repentant.

With this the three Jews were swiftly escorted to comfortable quarters, but only after Nebuchadnezzar had satisfied his curiosity about the fourth person he had seen in the furnace.

"But what happened to the fourth person who was with you?" Nebuchadnezzar asked. "Where did he go?"

"He returned to the throne of our God," was their general reply.

Following their trial of faith in the furnace, God blessed Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego for their obedience, and they were promoted to even higher positions of importance under Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's powerful and growing kingdom. The incident greatly altered the king's attitude for the better, but he had still much to learn about how great God really is. (Daniel 3:26- 30)

He also had much to learn about how insignificant he really was compared to God, even though he was the head of the most powerful nation on earth. Nebuchadnezzar had such a consuming awareness of his power and possessions that his mind was obsessed with it.

Long before that, Daniel had reminded him that these things had come only through God's hand, and that God could take them back at any time. The king of Babylon could only conclude that he must be a very special person in God's sight to be given such special things.

"If I'm a person distinctive enough for all I've accomplished and accumulated, then I'm too distinctive to be deprived of it," Nebuchadnezzar mused.

Little was he aware of what was soon to happen to him because of his egotistic overconfidence in himself. One night he dreamed an unusual dream that troubled him so much that he decided to call before him those who were supposed to have special knowledge in such matters, so that he could determine the meaning of the dream from them. Thus, on a certain day, the king's throne room was jammed with magicians, astrologers, and prognosticators, all anxious to please Nebuchadnezzar and receive his rich reward.

Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

"Listen carefully while I relate to you my strange dream," the king addressed them. "Afterward I don't want to be bothered by anyone who is merely guessing at the meaning of the dream. I want a sensible explanation, and I shall deal harshly with anyone who dares take up my time with ridiculous remarks and shallow philosophizing.

"I dreamed that I was standing in a wide expanse of open country, where there was a great tree. The tree grew swiftly until its side branches filled the sky and its top branches went up past the clouds. Mammoth leaves cast a vast shade area across the earth, and all kinds of beasts sought shelter there. Gigantic flocks of birds came to live in the far-reaching branches. Beasts and birds alike fed well on the tree's huge fruits growing in unbelievable abundance.

"Then down from the sky swooped a being whose voice filled all of space as he shouted out that the tree should be cut down, and that its branches should be removed, the leaves shaken off, the fruit scattered and that the beasts and birds should flee for their lives.

"The stump of the tree was to be left and encircled by a protecting band of iron and brass, but exposed to the elements for a period called 'seven times.' Any who can interpret this dream should step forth and speak up!"

There was a restless shuffle in the crowd, but not a man stepped forth. Probably some of the would-be interpreters remembered a previous time when Nebuchadnezzar angrily threatened to behead all who were unable to explain one of his dreams. In any event, not one of the many magicians, astrologers, and prognosticators came forth with anything to say, whereupon the king dismissed them.

For a while Nebuchadnezzar sat glumly silent, disappointed that none of his so-called "wise" men could help him. Suddenly a hopeful thought came to him.

"Why didn't I save time and effort and simply send for the man who interpreted my dream years ago?" he asked himself, gesturing for a servant. "Send word to Belteshazzar the Jew to come to me as soon as possible!"

"Belteshazzar" was the pagan name the king had given to Daniel, who soon arrived before Nebuchadnezzar. The king recounted to him all he had told his former audience.

"Not one of those learned men was able to tell me what my dream meant," the king observed discontentedly, "but I know you won't fail me because you are constantly in touch with the gods."

"I have only one God," Daniel smilingly reminded the king.

"Then ask your one God to show you the meaning of my dream," Nebuchadnezzar insisted.

Daniel Interprets the Dream

Daniel was troubled. The meaning of the dream was plain to him as soon as he heard it, but he was hesitant to startle the king by coming out bluntly with unpleasant facts. As the minutes dragged by and Daniel was still preoccupied with his thoughts, the king realized that there was something Daniel wished he did not have to tell him.

"If there's something you think I wouldn't want to hear, don't let it prevent your speaking out," Nebuchadnezzar said, at the same time desperately wondering what bad news he was about to hear.

"I'm afraid that only your enemies would be pleased to hear what I have to say," Daniel answered.

"But I'm sure that I want to know what it is even more than they do," the king retorted.

"Here is the meaning of your dream," Daniel began, knowing there was no point in trying to spare the king's feelings any longer. "The colossal tree you saw in your sleep is you. You have grown in such power in the world that many rely on you for protection and sustenance, just as did the animals in your dream that fed off the tree's fruits.

"The one you saw in your dream who came out of the sky and decreed that the tree should be cut down was a messenger from God. God has decided that you need to be taught humility and to be shown how insignificant your pomp and majesty are when compared to the God who made the heavens and earth."

Nebuchadnezzar was on his feet now, staring blankly out a window at his beautiful Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

"Just how does your God plan to teach me this humility you speak of?" the king asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Your dream was meant to tell you that," Daniel promptly answered. "The cutting down of the tree means you will lose your position as king of Babylon."

"You mean my enemies are going to take over my nation?" queried Nebuchadnezzar.

"Not at all," Daniel explained. "For seven years you will have no power over Babylon or any other nation, but God will protect your kingdom for you. Before this happens it would be wise to depart from sinful pursuits, including the worship of idols. God would also be pleased if you distributed a part of your great wealth to the poor among your people who are in such need of food and shelter. If you do that, God would surely postpone the miserable events that otherwise will soon come upon you." (Daniel 4:21-27.)

Nebuchadnezzar was naturally quite miffed with these statements from Daniel. Even though he had just declared Daniel's God to be considered the most powerful of deities, he didn't like to be told how he should worship. As for contributing to the poor, he reasoned that he would have no wealth left if he gave to all who were in need. Nebuchadnezzar ended the audience abruptly. This relieved Daniel, who was spared informing the king HOW he would lose control of Babylon. The fact was that Nebuchadnezzar was going to go insane!

As the months passed and the political and financial affairs of Babylon remained in a promising state, the king began to doubt that Daniel's interpretation of the dream was true. There was no indication of trouble ahead. On the contrary, matters appeared better than ever, what with the wars of expansion apparently in the past.

The Haughty One Humbled

A year after his dream, Nebuchadnezzar was walking in his palace, particularly pleased at the sight of the lavish surroundings.

"Feast your eyes on all that!" he exclaimed proudly to guests as he gestured widely toward costly walls and buildings of the city. "There's no place in the universe like Babylon, the city I have built through my great power for the honor and glory of my majesty!"

Just as the king finished uttering this extremely vain remark, he was startled by a thunderous voice from the sky!

"Nebuchadnezzar, you are to lose your kingdom," the voice boomed. "Within an hour you will be an outcast from this city of your haughty pride! Instead of living with men, you will be forced out into the fields and forests to live with animals! For the next seven years you will even act and look like a wild beast! It will take you that long to fully realize that God decides every man's state, and gives to, and takes from whomever He chooses!"

The king suddenly crouched crazily at the base of a fountain and gazed wild-eyed with his mouth wide open. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but only loud gasps and grunts came past his distorted lips. His shocked guests and aides backed away from him, obviously more perturbed by his conduct than by the thunderous voice, which possibly was heard only by Nebuchadnezzar.

The king fell to his hands and knees and ran awkwardly along the street. Women screamed and men seized them and pulled them away from the struggling figure.

A crowd began to gather, but everyone kept a safe distance from the prone figure. The king's aides were afraid to seize the stricken man. "Mad man! Mad man!" was the shout that spread around the streets, and that drew only more of a crowd. Even the members of Nebuchadnezzar's family, when they heard of his condition, made no moves to have him taken away privately. God willed it that way. (Daniel 4:28-33.)

Very likely Daniel, who had long been next to the king in authority, kept the government running smoothly while Nebuchadnezzar was insane. Daniel and his three friends could be expected to return Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom to him in good condition when he recovered.

" -- With the Beasts of the Field"

Meanwhile, little was seen of the former king. Occasionally he would be glimpsed in some distant wooded area digging for something to eat, but if he knew he was being watched, he would scurry away like a startled animal.

As the years passed and Nebuchadnezzar was seen less, Daniel had a growing desire to learn how the former king was making out. Daniel had no intention of helping him in any way, because he realized God was dealing with the insane ruler, and would keep him alive through the seven rugged years. By following the clues of farmers and hunters, Daniel found where Nebuchadnezzar was living at the time. It turned out to be a small cave. There Daniel almost came face to face with Nebuchadnezzar, whose hair and beard were long and matted. Even his fingernails and toenails were thick and long like those of an animal, which indeed he had become after years of living like one. It was difficult to believe that such a creature had once been the most powerful ruler in the world, but it was more difficult to believe that he would soon return to that same position.

If Nebuchadnezzar saw Daniel watching him, he gave no sign of it. He simply ambled down to a small stream, where he took a long drink. After that he munched on grass and dug vigorously in the ground, with his long nails, in search of roots. Shocked at the sight, Daniel returned to his home, thankful that he could know that God would restore Nebuchadnezzar to be a wiser man than he had been almost seven years before.

Chapter 154

Fall Of Babylon The Great

SATISFIED THAT Nebuchadnezzar was basically in good health, though insane and living like an animal, Daniel returned to his home to await the time when the former king of Babylon would regain a normal mind.

Sanity Returns

When Nebuchadnezzar had spent seven years in his miserable state of mental derangement, the former king's sanity suddenly returned to him. (Daniel 4:33-34.) It was as though he abruptly became conscious of himself after seven years of being only conscious like an animal. He stared down at rags, a long unkempt beard, and claw-like nails.

"What am I doing like this in these rocks and bushes?" he asked himself.

Having noted a distant farm hut, he went there, only to be met by the screams of terrified small children, who fled to the hut to hide, and by a protective father who appeared at the door brandishing a sickle.

"I want to know the way to the city," Nebuchadnezzar said. "It's that way," the man pointed. "Be on your way, and don't show up here again!"

Not everybody Nebuchadnezzar met that day was so unfriendly. A few felt sorry for this strange outcast. Through their help, he was able to get cleaned up, be trimmed of his long hair, beard and nails, and be respectably clothed. After that it was no problem to obtain transportation into Babylon, which he did possibly in the cart of a friendly woodcutter. During the long ride Nebuchadnezzar was lost in thought and troubled by what had happened to him since the moment he had been showing guests around his palace. What was immediately plain to him was that a long time had elapsed since then.

There was much confusion at the gates of the palace in Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar showed up there to announce his identity.

"In case you haven't heard, Nebuchadnezzar no longer exists!" a young guard sneered.

"Don't talk to him like that!" an older guard snapped. "That is King Nebuchadnezzar!"

From that moment on the palace was in an uproar. Those who hoped never to hear of Nebuchadnezzar again were understandably shocked when they recognized the former ruler. Those who were loyal to the former king greeted him joyously.

Now that the events of the past seven years were made clear to him, Nebuchadnezzar could view himself well. He had tried to exalt himself to God's level.

And God had made him drop to the level of animals, wild donkeys and such having been his only company in the hills and plains for a long time.

Nebuchadnezzar now had a clearer picture of God, too, realizing that God had mercifully corrected him, brought the meaning of something new to him -- humility. He was for the first time more ashamed of his actions as king than he was of those during his insanity. When that happened, God saw to it that Nebuchadnezzar was firmly reestablished on the throne of Babylonia. He was a much wiser ruler the rest of his days, during which he was honored more than ever by many peoples of all nations. (Daniel 4:34-37.) Nebuchadnezzar wrote the decree found in the fourth chapter of Daniel's book to teach others the lessons he had learned.

Belshazzar's Feast

Nebuchadnezzar died after forty-three years of ruling Babylonia. He was succeeded by his son Evil-merodach, under whom conditions in the kingdom began to worsen. However, one of the new king's acts was laudable. He freed Jehoiachin, the king of Judah who had been brought by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon and imprisoned nearly thirty-seven years previously.

To show honor to the vassal king, Evil-merodach therefore allowed Jehoiachin the privileges of sharing the royal food in the palace. (II Kings 25:27-30.) This probably didn't last very long because after only a very short reign Evil-merodach was assassinated and another took his place.

During similar sudden changes for the next few years, the kingdom's power steadily waned. By the time an idolatrous man named Belshazzar had become co-ruler with his father, Nabonidus (apparently a son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar), the empire was in serious trouble. Media and Persia, two nations to the north and east, had sent their armies heading toward high-walled Babylon, whose fall could mean the fall of all Babylonia.

Even under such ominous circumstances, Babylon seemed impregnable. Belshazzar disdainfully held a riotous feast for a thousand of his officials. As the evening progressed and wine flowed more freely, Belshazzar staggered to his feet and motioned for the music and chattering to cease.

"Why are we drinking to our gods from such ordinary cups?" he asked loudly. "Why not use the gold and silver vessels brought long ago from the so-called holy temple in Jerusalem? I say that it's time for those vessels to be put to a better use than in serving the God of Judah!"

There were raucous cheers. Servants hurried to bring out the costly containers, distribute them in the crowd and pour wine into them.

"Here's to our soldiers out on the walls!" Belshazzar bellowed, shakily holding aloft a gleaming golden goblet brimming with wine. "May they never run out of boiling water to pour down on the steaming heads of our bothersome besiegers!"

There were ripples of laughter, especially from the king's wives and concubines, who also were present. Everyone stood up, extended various containers of wine, roared approval and quaffed the beverages. Then the music continued and the people settled back to loud drinking of toast after toast to their many and varied gods. (Daniel 5:1-4.)

The Handwriting on the Wall

Just as waiters were struggling into the big room with huge trays of food, a woman screamed, bringing a moment of silence to the crowd. People pointed to the wall above the stage where the king and his favorites were sitting.

Still laughing at something that had been said at his table, Belshazzar glanced up. His expression abruptly changed. The color drained from his fear-stricken face. Within only a few feet of his head was what appeared to be a huge human hand, the forefinger tracing letters in the plaster with such pressure that it made deep, plain writing!

People were so paralyzed with fright at this awesome sight that they were hardly able to move. They watched with horrifying fascination as the hand wrote several groups of strange letters on the wall. Then the hand faded away. A few women fainted. Everyone stared at the wall, many trembling with fear. Belshazzar was suddenly aware that his knees were knocking against each other and that his vertebrae felt as though they had dissolved. He tried to call out, but it took several efforts to gain his voice.

"Call the astrologers, the Chaldean scholars and the magicians!" he finally was able to mutter.

The men Belshazzar had summoned dutifully filed in. The king pointed to the wall.

"Tell me what that writing means!" he demanded excitedly. "To any one of you who can do this, I promise magnificent clothing, a golden chain necklace and that he shall become the third one in power in the Babylonian empire!"

These "wise" men, as they were called, swarmed around the wall to study the writing, but not a one of the astrologers, scholars or magicians could make anything of it. They had to admit that the writing was utterly meaningless to them. Disappointed and still apprehensive, Belshazzar hesitatingly dismissed them, convinced that there was some ominous message on the wall he should know about. (Daniel 5:5-9.)

In contrast to the former festive atmosphere that had prevailed in the banquet room, there was now a restless sobriety. Food and drink no longer had much appeal. People were more interested in leaving than in feasting. At this point a matronly woman followed by attendants entered the room and walked toward Belshazzar.

"O king, live forever!" she respectfully said, bowing.

"What brings you here, queen-mother?" Belshazzar asked testily. "I heard you didn't approve of this gathering."

"I've just learned what happened," the queen-mother answered, glancing uneasily at the wall. "Don't give up hope of learning the meaning of that writing up there. Right here in this city is a man who used to be chief of the wise men. Nebuchadnezzar gave him that rank when this man showed unusual knowledge and understanding. As one who had the wisdom of the gods, he had the ability to interpret dreams and reveal hidden meanings. If you call on him, he should be able to help you."

"Who is this man?" Belshazzar asked, leaning forward expectantly.

"His Jewish name was Daniel, but King Nebuchadnezzar renamed him Belteshazzar, almost like your name," was the reply.

After a while a soldier brought in Daniel, now an aging man who had lost his high rank in the kingdom soon after King Nebuchadnezzar's death.

Belshazzar Learns His Fate

"I have heard of you and your unique abilities," Belshazzar said. "I have already asked many men to tell me the meaning of these letters on the wall, but they have failed. If you succeed, you shall receive the reward of being third man in power in this kingdom. Besides, you will be given fine clothing and a splendid necklace of gold!" (Daniel 5:10-16.)

"I don't have any desire for your rewards," Daniel told the king. "I prefer that you keep them or turn them over to someone else after I've given you the meaning of what is written on the wall. First, though, there are some other things you should know. Years ago your grandfather King Nebuchadnezzar gained great possessions, majesty, glory and honor. All that made him a proud, vain man who took or spared lives according to his whims. He wouldn't admit that it was the God of Israel who had allowed him to have his wealth and power. Therefore, God took his kingdom away from him and cast him out to live with animals until he could learn that God's will prevails above that of any man. Even though you knew all this, you, too, Belshazzar, have tried to elevate yourself. This very evening you ventured to show others your disdain for your Creator by using the vessels from God's holy temple for the profane purpose of drinking to the lifeless gods you foolishly worship. Because you have refused to humble yourself and raise the God who has given you the breath of life, God sent a hand to write you a warning!

"The words you see on the wall mean that your kingdom is at an end, that you have proved yourself to be an unwise ruler, and that the enemies at your gates have already begun to take your empire!" (Daniel 5:17-28.)

There was silence in the room as Belshazzar stared at Daniel. A deep fear showed in the king's face, but there was also resentment because Belshazzar was being told that he was an unwise ruler.

"You can't say that I don't at least keep my promises to you!" the king exclaimed.

In spite of his alarm at what he had just heard, Belshazzar managed to order his servants to bring a fine coat and a gold chain to put on Daniel at once, and directed one of his officers to proclaim that Daniel would be elevated to the third-ranking man in power in Babylonia. When Daniel left the palace, he was attired the way the king said he would be and was shown the courtesies extended to royalty. (Daniel 5:29.)

Meanwhile, days before, Median and Persian soldiers had started to work hard on the ambitious project of temporarily diverting the Euphrates River from its natural course through the city of Babylon into a marshland off to the side. This they accomplished, surprisingly, by digging a channel through one bank and piling huge amounts of stones into the river to shunt a most of its water, for a time, into the channel they had dug. Inasmuch as the Babylonians were penned up in their city, they certainly couldn't interfere, and apparently didn't even know what was being done.

The City Taken

With that part of the riverbed that ran through the city almost dry, troops of the Medes and Persians, led by men named Darius and Cyrus, marched at night through the riverbed mud to almost the very heart of the city. There they found a carelessly left open gate which led from the river through the walls along the river into the city proper. Troops poured into Babylon to confound the citizens and soldiers with utter surprise. Before morning the attackers were in command, having actually come within the outer limits of the city while Belshazzar and his guests drank in the banquet room of the palace.

The king, meanwhile, had retired to his quarters. He was frightened and distressed by what Daniel had told him. To add to his misery, he began to imagine that he was being watched and followed by someone or ones who meant him harm. Doubling his personal guard didn't give him a feeling of security. Nor did it protect him. Clever assassins succeeded in taking his life that night in spite of his guards. King Belshazzar didn't live long enough to see his city overrun by the besiegers he had scorned!

After the conquest of the Babylonians, it was decided that Darius, ruler of the Medes, should stay in charge of Babylon while Cyrus, ruler of Persia, went back to his affairs in Persia.

First of Exiles Return

The first of the Jewish exiles to start back for their homeland after being captives of the Babylonians were led by Zerubbabel, prince of Judah. Their long caravan of about fifty thousand people also included over seven hundred horses, more than a hundred mules, over four hundred camels and almost seven thousand donkeys. There were also herds of cattle and flocks of sheep to be used as food along the way and for starting new herds and flocks when they arrived in the homeland.

Directly from Babylon to the land of Judah was more than five hundred miles, but between the two places was the vast Syrian desert, an area too arid for crossing with animals other than camels.

There were too many animals to carry water for, which meant that the Jews would have to take a route twice as long in order to stay close to streams. Therefore, instead of setting out westward toward Judah, they started northwest along the west side of the Euphrates River, following it for roughly four hundred miles until they came to a region where smaller streams emptied into the Euphrates from mountains to the west. There they turned west and then south to move along the foothills of the mountains in northwestern Syria. This part of the route took them past Damascus, Mt. Hermon and along the northern part of the Jordan River. From there they came down into the land of Judah to end a trip close to a thousand miles long and which required about four months to make.

This was an exciting, happy type of journey, but not every event during the trip was joyful. There were deaths as well as births. Hostile bands of nomads occasionally made night raids to steal anything of value or even to drive off unprotected sheep or cattle.

Conditions were bad in Jerusalem, whose walls were broken, the interior charred by fire and the temple utterly demolished. Although a large part of the Jews chose to settle there, there was a general scattering of them all over Judah because of an effort to locate in the regions and home-sites their forebears had left. Ravages by the elements, animals and roving junk pickers had left most buildings uninhabitable. Tents and crude makeshift structures had to be set up to house the new citizens until they could repair or rebuild the old houses that were falling apart.

As soon as the people were established in fair comfort, the men were summoned to Jerusalem by Zerubbabel and Jeshua to rebuild the main altar at the temple site so that they could begin as soon as possible to make burnt offerings in the mornings and evenings. The altar was set up even before a new temple floor had been laid because they feared the people who lived nearby, and believed that this hurried act of obedience would give them greater protection from God.

When it came time for the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jews obediently observed it, having looked forward eagerly to the privilege of having this special time for themselves. This was to be the most joyous time of the year, but under the circumstances the Jews probably didn't observe it with the unrestrained joy they otherwise would have done. They were so thankful to be in their own country, though, that they gave liberally at the two offering times of the Feast. There was such a great amount of riches taken in that it was possible, with permission from King Cyrus, who still held Judah as a vassal nation, to purchase lumber for building a second temple from the nearby cities of Tyre and Sidon. Arrangements were also made to hire skilled craftsmen from these places to come the next year to carry out the intricate work the Jews weren't trained to do.

By the time the floor of the temple was completed, Jeshua had appointed men from the Levites for various functions. These assistant priests and priests were attired in the proper vestments for a dedication ceremony. Blowing trumpets and striking cymbals, these men led the people in happy songs of gratitude. This was followed by a loud chorus of joyous shouts.

At the same time there was loud wailing, in the far eastern fashion of showing sadness, by older men who had seen the original temple. They wept openly because they regretted that the new one would lack the size, beauty, majesty and furnishings of the first one.

Time passed while the Jews concentrated on cleaning up the rubble from the walls and brought in material to rebuild the broken parts. At the same time they managed to do a little work on the temple, but small progress was made. Meanwhile, their Samaritan neighbors became more and more disgruntled because of the construction that was taking place on the walls. Slowing up work on the temple and finally stopping the work wasn't too difficult for the Samaritans because it involved only one site. But it was impossible for them to hamper the work at dozens of places throughout Jerusalem.

Years passed. It was now sometime after the death of Cyrus' son that Darius the Persian became king. He proved to be in favor of the Jews.

In the second year of the reign of King Darius, two Jewish prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, were inspired by God to stir up their countrymen into continuing work on the temple in spite of the threats of their enemies. These men had come from Babylon with Zerubbabel. Having lived many years close to God, they more clearly realized the importance of getting on with the temple. Besides, they had more faith than did most Jews that God would protect those who would try to carry out the work God expected them to do.

"We have reason to believe that King Darius would favor work on the temple starting again," they told Zerubbabel, Jeshua and other leaders.

Encouraged, but at the same time beset with misgivings, the Judean leader eventually called together the temple workmen, who anxiously renewed their work, though concerned about how long they could continue without enemy interruption. As might be expected, the watchful Samaritans soon noted what was happening.

When Governor Tatnai was told what was taking place, his reaction was disappointing to the Samaritans. Instead of replying that he would come with troops, he sent a letter back indicating merely that he would look into the matter. A few days later the Samaritans saw Tatnai and a few aides riding southward through Samaria, apparently on their way to Jerusalem. There were no troops in the entourage, which could mean that the governor didn't intend to force the Jews into anything.

Obviously a fair person who didn't accept the exaggerated and hostile reports of the Samaritans, Tatnai came to Zerubbabel and simply asked him by whose authority he was allowing his men to work on the temple, and why Jerusalem's walls had been partly reconstructed with the strength of fortress walls.

"Our authority comes from the God of heaven and earth," Zerubbabel respectfully replied. "Years ago a great king of Israel was instructed by our God to build a temple here. Long after it was built, our forefathers angered God, causing Him to bring King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon against them. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple and took our people as prisoners to Babylon.

Some of those people are here with us. Others and their descendants still live in or near Babylon. In the first year of the reign of King Cyrus of Persia, Cyrus decreed, according to the desire of God, that the temple should be rebuilt by our people. Many thousands of us returned to Jerusalem with permission from the king, who gave us back the gold and silver vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the house of God. These we have here ready to be put back in use in the temple, which we haven't been able to finish even in the last sixteen years. That is because our enemies have constantly tried to prevent our work."

Tatnai asked a few more questions and then left, leaving Zerubbabel and Jeshua wondering what would come of the governor's visit. The Samaritans wondered too, when they saw the governor and his aides returning to Syria. On reaching his office, Tatnai made a report to send to King Darius, describing in detail his visit to Jerusalem.

"If you are in favor of it, I suggest that the Persian records at Babylon be searched to learn what was written about King Cyrus in this matter," Tatnai concluded. "Please let us know if the Jews should be allowed to continue their construction. Your decision will be carried out as soon as we receive word from you."

On reading Tatnai's report, King Darius ordered the royal records to be searched, but it was soon discovered that all but recent records had been moved to the Persian summer palace at Achmetha, up in the mountains about three hundred miles northeast of Babylon. There a scroll was found which clearly described what King Cyrus had done concerning another proposed temple at Jerusalem.

"This tells me just what I want to be sure of!" was Darius' pleased exclamation. "Now I'm going to make another decree to fit in with that of my famous predecessor, King Cyrus. It should straighten out those in Samaria who have been troubling the people of Judah!"

In his message to be made public, especially in the areas of Samaria, Judah and Syria, Darius ordered that work on the temple at Jerusalem shouldn't be hampered by anyone, that the tribute usually coming to Babylon from vassal nations to the west should go to the Jews in any amount they needed to continue building the temple and that the priests there were to be furnished bullocks, rams, lambs, wine, wheat, salt and oil.

"All I ask in return," explained King Darius, who had respect for the God of Israel, "is that the priests include me and my sons among those for whom they offer sacrifices and say prayers. I hereby declare that anyone who defies or ignores my wishes in this affair will have boards stripped from his home for building a gallows for hanging him. As for his home, may it never be used again for anything except an out-house. May the God of Israel destroy any who would harm the temple of God at Jerusalem! Let this decree be carried out speedily."

Darius' decree was carried to the western vassal nations with haste, bringing angry surprise and dejection to the Samaritans and relief and joy to the Jews. They had felt that Darius would favor them, but they didn't expect such vigorous support from him.

The Samaritans, fearing that they would be watched by Persian agents, almost immediately ceased troubling the Jews, who at long last felt a freedom they hadn't experienced since coming to their land.

For the next four years work on the temple progressed so well that the building was finished in the sixth year of the reign of Darius. Because of the former harassment from their enemies and their periods of lack of dedication to their work, the Jews were twenty years in carrying out their project.

The dedication ceremonies marked the most eventful day since the Jews had arrived. It was a time of triumph, joy and thankfulness. Everything was set in careful order for the functions of the priests and their assistants. Offerings included a hundred bullocks, two hundred rams and twelve male goats. Some of these animals, as God would have it, were furnished by the same people who had tried for years to prevent the building of the temple.

Conclusion

From this point onward, the events from then to now are mostly recorded in advance, as prophecy. But prophetic writings do not directly lend themselves to inclusion in such a narrative as "The Bible Story."

The account brings us up to the restoration of Judah under the Persians, a type of the future restoration of all twelve tribes to the Promised Land.

There is, of course, considerable history in the New Testament. But we do not plan to cover that in "The Bible Story."