

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 2

### 2 KINGS 11–17

#### KING PROTECTED (2 KINGS 11:1-12)

During the ninth century B.C. occasionally the kings of Israel and Judah had the same name. In Judah Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram became king. Jehoram married Athaliah and the couple had a son named Ahaziah [ay huh ZIGH uh]. Ahaziah also was the name of Athaliah's brother who had briefly served as king of Israel during Jehoshaphat's reign in Judah. When King Ahaziah of Israel died, his brother Joram became king. To complicate matters Jehoram of Judah sometimes is called Joram and Joram of Israel at times is referred to as Jehoram. In this lesson, unless stated otherwise, Ahaziah refers to the king of Judah and Joram indicates the king of Israel. God's imminent judgment hung over the dynasty of Omri and its control over Israel. Previously God's prophet Elisha had sent a young prophet to anoint Jehu, the commander of Israel's army, as the new king of the Northern Kingdom. Thereafter Jehu led an immediate coup to overthrow the dynasty of Omri, which had ruled Israel for over 40 years. Joram, the king, had been wounded in a battle with Aram and was recuperating at Jezreel. Joram was the uncle of Ahaziah, the king of Judah. Ahaziah had traveled to Jezreel to visit his wounded kinsman. Both kings died in Jehu's bloody purge. When Ahaziah's corpse was returned to Jerusalem, his mother's response was startling!

Ahaziah's mother was Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab (2 Kings 8:18). The name Athaliah means "the Lord is exalted." Despite her name, she did nothing to exalt the one true God. Her ambition was to exalt only herself. Rather than lament the loss of her son, Athaliah seized the occasion as a political opportunity. She made herself ruler over the kingdom of Judah and began to murder all legitimate heirs to her throne. The phrase all the royal heirs excepts Joash, the sole remaining male descendant of David. Athaliah was the only woman ever to rule either Israel or Judah. Her purge threatened to exterminate David's dynasty. Thus her reign also appeared to threaten God's promise of a Messiah who would come from David's line. The absence of any appraisal of her reign in the text of 2 Kings suggests she was a usurper who was ultimately denied legitimacy. It is ironic that while she appeared to

be the most serious threat to God's promise to David, in God's eyes she amounted to nothing, deserving not even a single word of condemnation.

God's purposes are often challenged by sinful self-interest. Our choices need to conform to God's purposes.

**Verse 2:** In order to secure her new throne, Athaliah felt compelled to eliminate any possible rival. Therefore she ordered the annihilation of the dynasty of David. Jehosheba [jih HAHSH ih buh], also related to the royal family, escaped the bloodbath because she had no direct claim to the throne and therefore was not a threat to Athaliah. Jehosheba was married to Jehoiada [jih HOY uh duh], one of the priests in the temple (2 Chron. 22:11). She was able to rescue her nephew from the prisoners awaiting execution. Joash [JOH ash] was only a baby, approximately a year old.

After removing him from immediate danger, Jehosheba concealed him. The bedroom probably was a storage space where sleeping pallets were stored. The Hebrew word refers to an inner room that affords privacy. Because of his age, someone was needed to care for him. In the custody of his nurse, Joash escaped the fate Athaliah had planned for him. The rest of his family did not. God's promise and God's purpose rested in the fragile life of this tiny child.

Whereas Jehosheba's family relationship did not threaten her life, her action in rescuing Joash clearly did. However, her loyalty to the dynasty of David, and hence to God's promise and purpose, was greater than her fear of death. We should take God's purposes and agenda as our own, even if it puts us at great risk.

**Verse 3:** At the first opportunity Jehosheba moved her two wards to the temple. There the danger to the young prince was much less. In addition the transfer provided the impressionable future king a godly atmosphere in which to grow up. Jehoiada was a faithful servant of God and would teach the child important truths about God. Joash remained in concealment within the temple complex for six years. During this period Athaliah ruled Judah. Her administration followed the pattern of her father. Hence the evil that Jehu's purge had eradicated in Israel found a home in the Southern Kingdom. Idolatry and tyranny replaced holiness and righteousness in Judah.

After the sole survivor of the royal line reached the age of seven, Jehoiada initiated a re-volt against Athaliah's wicked government. The priest selected trusted messengers and sent them to certain military officials. The commanders of hundreds were army officers. The Carites [KEHR ights] apparently were mercenaries who served as the royal bodyguard. The military and temple guards were instructed to seize control of critical locations in the city. These elite troops guarded the palace and temple complex. Their enlistment in the plot reveals fundamental dissatisfaction with Athaliah's usurpation of David's throne. It is significant that a religious leader institutes this revolt because his role in the young king's life will later lead to religious renewal.

On the specified day the conspirators acted to reverse the illegitimate seizure of the crown by Athaliah. The routine changing of the guard enabled them to double the size of armed troops in the city without raising suspicion. Jehoiada issued the soldiers equipment associated with David. This gesture symbolized the reestablishment of the legitimate royal family. Quickly the detachments carried out their mission and secured strategic posts around the palace and in the temple.

**Verse 12:** A large formation of soldiers was placed at the traditional site in the temple courtyard where the king appeared before the nation. Then Jehoiada brought the young prince out of hiding and presented him to those gathered. Their reaction was electrifying. With the obvious approval of the assembled crowd, Jehoiada proceeded with the coronation of Joash.

The ceremony involved placing the king's crown on the head of the young boy. Next Jehoiada presented a copy of the testimony to the nation's new ruler. The Hebrew word commonly was used for the law, especially the Ten Commandments. The document referred to here pertained to the responsibility of the king (see for example, Deut. 17:18). Likely the term implied that a copy of the entire law was placed in the new king's hands. Thus the scroll reminded the future leader of his covenant relationship and the demands that God imposed on him. Finally the priest anointed the new king with oil. This gesture signified that God had appointed the child to the royal office. Together the symbols indicated God's choice of Joash to become king and God's provision for him to carry out the task of

ruling God's covenant people.

In response the assembled crowd, which included worshipers as well as the military force, clapped their hands and shouted, "Long live the king!" Their enthusiastic acceptance of the new king helped the nation return to its fundamental values, including the worship of the Lord. The coronation acknowledged military, religious, and popular support for the legitimate ruler. The actions of Jehoiada pointed to the significant role that the religious leader would play in the new administration. Until the young boy was old enough to rule on his own, Jehoiada served as regent. Later the priest would lead in a spiritual renewal of the nation. Jehoiada accepted his responsibility to act in line with God's purposes. He risked his life by approaching others with a plot to overthrow the existing government. But his courage and commitment emboldened others to join with him. They, too, made their agenda the same as God's purpose. Their actions resulted in the restoration of the line of David on the throne of Judah. Unknown to them they also acted in line with God's purpose in sending the Messiah through David's line. We may never realize on this side of heaven the far-reaching scope of our actions for good when we line up with God's purposes and do what He directs us to do.

#### **TYRANT DEPOSED (11:13-16)**

The noise from the coronation in the temple courtyard quickly reached the ears of the queen. She hastily raced to the temple to investigate. Inside the temple precincts Athaliah immediately realized the scope of the counter-revolution. The seven-year-old king stood in the customary site where new kings were crowned. A crown rested on his head, oil glistened on his hair, and in his hands he clutched a scroll. Around him stood the attendants who accompanied a head of state. A strong force of armed soldiers added power to the turn of events. Troop formations could be seen everywhere.

The noise had attracted others off the streets of Jerusalem and the swelling crowd was cheering loudly and tooting horns in obvious agreement with the unfolding event. The helpless queen ripped apart her garments in anger and distress and screamed, "Treason! Treason!" Ironically her accusation served as the verdict on her reign. She was the real traitor.

**Verse 15:** The change of government was complete. The new king was still too young to actually rule the country. Until he was old enough to fulfill the responsibilities of kingship, the priest who had been the catalyst for the change would hold the reins of authority. His first decision was to order the execution of Athaliah. Her death was more than a political necessity.

The death warrant came from a priest—a mediator between God and humanity—and was the just judgment of God on a wicked queen. Athaliah had murdered her own family in order to seize power. Having acquired the throne by violence, she pursued the same policies that brought the demise of Ahab and Jezebel in Israel. These policies included promoting idolatry (2 Chron. 22:2-3), a clear violation of the Ten Commandments. Athaliah's gory coup replaced God's plan for the government of Judah. God intended that the nation should be ruled by the family of David.

Jehoiada insisted that Athaliah's death not profane the sacred precincts of the temple. He ordered the army to kill her at another location. Reverence for the Lord and for God's temple led the priest to instruct that soldiers take her outside and execute her there. Furthermore they were authorized to kill anyone who came to her aid. Evidently no one came to her rescue. The ranks of armed soldiers opened to allow the passage of the detail assigned to arrest and execute the usurper. Whereas those she killed were innocent victims of her ambition, her death was the lawful consequence of her own actions and the just judgment of God.

**Verse 16:** The army arrested the deposed queen and escorted her towards the royal palace. Inside the Horses' Entrance the party halted. This was the gate where mounted riders entered the grounds of the royal residence. There the soldiers carried out the death sentence. The reference to horses reminds the reader of the fate of Jezebel, who probably was Athaliah's mother. Jezebel had been thrown from her window when Jehu entered Jezreel after his rebellion. As soon as her body hit the pavement, Jehu trampled her corpse with the horses of his chariot (2 Kings 9:30-33).

Because Jezebel's daughter duplicated her mother's conduct, the daughter suffered a similar end. Even the

description of the structure as the king's palace, rather than the queen's palace, implies the illegitimate nature of her regime and pointed to the restoration of David's regal line.

#### **KING INSTALLED (11:17-21)**

**Verse 17:** The ascension of a new political ruler provided the nation with an opportunity for spiritual renewal. Jehoiada did not hesitate to seize the opportunity. He led the king and his subjects into a new covenant with the Lord. A covenant was the ancient equivalent to a legal contract or a treaty.

A covenant could be made between two parties of equal standing. For example, Abraham and Abimelech made a covenant giving the well at Beersheba to Abraham (Gen. 21:22-34). Many covenants were made between a superior and an inferior party. In such cases the superior party imposed the terms of the covenant on the inferior party. Whenever God is a party in a covenant, He is the superior party. He determines the terms. These are not for negotiation. The Lord established a conditional covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai during the time of Moses. Since the covenant was a legal contract, it contained terms and responsibilities for the parties in the agreement. God agreed to be Israel's God. Israel agreed to obey God's commandments. These initially were set forth in the Ten Commandments.

It was necessary for each generation of Israelites to decide for itself whether it would fulfill the terms of that covenant. Jehoiada and his generation readily accepted their responsibility. The Hebrew verb translated made literally means "to cut," showing the serious nature of such agreements. In most English translations the word LORD is printed in all uppercase type, denoting that the Hebrew text contains the personal covenant name for God. The use of this name reveals the intimate nature of the relationship between God and His people. Their agreement to be God's people implied that they must behave according to the stipulations set forth by God.

The covenant between the king and the people defined the relationship between the king and the citizens of the nation. He was not an autocrat, and they were not inferior beings. Both were members of God's covenant community. Within that community God delegated to the king the

responsibility to care for the other people of the covenant. He must act in line with God's purposes by carrying out God's directions.

**Verse 18:** Immediately the people demonstrated their commitment to their covenant with God by conformity to the First and Second Commandments. They left the temple that Solomon had built for the Lord and went to the sanctuary of Baal. The offensive structure was destroyed and the priest who officiated there was killed. The name Mattan [MAT uhn] was a common Phoenician name, so Athaliah may have imported this priest. However, Israelites also were known by this name (2 Kings 24:17). Therefore the nationality of the priest cannot be determined with certainty. The emphasis of this verse is on the termination of the cult of Baal. Just as the victory of Elijah on Mount Carmel led to the death of idolatrous prophets of Baal in the Northern Kingdom, the victory of Jehoiada in the Southern Kingdom likewise removed those who promoted the false god of the fertility cult.

After the destruction of the rival cult, Jehoiada moved to restore the exclusive worship of God among the people. He appointed overseers for the temple. The Hebrew term translated guards denoted subordinates who were placed in positions of supervising others. While the term does not specify the nature of their responsibilities, it implies a reorganization of the temple staff under Jehoiada.

Jehoiada's activities remind us that genuine change involves both negative and positive action. The eradication of Baalism left a void in the people's lives. That void needed to be filled with the worship of the one true God. Removal of sinful behavior alone is not sufficient. Wrong conduct must be replaced with conduct that pleases God.

**Verse 19:** Unlike the bloodbath that accompanied Jehu's purge in the north, Jehoiada accomplished the removal of Omri's descendant in the south with only the death of two individuals, Athaliah and Mattan. Having installed the legitimate ruler over the nation in a ceremony within the temple courtyard, the new king is moved to the royal palace. The symbolism is profound. The coronation in the temple indicated that it occurred under the watchful eyes of God Almighty and therefore carried His approval. However the temple was the jurisdiction of the priesthood. The king must rule from the palace, the seat of the political

government. Those who participated in the revolt accompanied Jehoiada and Joash to the throne room. The young boy's occupation of the throne announced the beginning of his reign as king. He was crowned in the temple but in the palace he began to rule.

**Verse 20:** As word about the new government spread throughout the nation, the citizens rejoiced. Although idolatry existed in Judah as it did in Israel, it never took root there as deeply as it had in the Northern Kingdom. Loyalty to the Lord was stronger in the Southern Kingdom. The removal of the wicked queen brought peace to the city of Jerusalem. Life could go on as God intended. We must take whatever steps are necessary to fulfill God's purposes. We also need to remember that we cannot do what God wants us to do without becoming the people that God wants us to be.

#### **TEMPLE REPAIRED (2 KINGS 12:1-21)**

Chapter 12 begins with a standard formula for summarizing the reigns of various kings. The reference to the king of the other kingdom, the length of the king's rule, and a reference to the king's parent are stated. The seven-year-old boy Joash ruled Judah 40 years. The evaluation of that period contains both divine approval and condemnation. During the period that Jehoiada the priest advised the king, God approved of the decisions that Joash made. However, Joash's religious policy stopped short of God's expectations. He failed to remove the local high places. These were ancient hilltop sites where the Canaanites once had worshiped their idols. Many of these high places were converted to the worship of Israel's God after the conquest of the region. Others continued to be connected with pagan deities. The existence of such sites contradicted God's expressed choice of Jerusalem as the sole permissible location for worship and His unwavering demand for the exclusive allegiance of His people.

The temple was over a century old when Joash became king. Years of neglect and abuse had damaged the structure. Therefore he instructed the priests to repair any deterioration of the temple. The king directed the priesthood to designate a portion of the offerings for use in this project. However, 23 years later he observed that the temple remained in disrepair. At that time Joash summoned the priests, including Jehoiada.

A special offering box was placed in the temple to receive finances for the project. As the funds accumulated, the king's secretary and the high priest would empty the box and count the money. The money was used to pay the construction workers. None of the money could be used for temple utensils until the major construction was complete. This prohibition was wise since designated funds can easily vanish when they are diverted to other uses. Money that was not used for repairs was given to the priests. Thus the renewal of spiritual life in Judah resulted in the repair of the place of worship and provision for the worship leaders.

Sadly after Jehoiada's death, Joash abandoned the exclusive worship of the Lord and permitted the reintroduction of Baalism (see 2 Chron. 24:17-27). The king authorized the death of Jehoiada's son when he objected. Joash's apostasy led to divine judgment. The judgment came in the form of an invasion from Aram. When the army of Hazael, king of Aram, marched toward Jerusalem, Joash collected priceless articles from his palace and the temple treasury in order to pay the Aramean monarch. The bribe worked, but it cost the nation dearly. Furthermore some of the items had been consecrated to God and therefore were sacred. Joash had greatly exceeded the authority that God had delegated to him.

In the end two of Joash's own servants assassinated him. He was buried in the city of Jerusalem, but he was denied the honor of interment in the royal tombs (2 Chron. 24:25).

#### **JEHOAHAZ'S REIGN AND IDOLATRY (13:1-9)**

When Jehu died, his son Jehoahaz [jih HOH uh haz] succeeded him as king of Israel. Jehoahaz's reign lasted 17 years. He continued the sinful pattern of Israel's previous kings. Specifically, he did not renounce the religious sites established by Jeroboam I [JER uh BOH uhm]. Jeroboam had led the 10 northern tribes to rebel against David's dynasty after Solomon died. The rebellion attained its goal of independence and Jeroboam became the first king of the Northern Kingdom. The new political state took the name Israel. The Southern Kingdom was known as Judah. David's descendants continued to govern Judah.

Jeroboam made numerous decisions that defined the character of the new state. In the area of religion he faced a dilemma. His subjects worshiped the Lord God. The Lord's

temple was located in Jerusalem, the capital of what had become a separate nation. Furthermore, the ceremonies of the temple asserted that David's dynasty was God's choice to rule all His people, including the northern tribes. The stability and security of Jeroboam's throne mandated that Israel's citizens not participate in such ceremonies. Therefore Jeroboam constructed two new places of worship within the borders of his kingdom—at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:28-30). The Lord sanctioned neither site.

Having abandoned God's chosen place of worship, Jeroboam compounded his fatal error by erecting golden calves at these sites. Such worship was unacceptable to the Lord. Nonetheless, people flocked to these more convenient sites for worship. Jehoahaz did nothing to change the worship practices of his nation. The corrupt religious pattern established by Jeroboam remained the norm for the citizens of Israel.

The Lord does not tolerate such blatant disregard for His commands. Divine judgment fell on the ancient nation of Israel. Once more hostility with Aram escalated. This time the war resulted in catastrophe. God permitted Aramean troops to overrun Israel. Elisha had mourned Israel's fate when the Lord showed him that Hazael [HAZ ay el] would become king of Aram (2 Kings 8:17-15). What the prophet foresaw came to pass. Such affliction would continue under the reign of Hazael's son Ben-hadad [ben-HAY dad].

**Verse 4:** Jehoahaz had continued to legitimize the shrines established by Jeroboam. He had failed to forcefully destroy the cult of Baal. Therefore God judged his kingdom. The defeated king of Israel recognized the stupidity of his religious course of action to date. His indifference concerning spiritual matters had caused his nation's breakdown. In the desperate situation Jehoahaz turned to the Lord for help.

God's response revealed two fundamental characteristics of His nature. First, God extends His grace to those who repent of sinful behavior. Jehoahaz demonstrated an unusual action by a king of the Northern Kingdom when he sought the LORD's favor. The reference to the Lord's hearing Jehoahaz indicated that God responded positively to the king's search. Thereby God confirmed that the king's contrition was real. Second, God shows compassion for His people. God observed the suffering that the people

of Israel experienced as a result of His judgment. Death, starvation, and loss of property were everywhere. Instead of giving the sinful people what their actions deserved, God showed mercy.

**Verse 5:** God's response to the people of the Northern Kingdom followed an ancient biblical pattern that dated back to the period of the judges. The sin of God's people led to judgment, usually in the form of a foreign invader. Here the sin was the people's persistent unfaithfulness to the Lord. Judgment came in the form of an invasion by Aram. Then Jehoahaz responded to God's judgment by repenting of his sinful behavior. According to the biblical pattern, deliverance followed repentance. The deliverance usually occurred through a leader or deliverer God raised up to defeat the invader.

The Bible does not identify the deliverer that the Lord raised up to help Israel escape Aramean power. Biblical scholars have proposed various individuals as the deliverer. Often these suggestions relate to the international situation at the time. On Aram's northern frontier lay the nation of Hamath. During the final years of Jehoahaz's reign, the king of Hamath, probably named Zakir, pursued an aggressive strategy that weakened Aram's military capacity. Around 805 B.C. Adadnirari III of Assyria invaded Aram. His attacks on Damascus enabled the Israelites to break Aramean control over their territory. Each of these kings has been suggested as the deliverer. Another attractive theory identifies the deliverer as Elisha. Nevertheless, an absolute identification is impossible. Therefore one must conclude the human instrument of this deliverance is secondary. The Lord delivered His people. Credit belongs to God and to God alone.

Despite the deliverance by God, the destruction within Israel from the Aramean war was wide-spread. The people's poverty reflected God's judgment against their sin; it also presented an opportunity for a new beginning.

**Verse 6:** The people who survived the destruction of the Arameans knew that the king had sought the Lord's intervention in Israel's plight. The sudden difference in their condition emphasized that God had answered his prayer. They should have expressed gratitude to God by strong fidelity to Him. Sadly they did not. They persisted in the kind of behavior that had typified Israel for generations.

The idolatrous shrines at Bethel and Dan continued to serve as major worship centers for the population. The disregard of God's commandments concerning worship produced a powerless faith. Such weak religious commitment cannot overcome worldly infringements in the lives of God's people. Jehoahaz's powerless religious conviction also allowed the continuation of the worship of the Baals. This was obvious even in the capital city of Samaria. The Asherah [uh SHEE ruh] pole still stood as it did when the cult flourished under Jezebel. Asherah was a fertility goddess who was identified as the mother of Baal. The role of Asherah was a significant element within the cult of Baal. The Asherah pole was a wooden object that stood upright. Its exact appearance is unknown today but it represented the site for worshiping the goddess. The existence of such worship in Israel violated the First Commandment. The nature of such immoral worship contradicted the morality God demanded of His covenant people.

The devastation of Israel's army in the conflict with Aram had been thorough. The army could muster only puny defensive strength. The chariot represented state of the art advanced technology of the era. Chariots used in battle typically carried two soldiers. One drove the horse-drawn vehicle. The other soldier fired a bow and arrow as the chariot moved across the battle-field. Thus chariots provided both rapid mobility and overwhelming firepower. On most battle-fields it was the undisputed master.

Approximately one-half century earlier, Ahab had commanded a chariot force of at least 2,000 vehicles. Only ten chariots remained. Second only to the chariot force, cavalry provided the elite fighting force in war. Its horse-mounted troops provided a commander with timely intelligence and swift striking power. Jehoahaz's cavalry force had been reduced to merely 50 horse-men. The infantry was traditionally the backbone of Israel's military power. They normally prevailed with overwhelming numbers. Those numbers, however, had been cut to only 10,000 men.

The extent of this military loss was conveyed with a powerful idiom. In the agricultural practices of the ancient world, after the grain had been reaped it was placed on a threshing floor. These threshing floors often were located on hilltops where the wind blew strongest. After the grain

dried, a worker beat it with a wooden fork. The fork then was used to toss the beaten grain into the air. The heavy kernels of the grain fell to the threshing floor, but their husks, which had been pulverized to dust, were blown away. Israel's army had been blown away and had vanished like husks at harvest.

Believers who experience God's blessings through answered prayer should begin to serve Him with all their hearts. When they do not do so, their lack of concern not only affects their own lives, it impacts the entire body of believers. Jehoahaz prayed. God answered his petition, but he failed to complete everything God demanded. Likewise the people of the nation did not do what God required of them. Thus the results of the king's repentance were limited and the consequences of his failure powerful. Like all of his predecessors, Jehoahaz's behavior did not please God. The narrative of Jehoahaz concludes with the typical formula. The inspired biblical writer indicated that he did not record all the deeds of the deceased monarch. Rather he noted those related to his spiritual activity and its impact on the nation. The reader was referred to the official court records for a more complete account of his rule. These documents no longer exist. Jehoahaz's son succeeded him.

#### **JHOASH'S REIGN AND HALFHEARTEDNESS (13:10-21)**

The new king's name was Jehoash [jih HOH ash]. He ruled 16 years, one year less than his father did. Like every other king in Israel the biblical writer's evaluation of his reign was negative. Under his leadership Israel found itself in a war on two fronts. Not only did the long struggle with Aram continue, but conflict with Judah also drained the nation's weakened resources. When Jehoash died, his son Jeroboam II became king. Jeroboam would lead Israel into an economic and political golden age. Unfortunately that future prosperity did not equate to renewed spiritual values. The spiritual path pioneered by the first Jeroboam was to reach a new low under the second Jeroboam.

**Verse 14:** Elisha was a crucial voice for the Lord in Israel during this era. After years of faithful service, the great man of God became terminally ill. When Jehoash learned of the prophet's illness, the king traveled to Elisha's residence to visit him. The visit was a dramatic, emotional event. Seeing the feeble figure of the once robust prophet, the king broke down and wept. He addressed Elijah as my

father, presumably a reference to the advanced age of the prophet as well as indicative of the respect to which the prophet was entitled. The repetition presumably reflected the king's sorrow.

Jehoash described Elisha as the chariots and horsemen of Israel. The phrase alluded to an earlier statement by Elisha (2 Kings 2:12). On that occasion Elisha described Elijah with the same words. In both instances a key spokesman of God was about to depart the scene. The phrase emphasized the truth that God, not Israel's armies, was the real defender of the nation. The real strength of Israel lay not in military technology or armed forces but in the word that God spoke through His preachers the prophets.

Here the statement doubtless reflects the king's assumption that the prophet's death would leave his kingdom defenseless. Even though Jehoash wept for Elisha's pending demise, he still did not turn away from his idolatry. His concern for the prophet was actually a request for help in Israel's military campaign against Aram.

**Verse 15:** Elisha fulfilled his responsibility as a prophet of the Lord. Prophecy was not restricted to a spoken medium. Frequently it also involved symbolic activity. The symbolism here was more than a mere object lesson intended to teach a spiritual truth. The spoken word of God contained the power to produce results. In a similar way the symbolic action commanded by God's prophet equated to God's power. Behind both word and deed was the capacity of the sovereign God to do what He said.

In response to the king's request Elisha instructed him to pick up a bow and some arrows. The bow and its arrows represented a significant military weapon in the ancient world. Hand-to-hand combat utilized swords and spears. However, the bow allowed a soldier to strike down his opponent before an enemy was close enough to harm him with sword or spear. The king obeyed Elisha and took the weapon.

**Verse 16:** Elisha's instruction for the king to place his hand on the weapon likely indicated that the king should hold it in a manner that allowed him to use the bow correctly. Symbolically the king's grasp represented the nation going to war under his leadership. When the prophet placed both of his hands on those of the king, the action symbol-

ized the transfer of divine power through the prophet to the king and into the weapon. That is to say the act was a prophetic gesture that emphasized God's presence and power in the upcoming military operation. The weapons of war would destroy the enemy, but credit belonged neither to their superiority nor to the skill of the soldiers who used them. Victory came from the Lord through His prophet.

**Verse 17:** Next Elisha instructed Jehoash to open a window that faced eastward. Aram was located to the north and east of Israel. Hence the prophet told the king to face in the direction of the enemy. Jehoash obeyed. Finally the prophet shouted the command to shoot. The king drew back the string and released an arrow. The arrow flew through the window toward Aram, in a real sense the first and most important shot of the king's campaign. It represented his dependence on God in future battles.

Elisha proclaimed victory. The repetition emphasized the certainty of the victory. God had spoken. It would come to pass. All that was required was for the king to lead the army into battle. God had assured him of success. The prophet's confidence in the prediction was enforced with a revelation of where the victory would take place. Aphek [AY fek] was a town east of the Jordan River near the Sea of Galilee. The promise was coupled with a challenge for the king to accept God's call and do as he was commanded.

The words until you have put an end to them insist the king must accept responsibility for carrying out God's instructions. Frequently God demands that His people act in order to see His promises fulfilled. No excuse relieves one of that responsibility. Even though he was suffering from a terminal illness, Elisha continued to serve the Lord as he was able. Regardless of the condition believers are in or the degree of suffering they experience, they should continue to serve the Lord. Success is derived from God's participation and is not the result of His servant's circumstance or condition.

**Verse 18:** In this instance the king was commanded to symbolically accept the responsibility to end the enemy threat. Elisha instructed him to take the rest of the arrows and strike the ground with them. Jehoash took the arrows and struck the ground, but the king stopped after hitting it only three times. The crisis demanded vigorous action, not token activity. Repeatedly Aram had defeated Israel in the

past. These defeats had weakened Israel's army significantly and had lost important territory. If the situation was to change, Israel must shatter Aram totally. The situation demanded enthusiastic blows. Instead a wavering leader offered timid strokes. When-ever believers are called on by God to act in any situation, they must respond with absolute obedience and put their entire being into the deed! Verse 19: Elijah's anger at Jehoash for striking the ground only three times was neither petty nor unfair. The king had heard the prophet describe the arrow as "the LORD's arrow of victory . . . over Aram" (v. 17). The arrow symbolized the power of God's word as spoken through His prophet. Jehoash should have listened to Elisha's prophecy and shown more enthusiasm in his symbolic action. He should have hit the ground repeatedly with the arrow. Then he would have utterly destroyed his enemy. Instead he limited his obedience to the divine command to three strikes against the ground. Thus he would win only three victories. Though Jehoash did lead Israel to success in the war with Aram, his halfheartedness prevented an even greater victory. Aram would return to negatively impact Israel in the future. Believers should not be satisfied with moderate effectiveness in their spiritual service but should diligently strive to accomplish as much as possible for the sake of God's kingdom.

Shortly after his encounter with Jehoash, Elisha died from his illness. Customarily a corpse was buried a day or two after death. Burial could be in a grave dug in the ground, a natural cave, or a tomb hewn out of rock. Tombs of this era contained ledges on which the corpses were laid. Often these were large enough for more than one body. The weakened state of Israelite defenses encouraged the nation's enemies to threaten the country. Moab contented itself with annual raids for looting small villages and farms. On one occasion a burial procession observed a band of Moabites traveling through the region. Quickly the Israelites sought safety. The looming danger ruled out normal interment ceremonies. At the same time the family could not abandon the body without burial. Therefore they located the closest tomb and tossed the corpse into it. The tomb chosen was that of Elisha. Although the prophet was dead, his prophetic power had not departed. When the dead body touched Elisha's skeleton, the man suddenly revived and stood up! This was not magic or fiction. The event was another symbolic revelation from God. The miracle presented one more sign to Israel. God was sover-

eign and His power was unlimited. He could revive the dead through the dead. Israel may have been on the verge of collapse, but if the people would repent, God would revive the nation.

#### **GOD'S MERCY TO ISRAEL (13:22-25)**

The survival of a rebellious people depended on God's grace and mercy. God willingly postponed judgment in order to give His people another opportunity to repent of their evil conduct and serve Him completely. During the reign of Jehoahaz, God's judgment against Israel came in the form of war with Aram. A series of military setbacks seriously damaged the political structure of the kingdom. Were it not for God's mercy the nation might have been exterminated.

Over 1,000 years earlier God had made a covenant with Abraham. God continued to re-new that covenant with subsequent generations. Because of that covenant, God was not willing to destroy the present generation even though they deserved it. He still loved His people. Even in this time of judgment God still hoped that His people might return to Him.

**Verses 24-25:** When Hazael died, his son Ben-hadad became king of Aram. Benhadad may have been a title used by the Aramean kings rather than a personal name. The word means "son of the god Hadad." Hadad was the chief god worshiped by the Arameans. Hazael had been an officer in the Aramean army. He murdered the king that preceded him and took the throne (2 Kings 8:15). Soon it was apparent that Hazael's ambition extended beyond his own borders. He attacked Israel and Judah and seized territory from both nations. Hazael's regime was brutal in carrying out his policy.

After his father's death, Jehoash attempted to recover the territory his father had lost to Hazael. Aram no longer held military superiority, and Jehoash's campaign against Benhadad son of Hazael enabled him to recapture those cities that his father had lost. Jehoash won three major victories over his Aramean foes just as Elisha had prophesied. The triumph enabled Jehoash to expand his territory but he was not able to destroy the Aramean army completely. Once again events had verified the reliability of God's word. Once more the people of Israel had benefited from God's mercy but failed to repent and conform to God's

demands.

Repeatedly God demonstrates His faithfulness and His mercy in our times. We can look back at the history of Israel and learn a valuable lesson. God desires that we serve Him with wholehearted consistency and persistence. His Word is accurate and His nature never changes. His mercy calls us to enthusiastic faithfulness.

#### **KINGS AMAZIAH AND JEROBOAM (14:1-29)**

Chapter 14 adds additional information concerning the reign of Jehoash in Israel. First however the formalized summary of Amaziah [am uh ZIGH uh] in Judah is recorded. Amaziah's father, Joash, had been assassinated after ruling Judah 40 years. The evaluation of Amaziah's reign was positive. He patterned his administration after the godly characteristics of his father, but he stopped short of the more elevated standard established by David. Like other members of the dynasty he failed to terminate the unauthorized, idolatrous worship practices at the various local worship sites in Judah.

The assassination of Joash destabilized the nation. The initial days of Amaziah's kingship were spent securing his throne. The immediate threat posed by the conspiracy against the royal family required determined response. Amaziah's prosecution of the assassins provided an example of the new king's conformity to God's will. Customarily in the ancient world the entire family of such traitors were put to death. However, the law of Moses restricted punishment to guilty parties only. A person could not be punished for another family member's actions (Deut. 24:16). Amaziah obeyed God's law and limited the executions to the actual conspirators.

After Amaziah had stabilized the internal situation, he turned his attention to problems along his borders. The initial movement was against Edom [EE duhm]. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau. Hence, they were closely related to the people of Judah. Unfortunately the two groups had become bitter enemies. David had won a decisive victory over Edom and made it part of his kingdom. After Solomon's death the Edomites began a prolonged struggle for independence. Although they had achieved independence prior to the time of Amaziah's reign, the Edomites continued to experience conflict with Judah. Control of Edom opened access to the lucrative

commerce from the Gulf of Aqaba.

Amaziah prepared to invade Edom. He ordered the conscription of able-bodied men, age 20 and above (2 Chron. 25:5). He supplemented his army with mercenaries. However, when a prophet of God reprimanded him for doing so, Amaziah dismissed the troops he had hired. The campaign against the Edomites was productive. Significant territory south and east of the Dead Sea reverted to Judah. The prominent town of Sela was part of the conquest. It was renamed Jok-theel as a reminder of Amaziah's sovereignty over the region. Sadly according to 2 Chronicles 25:14-16, at this point Amaziah succumbed to pride. When a prophet of God rebuked him for worshiping Edomite gods, he threatened the man of God and sent him away. Amaziah foolishly believed that he was responsible for his victory. He failed to listen to God's word through His prophet.

**Verse 8:** The majority of the mercenaries that Amaziah released from duty came from Israel. Angry over the loss of potential booty, the disgruntled Israelites looted Judean villages on their route home (2 Chron. 25:13). The security of the nation called for some type of response. "Come, let us meet face to face" was a declaration of war. It was Amaziah's challenge to the king of Israel to come and face him in battle. Amaziah did not seek a possible solution through diplomatic channels. Soldiers that he had hired had committed the crimes. No evidence exists that suggests that Jehoash [jih HOH ash] or any member of the Israelite government sanctioned the destruction. Amaziah's was an emotional outburst that reflected his vanity. The tracing of Jehoash's family tree back to Jehu may hint at both the real and perceived differences in the two royal families. Perhaps Amaziah viewed Jehoash as a usurper not only of the throne of Israel but in part of his own kingdom. After all David and Solomon had formerly governed the territory that had become known as Israel. The king of Israel was a rulership created by rebellion against the monarchy in Jerusalem.

**Verse 9:** Jehoash replied to Amaziah's challenge with a fable. The cedars that grew in Lebanon [LEB un nuhn] were proverbial for strength and growth. In Jehoash's fable, a lowly thistle growing on the forest floor sought a marriage between his son and the daughter of a cedar. According to the cultural viewpoint of that era, this request would

equate to an effort by the thistle to elevate itself to the lofty status of the cedar. Before the cedar could reply, an animal wandering through the forest trampled the thistle. The implications of the fable were clear. The cedar represented Israel. The thistle represented Judah. Despite Judah's recent success against Edom, Judah's army was no match for the military prowess of Israel. If war came, Judah surely would be beaten decisively.

**Verse 10:** Judah's victory over Edom had made Amaziah arrogant. He failed to understand the vast difference in the military capacity of Edom and that of Israel. Jehoash warned Amaziah that an attack against Israel was foolish. He advised the aggressive king of Judah to take pleasure from his victory over Edom. He also admonished him sternly that his glory would be lost if Judah invaded Israel. Israel certainly would defeat Judah. In the aftermath of such a defeat, Amaziah and the people of the Southern Kingdom would face terrible suffering. The warning implied that war would unleash the full fury of Jehoash's wrath.

**Verses 11-12:** When it became apparent that Amaziah was not persuaded by Jehoash's logic, the king of Israel seized the initiative and invaded Judah. The two armies collided at Beth-shemesh [beth-SHEM mesh], a small village about 24 miles west of Jerusalem. Just as Jehoash had predicted, he defeated Judah decisively. The nation was routed. After the battle of Beth-shemesh, the Southern Kingdom's army melted away. Its soldiers deserted and returned to their homes.

**Verses 13-14:** Amaziah was taken prisoner. The victorious Israelite army marched to Jerusalem and looted Judah's capital, including the temple built by Solomon. A 200-yard-long section of the city wall was destroyed. This breach left the city defenseless. Jehoash's taking of hostages from Judah was unprecedented in nature.

Jehoash died sometime after his return to Samaria [suh MEHR ih uh], the capital of Israel. The reader is notified that additional facts about his role in history were recorded in the official court records. These papers are no longer extant.

Amaziah lived 15 years longer than did his antagonist. An attempt to overthrow his leadership became known.

Although the precise cause of the discontent with his rule is unclear, the opposition obviously was widespread. The king left the capital and fled to Lachish, a fortified city southwest of Jerusalem. The alienated king hoped for safety and an opportunity to regroup. He found neither. The leaders of the coup sent a raiding party there and killed Amaziah. His corpse was returned to Jerusalem and buried in the royal tombs.

While the conspirators succeeded in tracking down the refugee king, they did not grasp his throne. It appears that Amaziah's son Azariah had been made coregent with his father earlier. Azariah enjoyed widespread popular support. Under his capable leadership the period of hostility with Israel came to an end. Azariah continued to expand Judah's territory in the south.

This king also was known as Uzziah [uh ZIGH uh] (2 Kings 15:13; Isa. 6:1). Meanwhile following Jehoash's death, his son Jeroboam II had become the new king of the Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam II would lead Israel 41 years. He proved himself an able head of state. Peace and prosperity characterized most of his reign. Israel was the strongest power in the region. Aram lay weakened from earlier Assyrian invasions. However, internal weakness prevented Assyria from imperialistic control. Israel and Judah enjoyed peace. The economy of both nations thrived.

During Jeroboam's reign the prophet Jonah predicted national expansion. This prophet was the same Jonah after which the biblical book is named. The territorial size of Israel reached its historical limits. The dramatic change in the national circumstances dazzled the population. They interpreted their prosperity as a sign of divine favor. The state cult enjoyed popularity. In reality the change in the situation came not from divine favor, which implied approval but from divine compassion (2 Kings 14:27). God showed mercy because of the extreme suffering the people had experienced. Whereas the Northern Kingdom of Israel soon would vanish from history, the Southern Kingdom of Judah would continue. All surviving descendants of Jacob would be called Jews, a shortened form of Judahites.

Cracks, undetected by most of the nation's inhabitants, began to develop in Israel's geo-political sphere. Amos, a sheep breeder from Judah, warned of imminent reversal of

the nation's destiny. Hosea, a prophet deeply affected by his unfaithful wife, echoed the alarm of Amos. Blinded by prosperity, the population refused to hear and heed the prophetic condemnation.

### **KINGS AZARIAH AND ZECHARIAH (15:1-12)**

The appraisal of kings in Judah continued to be essentially positive. Following Amaziah's assassination, his son Azariah became king. He governed Judah 52 years. The reckoning of this reign confuses the modern reader. The date that relates to the reign of Jeroboam identifies when Azariah became the sole ruler of the kingdom. However, the 52 years includes the time of his coregency with his father. Like prior godly kings Azariah's accomplishments were flawed by his failure to remove the various local shrines throughout the nation. The citizens of Judah continued to worship contrary to God's will.

The peaceful relationship with Israel allowed Azariah to employ his army in other locations. He won major victories against the Philistines, the Ammonites, the Edomites, and the Arabians. In addition to these military operations, he directed important building projects in Jerusalem. The military reputation of Azariah spread throughout the region and he too became proud. As is common with haughtiness, Azariah made a disastrous choice. According to 2 Chronicles 26:16-23, his arrogance provoked him to burn incense in the temple. Only priests from the tribe of Levi were authorized to perform this ritual. When the priests rebuked him, Azariah became enraged. But before he could react God struck him with a serious skin disease, often identified as leprosy. The disease forced him to live in isolation for the rest of his life. His son Jotham became coregent with him and handled the daily routine of government.

While Azariah was still reigning, Jeroboam died and his son Zechariah [ZEK uh RIGH uh] succeeded him. Zechariah persisted in the same religious policy that previous kings of the Northern Kingdom had pursued and so was condemned by God.

**Verse 10:** Six months later Zechariah was assassinated. He was struck down publicly by a man who wanted to become king. The bold assassin was Shallum [SHAL uhm]. Shallum's crime was significant in at least two ways. First, he seized the kingship on his own initiative. He was

neither called by God nor anointed by a priest or prophet to be king. His acquisition of the throne reflected sinful ambition, a self-centered craving that was pursued with the philosophy that the end justified the means. Second, this king instigated a period of chaos. Hereafter most of the kings of the Northern Kingdom chose violence as the means to power. The remaining history of Israel would become extremely turbulent. Conspiracy and murder replaced right of birth as the means for transfer of power.

Zechariah's reign was brief. About the only accomplishment of his time on the throne was the fulfillment of God's word that Jehu's dynasty would last four generations. Zechariah was the last king descended from Jehu.

### **KINGS SHALLUM, MENAHEM, AND PEKAHIAH (15:13-26)**

**Verse 13:** The time of Shallum's reign is fixed by dating it during Azariah's thirty-ninth year as king of Judah. Here Azariah is called Uzziah. The implication of the dual names is unclear. Perhaps one was a throne name and the other a personal name. Azariah means "the Lord has helped"; Uzziah means "the Lord is might."

Shallum reigned only one month. Only the one-week reign of Zimri was shorter (1 Kings 16:15-20). His impact was minimal. The inspired writer even omitted the characteristic negative evaluation. Although he assassinated Zechariah and proclaimed himself king, he lacked the support necessary to govern a nation.

**Verse 14:** Sinful ambition is characteristic of the ungodly and often is revisited on its possessor (Jas. 3:14-16; Gal. 6:7-8). Shallum's aspirations, though initially successful, led to his own death by assassination. Tirzah [TUHR zah] was an earlier capital of Israel. When Omri built Samaria, the capital was moved to the new city. The monarchy probably maintained a military garrison in Tirzah after the transfer of the government. Perhaps Menahem [MEN uh hem] was the commander of troops stationed in that city. Whatever his prior status, he clearly had no intention of submitting to the usurper. Menahem moved swiftly to depose Shallum. Shallum's execution left the throne vacant. Rather than return the crown to Jehu's dynasty, Menahem installed himself as king.

**Verse 16:** Menahem insured that he lasted longer than

Shallum by moving to squelch any resistance to his power. God's people should never be guilty of the brutal behavior that characterizes the ungodly. Tragically Menahem's activity typified the pagan nations around Israel. The biblical record lists one example of the atrocities that he committed against those who refused to acknowledge his sovereignty. Though the exact location of Tiphshah [TIF suh] is uncertain, it was an Israelite community and should not be confused with the city of the same name on the Euphrates River. When the inhabitants of Tiphshah did not accept the change in government, Menahem attacked it. The atrocity of cutting open the belly of a pregnant woman was not uncommon in the warfare of the ancient Near East. The act seems to assert the complete termination of a population. A future generation was exterminated along with the present generation.

Such slaughter was more characteristic of ungodly nations such as Ammon and Assyria and marked a new low in the history of Israelite kingship. Believers in Christ are to maintain a distinctive lifestyle. Areas of our lives that do not conform are to be changed so that we will please God. In 745 B.C. Tiglath-pileser III, also called Pul, became king of Assyria. Tiglath-pileser quickly reversed the decline of Assyrian power. Unlike his predecessors, he sought permanent conquest of new territory and not just tribute. He punished rebellion among his subject states with cruel deportation of the population and incorporation of their territory into his empire. Menahem acknowledged Pul's sovereignty by paying tribute to him and thus was allowed to retain his title. However, Israelite kings no longer were free to govern the nation as they desired. Previously they had denied the Lord His rightful authority over them. Henceforth they would submit to an Assyrian king instead.

The heavy tribute paid to Assyria required Menahem to levy a heavy tax on his own subjects. The looming Assyrian threat and its economic drain fostered discontent. Menahem's successors not only lacked the power to oppose Assyria, but also they lacked the strength to secure their own survival. The last extended opportunity for covenant renewal had passed. Internal anarchy and external oppression distinguished the rest of Israel's history. The leadership did not lead the nation in spiritual renewal. So power-hungry men killed kings in order to become king. Then other greedy men killed them. The efforts of these grasping usurpers heralded catastrophe and the ultimate demise of the Northern Kingdom.

Menahem's son Pekahiah reigned only two years. The same religious and political agenda that had proved disastrous in previous centuries persisted. Pekah, one of his officers, killed him in the royal residence. A small force of Gileadites supported Pekah in the coup. Gilead was a rugged region east of the Jordan. If Shallum came from this area as some think, this plot may suggest that geographical divisions contributed to the discord in Israel. On another level the dissension resulted from the spiritual condition of the population. Harmony within God's covenant community is the consequence of the people's right relationship with God. The believer's relationship with God substantially affects the believer's relationship with other people.

#### **KINGS PEKAH AND JOTHAM (15:27-38)**

Pekah's reign is described with the typical formula and the expected condemnation (vv. 27-28). However, the formula introduces a puzzle concerning chronology. The 52nd year of Azariah was 740 B.C. The inspired biblical writer stated that Pekah reigned 20 years. Samaria fell to Assyria in 722 B.C. and the nation of Israel ceased to exist after that date. That is a period of only 18 years. Furthermore according to 2 Kings 17:1, Hoshea was king after Pekah for nine years. How can we understand this puzzle? One likely solution is that Pekah exercised kingly authority in the country before he actually seized power. Pekah's support most likely came mainly from the Transjordan or Gilead. He may have been the choice of those living in that region to succeed Shallum. They may have even proclaimed him king. However, Menahem's brutal campaign against domestic enemies prevented any hope of his becoming king in reality. Once Menahem's weaker heir, Pekahiah, became king, however, Pekah saw his opportunity. He seized the throne by murdering Pekahiah in a bloody coup. Having become king, Pekah reckoned his reign from an earlier date.

During the reign of Pekah, Israel and Aram formed an alliance to throw off the yoke of Assyrian domination. Recognizing their joint inferiority to the Assyrian military machine, the two kingdoms urged Judah to join them in a war against Tiglath-pileser. Judah, then ruled by Ahaz, refused their overtures. Therefore the alliance determined to force Judah's participation.

Pekah and Rezin, king of Aram, plotted to overthrow Ahaz

and install a puppet monarchy in Je-rusalem (Isa. 7:6). In this crisis the prophet Isaiah warned Ahaz not to be alarmed. God was with Judah and would protect it from destruction. Instead of trusting God, Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help. The Assyrian army thrust through Aram into Israel. The sole avenue of hope for the nation seemed to be the removal of the current regime. Once more a conspiracy developed. Pekah was assassinated and a new usurper seized power.

The biblical narrative contains the typical denunciation of Pekah's government (v. 28). The disdain his contemporaries felt toward him and his policy can be seen in the words of Isaiah during the crisis with Judah. While speaking with Ahaz, the prophet refused to utter Pekah's name. Instead he identified him as the son of Remaliah (see Isa. 7:9). The narrative next returns to the reign of Jotham. Azariah died and his son Jotham became sole ruler of Judah. The analysis of his rule is similar to that of his father. Once more the king of Judah does what is right in God's eyes but fails to grasp the importance of worshiping God according to the pattern He has established. Worship is not a matter of what people like or of what is convenient to them. It must be what God wants.

Jotham devoted his energy to construction projects including renovations to the temple. However, toward the end of his reign the crisis with Israel and Aram began to unfold. His son Ahaz became king before the climax of the emergency. Jotham likely had already pursued a policy to align Judah with Assyria in the crisis.

The history of Israel and Judah demanded that they live distinctively in accordance with their covenant with God and reject conformity to the world around them. In Israel the leadership failed completely. In Judah the kings partially obeyed God's will. However, they never fully met God's expectations. Surely disaster loomed in the future of the two kingdoms.

We need to learn from the example of these two nations. We must acknowledge the necessity of a distinctive lifestyle for Christians and not stray from the behaviors and attitudes that God expects.

#### **AHAZ'S ALLIANCE WITH ASSYRIA (16:1-9)**

The narrative in 2 Kings continues with the reign of Ahaz in Judah. Once again the dates of the reign may seem confusing to the reader. The reference to the 17th year of Pekah, however, likely designated the time Ahaz began a coregency with his father, Jotham; whereas the 16 years refers to the period he was sole ruler. Unlike his father and grandfather, Ahaz did not comply with an acceptable religious policy. He failed to do what was right in the Lord's sight. Instead he practiced the idolatry of Judah's neighbor Israel. His creed was like that of the Canaanites who had inhabited the land at the time of the conquest under Joshua. He made his son pass through the fire. This biblical expression probably indicated that he sacrificed his child in a ritual that involved burning the victim alive! In an anticlimactic notation, the failure to remove the local, idolatrous hilltop shrines throughout the nation is included in the formal summary of Ahaz's reign. Specific incidents that occurred during his life follow this summary of his reign.

The increased threat from Assyria pushed two former enemies into a coalition. Assyria already had exerted some sovereignty over Aram. Rezin, the king of Aram about 735 B.C., attempted to stop the Assyrian advance. He entered into an alliance with King Pekah of Israel. The newly formed coalition, however, was not strong enough to oppose a superpower like Assyria. Therefore the two new allies attempted to entice King Ahaz of Judah to join their coalition. When he refused, the two kings massed their armies on Judah's border. They came to wage war against Jerusalem. They intended to invade Judah and depose Ahaz, so they could install a puppet king to do their bidding (Isa. 7:6).

This political crisis also was a spiritual crisis. The political crisis escalated into open war. Judah lacked adequate troops and weaponry to defend the nation from the expected invasion. The prophet Isaiah promised Ahaz that God would defend Judah (Isa. 7:3-9). However, Ahaz's worship of other gods reflected an absence of genuine faith in the Lord. The threatened king sought protection from Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, instead of trusting in God. Ahaz declared his submission to the foreign ruler. He replaced trust in the eternal God with trust in a mortal king. In order to cement his newly found status as a vassal of Assyria, Ahaz removed gold and silver dishes from the temple in Jerusalem and paid tribute to the Assyrian

king with them. So after renouncing fidelity to God, Ahaz aggravated his transgression by looting the only site that God had sanctioned as a place for worship.

Ahaz's spiritual bankruptcy did not bode well for the military situation. At the beginning of the war, an Aramean army captured Elath, a port on the northern end of the Red Sea. The capture of this seaport reveals the magnitude of Judah's initial defeat in this war. Furthermore, the loss signified a reversal under the wicked Ahaz of the southern expansion under the previous godly monarchs. Aram secured control of the area by settling Aramean colonists in the city. The victory reinforced the illusion of coalition strength.

After Ahaz petitioned Tiglath-pileser, the Assyrian ruler invaded Aram. The Assyrian army marched into Damascus and captured it. King Rezin was put to death. The inhabitants were exiled to Kir. The location of Kir is uncertain but it has been identified as the ancestral homeland of the Aramean people (see Amos 9:7). Tiglath-pileser's attack against Aram was not primarily because of Ahaz's plea. His invasion of Aram was motivated by his own ambition and greed.

Tiglath-pileser reinforced his domination over Judah by imposing his religious rites over the apostate king of Judah. With an Assyrian vassal state (Judah) on its southern border and Assyrian territory (Aram) on its northern border, Israel was caught in a vise.

#### **AHAZ'S CORRUPTION OF WORSHIP (16:10-20)**

After the Assyrian capture of Damascus, Ahaz traveled to the fallen city to meet with his new overlord, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria. While the Judahite king was in the city, a pagan altar impressed him. Presumably this was an Assyrian fixture. The Scripture is not explicit as to whether Ahaz's eagerness was voluntary or forced. Clearly it signaled that polytheism had replaced monotheism. One cannot miss the similarity in behavior here with that of Jeroboam I in Israel. Ahaz obtained plans of this altar and sent them to the high priest in Jerusalem. The priest was instructed to duplicate the structure. Holiness had become secondary to allegiance to Assyria.

When Ahaz returned to Jerusalem, he commanded Uriah the high priest to utilize the new altar for all major public

sacrifices. The sacrifices mentioned in the text represent fellowship and devotion to the Lord. Their presentation on the new Assyrian altar implied that the fellowship and devotion had been denied to the Lord and given instead to Assyria.

Uriah did exactly as commanded. His obedience pointed to the sad state of worship in Judah. The high priest was suppose to act as an intermediary between God and God's people. Instead he had become the servant of a degenerate king. His attire was designed to reveal the glory of God. Instead his attitude demonstrated submission to human vanity. The rituals of sacrifice were defined in the law of Moses. But Uriah replaced the eternal edicts of a sovereign God with the whim of a subjugated potentate.

Ahaz continued to dismantle the temple. His motivation was twofold. He needed these assets to pay the tribute his new master demanded. He also was afraid the perpetuation of Israel's worship might anger the new overlord. Tiglath-pileser might perceive the uncompromising commandments of God as a defiant gesture of rebellion against the state cult of Assyria.

Ahaz's terrible decisions resulted in Assyrian domination of Judah. The domination was religious as well as political. The prescribed furnishings of the Lord's temple in Jerusalem were removed. Items associated with foreign deities were introduced into the temple services. The reference to Ahaz's accomplishments (v. 19) suggests that he was a capable secular leader. However, his failure in the religious realm nullified any benefits from his secular achievements. The notation that Hezekiah replaced Ahaz raised hope for the nation's future.

#### **SAMARIA'S FALL STATED AND EXPLAINED (17:1-23)**

The reader is left in suspense about Judah, while the narrative resumes the account of Israel's downfall. The next and final king to govern Israel was Hoshea [hoh SHEE uh]. He had seized the throne by organizing a conspiracy against Pekah and killing him. The biblical condemnation of this new king is less harsh than its denunciation of previous rulers in the Northern Kingdom. Nevertheless Hoshea's piety was less than needed and so in the final analysis his regime also was condemned.

In Assyria Tiglath-pileser III was succeeded by Shalma-

neser V. Assyria continued to claim authority over Israel despite the change in both governments. Shalmaneser completed the attack on Israel begun by his predecessor, and Hoshea paid tribute money to signify submission. Despite his military defeat, Hoshea harbored hope of Israelite independence. He entered into negotiations with Egypt for support in case he decided to rebel. The biblical account identifies So as the name of the Egyptian pharaoh [FEHR oh]. Secular records mention no king by this name. At the present his identity cannot be determined with certainty. In any case, pinning hope on Egypt was foolish. Shalmaneser would not allow Israel to throw off the Assyrian yoke. He marched rapidly toward Samaria [suh MEHR ih uh] to capture Hoshea.

**Verse 5:** When Shalmaneser arrived at Samaria, he laid siege to the capital city. It took three years for him to take the city. When it fell in 722 B.C., the history of the Northern Kingdom came to an end. Henceforth God's covenant community would be recognized in terms of Judah. According to Assyrian documents, Sargon II claimed to be the captor of Israel. Sargon was Shalmaneser's successor and brother. Shalmaneser's death occurred in the same year that Samaria fell. Either Shalmaneser was not present and Sargon served as the military commander in the field, or Shalmaneser died during the siege and Sargon became king before Israel's final surrender. Either case fits the scenario.

**Verse 6:** Though God had delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, the history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel eventually culminated in invasion and captivity by Assyria. The people of Israel had been progressively losing their freedom. The decline finally climaxed in a complete loss of everything, including their inheritance in the promised land. Assyria was a cruel victor. Survivors of the conquest were deported to territory in other parts of the Assyrian Empire. Only elements from the lowest classes of society were permitted to remain in Israel. Rebels from far away provinces were settled in Israel. In time these two groups, God's people (who became known as the Jews) and Gentiles, assimilated and became the Samaritans of the New Testament era. In like manner the exiled Israelites blended with the population of their new residences and vanished from history as a recognizable ethnic group. God's people must obey Him exclusively to experience moral and spiritual freedom.

**Verse 7:** The bondage experienced by the Israelites came as a result of disobedience and lack of trust in the Lord. For four centuries their ancestors had been strangers in Egypt where they experienced bondage (see Gen. 15:13). Despite Pharaoh's efforts to exterminate the Hebrew people, they had survived. Finally God performed a series of spectacular miracles and forced Pharaoh to release the Israelites. When the Egyptian king changed his mind, his army was destroyed by another display of God's might. Despite these demonstrations of God's love and providence, the people constantly grumbled about conditions. Soon after God's deliverance, they fashioned an idol and attributed their emancipation to it. Repeatedly that generation ignored everything that God did for them and worshiped other gods.

**Verse 8:** Settlement in Canaan did not lessen the people's tendency to forsake God in order to worship idols. In their new homeland they quickly adopted the religion of the defeated inhabitants, especially the cult of Baal [BAY uh]. Later they favored a monarchy patterned after that of their enemies. The kings introduced new pagan customs as they formed alliances with neighboring kingdoms. They married foreign royalty and erected temples to the gods of their new brides. They paid homage to the gods of their recurrent overlords.

**Verse 9:** The fundamental issue was Israel's violation of their covenant with the Lord. They had entered into a covenant relationship with Him at Mount Sinai. But they had forgotten the significance of the entire exodus experience and their pledge to serve the Lord according to the terms of the covenant. A single Hebrew verb is rendered secretly did. The sense of the text suggests that the Israelites attempted to cover up their idolatry. The statement strikes at the perverse nature of their covenant violation. They gave the Lord public adoration, but supplemented it with devotion to other gods, a violation of the First Commandment. God's indictment of His people is supported with specific evidence of their disloyalty. The first is their affection for the high places. These were local sites of worship. Both sacrifices and incense were burned on altars erected in these places. God had restricted both of these activities to the temple in Jerusalem. The mere existence of sites for such rituals in any other location violated God's law. The description of the illegal locations in watchtower to fortified city indicated how numerous such sites had become.

Many of these originally had been erected by the Canaanites. Idolatrous worship that included immoral behavior continued to characterize activities at the high places after Israel occupied the territory.

**Verse 10:** The sacred pillars and Asherah [uh SHEE ruh] poles were associated with female deities in the Baal cult. Whether the two objects are identical or some unknown distinction exists is debated. Both had a similar function and both indicated the worship of a god other than the Lord. Such symbols were an abomination to a holy God. Both spiritual and literal adultery were involved in activities associated with these objects.

**Verse 11:** The rituals conducted at the various local shrines came from the Canaanite period in the region's history. God had judged the Canaanites for these rituals specifically. Because the Canaanites had practiced them, God did not permit them to continue to inhabit the land. He authorized the Israelites to eradicate them and to replace them as the inhabitants of the territory.

Despite this vivid object lesson, the new inhabitants of the region had incorporated the accursed sites and their repulsive rites into their lifestyles.

The Israelites had failed to grasp that the destruction they were permitted to bring against the former inhabitants of Canaan was the consequence of the Canaanites' behavior, specifically of their practices at these pagan worship sites. The phrase provoking the LORD does not mean that the people made God mad, and He instantly reacted by destroying them.

God is "slow to anger" (Ex. 34:6-7). Nevertheless, His wrath is the divine response to human sin and injustice. If sinners repeatedly refuse to repent, they ultimately will experience God's judgment.

**Verse 12:** God's people must obey Him in order to experience the moral freedom He desires for them. The First Commandment prohibited the worship of other gods. Yet the rebellious Israelites not only adopted the religious shrines and rituals of the dispossessed Canaanites, but also they even worshiped their gods! They deserted the living God—who revealed Himself through His mighty deeds—in order to serve lifeless objects. Thus they

violated the terms of their covenant with the Lord. Both the prohibition against worshiping other gods and the ban against idols were clear (Ex. 20:3-6). No acceptable excuse could be offered for violating these Commandments.

In addition to written commandments, God sent numerous prophets ("seer" was an older name for a prophet, 1 Sam. 9:9) to warn Israel and Judah. These preachers constantly condemned unacceptable conduct and exhorted the people to change their behavior. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of both nations continued to reject such messages and persisted in their wicked activities. Their rejection of God's message became a pattern that was repeated generation after generation.

**Verse 16:** The accusations against Israel continued. Each additional charge made clear the people's responsibility for what had occurred. The Ten Commandments were the basic terms of their covenant with God. Once more the inspired writer graphically delineated specific cases where the Israelites forsook the commandments. While a case is not presented for each of the Ten Commandments, the evidence is sufficient to convict on all counts.

The next presentation of evidence concerns the Second Commandment and the actions of Jeroboam I. He erected worship sites in Israel at Bethel and Dan to prevent his citizens from participating in the worship at the temple in Jerusalem. In the temple the ark of the covenant represented the throne of God. Something was needed at these new sites to replace the ark in the new religious order. Jeroboam I selected an ancient symbol, the golden calf. The setting up of golden calves at Dan and Bethel was deliberate defiance of God's will. God condemned the kings in the Northern Kingdom because they tolerated the presence of these abominations.

The next statement further reveals the syncretistic nature of Israelite worship. Astrology was common in the popular eastern religions imported from Assyria. Baal was the chief god of the indigenous Canaanite population. When the Israelites entered Canaan, rather than destroy the cult of Baal, they joined in worshiping him. They did not consider this worship to be at variance with their worship of the Lord. Thinking in such a grossly erroneous manner allowed them to incorporate Assyrian religious ideas into their apostasy as well.

**Verse 17:** Certain worship practices presented additional evidence against the Israelites. They had sacrificed their children to other gods by burning them alive. Innocent children suffered horrifying pain. God is the champion of the weak and helpless. He never allows such ghastly practices to go unpunished.

Divination involved an attempt to contact supernatural powers to answer questions. The answers to these questions were hidden from **Verse 18:** The people of Israel originally consisted of twelve tribes descended from Jacob's sons. The two southernmost tribes were Judah and Simeon. Eventually Judah absorbed Simeon. After Solomon's death the ten other tribes formed a new nation. The new nation called itself Israel, whereas the other nation identified itself as Judah. After the Assyrians destroyed Israel in 722 B.C., only Judah survived. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom should have been a powerful warning to the people of Judah. God expected them to be devoted exclusively to Him. They were to worship Him alone.

**Verse 19:** What was Judah's response to God's warning? Unbelievably, Judah missed the message of Israel's disappearance. Rather than repent and commit to an exclusive relationship with God, the people duplicated the behavior of the exiled Israelites! The people of Judah did the very things that caused God to judge Israel so harshly.

**Verse 20:** The phrase all the descendants of Israel included both Israel and Judah. Here the name Israel refers to the patriarch Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel to signify a covenant relationship had been established. The statement that God had rejected both kingdoms can be understood best in terms of the context of the first readers. The Book of 2 Kings was written after the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of Judah's inhabitants. At that time, neither Judah nor Israel existed. The once proud city of Jerusalem was a pile of rubble. The glorious temple that Solomon had built lay in ruins. Its rituals and sacrifices had ceased.

The population of the Northern Kingdom had been assimilated with Gentiles in the regions where they lived. Most of the survivors of the Babylonian conquest of Judah lived in exile far away in Babylon. Some had traveled to Egypt as refugees. Certainly that generation felt that God had

banished them from His presence. Fortunately the story of God's redemptive acts in human history did not end with 2 Kings.

Since the Israelites gave themselves over to idolatry, God handed them over to plunderers. The Assyrians were described as plunderers. They did not have a legitimate claim to the Israelite land or possessions. However, since Israel broke the covenant with God, its terms were no longer valid. Therefore God no longer protected them. The section closes with a summary of the history of the Northern Kingdom (vv. 21-23). God punished Rehoboam by taking part of his kingdom and giving it to Jeroboam I. Rather than show gratitude and fidelity to God, Jeroboam led the people to sin grievously. The same sins were committed generation after generation. Repeatedly God sent prophets who warned the people about the consequences of their sinful behavior. Finally God kept His word and punished the people of Israel for their sins. They were exiled throughout the Assyrian Empire.

#### **SAMARIA'S REPOPULATION AND SUMMARY (17:24-41)**

After the deportations only the lowest strata of Israelite society remained in the territory that once had been the Northern Kingdom. The identity of the region changed from Israel to Samaria, taking the name of the former capital. Exiles from other parts of the empire were relocated to the land vacated by Israelites. These newcomers were ignorant of God and did not fear Him. They did not live according to God's commandments.

Therefore God judged the sinful conduct of the new inhabitants. Wild lions lived in that region and their attacks killed some of the people. The polytheistic people of the ancient world widely held to a strong connection between the land and its god. Gods were believed to be stronger in the geographical areas where they were worshiped. In order to protect themselves from the danger they attributed to "the God of the land," they appealed to the king for the return of a priest from the Israelite exiles. The priest who returned taught the people about God and how to obey Him. Despite this acceptance of God, these Gentile residents in Israel did not abandon their idols. Eventually Gentiles and Israelites intermarried and became the Samaritans of the New Testament era. Israel's history serves as a vivid reminder that God expects His people to worship only Him.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 9

### 2 KINGS 18–21

#### REFORMS AND VICTORIES (2 KINGS 18:1-8)

Shortly after the demise of Israel, a new king came to the throne in Judah. Under his leadership the nation would experience sweeping spiritual renewal. His name was Hezekiah [HEZ ih kigh uh], and he governed Judah 29 years. The magnitude of his achievements cannot be overstated. According to the evaluations in 1 and 2 Kings, Hezekiah and his great-grandson Josiah were two of the few godly kings to rule Judah. Only these two were praised without reservation because they worshiped God according to two basic commands recorded in Deuteronomy—the commands that only God be worshiped and that He be worshiped in Jerusalem (Deut. 12–13). In Judah’s decline into depravity, Hezekiah’s reign presented a brief era of hope.

Under the vigorous leadership of Hezekiah all of the unauthorized worship sites with their immoral rituals were demolished. He also repaired the temple in Jerusalem and made it the sole location for corporate worship (2 Chron. 29–31). During this spiritual renewal an ancient relic that God once sanctioned was destroyed. It had become the object of worship rather than a symbol of salvation. The generation that Moses led out of Egypt was characterized by repeated complaining about God’s provision.

While moving through the wilderness, the Lord punished their grumbling by a plague of venomous snakes. The burning bite of these serpents killed many of the Hebrew people. When the people repented, God instructed Moses to cast a bronze image of a snake and place it on a tall pole. Thereafter if a victim of snakebite looked at the image, the person would recover and not die from the poison (Num. 21:4-9).

The inspired writer of 2 Kings referred to the object as Nehushtan (2 Kings 18:4). The name likely was a play on words. Both the Hebrew words for “serpent” and for “bronze” are both very similar to this name. Some scholars have suggested that the object had become associated with a Canaanite serpent deity. At any rate the people’s worship of it violated the First and Second Commandments. Therefore Hezekiah smashed it. We must be

careful that the items associated with serving God don’t become the object of worship themselves. Worship is to be reserved for God alone.

God honored Hezekiah’s commitment. Two historical events summarized the success of Hezekiah’s reign in foreign policy. Assyrian domination was broken by an incident that is described in detail later. And the Philistines were defeated. Judah captured their towns and rural areas. Thus the national territory was expanded and the citizens of Judah enjoyed a period of freedom.

#### EXILE AND SIEGE (2 KINGS 18:9-37)

In 2 Kings 18 the narrative returns one last time to the Northern Kingdom. In verses 9-12 the text repeats information recorded in 2 Kings 17:1-6. Its repetition seems to have a dual purpose. First, it reminds the reader of the reasons for Israel’s disappearance—the people’s recurring violation of their covenant with God. Second, it reveals the difficulty facing Hezekiah. He could not serve both God and Assyria. If he submitted to Assyria, he would be required to sacrifice to Assyrian gods and the Lord would destroy Judah. If he refused to submit to Assyria, Assyria would destroy Judah. Could Judah possibly survive? Did Hezekiah fear the Assyrians more than he trusted God? Subsequent verses reveal answers to these questions. After a three-year siege, Assyria captured Samaria, the capital of Israel. Captured Israelites were deported. Most of them were resettled along the northern and eastern borders of the empire where they were assimilated into the indigenous population. The inspired biblical writer was explicit. Israel perished because the people did not keep the terms of their covenant with God. A covenant was the ancient equivalent to a legal contract or an international treaty. When ever God is a party in a covenant, He is the superior party. He determines the terms. These are not for negotiation.

The Lord established a conditional covenant with the twelve tribes at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1–24:8). The behavior of the 10 tribes that comprised the Northern Kingdom of Israel had rendered that agreement null and void by their behavior. They repeatedly had violated its terms and constantly refused to listen to God. Therefore God judged Israel and it vanished from history.

Hezekiah likely spent the first decade of his administra-

tion on internal affairs. This focus allowed him to establish the religious values that later led to revolt against Assyria. His decision was not based on a popular whim or political expediency. It was the consequence of a clear choice to obey God.

During Hezekiah’s reign rebellion against Assyrian dominion first surfaced in 712 B.C. The focus of the revolt centered on the coastal city-state of Ashdod. Although Hezekiah was tempted to join the Ashdod rebellion, Isaiah warned against Judah’s participation. Sargon reorganized Ashdod into an Assyrian province. The other rebellious kingdoms in the region promptly paid the required tribute. Thereafter revolts in other parts of the empire diverted Sargon’s attention and resources.

The absence of Assyrian troops in the immediate vicinity emboldened Hezekiah’s courage. Sargon died before he could react. However, after his son Sennacherib secured the throne, he marched at the head of an army to assert his sovereignty over Judah and to teach the rebellious king in Jerusalem a lesson. Sennacherib and his army arrived in Judah in 701 B.C. after defeating the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Hezekiah persisted in his defiance. Sennacherib quickly began to overpower the fortified garrisons he encountered as he marched toward Jerusalem. Resistance in the city of Lachish slowed the Assyrian advance.

The stalemate at Lachish provided an opportunity for Hezekiah to recant of his decision to fight. When he offered to declare his submission to Assyria, Sennacherib demanded a huge tribute. Hezekiah stripped the gold plating from the temple in order to pay the levy. Not satisfied with the financial gain, Sennacherib dispatched troops from the siege of Lachish to seize Jerusalem. The battle for Lachish continued under the watchful eyes of Sennacherib while three of his top officials, including the commander in chief of his army, attempted to capture Jerusalem. When the force reached Jerusalem, it took control of one of the city’s sources of fresh water. Then the three Assyrian leaders summoned Hezekiah.

Hezekiah refused to meet them. Instead he sent three of his own officials to negotiate with the Assyrian officials, suggesting his equality with Sennacherib. The three men held positions of prominence within Hezekiah’s cabinet.

They all were close advisors whom he could trust. Hezekiah's vacillation between loyalty and rebellion had revealed him to be an untrust-worthy vassal of Sennacherib. Therefore the Assyrian monarch most likely intended to remove him from power. Hezekiah's sole chance for survival lay in continued resistance.

The Assyrian official who held the title "Rabshakeh" presented military and religious reasons that Judah should surrender. First, Judah's army was no match for the Assyrians. The Assyrian army had no equal in size or skill. Archaeological evidence offers a rare glimpse into its power in battle.

Assyrian reliefs discovered on a palace wall in Nineveh depict the fall of Lachish, an event contemporary with the Assyrian army's advance toward Jerusalem. Graphic pictures show the violence and loss of life as the walls were breached. The people of Jerusalem knew that other towns and communities already had met similar fates.

Second, the Assyrian warned that Judah could not depend on God to protect the nation. He reasoned that Hezekiah's destruction of ancient religious sites had made Judah's God angry with the king. While these words revealed a total lack of comprehension of God's nature, their logic would have appealed to the minds of less spiritual individuals inside Jerusalem.

Hezekiah's representatives requested that the Assyrian officials speak Aramaic rather than Hebrew. They sought to limit communication so that it would only involve those officially engaged in the negotiations. No doubt that word about the arrival of a large Assyrian army and the subsequent discussions spread throughout the enclosed city. Hundreds of onlookers gathered on top of the walls to observe the event. They spoke Hebrew. Aramaic was a foreign language that commonly was used in diplomacy. Not many of those trapped in the city were fluent in the unfamiliar dialect. Therefore Hezekiah's delegates requested that it be used for the discussion. Instead the Rabshakeh ignored Hezekiah's diplomats and addressed the citizens of the city directly. He warned them not to let their king persuade them to trust in the Lord. Hezekiah could not protect them from the Assyrian army.

**Verse 30:** The Assyrian official's words reflect what indeed

Hezekiah had announced to his people. Thus the Rabshakeh tried to neutralize the energizing impact of Hezekiah's trust in the Lord. Those who truly possess faith in the Lord and in His power to deliver can encourage others by their public testimony.

The Assyrian claimed that Hezekiah had lied to the people. His accusation deviously called for a popular uprising to remove Hezekiah from power. The Assyrians promised that if the people would surrender, they would be permitted to live in peace. But if they decided to listen to Hezekiah, they would be defeated.

The frightened citizens could listen to the humanistic rationale of Sennacherib or trust in the faithful example of Hezekiah. As Sennacherib's spokesman continued, he shifted the debated issue from the reliability of Hezekiah's words to the Lord's capability. He noted that the gods of other peoples had failed to protect their citizens. Then he asked what made them think that the Lord could prevent Jerusalem's capture? His question failed to recognize that the Lord was not just another deity within polytheism. The Lord is unique. He was and is the Creator of every-thing, the one true and living God!

The people did not answer the Assyrian delegation. Instead they obeyed Hezekiah's instructions to remain silent. The three men that Hezekiah had sent to confer with the Assyrians returned to him and reported the discussion. Even before they spoke, the king would have realized that the encounter was unsatisfactory. The clothing of the three was ripped and torn, the traditional sign of tragedy or mourning.

#### **KING AND PROPHET (2 KINGS 19:1-7)**

**Verse 1:** Hezekiah's response to the report of his three government officials reflected the despair that hung over the city. He, too, tore his clothing. He then put on a sackcloth garment. Sackcloth was a coarse fabric made from goat or camel hair. It was worn as a sign of mourning or anguish. Often fasting and prayer accompanied the wearing of this material.

Hezekiah left his chambers and went to the temple. He no longer was a defiant head of state plotting with his peers to overthrow the yoke of Sennacherib. Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, had once faced a similar dilemma.

Ahaz had rejected God's promise of protection and turned to Assyria for help (2 Kings 16:5-20). Hezekiah made the opposite decision. He would seek the Lord's help in this crisis.

The temple represented the Lord's presence and power in the midst of His covenant people. Hezekiah determined that he would seek God's intervention. He would come in humility, dressed in sackcloth. His actions symbolized his inadequacy and his dependence on Almighty God. In threatening situations, confessing one's own inability is a prerequisite to acknowledging the Lord's ability to deliver.

**Verse 2:** The exact nature of the two offices that Eliakim [in LIGH uh kim] and Shebna [SHEB nuh] held is unclear. Eliakim has been identified as the palace administrator, a position evidently secondary only to the king. Shebna is identified as the court secretary, an office comparable to the modern secretary of state. Shebna once had held the former office but had been removed because of his arrogance (Isa. 22:15-25). Nonetheless he remained a trusted advisor within the king's inner circle.

Once more Hezekiah sent the two officials on an assignment as his personal representatives. A number of priests joined them in this mission. The group was dressed in sackcloth. They were sent to Isaiah [igh (eye) ZAY uh], son of Amoz [AY mahz]. Isaiah was the inspired writer of the biblical book that bears his name. He served the Lord as a prophet for around 40 years. A prophet was a person that God called and commissioned to communicate His word to other people. Perhaps Hezekiah remembered the words this prophet had spoken to his father in an earlier crisis (Isa. 7:1-25). More likely Isaiah's established reputation as a proven spokesman of the Lord motivated Hezekiah's request. At any rate, Hezekiah's initiative in seeking Isaiah was extraordinary. Previously prophets sought out kings, only to be rebuked for speaking God's messages clearly. On this rare occasion a king sought God's prophet in order to hear God's message directly.

**Verse 3:** Hezekiah instructed his emissaries to deliver a specific message to the prophet. He compared the crisis of the Assyrian threat to that of a woman ready to deliver a child but unable to do so. The analogy conveyed the critical nature of the moment. The Assyrian army was at the

gates of the city and was about to destroy it. This reality caused every citizen intense anguish. The reference to the day as one of rebuke reveals that Hezekiah understood God's involvement in the events unfolding before him. The Assyrian presence resulted from the covenant violations of God's people. God was punishing them because of their sins. The occasion also was a dis-grace. The danger exposed their sinfulness and asserted that they deserved its punishment.

The analogy may have been a popular proverb for frailty and the need for strong assistance. The comparison was made to a woman in labor. Her baby was lodged in the birth canal and unable to be born. Her contractions were ineffective. Someone must assist her. Otherwise both mother and child would die. Hezekiah recognized that only God could provide the assistance essential for his survival and the continuation of Judah.

Hezekiah admitted that he lacked the resources necessary to defeat Assyria. Rabshakeh's assessment of Judah's military situation was undeniably correct. However, the Assyrian had made a serious error. His mockery of God was an abomination. Perhaps God would spare Judah when He punished the Assyrian's blasphemy.

**Verse 5:** The court officials and priests went to the prophet. Hezekiah did not demand that Isaiah come to him. He instead sought Isaiah's help. The description of the royal officials as servants implied that they obeyed their master the king. They carried out his instruction precisely and delivered his message. In turning to the Lord's messenger, Hezekiah in effect turned to the Lord.

**Verse 6:** Isaiah instructed the king's emissaries on what they were to tell Hezekiah. The words "The LORD says" indicated that the message that followed was not the prophet's words. Rather they were God's words. What followed was given in first person—Me, not Him. The king needed to hear from God, not another human being. The Lord told Hezekiah not to be afraid. The words spoken by the Assyrians blasphemed God. The Hebrew word is derived from a root that means "to cut" or "to hack." It means to revile God. God would not allow such sacrilege to go unanswered. God would demonstrate that He could and would deliver impotent Judah from powerful Assyria. His word, not Sennacherib's was true.

**Verse 7:** Rather than add Jerusalem to his list of victories, Sennacherib would suddenly hear something that would make him tremble in fear. Consequentially, he would give up his siege of the city and return to Assyria. There he would die by the sword. All of the details were not disclosed to Hezekiah. Instead Isaiah's information provided reassurance and called the king to trust the Lord completely.

The specific predictions mentioned proved extremely accurate. Before Sennacherib reached Jerusalem he received an intelligence report that caused him to stop his march (v. 9). He abandoned his assault on Jerusalem completely and returned to Nineveh (v. 36). Approximately 20 years later, two of Sennacherib's sons assassinated him (v. 37). They fled the country and another son, Esar-haddon, became king of Assyria.

#### **PRAYER AND PROPHECY (2 KINGS 19:8-37)**

While at Libnah, word reached the Assyrians that an Egyptian army was advancing to attack them. Sennacherib could not ignore this threat so the attack against Jerusalem was postponed. Meanwhile he sent an ominous letter to Hezekiah. He viciously criticized Hezekiah's decision to trust in the Lord. He noted with cynicism that the gods of other nations had failed to protect their worshipers from the Assyrian invaders. He implied that Hezekiah's fate was sealed.

**Verse 14:** Although the content of the letter was essentially the same as Rabshakeh's speech, the king's reaction was different in that he did not tear his clothing or show other signs of distress. Instead he immediately went into the temple. There he opened the letter as if he were showing God the blasphemy that was written in it. Hezekiah responded to this letter with faith. While not denying the seriousness of the Assyrian threat, the king nevertheless acknowledged the Lord by asking His help and asserting His power to deliver Jerusalem.

**Verse 15:** Hezekiah addressed God with titles that reflected God's relationship first to Judah and then to the universe. LORD was God's covenant name. The meaning of the name was revealed to Moses by God Himself (Ex. 3:14-15)—"I AM WHO I AM." The statement links God's promise of the present with His performance of the past. Hezekiah's use of the term Israel rather than Judah em-

phasized the basis of his petition. Judah was the title of his political state. However, the citizens of Judah belonged to a greater identity. They were descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel with whom God had made a covenant at Mount Sinai.

The phrase who is enthroned above the cherubim reinforced the idea of the covenant relationship. The reference was to the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant. The people of Judah considered the Lord to be enthroned above the cherubim on the mercy seat. The ark contained the two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, the terms of the people's covenant with the Lord. It was kept in the holy of holies, the innermost sanctuary of the temple. This sacred object certified the covenant between God and Israel and represented God's power to defend His people. Thus Hezekiah asserted that Sennacherib threatened the lives of God's covenant people and called on God for salvation.

The Lord could not be compared to the gods of the nations that Assyria conquered. The Lord was the only true God. The evidence of the Lord's deity was undeniable. Idols were manufactured by human artisans. The Lord the Creator made the craftsman who fashioned the idol.

**Verse 16:** The call for God to listen, hear, and see was a supplication for God to act. The letter of the Assyrian monarch presented overwhelming evidence of his disdain for the Lord, whom Hezekiah addressed as the living God. The appellation distinguished the Lord from false deities. An idol cannot move. It cannot speak or hear. It cannot act in response to a given situation. However, the God of Israel moved without assistance. He spoke to and listened to His people. And He acted. He is alive! He is the only living God.

**Verses 17-18:** The power of Assyria was well known. The Assyrian Empire stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. However, the Assyrian gods were only wood and stone objects made by humans. These inanimate objects were powerless to alter the fate of their misled worshipers.

**Verse 19:** Hezekiah knew that God was real. Judah's present crisis offered an opportunity for God to distinguish Himself from the pagan pantheon. By acting to deliver

Judah, the Lord would demonstrate that He alone is God. The news of the nation's deliverance by the hand of its God would reveal His reality to the entire world. While Hezekiah prayed, God spoke to Isaiah. God condemned Sennacherib, predicted his demise and promised to spare Judah. Sennacherib would not enter Jerusalem. The same night that Isaiah delivered God's promise to Hezekiah, the angel of the Lord moved through the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000. Sennacherib abandoned his campaign and left Judah. The Assyrian king once boasted that he had shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage. The reality was that Hezekiah shut himself in for protection by turning to God. In threatening situations we should turn to God and affirm His power to help.

Three distinct leadership roles functioned within the religious community of ancient Judah. Sages or wise men instructed adolescent boys in how to live in harmony with the world around them. They taught that a proper relationship with the Lord was the basis of all knowledge. The priests carried out the rituals of public worship and explained the particulars of the law. The prophets received a message from God that applied to the people's current situation as well as to their future. The prophets were spokespersons who brought fresh words from God.

The role of the prophet frequently has been misunderstood. Popular opinion has typically understood their ministry in terms of their predictions. In fact, the Scripture records that prophets originally were called "seers." Predicting the future did play a prominent part in their ministry, but their role was much greater than that of a foreteller. They were the forthtellers, the preachers of the times, and their primary function was to proclaim God's word related to a given situation. The personalities and circumstances of the prophets varied widely, but they shared a common empathy with God. Their ministry was characterized by the simple phrase, "This is what the Lord says." Their preaching contained a strong ethical content and called people to repent of wicked behavior and trust God exclusively. Therefore, those prophets who remained faithful to God's calling frequently were very unpopular.

As the eighth century B.C. ended, Assyrian expansion had changed the map of the biblical world. Aram and Israel no longer existed as separate entities. Assyria had subjugated both kingdoms and deported a majority of their

populations. The growing tide of Assyrian conquest threatened to wash Judah away also. Hezekiah [HEZ ih kigh uh] was king of Judah. In the face of recent Assyrian victories, the temptation to complacent submission was enormous. The dominant voice of prophecy in his time was Isaiah [igh (eye) ZAY uh], the inspired writer of the biblical book that bears his name. Isaiah was called by God to be a prophet in the same year that Hezekiah's great-grandfather, Uzziah, died (Isa. 6:1). His ministry continued during the reigns of Jotham and Ahaz, as well as of Hezekiah. Of these four kings, Hezekiah is the most highly commended for his faithfulness to the Lord. Isaiah charged Hezekiah to remain faithful to the Lord despite the growing Assyrian threat. He also called Hezekiah to alter any attitudes in the king's life that did not meet God's standards.

#### **HEZEKIAH'S PRAYER (2 KINGS 20:1-3)**

The phrase "in those days" (v. 1) fixes the events in chapter 20 as approximately the same time period as the events in chapter 19. But the ambiguity of the phrase suggests that the events in chapter 20 did not necessarily occur after those in chapter 19. In fact, Hezekiah's illness and recovery, as well as his reception of the envoys from Babylon, likely occurred prior to Sennacherib's invasion in 701 B.C. (2 Kings 18:13-19:37). Chapter 20 may have been positioned out of chronological order for a theological purpose. In its present location the chapter contrasts the fortune of a person who trusted God, Hezekiah, with the fate of one who mocked God, Sennacherib (19:37).

Sometimes the prophet of God addressed the world at large. At other times he spoke to a single individual. Kings frequently received messages from God's prophet so that they might rule God's people according to God's desires. On many occasions during Isaiah's service as prophet, God sent him to the various men who were kings of Judah. Each time he offered the ruling monarch an opportunity to change unacceptable behavior and to act as God required. Rarely did the king listen and modify his conduct. The particular occasion that generated the prophet's visit recorded in chapter 20 was the serious illness of Hezekiah.

The identification of Hezekiah's sickness is unknown. Nor are its symptoms given. The inspired biblical writer indicated that his condition was critical. The expression "terminally ill" (v. 1) indicates that whatever the disease, it normally would have been fatal and nothing in Hezekiah's

case suggested any other prospect.

The arrival of Isaiah seems unsolicited by the ailing head of state. God sent him with a specific message pertaining to his responsibility in this personal crisis. Hezekiah's illness was indeed terminal. Therefore, he needed to get his "affairs in order." These affairs included both personal matters and his responsibilities as head of state. No hope was offered. Instead the king certainly would die. Therefore he must prepare himself to meet God. He must arrange for the needs of his survivors. Likewise he must settle arrangements for his succession as king. Taking care of the nation was vital.

**Verse 2:** The prophetic word generally was a demand for hearers to change attitudes and actions. It was a clarion call for people to submit to God completely. Usually God chose to act contingent on the response of those who heard the message. The prophet Amos declared God's judgment against Israel. No one listened. Instead he was told to return to Judah and earn a living there. Soon thereafter an Assyrian army destroyed the kingdom completely. In contrast the prophet Jonah pronounced God's judgment against the Assyrian city of Nineveh. He boldly declared that God would destroy the municipality in 40 days. However, when the citizens of the city heard the message and repented, God spared Nineveh from immediate destruction.

Hezekiah likewise was unwilling to accept his demise in the near future. Instead, he did what he always did in time of crisis. He prayed. He turned his face to the wall, a gesture that isolated him from others present in the room. He spoke to God, not to other people. Not even the great prophet Isaiah could help him. Only God possessed the power and authority to change the king's future. Therefore Hezekiah entered into direct, private communication with the Lord.

**Verse 3:** The Hebrew grammar and vocabulary in this verse reflect a deep emotional petition. Hezekiah was desperate. Repetition of conventional prayer language would have been shallow. The man with a terminal illness spoke directly and to the point. He called God by name, the LORD. When Moses asked God about His name, God responded by saying, "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex. 3:14, KJV). God's answer declared His consistent nature, yet affirmed the

mystery of that nature. God never changes but He remains so awesome that humanity cannot comprehend Him entirely. The title LORD was a covenant name that recalled the covenant relationship between God and His people. Hezekiah belonged to the Lord's covenant people.

Hezekiah asked for the Lord to remember the king's commitment to Him. The verb translated remember can convey the sense of paying close attention to the object being remembered and accompanying the memory with an appropriate action. In other words Hezekiah politely implied that his previous behavior did not deserve the fate just revealed to him. His righteous reign stood in stark contrast to that of his predecessors.

Hezekiah described his life using an analogy. Walking moves a person from one location to another place. The progress of an individual down a visible path is comparable with the movement through the time and space that comprise one's life. Thus the verb walked figuratively denoted the progression of the king's lifetime. Hence it is equivalent to the English term lifestyle.

One's lifestyle is determined by the choices one makes in life. Hezekiah's choices consistently resulted in actions that God considered good. His commitment to these choices was absolute and without regret. The Hebrew word translated faithfully literally means "in truth." In Hebrew thought the word translated truth contained the underlying sense of certainty and dependability. The term described a characteristic of God's nature. God never changes. Therefore, this attribute of God was revealed to humanity and enabled people to know God. In the biblical sense, no valid truth exists outside of God.

The word translated wholeheartedly literally means "with a complete heart." The ancient Hebrew language depicted life as the Hebrews experienced it. It reflected matter-of-fact observations rather than philosophical speculations. Our manner of thinking frequently varies from that of ancient Judah. Consequently, many people fail to appreciate some biblical ideas. The word "heart" is a primary example. It did not have some nebulous or romantic sense. Rather "heart" conveyed a concrete and objective reality. The Hebrews observed that whenever an individual made a significant decision, that person felt pressure in the chest at, or near, the location of the heart. Therefore

they associated life-changing decisions as being made in the heart.

Modern medical science has confirmed this phenomena. The stress of such decisions affects the cardiovascular system. The blood pressure and heart rate increase and the individual experiences a physical sensation in the chest. The addition of the term "whole" implied that in every choice in his life Hezekiah had tried to obey God. Together the two words faithfully and wholeheartedly indicated that Hezekiah had sought to serve the Lord with his entire being. Hezekiah finished praying and then wept bitterly. His tears revealed that his prayer was genuine. He had spoken honestly to the Lord. The dilemma of why good people suffer has consistently troubled God's people.

In the final analysis, the only answer is given in the Bible. Despite every appearance a person simply must trust God. He always will do what is right. Knowing this fact does not necessarily relieve the suffering completely. Jesus—knowing what He was about to do—responded with lamentation when He gazed at the tomb where Lazarus was buried. Ultimately, explicit trust in God enables the sufferer to overcome the pain.

#### **HEZEKIAH'S HEALING (2 KINGS 20:4-11)**

**Verse 4:** God is sovereign. God always knows what is best in each individual situation. Therefore God answers human petitions in a variety of ways. Sometimes He does not grant the request. At other times He gives the individual what is asked in His own way and according to His timing. On occasion God grants the petition instantly. Hezekiah's prayer revealed a primary example of divine intervention after prayer. Apparently when the king turned and faced the wall, Isaiah understood the gesture implied that he was dismissed. Therefore, he left the king in prayer. Immediately after Isaiah left the king's presence, the Lord spoke to him a second time. The prophet was still inside the inner courtyard, only a short distance from the chamber where the king was praying.

**Verse 5a:** God commanded Isaiah to return to the king and deliver a new message to him. Once more the Lord told the prophet the exact words that he was to speak. God described Hezekiah as the leader of God's covenant people. The type of leader was revealed in the message. God

identified Himself with Hezekiah's ancestor David. David, despite his monumental failure in his sin with Bathsheba, remained the model king (1 Kings 9:4; 14:8). The implication was that Hezekiah was of the same spiritual character as David. The significance of this conclusion was twofold. First, Hezekiah had succeeded in modeling his role as king after the pattern of David.

Second, Hezekiah's personal relationship with Him pleased God. The second made the first possible. We cannot do anything for God until we are first right with God. God acknowledged that He had heard Hezekiah's prayer. The verb translated heard implied that God not only knew the king's plea but also that He would act in response to the words spoken. Furthermore, God stated that He had seen Hezekiah's tears. Together the two ideas suggest an intimate involvement in Hezekiah's life. God is not a distant, uninvolved Being. Hezekiah's petition brought an immediate change in his future. God would heal him. God instructed Hezekiah to wait until the third day and then go to the temple. This gesture acknowledged that the cure came from the Lord. God granted Hezekiah an additional 15 years of life and promised that Jerusalem would not be captured during his lifetime. The deliverance of the city was connected both to God's reputation and to the covenant with David. Hezekiah's commitment to God likened him to David. The survival of the city revealed that God honored such commitment.

After speaking the words that God instructed him to say, Isaiah told Hezekiah to treat the illness medically. A poultice made from figs was an ancient treatment used on ulcerated sores. The medication coupled with the period of waiting indicated that while God answered the prayer immediately, Hezekiah's recovery was progressive. Hezekiah's return to the Lord's temple required his complete recovery. Any trace of infected skin (v. 7) made him ceremonially unclean. Entrance into the temple was denied those who were unclean. In light of the king's present condition, the waiting period was brief for such a radical change in status. Its swiftness pointed to God as the Healer. The inspired writer inserted the results of the treatment before continuing the narration. When the king did what God told him, the results were everything promised. He was healed.

After stating the success of the treatment, the biblical

writer returned to the conversation between Hezekiah and Isaiah. Having been told that God would cure his sickness, the king asked for a sign to validate the promise. The function of a sign was to reassure the king during his recovery. He did not anticipate an instantaneous restoration. He wanted indisputable proof that he had understood God's message correctly. His request did not reflect unbelief. Rather the act must be viewed against a similar incident in the time of Ahaz, Hezekiah's father. In the earlier event, Judah faced an invasion from the combined armies of Israel and Aram. Isaiah warned Ahaz not to fear because God was with Judah. God offered to give Ahaz a sign as confirmation of God's pledge. Ahaz rebuffed that offer with pious language in an attempt to mask his unbelief. The prophet strongly rebuked Ahaz for refusing to specify a sign and announced one himself (Isa. 7:1-25). In contrast to Ahaz's unbelief, Hezekiah's request connoted his faith in God's promise. The sign confirmed that he understood the promise rather than implied that he doubted God's power to fulfill it.

Isaiah gladly presented Hezekiah with a choice of two signs. The exact nature of the signs is disputed, the meaning remains the same. Did Hezekiah want the shadow to increase or decrease? The movement of the sun made the expansion of the shadow a certain occurrence. For the shadow to reverse itself was unnatural. Hezekiah selected the more difficult of the two choices. Nonetheless, it occurred just as he requested. God had confirmed His word in the mind of his servant the king. This sign not only confirmed that Hezekiah would not die, his lengthened life span declared clearly that the Lord has the authority and power to retract a statement of judgment when people turn to Him for help. Hezekiah received a deathbed healing from God and thus should have remained humble and grateful. Since the next 15 years of his life were a gift from God, he should have used every second of them wisely. To avoid becoming puffed up with pride, God's people should reflect on His past blessings and deliverance.

#### **HEZEKIAH'S PRIDE (2 KINGS 20:12-21)**

**Verse 12:** Shortly after Hezekiah's recovery, a delegation from Babylon [BAB ih lahn] arrived in Jerusalem. Babylon was an ancient city-state in Hezekiah's time. It had been conquered by Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria. He retained his title as king of Assyria but also made himself king of Babylon. By 721 B.C. the Chaldean Merodach-baladan [mih

ROH dak-BAL uh dan] ruled Babylon. With Elamite support he resisted the advances of the Assyrian king, Sargon II. Babylon gained temporary independence. However, in 710 B.C. Sargon attacked again and took the throne of Babylon. With Sargon's death in 705 B.C., Babylon and other nations rebelled against Assyria. Merodach-baladan had returned to power. Most likely he sent messengers to Hezekiah in this period before Assyria, under its new king, Sennacherib, defeated Babylon again in 703 B.C.

During a short period of Babylonian independence, envoys from Babylon arrived in Jerusalem. An alliance with Judah might divert Assyrian military efforts then concentrated against Babylon. Therefore Merodachbaladan sent diplomatic letters and a gift to his Judahite counterpart. Hezekiah had just recovered from his critical illness when the envoys arrived. Although the biblical evaluation of Hezekiah is positive, he was prone to sinful pride. After his miraculous recovery from a fatal illness Hezekiah failed to show appropriate gratitude to God (2 Chron. 32:24-25). Consequently the arrival of the Babylonian delegation served as a divine test to reveal Hezekiah's heart (2 Chron. 32:31). God desires that His people have godly character and faithfulness. The king's pride quickly was exposed by this test.

**Verse 13:** Flattered by the attention paid to him by the Babylonian monarch, Hezekiah foolishly gave the diplomats a grand tour of his capital. Apparently word about the miraculous sign had reached Babylon. According to 2 Chronicles 32:31 the envoys also inquired about it. Perhaps in response Hezekiah emphasized the extraordinary nature of the sign more than the intercession of God or the dependability of His word. Unquestionably the visit of the Babylonian envoys questioned the object of the king's trust. Would he rely on the promise that God made to him through the words of Isaiah? Or would he depend on foreign alliances. His enthusiasm at the reception of the Babylonians may have revealed too much dependence on treaties with foreign governments and too little faith in God. Hezekiah's guided tour of his capital definitely revealed unsuitable pride in his status and his material possessions. Too little attention was directed toward the God responsible for both.

Hezekiah unwisely made a proud display of the wealth of his kingdom. He showed the foreigners his assets and his

potential. His foolish decision reflected human vanity and a desire to boast. God's people should avoid being caught up in "conspicuous consumption" and living a lifestyle aimed at proudly displaying one's possessions and prestige.

**Verse 14:** The prophet Isaiah came to Hezekiah and asked him a series of questions designed to expose his sinful pride. God's exposure of Hezekiah's pride was redemptive. Recognition of a problem is the first step in correcting the situation.

Isaiah asked about the identity of the strangers and the purpose of their interview with the king. Hezekiah's answer seems to deprecate his own actions. He said that they were from Babylon, a very distant land. The implication was that the great distance made the king's revelations to the envoys irrelevant. Hezekiah thought only in terms of the present. Reeling from the constant hammering of the Assyrian army, Babylon hardly was an immediate threat to Judah. Little did Hezekiah appreciate the reality that the decisions one makes "now" have future implications.

**Verse 15:** After discovering the identity of the strangers, Isaiah inquired about the extent of Hezekiah's revelation. Hezekiah unashamedly disclosed that he had showed the visitors everything. Hezekiah had allowed human vanity rather than astute wisdom to govern his conversation and exhibition. Sinful pride had been disclosed in his actions. Its consequences would soon become apparent as well. God's Word tries and tests our hearts and actions for sinful pride. The function of a prophet was to speak God's words in an era when the written Word was not yet complete. Thus Isaiah's inquiries were questions that came to Hezekiah from God in order to confront Hezekiah with his sin. Today the Scriptures function in much the same way. God speaks to us through the Bible and exposes unacceptable behavior.

**Verse 16:** Once Isaiah learned the extent of Hezekiah's foolish behavior, he pronounced judgment. The prophetic formula "Hear the word of the LORD" called for the king to submit to God's verdict. To hear involved not only perceiving the meaning of the words spoken but also acting on them in an appropriate manner. God required that Hezekiah replace his pride with humility.

**Verses 17-18:** Ironically, things that Hezekiah had displayed before the Babylonian delegation eventually would be carried off by Babylonians. Over a century later a victorious Babylonian army would enter the city of Jerusalem and place Judah under Babylonian control. One of Hezekiah's descendants would be exiled to Babylon in 597 B.C. Approximately 10 years later Jerusalem would be destroyed. Those who survived the destruction either went to Babylon as exiles or fled to Egypt as refugees. The wealth of the city, including the sacred objects of the temple, was transferred to Babylon. Little did Hezekiah realize the magnitude of harm that his pride would generate. The fact that Assyria, not Babylon, was the world power at this time, lends credence to the divine origin of this prophecy. Hezekiah ruled God's people as a godly monarch. Nonetheless his pride warns the reader that godly people can fall into the sin of pride.

**Verse 19:** A variety of opinions exist about Hezekiah's words recorded in verse 19. Some have felt that Hezekiah made a smug, selfish comment. Others have argued that his was a prayer that the disaster be delayed as long as possible. Still others have concluded that the king accepted the inevitability of the judgment but was thankful that it would not occur in his lifetime.

According to 2 Chronicles 32:26, although Hezekiah's motives may have not been totally pure, he did humbly accept the Lord's correction. God's people should humbly accept His Word even when it corrects and disciplines them. The summary of Hezekiah's reign follows the typical pattern of previous kings with one exception. His construction of the tunnel that bears his name is listed as a specific achievement. The tunnel brought water into Jerusalem. The amazing engineering feat was cut through solid rock. Hezekiah's death changed the fortunes of his country. If he had been the best king to date, his son would prove to be the worse king ever. The predictions spoken by Isaiah soon would be reality.

The period of history that formed the background for this lesson was a time of dramatic change in the ancient Near Eastern world. The mighty Assyrian Empire had dominated the area for many decades. Every aspect of daily life was determined by Assyrian policy. Vassal states like Judah denigrated themselves in order to show regard for Assyria and escape the fate of states like Israel. During the last

quarter of the seventh century B.C. an amazing shift in power occurred. In 626 B.C. a Chaldean chief named Nabopolassar seized the throne of Babylon and won its independence from Assyria. Outlying states such as Judah were free to rebel without fear of Assyrian retaliation. Under the strong leadership of Josiah, Judah enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity.

Weakened by the Babylonian rebellion, the Assyrian Empire was ripe for plunder. In 614 B.C. the Medes stormed its ancient capital, the city of Asshur. Nabopolassar made a treaty with the Medes and two years later the new capital of Nineveh fell to the alliance. The battered Assyrian army retreated westward to Haran. A victorious Babylonian army pursued them.

Nabopolassar's son, a brilliant military strategist named Nebuchadnezzar commanded this powerful force. The sudden shift in the balance of power alarmed Egypt. Egyptian troops soon joined the fight against the emergence of Babylon. At the decisive Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. the Babylonians routed the Egyptians and became the world power.

The religious scene in Jerusalem witnessed an equally dramatic transformation. For most of the seventh century, Judah plunged deeper than ever into idolatry. The worship of the Lord was so neglected that it seemed doomed to vanish. However, in the respite created by the Assyrian-Babylonian war, a revival swept through Judah. After the discovery of the law book in the temple, the law that the Lord gave to Moses at Mount Sinai became the focus of attention. King Josiah led the nation in religious and moral reforms.

#### **REIGNS OF MANASSEH AND AMON (2 KINGS 21:1-26)**

Although Judah teemed with religious sites, the only one sanctioned by the Lord was the temple in Jerusalem. David had planned to build this structure but the Lord had prevented him from doing so. Nonetheless God had promised him that his son would build the temple (2 Sam. 7:1-29). Solomon completed the construction of the temple over 200 years before Manasseh became king. David's son patterned the temple after the ancient tabernacle that the people of Israel had constructed in the wilderness. The sacred ark of the covenant that had been housed in the tabernacle was then placed in the most sacred part of

the temple.

Therefore the temple represented the presence of God in Judah. The Lord prescribed that the nation must celebrate its religious festivals and holy days at this temple. It became the only site where the people were permitted to offer God sacrifices. Laws written in the Word of God governed the temple's holy ceremonies as well as the priesthood.

The Scripture introduces Manasseh with the usual formula stating his age and length of rule. The name of Manasseh's mother also is included. During Manasseh's reign, Assyria maintained its position as the dominant world power. Approximately the first 10 years of his reign probably involved a coregency with his father, Hezekiah. For the next 45 years he enjoyed sole authority over Judah. He proved to be a loyal vassal to his Assyrian overlords. The pagan astral cult was instituted in Jerusalem and worship of the Lord sank to perhaps its lowest ebb in Judah's history. The incredible length of Manasseh's regime made him an influential king.

Tragically that influence was employed for evil, not for good purposes. The simple evaluation that "he did what was evil in the LORD's sight" (2 Kings 21:2a) is followed by a massive catalog of specific crimes. Not only did Manasseh reverse the religious policy of his father, but also his own religious policy resulted in greater evil than that which had occurred during the era before Joshua's conquest (v. 11)! Manasseh reinstated the worship of Baal throughout the kingdom. He encouraged the fertility cult of Asherah [uh SHEE ruh]. Idol worship was practiced even in the Lord's temple. The king freely participated in the occult and even sacrificed his own son in cruel pagan rituals (v. 6).

The inspired biblical writer noted that Manasseh's actions provoked the Lord. God's anger is not an emotional outburst. It denotes the divine response to human sin. It expresses God's abhorrence of wicked behavior and His determination to eradicate evil. God had provided Judah with Scripture detailing the nation's covenant responsibilities and the consequences for failing to carry them out. Manasseh and the people had ignored the warnings. Hence judgment was certain. The basis for God's verdict of guilty against the nation was identified by two unfavorable

comparisons. First, the spiritual condition of the population was worse under Manasseh than when the Amorites inhabited the territory. Second, his level of religious leadership had sunk to that of Ahab, a wicked king of the defunct Northern Kingdom. Divine judgment previously had wiped away both the Amorites and the Northern Kingdom. Therefore God was going to eliminate Judah's existence! The sentence was communicated to the nation through the preaching of the prophets.

In addition to the religious apostasy that Manasseh incited, he also was guilty of murder. His regime presumably sustained its power through terror and torture. Legend has credited Manasseh with martyring Isaiah.

Curiously except for the unnamed prophets in verse 10, the prophetic voice was silent during the long reign of Manasseh. It is not inconceivable that preaching divine judgment cost such messengers their lives.

According to 2 Chronicles 33:10-17 Judah's refusal to heed God's warning led to an Assyrian invasion. Manasseh was captured and carried away in chains. In his suffering the de-throned king finally turned to the Lord. The Lord permitted him to return to Jerusalem and re-claim his throne. Thereafter he made a limited effort to reverse his previous policy.

However, it was too little, too late. Shortly thereafter Manasseh died. Manasseh's 22-year-old son Amon became king. Amon continued the religious apostasy instigated by his father. He completely abandoned any semblance of serving the Lord. In the second year of his reign, certain government officials assassinated Amon, but the conspirators lacked widespread public support. They were captured and executed for their crime. Amon's heir apparent to the throne was his eight-year-old son Josiah.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 16

### 2 KINGS 22–25

#### RECOVERY OF THE BOOK OF THE LAW (2 KINGS 22:1-20)

After his father's assassination, the people of Judah made Josiah king although he was still a small child. Young Josiah eventually proved himself an exceptional leader. His name means "the Lord heals." It was a most appropriate appellation for the young monarch. Early in his reign he rejected the policies of his father and grandfather. Instead he decided to follow the example of his ancestor David. He committed himself to ruling as a faithful servant of the Lord. In the 12th year of his rule, he began removing some of the prohibited high places in the region (2 Chron. 34:3). Many of these had continued to serve as worship sites for Baal and other Canaanite deities.

Josiah began serious religious reforms in the 18th year of his reign. The neglect of the Lord's temple in Jerusalem was evident. It no longer displayed its former glory. Furthermore, inside were objects connected with the worship of various pagan idols. The situation was intolerable. At the age of 26 the king moved to correct the situation. He ordered repairs be made to the Lord's temple. Materials were appropriated and the people collected funds to pay for the task. Workers with integrity were recruited for the labor and the renovation commenced.

**Verse 8:** Hilkiah [hil KIGH uh] was the high priest. He knew how to perform the necessary rituals to accomplish the cleansing and sanctification of the temple as it was renovated. De-testable idols and alien worship implements were removed. Shaphan [SHAY fan] was a prominent court official who served as scribe and treasurer. He evidently acted as a liaison between the king and the high priest.

During the temple renovation project Hilkiah presented Shaphan with a startling discovery. The text describes Hilkiah's discovery as the book of the law. This designation indicated that the scroll was no ordinary book. It was accepted immediately by everyone as Scripture. The exact identification of the book remains uncertain. Some scholars theorize that Hilkiah found a copy of the entire Pentateuch—the entire five books of the Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Other

scholars believe that the discovered manuscript only contained Deuteronomy.

Books were rare and during the lengthy period of hostility that characterized Manasseh's reign the book of the law easily could have been displaced. An entire generation or more had grown up without knowledge of its contents. Shaphan took the book and read it.

Then Shaphan reported to the king. First he informed him about the progress of the work and its financing. Next he told the king about the discovery of the book. The rediscovered book of the law was read to Josiah.

**Verse 11:** Josiah's response to Shaphan's reading was dramatic. He was greatly disturbed by the nation's failure to live up to the commands that he heard. He quickly realized that Judah's conduct warranted divine judgment. In anguish he ripped his garment, an accepted sign of grief in that culture. Such action could signify mourning because of death or national calamity. In some instances tearing one's garment also was an external expression of repentance.

**Verse 12:** Josiah did not allow his fear to paralyze him. He had heard what God had said through the reading of God's Word and he sprang into action. He immediately appointed a delegation to seek information regarding what the government needed to do. Shaphan's son Ahikam [uh HIGH kam] was part of this delegation. Ahikam would later take a stand to protect the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 26:24). Other members Josiah commissioned included Achbor [AK bawr], the son of Micaiah [migh KAY yuh], and one of his servants named Asaiah [uh ZAY yuh].

**Verse 13a:** Encountering God's Word in a fresh, renewed manner should lead believers to evaluate their actions and lifestyles. Josiah commanded the delegation to go and inquire of the LORD. The phrase inquire of the LORD meant to seek out a prophet and ask God's opinion about some matter. At that time the Scripture was incomplete. The Law was widely recognized as God's Word. Some other books also were available. However, the entire New Testament and many Old Testament books had not yet been written. During this interim period, one role of the prophet was to deliver God's word concerning specific issues not addressed in Scripture. Josiah knew that his people had

violated the laws contained in the newly discovered lawbook. He knew God would be justified in punishing them for that behavior. Josiah sought a prophetic word to interpret the ramifications of the nation's disobedience. He also wanted to know what conduct was appropriate in response to God's judgment.

The group Josiah appointed went to a prophetess named Huldah. While women prophetesses were rare, God did speak through them on occasion. Miriam and Deborah also were prophetesses. We do not know why the representatives chose Huldah rather than Jeremiah. We do know that Jeremiah's contemporaries did not appreciate his ministry and that he frequently found himself at odds with them. His exalted reputation of today comes from biblical insight. Huldah acknowledged that Josiah's assessment of the situation was correct. God's judgment would strike Judah. However, because of his personal attitude toward the Lord, Josiah would be spared from seeing the fate of Jerusalem. God's punishment would not occur until after Josiah's death.

#### JOSIAH'S REFORMS (2 KINGS 23:1-30)

**Verse 1:** In response to the written Word of God and the prophetic word of God, Josiah intensified his reforms. He summoned the leaders to Jerusalem. Josiah was not content with his own personal avoidance of disaster. His attitude had resulted in divine mercy. Perhaps if the people demonstrated a similar attitude toward God, they too might receive God's mercy. Because of the depth of his encounter with the Word of God, he did all that he could to lead the nation to spiritual renewal and safety.

**Verse 2:** The crowd that assembled went to the temple. The king appealed to a higher authority. The assembly contained young and old, important religious leaders and common people. The king addressed them. He did not deliver a powerful motivational speech nor issue new commands. Instead he took the recently discovered lawbook and began to read.

The Scripture that he read was described as the book of the covenant. The designation reminded Josiah's hearers that they enjoyed a covenant relationship with God. The covenant required a specified standard of conduct. It was the responsibility of each member of the covenant community to conform to that standard. The Word of God was

more effective in changing the lives of people than any edict of a king. It described acceptable conduct and listed the effects of obedience and disobedience. Those who heard would understand the privileges and obligations inherent in the people's relationship to the Lord.

**Verse 3:** Josiah provided excellent leadership for the people by modeling the commitment that he desired them to make. He publicly made a covenant to do everything required by the law that he had read. A covenant was the ancient equivalent of a legal contract or international treaty. The language suggests a formal adoption of the terms that God had laid out in the written Word. The mention of commandments, decrees, and statutes implies a variety of laws and suggests that the passage Josiah read was extensive in content and length.

In Hebrew thought the heart represented the seat of an individual's volition. Life-affecting decisions impact our cardiovascular system. A person's blood pressure rises and heart rate increases, creating a physical sensation in the chest. The Hebrew word translated mind frequently denoted human existence. Often it is translated "soul." Together the terms heart and mind represented the entirety of the king's being. He made a definitive choice to obey God's Word. Then the people joined their king in the decision to obey God's Word. As God's people experience a fresh encounter with His Word, they will recommit themselves to living for Him and advancing His kingdom.

**Verse 4:** As a result of the rediscovered lawbook and the renewal of the covenant, Josiah implemented religious and spiritual reform in Jerusalem and Judah by eliminating idolatrous practices and objects. His reform embraced new practices and eliminated old ones. He issued instructions to the staff at the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Overall responsibility for the temple rested with the high priest. Under his supervision other priests performed the duties necessary to maintain the temple's rituals and functions. In addition numerous Levites were employed in a variety of activities that included collecting money and securing the entrances.

Josiah began fulfilling his covenant commitment by removing every vestige of idolatry from the temple. He started with illegitimate articles. The Hebrew term in this context referred to portable cultic objects including equipment,

tools, containers, and furniture used in the worship of false gods. The Canaanite storm god Baal, the fertility cult of Asherah, and the pagan astral cults were the principle intruders in the sacred premises. The collected items were taken to the Kidron [KID ruh] and burned.

The Kidron Valley formed the eastern boundary of Jerusalem. It separated the city and the temple mount from the Mount of Olives. The steep slope off of the temple mount made it a natural site for dumping refuse. A small brook meandered the length of the valley. A number of cemeteries were located in the area. One of these may well have been the site for burning the prohibited religious items. Certainly a locale associated so closely with death contained symbolic implications. The defiling items themselves had been defiled completely by the ultimate defilement, death.

Assyrian weakness had permitted Josiah to reestablish the sovereignty of David's royal line over territory that had formerly been the Northern Kingdom. The ashes of the burned idols were taken to Bethel to desecrate one of the sites of idolatrous worship initiated by Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12:28-30). Jeroboam had set up golden calves at Dan and Bethel in order to prevent the citizens of his kingdom from traveling to Jerusalem to worship.

Later when the priest of the sanctuary at Bethel rebuked the prophet Amos, the priest described Bethel as the king's sanctuary (Amos 7:13). In addition to defiling the site, Josiah also destroyed the altar and the high place at Bethel (2 Kings 23:15). Centuries earlier when Jeroboam I was worshiping at Bethel, a prophet from Judah arrived and predicted the devastation that Josiah would later bring (1 Kings 13:1-3). A monument had been erected over that prophet's grave. Josiah did not disturb it (2 Kings 23:17-18).

**Verse 5:** The next step in the king's reformation was abolishing the clergy of the banned religions. Those losing their positions were responsible for influencing Judah's citizens to violate the fundamental commandments of their covenant with God. Their power had been widespread. They had functioned in the capital and in rural areas as well. From the time of Joshua to Josiah, Baal had been a chief rival for the affections of the Hebrew people. His character was the antithesis of the Lord's nature. The

immorality associated with the worship of Baal was repugnant to the Lord and the opposite of the ethics demanded by God.

The remainder of the list contained astral bodies. Their dominance in the list illustrates the folly of idolatry. The Lord was the Creator of the entire universe. But rather than worshiping the One who created these objects, people foolishly prayed to His creation.

**Verse 6:** Manasseh had set up the Asherah pole in the temple. Asherah was a female fertility deity. Cultic prostitution formed a significant component of her worship. The pole was a wooden symbol associated with her lewd worship. Its exact form is unknown. Whatever the appearance of the erotic pole might have been, it was abhorrent to the Lord. After the pole was burned, the ashes were scattered on the graves of the common people. Again the gesture was saturated with symbolism. The fertility goddess was dead, destroyed, and buried with society's poor and unwanted.

Once Josiah's reform movement was initiated in Jerusalem, he expanded it into other parts of his kingdom. Worship sites for the various cults and unsanctioned sanctuaries for worshipping the Lord were scattered over a multitude of hilltops in the kingdom. These were destroyed.

The Topheth (v. 10) was located in the Hinnom Valley outside Jerusalem. It was the site of illicit worship that included child sacrifice. Children were burned alive as an offering to pagan gods (Jer. 7:31-32). The location became the garbage dump for the city. The New Testament Greek name for the site was Gehenna. Because of its foul stench and continuous burning, the designation came to be used to refer to hell, the place of final punishment. Josiah's reformation was not limited to Judah. Samaria and the religious sites of the former Northern Kingdom also were included. For the first time in recent memory the Passover was observed in Judah. According to Chronicles it had been observed during the time of Hezekiah. The distinctiveness of this observance during the reign of Josiah was in its depth and thoroughness. Once Josiah heard the message of God's Word he became a zealous servant of the Lord. He was determined that his life and his responsibilities would conform to God's known will. Encountering the Word of God in a fresh and renewed manner should

lead God's people to remove from their lives anything that competes with their loyalty to Him.

Josiah zealously reformed Judah's religion. Despite his commitment, however, he was unable to totally reverse the impact of his father and grandfather. Not everyone supported his reformation fully. Therefore God's judgment hung over the land like a black cloud. Events on the world stage would soon overwhelm the tiny nation.

Egypt had watched the emergence of Babylon with a wary eye. Egyptian foreign policy sought to check Babylonian aggression. Pharaoh Neco dispatched troops to bolster the shaky Assyrian army. Josiah attempted to head off Neco as he advanced along the coastal plain on his way to Carchemish. At Megiddo in northern Israel the two armies collided in 609 B.C. Josiah was killed and his army routed. The prophetic word of God from Huldah proved accurate.

#### **REIGN OF JEHOAHAZ (2 KINGS 23:31-35)**

Popular support among the ordinary citizens of Judah put Josiah's son Jehoahaz, also known as Shallum, on the throne. The brevity of his rule did not allow him adequate time to significantly alter his father's policy. However, it is clear that Jehoahaz was wicked. Three months after Josiah's death at Megiddo, the victorious Neco imprisoned Jehoahaz at Riblah, the base of the pharaoh's military operations. The pharaoh imposed a significant tribute on Judah. He changed the name of Jehoahaz's brother from Eliakim to Jehoiakim and placed him in charge of collecting the tribute. When Neco returned to Egypt, he took Jehoahaz with him. The former king of Judah later died as an exile in that foreign nation.

The world changed rapidly and dramatically as the seventh century B.C. came to a close. The mighty Assyrian Empire had all but disappeared. Babylon [BAB ih lahn], formerly dominated by Assyria, had emerged as the world's new superpower. After its defeat at Haran, the remnant of the Assyrian army retreated to Carchemish, an old Hittite city on the Euphrates River. The city was an important river crossing on the international trade route. The Assyrians dug in and hoped for a miracle to survive. Help seemed to come in the form of an old enemy. Egypt concluded a weak Assyria made a better neighbor than a strong Babylon. Therefore Egypt joined Assyria's war against Babylon. Pharaoh Neco moved reinforcements to

Carchemish. Tiny Judah attempted to block the Egyptian troop movements but was defeated by Egypt (2 Chron. 35:20-24). Ultimately in 605 B.C., the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar [NEB yoo kad NEZ uhr] attacked the Egyptian army at Carchemish. Babylon won a decisive victory. Egyptian forces retreated. Assyria vanished and its empire transferred to Babylonian control.

The death of his father obliged Nebuchadnezzar to withdraw shortly after his great triumph. He returned to Babylon to secure the throne for himself. The inevitable was delayed only briefly. Nebuchadnezzar quickly reappeared and marched toward Jerusalem. Jehoiakim [jih HOY uh kim], the king of Judah, became his vassal and the first Judean exiles were deported to Babylon. A few years later, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Egypt. Neco met him along the Egyptian frontier. This time the Babylonians were forced to retreat.

Meanwhile two distinct parties had emerged in Jerusalem. One party favored continued submission to Babylon. This party was in the minority, but the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah encouraged its supporters. The majority party increasingly looked to Egypt for liberation from Babylon. It pressured the king to rely on Egyptian promises of aid and to raise the standard of revolt.

#### **BABYLONIAN OPPRESSION (2 KINGS 23:36-24:7)**

Josiah's defeat at the Battle of Megiddo had made Judah a vassal of Egypt. Pharaoh Neco deposed the people's choice for king, Jehoahaz, and established his brother Eliakim on the throne of Judah. As a sign of his sovereignty over the monarch, Neco changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was not godly like his father. Instead he followed in the evil pattern of Manasseh [muh NASS uh] and served foreign gods.

**Verse 1:** Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judah marked the beginning of the fulfillment of God's prophecy that He would remove the inhabitants of the Southern Kingdom from the land of promise and from His presence. The death of his father obligated Nebuchadnezzar to return to Babylon immediately after his victory at Carchemish. He secured his throne and returned to reap the rewards of the battle. Nebuchadnezzar's entrance into Jerusalem marked liberation from Egyptian domination. Judah had not participated in the fighting except for Josiah's failed attempt to

block Egyptian movement north. Therefore Nebuchadnezzar viewed the Judahites favorably. He deported a select number of them to Babylon. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were among these captives. These early exiles enjoyed excellent treatment in their new home. They were educated and many of them later filled important positions in the Babylonian government.

After only three years, Jehoiakim revolted against Babylonian rule and sought to reestablish Judah's independence. The likely form of the rebellion was a refusal to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar. The revolt presumably was prompted by the Babylonian defeat in Egypt. However, Jehoiakim miscalculated the significance of the battle. A defensive stand against an overextended opponent did not translate into military capacity to drive Babylon out of the promised land. Babylon still was more than capable of occupying Judah.

**Verse 2:** Nebuchadnezzar did not respond immediately with a large-scale invasion of Judah. Instead he contented himself with destructive raids. To carry out these forays he detached a small contingent of Babylonian soldiers. This force recruited additional strength from Judah's traditional enemies. The hostility between Aram and Israel had lasted for centuries.

Although neither political state existed during Jehoiakim's time, the national hatred between the Aramean [ar uh MEE uhn] and ethnic Israelites remained alive. The Israelites considered the Moabites [MOH uh bights] close relatives although the two groups had experienced both hostile, as well as peaceful relations through the centuries. Jehoiakim's ancestry included a Moabitess named Ruth. Moab had been a part of David's kingdom. King Omri gained some degree of control over Moab, but the nation eventually won its independence from the Northern Kingdom. The Ammonites [AM uh nights] had fought the Israelites as early as the era of the judges. Both sought to control the fertile Gilead region. The use of men from among Judah's traditional foes enabled Nebuchadnezzar to damage Judah's ability to fight without weakening his own army.

The inspired writer of 2 Kings attributed the impending destruction of Judah—not to the Babylonians—but to the Lord. Prior to the Babylonian conquest, the Lord had

revealed to both Jeremiah and Habakkuk that divine judgment would take the form of a Babylonian invasion from the north. Therefore as the inspired writer looked back at these historical events with the clarity of hindsight and the certainty of divine revelation, he reached an accurate conclusion. The judgment that God's people had experienced was the obvious fulfillment of the prophetic word.

**Verse 3:** The Babylonian army moved at King Nebuchadnezzar's command. However, contrary to Nebuchadnezzar's personal awareness, he was serving as the Lord's instrument of judgment against His disobedient people. Nebuchadnezzar's goal was to punish a rebellious vassal, but God's sovereign purposes were being accomplished through this pagan king's actions.

How is the phrase to remove them from His sight to be properly understood? We know that the omnipresent Lord is everywhere (Ps. 139:7-12).

However, during this period in Old Testament history the Lord was understood to dwell in the promised land. To be cast out of the land was viewed as synonymous with being separated from His presence. Hence the phrase to remove them from His sight points to the removal of the people from the land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants, and more particularly from worship in the Jerusalem temple. The people did not lose their position as God's people. They were still His people, and God would restore their presence in the land after they had spent 70 years in exile.

The reason for this harsh judgment was the apostasy of Manasseh's era. His sins are cited specifically. Nonetheless the implication is that his leadership motivated the people to sin as well. The generation that went into exile complained that God's judgment was not fair. They insisted that they were being punished for the transgressions of Manasseh's generation, the generation of their parents. The prophetic preaching of both Ezekiel and Jeremiah soundly refuted this interpretation (Jer. 31:29-30; Ezek. 18:1-32).

Manasseh did evil in God's sight, but other Judahites committed the same kinds of evil as well. Therefore they were being punished not for Manasseh's sins, but for what they themselves did.

**Verse 4:** The Lord's judgment not only was punitive, but also it was protective. Manasseh's policies had cost innocent people their lives. Some of these were martyred because of their loyalty to the Lord. Some died in the Assyrian invasion (2 Chron. 33:10-11). Although his capture by the Assyrians caused Manasseh to acknowledge that the Lord was God (vv. 12-13), he was not able to reverse his negative influence. He started the people down the path of destruction, and they never changed course.

The usual formulaic statements summarized the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:5-6). At his death, his son Jehoiachin [Jehoiachin] became king. The section closes with a statement about Egyptian weakness. Neco may have temporarily halted Nebuchadnezzar's conquest, but the Egyptian pharaoh had lost much territory.

#### **BABYLONIAN CONQUEST (2 KINGS 24:8-20A)**

Eventually Nebuchadnezzar led his army to suppress Jehoiakim's rebellion. The Babylonian king arrived in Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. Judah received no help from Egypt. Jehoiakim died shortly before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The cause of his death is unknown.

Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, was 18 years of age when he became king. He inherited a disaster. The most powerful army on earth surrounded the city of Jerusalem. It was only a matter of time until the food supply was exhausted, disease reached epidemic proportions, or the Babylonians breached the city walls. After three months Jehoiachin surrendered the city. He was deported to Babylon along with 10,000 captives, including a priest named Ezekiel.

Nebuchadnezzar sought to eliminate potential rebellions in the future by including among the exiles the entire army and all the manufacturers of war materials. Leaders and other influential citizens also were deported. The Babylonians looted the city and carried away the valuable assets of the king's palace and the furnishings of the temple. Some of the utensils carted off to Babylon dated back to the time of Solomon. This second exile occurred approximately eight years after the first exile. Unlike the first exiles, these latter ones were prisoners of war. The inhabitants that remained after the massive deportation primarily were from the lowest strata of society. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jehoiachin's uncle to replace

him. He changed the new king's name to Zedekiah, an action that demonstrated the Babylonian king's sovereignty over Judah. Like his brother Jehoiakim, Zedekiah rejected the Lord.

**Verse 20:** The Lord's anger or wrath is His response to human sin and injustice. He has determined to judge all wicked behavior. The strong language He finally banished them from His presence reflects another characteristic of God's nature. While God despises sin, He loves sinful humanity. God had delayed judgment in order to give His people an opportunity to repent. Instead they continued to follow after the pattern of Manasseh. Therefore God would punish them. He would banish them from the promised land and from the temple. The temple represented God's presence with His people. Previously God had acted to "remove" them from His sight (v. 3). In verse 20 the intensity has increased. The Lord's people were banished from His presence. The former verb means simply "to take away," whereas the latter means "to hurl away." Zedekiah had witnessed two previous deportations to Babylon. The sharp denunciations of the prophet Jeremiah warned against further rebellion. But Zedekiah stubbornly failed to heed the warnings and rebelled against Babylonian rule.

#### **JERUSALEM'S REBELLION AND FALL (2 KINGS 24:20B-25:21)**

Typical of this inability to learn from the past was the political policy of Zedekiah. Despite past defeats and continued Babylonian military superiority, he was enticed by those who favored alliance with Egypt to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar would tolerate no more insubordination. He marched with his entire military force to eradicate the kingdom of Judah. Surviving documents poignantly describe the loss of communication as towns outside Jerusalem fell before the Babylonian onslaught. In late 589 or early 588 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar's army reached Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. The siege lasted 18 months. At one point the pharaoh sent an Egyptian army to relieve Jerusalem (see Jer. 37:5-10). Nebuchadnezzar's main force withdrew from the city to meet this threat. The citizens of Jerusalem rejoiced prematurely in their deliverance. Nebuchadnezzar quickly routed the Egyptians and returned to Jerusalem. The brief respite demonstrated that the

Egyptian promise of help was a false hope. Furthermore, it strengthened the resolve of the returning Babylonian army and doomed the city. As the siege entered its final weeks, the food supply inside the city was exhausted. Starvation and disease were widespread. At last in 587 B.C. the Babylonian army breached Jerusalem's walls and its soldiers poured into the ill-fated city. Unimaginable horror was unleashed everywhere. In the chaos, some Judahite troops and officials managed to escape.

Most of those fleeing Jerusalem headed for the rugged terrain of the Jordan Valley and the cliffs above the Dead Sea. Edomites routinely betrayed the refugees' hiding spots to Babylonian patrols. The royal family was captured outside Jericho. Zedekiah and his family were brought before Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah watched the execution of his sons. Then the Babylonians gouged out his eyes and sent him to Babylon in chains.

**Verse 8:** Less than a month after the capture of Jerusalem, Nebuzaradan [NEB uh zahr-AY dan] entered the city to complete its destruction. He is identified as the commander of the guards and a servant of the king of Babylon. The meaning of the former designation is uncertain. It probably means that he commanded the king's imperial guards. The latter phrase not only details his subservience to Nebuchadnezzar, but also suggests absolute loyalty as well. Nebuzaradan clearly was a high ranking military officer with significant authority. He exempted Jeremiah from deportation because the prophet's preaching had been so favorable to Babylon (Jer. 40:1-6).

**Verse 9:** Nebuzaradan began his mission with the destruction of the city's two most significant structures. The temple represented the religious strength of the subjugated people and the king's palace the political power. Both buildings were burned. Then other prominent buildings were systematically razed. From the Babylonian perspective, the eradication of the temple represented the superiority of their gods over the Lord. The elimination of the palace marked the termination of state leadership. The other structures represented the end of national existence.

**Verse 10:** After destroying the city's buildings, Nebuzaradan focused attention on neutralizing the Jerusalem's defenses. In the ancient world, cities built walls as a means

of protection. The walls kept out bandits and enemy armies. If the walls were removed, even wild animals were free to roam the city. Thus the troops that accompanied Nebuzaradan were ordered to demolish Jerusalem's walls. They would not be rebuilt until Nehemiah's time. Most of the survivors from the fighting were sent to Babylon. Even those who had defected to the Babylonians during the war were sent into exile. Only the very poorest inhabitants were permitted to remain in the territory of Judah. Surviving government officials and certain religious leaders were executed.

Nebuzaradan continued to separate the people from their material possessions. Buildings and permanent construction had been torn down and rendered unusable. Anything portable of value was shipped to Babylon.

**Verse 21b:** The Babylonians viewed their conquest of Jerusalem as a victory of their gods over the Lord. However, the biblical record reveals the Lord's sovereignty in all that occurred. Before the Babylonians arrived in Judah the first time, the Lord warned that He had summoned them as an instrument of divine judgment. Unless the nation repented, the people would be exiled. The Lord repeated this warning with increasing urgency during the Babylonian occupation of Judah. At no time did the people of Judah repent. Instead they turned to idols for help or depended on the Egyptians for salvation. Neither of these resources could deliver them. The Lord, therefore, sent them away into exile just as He had promised.

The exile of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in Babylon differed from the Assyrian deportations of the Northern Kingdom of Israel a century earlier. Whereas the Assyrians settled Gentiles in the vacated territory of the Northern Kingdom, the Babylonians left Judah sparsely occupied. In addition the Assyrians dispersed the exiles across their empire, but the Babylonians settled the Jewish exiles in ethnic communities.

#### **GEDALIAH'S APPOINTMENT AND ASSASSINATION (2 KINGS 25:22-26)**

The few remaining inhabitants would no longer have their own king. The national government had been dismantled. In its place Nebuchadnezzar installed a puppet governor. Gedaliah, the son of an ally of Jeremiah, was appointed to the position. He seemed inclined to favor a policy advised

by the prophet, but he held office for only two months. A few extreme nationalists who had survived the destruction of Jerusalem assassinated the governor. They also killed others associated with him.

Despite the counsel of Jeremiah, the entire Jewish population who remained in Judah fled. They became refugees in Egypt. The descendants of Abraham no longer inhabited the land that God had promised to them. The place that God selected to worship Him no longer was available to them. Finally in 538 B.C., after the collapse of the Babylonian Empire, Cyrus, the king of Persia, issued a decree that the Jews be permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the destroyed city.

#### **JEHOIACHIN'S RELEASE (2 KINGS 25:27-30)**

**Verse 27:** The Book of 2 Kings ends with a glimmer of hope for the people of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar's son Evil-merodach [EE vihl-mih ROH dak] became king of Babylon at his father's death in 562 B.C. His name means "worshiper of Marduk." Marduk [sometimes called Merodach or Bel] was the chief Babylonian deity.

Unexpectedly Jehoiachin was released from prison. He had survived 37 years in exile and outlived his captor Nebuchadnezzar. Jehoiachin represented the legitimate royal line. His release hints of better days ahead for Judah and implies that those days will come through the line of David.

**Verse 28:** The Babylonian monarch's treatment of Jehoiachin recognized him as a genuine king. He was not just a king, but the most prominent foreign king in the capital. This Babylonian recognition was an initial step in the restoration of David's monarchy. The Jews no longer lived in Judah. They lived in Babylon at that time. But in Babylon, their king had received recognition.

**Verse 29:** The release from prison marked a radical reversal in the fate of Jehoiachin. The garments of bondage were removed and replaced with royal attire. He routinely dined with the Babylonian king. Having seen their king's status restored, the people could hope that a restoration of their nation might be possible. In the Jewish communities new hope sprang up. People abandoned the idolatry that precipitated the disaster of 587 B.C. One day they would return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. One day

a descendant of David would establish an eternal kingdom.

**Verse 30:** Just as God ultimately took care of Jehoiachin, God could take care of Judah. The readers of 2 Kings need to trust the Lord and find hope in Him. Even though believers may abuse the privilege of their fellowship with God, He mercifully seeks to restore them.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 23

### ESTHER 1–2

Ahasuerus [uh haz yoo EHR uhs] ruled the Persian Empire from 486 to 465 B.C. During the third year of his reign, he invited Persian officials and nobles to a 180-day celebration of his power and majesty. At the end of the celebration, he held a weeklong feast for all the men in the fortress of Susa. Queen Vashti [VASH tigh] provided a separate feast for the women of the palace. On the final day of the feast Ahasuerus summoned Vashti to his banquet so he could display her beauty to the assembled men, but Vashti refused. Her refusal infuriated the king (Esth. 1:1-12).

The king consulted his advisors to determine what to do with his disobedient queen. The advisor Memucan [mih MYOO kan] stated that if Vashti remained unpunished, others, including wives across the empire, would disobey authority. He suggested punishing Vashti by removing her as queen and then seeking a new queen. Such action would serve as an example to all wives not to disobey their husbands. The king followed Memucan's advice (1:13-22). Commissioners from each Persian province began to gather the most beautiful young girls and send them to Ahasuerus. Among the women selected was Esther [ESS tuhr], the beautiful cousin of the Jew Mordecai [MAWR duh kigh]. After a year of preparation, Esther entered the king's presence, and he selected her as his new queen. Later Mordecai learned of a plot to assassinate the king. He informed Esther, who reported it to the king on Mordecai's behalf, and the plot was foiled (2:1-23).

Ahasuerus: From King to Spurned Husband (Esth. 1:1-12) Ahasuerus, also known by his Greek name Xerxes, succeeded his father Darius I as ruler of the Persian Empire. For approximately 20 years (486-465 B.C.) Ahasuerus ruled an empire extending from modern-day Pakistan in the east to the northern Sudan in the southwest. For administration purposes Ahasuerus divided his empire into 127 provinces (Esth. 1:1).

At the beginning of his reign, Ahasuerus faced the typical rebellions of subject peoples who were hoping to regain their freedom. Ahasuerus secured his empire by crushing rebellions in Egypt and Babylonia. Darius had rebuilt

Susa [SOO suh], the capital of ancient Elam. Ahasuerus's winter residence was located in the fortress of Susa (1:2). The fortress consisted of a rec-tangular platform that rose 72 feet above street level. A huge wall running two and a half miles surrounded the fortress and provided protection and privacy.

After crushing rebellions in Egypt and Babylonia, Ahasuerus celebrated during the third year of his reign with a great feast. The king invited nobles and military officials to Susa to accomplish three goals. Kings in the ancient world typically used banquets to display their majesty and to maintain the loyalty of their subjects. Ahasuerus certainly intended his banquet to accomplish the same. As a third goal Ahasuerus assembled his military officers to begin planning his campaign against Greece. The banquet probably did not last 180 days, but for 180 days the king displayed evidence of his power and majesty (1:3-4).

Ahasuerus invited every male who worked in the fortress of Susa to the weeklong banquet at the end of the 180 days (1:5). The luxury on display and the foods and wines served must have been unbelievable. The marble columns in the garden courtyard were draped with white and purple linen (the royal colors of Persia). The guests reclined on gold and silver couches surrounded by the beauty of the courtyard and the mosaic pavement. Wine flowed freely at Persian banquets, and the guests drank all they wanted from golden goblets (1:5-8).

As Ahasuerus entertained the men of the palace complex, Queen Vashti entertained the women of the palace. According to ancient historians, Amestris served as Ahasuerus's queen. Vashti, meaning "sweetheart," might have been a pet name for Amestris or it might be the Greek version of her name. Husbands typically came with their wives to Persian banquets, but men and women often separated after the drinking began. That Vashti hosted a banquet for the women indicated she possessed authority within the palace. That she hosted a banquet separate from her husband's foreshadowed the separation that would soon occur between them (1:9).

On the final day of the feast, the inebriated Ahasuerus called for Vashti to come to him so he could display her beauty to the men of the fortress. Later rabbis believed the king's command for Vashti to wear her royal crown meant

he wanted her to wear nothing but her royal crown. Other Bible students suggest the king wanted Vashti to come unveiled. For a woman to uncover her face before men, especially men who had been drinking for six days, would have been a horrifying violation of custom and modesty. Vashti refused her husband's command, an action that enraged the king. Ahasuerus ruled most of the known world but could not force his wife to do his bidding. Vashti knew the possible results of her disobedience but chose to do what was right rather than what was easy. She chose propriety and dignity over shameful behavior (1:10-12).

Those in authority sometimes use power and position to demand unrighteous, immoral behavior. Taking a stand against one who can influence our career and well-being requires courage. As believers we need to act consistent with our faith in and commitment to God.

#### VASHTI: FROM QUEEN TO COMMONER (ESTH. 1:13-22)

Ahasuerus elevated a domestic problem into a matter of national concern and called upon his top advisors to provide a solution. The king had seven trusted advisors (see Ezra 7:14) who had access to him and served in top-level government positions. Advisors possessed prestige and power but also faced the wrath of the king if they provided bad advice or counsel the king did not wish to hear. Ahasuerus asked the advisors to determine what Persian law dictated be done to the disobedient queen (Esth. 1:13-15). The fact that Memucan spoke for the advisors indicated he possessed the highest status. Memucan exaggerated the impact of Vashti's actions and claimed that unless Vashti was severely punished, women, both noble and peasant, throughout the empire would begin to despise and disobey their husbands. Memucan claimed that before the day ended the empire's social structure would crumble. Certainly Memucan's claim constituted an overreaction to Vashti's disobedience. One act of disobedience by the queen would not cause an empire-wide crumbling of societal norms and authority. Memucan wanted to provide a solution the king would like and that would keep him in the king's favor (1:16-18).

Memucan suggested Ahasuerus should issue a royal proclamation stripping Vashti of her royal title and position and begin a search for a new, worthier queen. Since Vashti possessed incredible beauty and dignity, finding a worthier queen would prove difficult. More than likely

Memucan meant the king needed to find a more obedient queen. If the king followed his advice, Memucan stated, wives would honor their husbands and the empire's social structure would re-main strong (1:19-20).

Ahasuerus approved Memucan's plan. He immediately sent letters to every province in the language of the province so the king's proclamation would be clearly understood. The proclamation stated husbands should be masters of their houses and should speak in the language of their own people. Some Bible students find it odd that the Persian king would encourage family heads to speak in their own native language, but the choice of language probably indicated the husband being master of his home (1:21-22).

Persian law contrasted sharply with God's law. Unlike God's law, Persian law depended on the mood of the king. If the king was happy, his subjects experienced relative peace, but if he became angry, his people suffered. In His unchanging steadfast love, God provided a law that focused on the development and maintenance of a loving, just society under His guidance and lordship. God's law reveals His compassionate nature and helps us live an abundant life.

### **ESTHER: FROM CAPTIVE TO QUEEN (ESTH. 2:1-23)**

Some time after the delivery of the royal proclamation, Ahasuerus remembered Vashti's beauty and the relationship he had enjoyed with her. However, he had chosen to punish her disobedience by removing her as queen, and he could not change his decree (Esth. 2:1).

Memucan's suggestion had included seeking another queen (1:19). Ahasuerus's personal attendants encouraged him to begin an empire-wide search and have the most beautiful young women brought to him so he could choose his new queen. To ensure Ahasuerus would find a suitable replacement for Vashti, the attendants suggested placing the young women under the care of the king's eunuch Hegai [HEE gigh], who would provide them with the proper beauty treatments and court-etiquette lessons so the women could impress the king (2:2-3).

Unlike a modern beauty contest in which contestants can win scholarships and perhaps come to the attention of talent scouts, being selected as a potential queen held little

promise of a good life. The women would never see their communities or families again and would spend the rest of their lives in the king's harem, unable to have a fulfilling marriage and children. The slim chance they might be selected to replace Vashti offered little hope. The king thought nothing of their hopes and dreams as he ordered the search for his new queen to begin (2:4).

**Verse 5:** A Jewish man named Mordecai served in the fortress of Susa. He was evidently a member of the king's court (see 2:21; 3:2). Some Bible students suggest the name Mordecai may be related to the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Sometimes conquering nations gave captives new names to reflect their dominance over their captives (see Dan. 1:6-7). If the name is of Persian or Babylonian origin as some scholars suggest, Mordecai's parents may have given him a Jewish name to reflect his heritage and a Persian name to allow him to integrate into Persian society. Mordecai's instruction to Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity may indicate he used his non-Jewish name to conceal his own ethnic and religious identity.

Mordecai descended from the tribe of Benjamin. His father was Jair [JAY uhr], his grandfather was Shimei [SHEM ih igh (eye)], and his great grandfather was Kish. Saul, Israel's first king, also came from the tribe of Benjamin and his father also was named Kish (1 Sam. 9:3). The two men named Kish are certainly not identical because they were separated by hundreds of years, but the similar names may imply Mordecai shared a common ancestry with Saul. One of Saul's enemies had been Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:7-9). Mordecai would soon face his own enemy Haman, the Agagite (Esth. 3:1). As God had helped Saul triumph over Agag, so He would help Mordecai triumph over Haman.

**Verse 6:** The phrase taken into exile from Jerusalem can refer to either Mordecai or Kish. Nebuchadnezzar [NEB yoo kad NEZ uhr] took King Jeconiah [JEK oh NIGH uh] (also known as Jehoiachin) and other Jews into exile in 597 B.C. If Mordecai had come into Babylonia with King Jeconiah, he would have been over 120 years old and Esther would not have been too much younger. Probably Mordecai's great grandfather Kish had gone into exile with King Jeconiah. Since those who had gone into exile with Jeconiah were members of the royal family or the upper class, Mor-

decai came from a family of means. His background may have helped him secure the position he had in the fortress in Susa (see 2:5,21).

**Verse 7:** Mordecai had adopted his orphaned cousin Hadassah [huh DASS uh]. Hadassah, meaning "myrtle," also had another name, Esther. Some Bible students state the name Esther shares a common root with the name of the goddess Ishtar, but other Bible students dispute the link. The name Esther appears similar to a Hebrew verb meaning "to conceal" or "to hide." It reminds us of Mordecai's decision to keep her ethnic and religious identity a secret.

Like Vashti, Esther possessed great beauty. If Ahasuerus sought a new queen worthy to replace the stunning Vashti, Esther could be the woman he would choose. As Mordecai knew and Ahasuerus would discover, Esther possessed not just great physical beauty but beauty of character as well.

Bible students have long pointed out the name of God never appears in the Book of Esther. The absence of God's name, however, does not imply the absence of His presence. Mordecai's ancestors had raised him as a faithful believer, and he had no doubt taught Esther to know and trust in God. God had given Mordecai a role that would prove invaluable and had given Esther the beauty and strength of character that would enable her to save her people.

Mordecai's and Esther's faith enabled them to cope with unavoidable changes in life. Faith in God had sustained Mordecai and his ancestors as they lived, worshiped, and followed God in an alien nation and culture. Faith in God sustained Esther through the loss of her parents. When we face unexpected change in life, our faith in God can sustain us also, helping us to cope with new circumstances and continue to follow and live for God.

**Verse 8:** The Bible does not provide the number of women brought to Susa, but several hundred women must have been selected, if not more. Those who sought the women for the king probably gave them little choice but to accept the invitation. Ahasuerus could demand anything or anyone he wished. When the commissioners found a beautiful, young, unmarried woman they believed the king might like, they simply took her. She became part of the

king's harem, effectively married to him whether he took pleasure in her or not.

Among those selected was Esther. The passive verbs taken and placed indicated that, like the others, she had little choice. Hegai, the king's eunuch, supervised all the women. As a eunuch he posed no threat to the purity of the king's harem, and as a competent administrator, he had risen to supervise one of the king's most important projects.

**Verse 9:** Esther's beauty, dignity, and manner brought her to the attention of Hegai, who knew what the king wanted. Esther quickly won Hegai's favor, a word often used to describe God's faithful love to His people. Esther followed in the footsteps of Joseph, who had won the favor of the prison warden (Gen. 39:21), and Daniel, who won the favor of Nebuchadnezzar's chief official (Dan. 1:9). God also had destined Esther for great service to Him.

As Mordecai had cared for Esther as a good father cares for his child, so did Hegai. Hegai immediately engaged her in the year-long preparation of beauty treatments and special diet, probably putting her ahead of other women who had arrived earlier. From the harem servants, he selected seven women to attend Esther. Hegai had known the surpassing beauty and grace of Vashti and realized Esther could be the one to replace her. He acted quickly to provide the king with a new queen.

**Verse 10:** In obedience to unexplained instructions from Mordecai, Esther did not reveal her ethnic background. Some Bible students suggest the queen needed to be of Persian descent, and if Hegai or others knew Esther's background, she could never have become queen. Other Bible students suggest Mordecai knew anti-Semitism existed in the government.

Haman's plot to kill all the Jews (Esth. 3:1-15) may have been the most drastic expression of an anti-Semitic sentiment that pervaded the court. Wishing to protect Esther and give her a future, Mordecai advised her not to reveal her background.

Once Esther entered the harem, Mordecai checked on her daily. Since people knew of Mordecai's Jewish background, some Bible students have wondered if his

actions did not jeopardize Esther. Mordecai probably did not specifically ask regarding Esther's welfare, but simply inquired in general regarding events in the harem, hoping to hear news of Esther. The diverse backgrounds of the women in the harem would have helped hide Mordecai's specific interest in Esther (2:11).

For 12 months the young women prepared for their audience with the king. The year-long treatments and training probably included court etiquette and tips on how to dress for Ahasuerus as well as the beauty treatments.

When the king summoned a young woman, she received permission to bring with her anything she believed might help her be selected as the new queen. If the king did not select her, she entered a second harem where she remained for life unless summoned again by Ahasuerus (2:12-14). The pressure on each young woman would have been intense and the disappointment when not selected must have been devastating.

When Esther's turn came to enter the king's presence, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai suggested. She trusted Hegai's judgment because she believed he knew what pleased Ahasuerus (2:15).

After being brought to the king's harem, Esther could have sulked or angrily denounced her fate. Instead, she continued to trust God and listen to the wise advice of others. She adjusted to her new situation and faced with courage and eagerness the challenge before her. As we face new situations and challenges, we also need to maintain faith in God and allow Him to lead us through prayer, Bible study, and the sound advice of other believers into a continued life of service.

**Verse 16:** The month of Tebeth [TEE beth] corresponded to the latter half of December and the first half of January on our calendar. The seventh year of Ahasuerus's reign would have been approximately 479 B.C. Four years had passed since Vashti's removal as queen. During that period, Ahasuerus had been actively involved in ruling and seeking to expand his empire. From 480-479 B.C. he had waged an unsuccessful war against Greece that must have disappointed him. During the cold, wet month of Tebeth, as the king grieved over his army's defeat and his loss of Vashti, Esther appeared.

**Verse 17:** As Esther won Hegai's favor and gained the approval of all who saw her, so she won the favor and approval of Ahasuerus. He placed the queen's crown on Esther's head and formally proclaimed her queen. After being selected as one of the young women to be brought to the king's palace, Esther actively sought to become queen. She learned the ways of the court, submitted to the beauty treatments, and closely followed Hegai's advice. She, like the others selected, probably realized becoming queen constituted the only escape from a lifetime of living as a concubine in the harem. Esther also may have believed being queen might provide her with opportunities to help her people and others. Esther met the challenges of an unavoidable change and utilized new opportunities.

Ahasuerus celebrated his selection of a new queen with a great banquet for all his officials and staff. To enable the entire empire to share his joy, Ahasuerus cancelled tax payments from his provinces and gave expensive gifts. Ahasuerus's generosity regarding his queen would be demonstrated again later when he would offer Esther even half his kingdom (5:3,6; 7:2).

Finding Esther as queen marked the end of a difficult period in the king's personal life and the beginning of a promising future (2:18). The Bible does not explain why the virgins were assembled again. Perhaps the king wanted them to appear before his new queen and recognize her status (2:19). Esther continued to obey Mordecai by keeping her ethnic, religious background secret. As she had obeyed her adoptive father in the past, she continued to do so even after becoming queen (2:20). Esther's respect for those in authority serves as a model for us.

**Verse 21:** One day as Mordecai served at the King's Gate, he learned of a plot by Bigthan [BIG than] and Teresh [TEE resh], two palace guards, to assassinate Ahasuerus. For some reason the two eunuchs had become furious with the king. Rather than dealing with their anger, they chose to seek vengeance by assassinating Ahasuerus.

**Verse 22:** Mordecai had access to Queen Esther and informed her of the plot. When Esther then told the king, she gave Mordecai credit for discovering the plot and saving Ahasuerus. Mordecai could have remained quiet and allowed the plot to succeed. However, Ahasuerus served

as his king, and Mordecai respected those in authority as he had taught Esther to respect those in authority. Mordecai also knew the death of Ahasuerus would remove any opportunity for Esther to serve as queen, because a new king would select a new queen. In addition, Mordecai firmly believed God could use Esther to bless the Jews and others.

**Verse 23:**After Ahasuerus verified the charges, Bigthan and Teresh were executed. Mordecai's service was entered into the official records of the royal court according to Persian custom. The king did not immediately reward Mordecai for saving his life. Later the king would correct his mistake and appropriately honor Mordecai (6:1-11). Both Esther and Mordecai utilized opportunities to help others. When taken from her home to the king's harem, Esther responded positively and used the opportunity to prepare her-self to become queen. When Mordecai learned of a plot to assassinate Ahasuerus, he utilized Esther's position to foil the plot and save the king's life. No matter how opportunities come to us, we need to use them to serve God and help others.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 30

### ESTHER 3–10

Ahasuerus [uh haz yoo EHR uhs] appointed Haman [HAY muhn] as his chief official. When Mordecai [MAWR duh kigh] refused to bow before Haman, Haman became furious. To avenge the insult, Haman decided to kill not just Mordecai, but all the Jews. Haman determined the month and day of the slaughter by casting lots. By hiding his true intent and offering a bribe, Haman convinced the king to allow the destruction. The royal decree that went throughout the empire doomed the Jews to death (Esth. 3:1-15).

After Mordecai learned of Haman's plan and the royal decree, he joined the Jewish population in mourning by fasting and wearing sackcloth and ashes. When Esther [ESS tuhr] learned of Mordecai's behavior, she sent clothes for him to wear rather than sackcloth. Mordecai refused the clothing, and Esther sent the eunuch Hathach [HAY thak] to discover the reason for his behavior. Mordecai reported everything to the eunuch, gave him a copy of the decree, and instructed him to ask Esther to approach the king. The eunuch returned and informed Esther (4:1-9).

Esther sent word to Mordecai that no one could enter the king's presence unless summoned by the king and she had not been summoned for 30 days. Mordecai told Esther she would not escape the consequences of the decree and suggested she had become queen precisely in order to save her people. Esther asked the Jews in Susa [SOO suh] to fast for three days in order to provide her with spiritual support. At the end of the three days, she would approach the king, even if doing so meant her death (4:10-17).

#### HAMAN'S RISE (ESTH. 3:1-15)

After Esther's selection as queen of Persia and Mordecai's foiling of an assassination plot against the king, Ahasuerus promoted Haman to serve as his chief official. Haman's identification as an Agagite carried sinister implications. One of King Saul's enemies had been Agag, king of Amalek. The people of Israel had experienced tense relations with the Amalekites for centuries. Early in the Israelites' journey through the wilderness after the exodus, Amalek had attacked them, but God had granted the Israelites victory (Ex. 17:8-16). Saul's failure to kill Agag

after defeating Agag's army set in motion Saul's rejection and decline as king (1 Sam. 15:1-35).

Haman's identification as an Agagite recalled Israel's long history of battling enemies who had tried to destroy God's people. Haman's actions toward Mordecai and the Jews would soon confirm Haman as yet another enemy of the Jews (Esth. 3:1).

**Verse 2:** Ahasuerus commanded the entire royal staff to bow before Haman in recognition of his status in the court. Individuals in the Persian court typically bowed to those in higher positions, sometimes even prostrating themselves before a superior. Bowing to Haman constituted nothing unusual in that culture, but Mordecai would not bow down or pay homage.

The Bible does not specifically indicate why Mordecai refused to bow before Haman. Some Bible students believe Mordecai based his refusal on the first two of the Ten Commandments. God commanded the Israelites not to have any gods before Him and not to engage in idolatry by making or worshiping images (Ex. 20:2-6). Yet, the people of Israel did bow before their own kings (1 Sam. 24:8; 2 Sam. 18:28; 1 Kings 1:16), and Mordecai probably had to bow before Ahasuerus since he served the king.

Two reasons may have led to Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman. First, Mordecai may have known of Haman's anti-Semitism either because of Haman's background as an Agagite or because Mordecai heard of Haman's animosity while serving in the court. Knowing Haman's hatred, Mordecai might have refused to bow to an enemy. Second, Haman may have viewed bowing to himself as recognition not just of his position in the royal court, but also as recognition that he possessed a semi-divine or divine status. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman may have been motivated by a refusal to support a claim to divinity on Haman's part.

As the only one in the court refusing to bow to Haman, Mordecai's refusal drew attention. Others in the court asked him why he refused to bow, thus disobeying a direct command of the king (Esth. 3:3). Each day they warned Mordecai and encouraged him to bow before Haman, but Mordecai resolutely refused. Finally, they informed Haman to see if Mordecai's disobedience would continue to be

tolerated. Mordecai had told them he was a Jew, perhaps supposing that fact would explain his disobedience. The court officials informed Haman of Mordecai's ethnic and religious background as well (3:4).

Mordecai knew others in the court would notice his refusal to bow to Haman, yet he remained faithful to God by refusing to give honor due only to God to someone who did not deserve such respect. Knowing the potential cost, Mordecai refused to compromise but maintained his loyalty to God. We need to demonstrate the same faithfulness to God and courage in obedience even when we know such faithfulness and obedience may prove costly.

**Verse 5:** Haman may already have noticed Mordecai's refusal to bow on some occasions but may not have observed Mordecai's consistent refusal to bow to him. Haman's fury upon being informed of Mordecai's action indicated Haman's arrogance and pride. Haman's promotion had gone to his head and made him believe he was better than everyone else but the king. Mordecai's refusal to give Haman the recognition and reverence Haman thought he deserved crushed Haman, and he responded with rage.

**Verse 6:** Haman's action further indicated his incredible arrogance and pride. Punishing Mordecai would not be enough to compensate for the insult against Haman. Knowing Mordecai was a Jew, Haman decided to kill every Jew in the Persian Empire. This chief official believed only ethnic, religious cleansing could atone for Mordecai's sin against him.

Haman used the casting of lots to determine the day and the month on which the Jews would be slaughtered. The Hebrew word *pur* is based on a similar-sounding Babylonian word with a primary meaning of "lot" and a secondary meaning of "fate." Persians used pebbles or broken stones for casting lots. Persian astrologers typically began a new year by casting lots to determine opportune days for specific events. Haman used the casting of lots at the new year to determine the fate of the Jews and to satisfy his anger. Ahasuerus's 12th year would have occurred 5 years after Esther became queen. The first month, Nisan, referred to mid-March through mid-April. The casting of lots determined the slaughter would occur in Adar, the 12th month, mid-February through mid-March. Thus Ha-

man would have a year to plan the slaughter (3:7).

Having determined the date, Haman moved to secure the king's approval. Without identifying the Jews, he cleverly mixed truth with lies and painted the unnamed group as a threat to Ahasuerus's empire. The Jews were scattered throughout the empire and their laws marked them as different, causing some to be suspicious (see Dan. 6:5), but they did not defy the king's laws. The Jews had been loyal subjects and Mordecai had even saved Ahasuerus's life, but Haman knew his charges would strike fear in the king. Ahasuerus had previously crushed rebellions in Egypt and Babylonia and was in no mood to tolerate a potentially rebellious people living in pockets throughout his kingdom (Esth. 3:8).

To ensure the king's support Haman offered a bribe of 375 tons of silver, an incredible amount both by Persian and contemporary standards. Perhaps Haman believed he could use the plunder from the Jews to pay the amount (see 3:13). He so wanted the destruction of the Jews, he was willing to give generously to ensure their annihilation (3:9).

Haman's accusation and bribe worked as planned. Since Ahasuerus trusted Haman and feared revolt, he gave Haman the royal signet ring and granted him complete authority to act. Ahasuerus's words regarding the money may have been a polite way of accepting the bribe or a means of empowering Haman to draw on the royal treasury to carry out his plan. Ahasuerus, acting out of fear and desiring to preserve his power, condemned an entire, unidentified people to death (3:10-11).

Haman immediately set the royal scribes to work drafting copies of the order in every script and language used in the empire. Copies would go to the satraps who governed larger areas, the governors who supervised smaller areas, and the ethnic and tribal leaders who represented each ethnic group in each area. Although the Persians possessed a good communication system, several months might pass before outlying areas received the order, but no area would be forgotten (3:12).

The date when the scribes began to copy and send the order carried special significance. First, Persians believed the number 13 to be unlucky. Perhaps Haman believed

the 13th day appropriate since the order was intended to bring bad luck and death to the Jews. Second, the 13th day of the 1st month was the day before the beginning of Passover. As the Jews prepared to celebrate God's deliverance of their ancestors from Egyptian slavery, the scribes were writing a decree ordering the Jews' destruction.

The order aimed for the complete annihilation of the Jews. Neither men nor women, young nor old among the Jews would escape. After destroying the Jews, the Persians would seize their possessions as an army would plunder an enemy city or nation. The slaughter would occur on the 13th day of the 12th month. The Persians had almost a year to eye greedily the Jews' possessions, and the Jews had the same period to grieve and fear their deaths (3:13).

As couriers left to carry the order to all parts of the empire, Ahasuerus and Haman sat down to a fine meal. Ahasuerus, oblivious to the injustice of the order, believed the decree would protect him and his rule. Haman rejoiced because he believed the slaughter of the Jews would finally atone for Mordecai's insult. Meanwhile, confusion gripped the inhabitants of Susa as they pondered the reason for the decree and began to suspect the loyalty of some of their fellow workers (3:14-15).

Haman turned his anger at a subordinate's failure to bow to him into a justification for genocide. Ahasuerus, who could have requested further information and investigated Haman's charges, accepted Haman's word and doomed an ethnic group to annihilation. Such actions have not been confined to the time of Ahasuerus. Throughout history pride and hatred have led to massive slaughters of ethnic groups, and the Jews have suffered more than most peoples, a recent example being the Holocaust during World War II. We do not need to turn anger over the action of specific individuals into a desire to slaughter an entire group. While seeking justice, we need to act in ways that do not destroy innocent persons or bring greater condemnation to ourselves.

#### **MORDECAI'S PLEA (ESTH. 4:1-9)**

Upon learning of Ahasuerus's decree instigated by Haman, Mordecai reacted with the typical expressions of great mourning and grief (4:1). Tearing one's clothes, wearing sackcloth (a coarse material made from goat or camel hair) rather than normal clothing, and placing ashes on one's

head all signified intense mourning. The loss of a loved one (Gen. 37:34), the loss of a city (Ezek. 27:30-32), or the loss of one's honor and purity (2 Sam. 13:19) could lead to such displays of grief.

Mordecai walked into the middle of Susa and began to cry out loudly and bitterly. Some Bible students suggest Mordecai intended his public actions as a protest against the king's unjust decree. Most Bible students, however, believe Mordecai responded with actions appropriate to the grief he felt at the planned annihilation of his people. By making his mourning public, Mordecai identified himself to everyone as a Jew, a victim of the coming massacre. Most who worked with him already knew his ethnic, religious background (Esth. 3:4). Any who did not, now knew and could put a face to the king's decree against the Jews.

As long as people remain faceless to us, we often delay in providing assistance or protesting unjust treatment they receive. When someone we know faces a threat, we more willingly and quickly respond.

Even in his grief, Mordecai obeyed Persian law. Persian law prohibited anyone wearing sackcloth from entering the King's Gate and thus upsetting the king. Mordecai walked to the King's Gate but stopped there (4:2).

If his intent had been to protest the king's decree, he might have passed through the King's Gate and demanded to see the king. Haman had told the king he wanted to destroy a group who defied the king's laws. By obeying Persian law, Mordecai proved Haman's charge to be a lie. As Jews throughout the empire learned of the decree, they joined in Mordecai's response (4:3). Their doom seemed sealed.

As queen, Esther had a number of attendants. When they saw Mordecai's public demonstration of mourning, they notified Esther. Apparently the attendants knew Esther had ties to Mordecai although they may not have known she was Jewish as well. Unaware of the decree, Esther had no idea what had brought such grief to her adoptive father. She sent clothes to Mordecai, but he refused the clothing and continued his mourning (4:4).

**Verse 5:** Esther singled out Hathach and sent him to ask

Mordecai what he was doing and why. Esther loved her adoptive father and wanted to help. Probably she thought some personal matter troubled Mordecai. She would soon discover that a far greater threat caused Mordecai's mourning.

Esther's love for Mordecai led her to send a trusted servant so she could understand the reason for Mordecai's behavior. Hathach met with Mordecai in front of the King's Gate. Mordecai told Hathach about the king's decree to slaughter the Jews. Mordecai knew not only about the decree but also about Haman's plotting and the exact amount of the bribe Haman had offered Ahasuerus (4:6-7).

**Verse 8:** Mordecai not only told Hathach about the decree, he gave Hathach a copy of it. Knowing Esther's concern for him, Mordecai wanted her to be fully informed of the threat against them and their people. Esther could listen to Hathach's report and read for herself her husband's decree.

Mordecai provided Esther a copy of the decree for more than informational purposes. He asked Hathach to explain the situation to Esther and then instruct her to approach the king and plead with him to save her people.

Prior to this time Mordecai had instructed Esther to keep her Jewish identity a secret (2:10,20). At this point, however, he asked her to reveal her ethnic, religious background to the king and ask him to save her and her people. Such an act would require great courage. Mordecai hoped the complete information regarding the decree combined with Esther's love for Mordecai, her people, and God would give her the courage to act.

**Verse 9:** Hathach returned to Esther, reported Mordecai's words, gave her the copy of the decree, and passed on Mordecai's instructions to her. Esther had received complete information and a call to act. She could make an informed and courageous response.

Esther wanted to know the reason for Mordecai's actions, and Mordecai wanted her to know everything possible about Ahasuerus's decree. Knowing the facts would provide Esther with the understanding she needed regarding the threat and her need to act. We also need to gather information in order to render more effective service to

God. As international missionaries learn about the culture of the people to whom they are sent and learn to speak their languages, so we need to learn about those to whom we minister. Understanding helps us match our God-given gifts to specific areas of ministry and serve God with love and humility.

#### **ESTHER'S RESOLVE (ESTH. 4:10-17)**

**Verse 10:** Both Esther and Mordecai placed great trust in Hathach, and he did not disappoint them. He faithfully delivered their messages and, by so doing, performed a great service.

**Verse 11:** According to Persian law, if an individual approached the king without the king having summoned the person, the individual faced the death penalty. The king did not tolerate interruptions; although, in rare instances, the king might forgive an intrusion, extend his golden scepter, and welcome the individual into his presence. The law applied to all, even the queen.

Mordecai knew Persian law, but he did not know what Esther next told him. Esther stated Ahasuerus had not summoned her for a period of 30 days. Mordecai may have assumed Esther had daily access to the king. He needed to be informed of the true situation. The king's failure to summon Esther might indicate his displeasure with her. If she entered the king's presence, he might well have her executed before she had an opportunity to state her reason for coming to him.

**Verse 12:** Hathach delivered Esther's response to Mordecai. The three individuals took a great chance because some individuals in the royal court might have noticed the conversations and reported to Haman, who certainly would have been interested in any contact between Mordecai and the queen.

**Verse 13:** Mordecai warned Esther the palace would not provide refuge from the coming slaughter. He recognized the danger Esther faced if she approached the king without being summoned, but he wanted her to understand that not approaching the king constituted a greater danger.

**Verse 14:** Mordecai further stated that if Esther failed to act, salvation would come from another place. How that

might happen, Mordecai did not know, but he believed God would act.

The most well-known quotation from the book is Mordecai's statement to Esther: "Who knows, perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this." Mordecai believed Esther's selection as queen came not just as a result of her great beauty, dignity, and respect for the king's position and authority. Mordecai believed God had given Esther the gifts and opportunity to become queen so she could act to protect her people.

Being queen provided Esther an influence available to no other Jew in the empire. Mordecai encouraged Esther to realize her God-given opportunity and responsibility and fulfill God's purpose.

Power, position, and influence are not gifts to be squandered for our own benefit. When God places us in any position of leadership, we need to allow God to direct us for the benefit of others. Only God can bring in His kingdom, but we can work with Him in caring for and encouraging others.

Mordecai had already seen God working in a wonderful way by raising Esther to be queen. Yet Mordecai also knew Esther had worked with God in becoming queen. She had obeyed Hegai's instructions and followed his advice. She had presented herself to Ahasuerus in a dignified, respectful manner. Mordecai told Esther she needed to work with God again. Like Esther, we all have been blessed by God as He has worked in our lives. He has gifted each of us with unique abilities and personalities so He can work through us to bless the lives of others and accomplish His purpose. Like Esther, we need to have the faith, courage, and love to serve God.

**Verse 15:** As a woman of faith Esther must have occasionally wondered why she had become queen. She agreed with Mordecai that her position in the royal court provided her an opportunity no other Jew had to act and save her people. She quickly responded to Mordecai.

**Verse 16:** Esther instructed Mordecai to have every Jew in the city of Susa join her in a three-day fast. Since learning of the king's order, the Jews had been fasting, but Esther called them to a more intense fast. Most fasts only lasted

during the day, but Esther commanded an absolute three-day fast in which the Jews would fast day and night, neither eating nor drinking.

Esther's instruction to fast for her (Esth. 4:16) implied the Jews would pray for her as well. Esther intended the fast as a time to engage in earnest prayer, seeking God's help as she prepared to enter Ahasuerus's presence.

Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan. 3:16-18), Esther knew she might die. She asked the Jews of Susa to lift her up in their prayers, asking God to prepare the way for her so she could accomplish His purpose.

In the past Esther had dutifully obeyed Mordecai, her adoptive father. In this time of emergency she recognized the truth of his words and challenge to her and again obeyed. Mordecai then obeyed Esther's instructions to call the Jews to fasting and prayer (Esth. 4:17).

Esther willingly decided to follow God despite the risk. Yet, she did not take a foolish risk. She did not leave immediately and barge in on the king. She gathered information, listened to the advice of Mordecai, considered the need to act and the risk involved, and asked the Jews of Susa to pray with her as she prepared to approach Ahasuerus. Sometimes following God means we also accept risks, but moving too quickly ahead without gathering information, consulting spiritual advisors, and engaging in intense prayer may indicate not faith but foolishness. God calls us to follow Him. By maintaining a close, personal relationship with God, we can know the way He leads us, prepare ourselves to go, and serve Him.

On the third day of Esther's and the Jews' fast, Esther [ESS tuhr] dressed in her royal garments and stood in view of Ahasuerus [uh haz yoo HER uhs]. When Ahasuerus saw Esther, he extended the golden scepter, thereby welcoming her into his presence. Ahasuerus asked Esther why she had come. Esther invited Ahasuerus to a banquet that day and asked him to bring Haman [HAY muhn] as well. At the banquet, Ahasuerus again asked Esther her purpose in coming to see him. Esther told Ahasuerus that if he approved of her and would grant her request, she would like him and Haman to come to another banquet the next day. Then she would reveal her request (Esth. 5:1-8).

Haman left the banquet feeling on top of the world, but as he passed Mordecai [MAWR duh kigh] on his way home, Mordecai refused to bow or display any fear. Arriving home, Haman called his wife and friends together, listed his wealth and accomplishments, and told them about the special banquet to which the queen had invited him. His wife and friends suggested he build a gallows and ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai. Haman immediately had workers construct the gallows (5:9-14).

That night Ahasuerus could not sleep and asked his attendants to read from the record of events in the royal court. The attendants read about Mordecai's foiling of an assassination plot, and the king realized he had failed to honor Mordecai. Haman had just arrived at the court, and Ahasuerus asked him what should be done to honor a man who had provided exceptional service to the king. Thinking the king was referring to him, Haman described what he would like done. Ahasuerus instructed Haman to immediately honor Mordecai in exactly that manner. After honoring Mordecai, Haman hurried home with his head covered in shame. His wife and friends predicted Haman would soon fall before Mordecai (6:1-14).

At the end of the second banquet, Esther revealed Haman's treachery. As Ahasuerus angrily paced in the garden, while considering how to punish Haman, Haman fell on the couch where Esther reclined and pleaded for his life. When Ahasuerus entered, he accused Haman of trying to molest Esther. Harbona [hahr BOH nuh], a royal eunuch, suggested hanging Haman on his own gallows, and Ahasuerus followed his advice (7:1-10).

### **ESTHER APPROACHED THE KING (ESTH. 5:1-8)**

**Verse 1:** On the third day of the fast Esther and the Jews of Susa had been observing, Esther put on her royal robes and prepared to approach Ahasuerus. She followed proper court etiquette by dressing appropriately. Her royal robes must have accented her God-given beauty. Esther entered the inner courtyard of the palace, where she stopped and stood in sight of Ahasuerus sitting on his throne. Esther trusted God to cause Ahasuerus to accept her intrusion.

Moses returned to Pharaoh's court after a 40-year absence to deliver Israel from Egyptian slavery. Esther returned to Ahasuerus's presence after a 30-day absence to deliver the Jews from Haman's decree. Passover celebrated God's

work through Moses, and Esther entered Ahasuerus's presence during Passover season (see p. 114). God used Esther as a Moses for her time.

**Verse 2:** When Ahasuerus noticed Esther's presence, she won his favor even as she had when he first saw her (Esth. 2:16-17). He extended the golden scepter toward her, thereby indicating his delight at seeing her and inviting her to approach. Perhaps after 30 days of not seeing Esther, her beauty overwhelmed him as it had the first time they met. Following court etiquette, Esther approached the king and touched the tip of the golden scepter. The king's acceptance of her meant she had overcome the first obstacle to saving her people.

**Verse 3:** Since Esther had come to Ahasuerus without being summoned and had jeopardized her life, he knew she wanted more than to pay a social call. Even though he had no idea regarding the reason for her visit, he knew it must be serious. Ahasuerus asked Esther what she wanted and stated he would give her even to half the kingdom, words reflecting the formal language of the royal court. His offer indicated he welcomed Esther and would seek to help in any way he could.

Esther had promised Mordecai she would approach the king despite the risk (4:16). Esther kept her promise. She stepped out on faith and trusted God to preserve her life so she could save her people. Like Esther, we need to step out on faith when God calls us to do so, whether God's call is to defend others or to serve in another manner. Though our personal safety is not guaranteed, God will work through our obedience to accomplish His purposes.

In the Persian Empire banquets served as acceptable occasions for negotiating and discussing important matters. Perhaps not wanting to make her plea before court officials and guards in Ahasuerus's presence, Esther invited Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet. Apparently Esther had been confident the king would welcome her because she had already prepared the banquet. After Esther left, Ahasuerus immediately commanded his servants to bring Haman, and the two of them honored Esther's request (5:4-5).

Once Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman had eaten the meal and wine was served, the appropriate time had come for

discussing important matters. Ahasuerus again stated his favorable attitude toward Esther and again inquired about the nature of her true concern (5:6).

Esther politely answered Ahasuerus and asked him and Haman to come to another banquet the next day when she would reveal her true concern (5:7-8). Some Bible students wonder why Esther did not ask Ahasuerus for his help at the first banquet because Ahasuerus's mood might change at any time, and Esther might lose his favor. Esther followed Near Eastern custom, preparing to present her case and being content to wait for what she sensed was the precise moment to speak. Esther waited until she felt God's timing was right to present her case.

Serving God courageously does not mean acting on impulse and assuming God will provide last-minute directions. We need to prepare as well as possible so we can serve God effectively in every situation. Esther possessed a deep faith in God that, combined with her planning and courage, enabled her to defend and save her people.

#### **HAMAN PLOTTED MORDECAI'S DEATH (ESTH. 5:9-14)**

Haman left the banquet feeling on top of the world, but as he journeyed home he passed Mordecai. Mordecai had ended the three-day fast, put on his normal clothing, and come back to his place of service at the King's Gate. As Haman passed by, Mordecai not only refused to bow before him, he refused to indicate any fear of Haman or grief concerning Haman's decree. Esther's promise to act combined with Mordecai's faith in God had removed fear from him. Haman became enraged (5:9).

When Haman arrived home, he sent for his wife Zeresh and friends to tell them about his day. He pointed out his great wealth, his large number of sons, and his high position in the royal court. He then told them about being invited by Queen Esther to a private banquet with her and the king. Furthermore, he told them he had been invited by the queen the next day as well. Life could not be better and he could not be greater, except for one gnawing problem—Mordecai. Mordecai's very presence as a living person on earth angered Haman. His pride would not allow him to tolerate Mordecai and would lead to his disastrous fall (5:10-13).

Haman's wife and friends fed his ego. They suggested

he could eliminate Mordecai by building a 75-foot-high gallows and asking Ahasuerus for permission to hang Mordecai on it. The gallows probably constituted a sharpened pole upon which Mordecai's dead body would be impaled for all to see. When people saw the dead Mordecai, they would recognize Haman's great power. Since Haman and Ahasuerus enjoyed such a close relationship, surely the king would grant Haman's request. Haman loved the idea and immediately ordered the construction of the gallows (5:14).

Haman had an unrealistic view of himself and life. Arrogantly believing in his own greatness, he thought his life should be great as well. Everything should come to him, and everyone should acknowledge and respect him. The refusal of one person to bow so angered him, he conspired to annihilate a large group of people.

Life did not center on Haman nor does life center on us. Life centers on God. We have no reason to develop inflated views of ourselves nor do we have any reason to expect life will always go the way we want it. God calls us to serve Him and work with Him in fulfilling His purposes, not our selfish dreams. Working with God we recognize the worth of all people and experience true life.

#### **THE KING HONORED MORDECAI (ESTH. 6:1-14)**

Following the first banquet with Esther and Haman, Ahasuerus could not sleep. His sleeplessness set in motion a chain of events leading to Haman's destruction. The events happened not as coincidences but as demonstrations of God's active involvement to accomplish His purposes.

Unable to sleep, Ahasuerus commanded his personal attendants to bring the royal records that chronicled the events of his reign and read from a section of the records. Undoubtedly Ahasuerus enjoyed hearing of his great deeds. They read the account of Mordecai saving the king's life by informing him of an assassination plot. After the account had been read, the king asked how Mordecai had been rewarded. The attendants replied that Mordecai had received no reward. Persian rulers typically rewarded those who had performed valuable service to them by giving them land, exemption from taxation, or monetary gifts. By recognizing individuals, kings could demonstrate their generosity and bring greater honor to themselves. Ahasu-

er's failure to honor Mordecai constituted an injustice for Mordecai and a bad reflection on the king (6:1-3).

Ahasuerus immediately decided to remedy the injustice and asked which of his advisors was present. Haman had arrived at the court early because he hoped to get an early audience with Ahasuerus and receive permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows being built. Ahasuerus's attendants informed the king of Haman's presence, and the king immediately sent for him (6:4-5).

Ahasuerus asked Haman what the king should do to honor someone special. As Haman had accused a group of people of treachery without identifying them, so Ahasuerus did not tell Haman whom he planned to honor. Haman's arrogance naturally led him to think Ahasuerus planned to honor him. After all he served as the king's chief official and had only the day before attended a banquet with just the king and the queen. Ahasuerus could certainly not think more highly of anyone else in the kingdom (6:6).

Convinced Ahasuerus planned to honor him, Haman began to list everything he would want done to him so all could clearly see his power and influence and how greatly the king respected him. Haman suggested the king allow the honored individual to wear one of his robes. Wearing a robe the king had worn constituted a great honor, and some believed it actually conveyed royal power to the wearer. Haman then suggested the king allow the honored individual to ride one of the horses the king had ridden. The horse would wear a royal insignia indicating its status as one of the king's horses. Finally, Haman suggested one of the king's highest officials lead the horse around the city square and proclaim the king's special honoring of the individual (6:7-9). Clearly Haman harbored a deep desire to be king. Haman had described the perfect way he wanted to be honored.

Ahasuerus's next words immediately transformed Haman's dreams of honor into nightmares of horror and humiliation. Ahasuerus instructed Haman to honor Mordecai exactly as Haman had suggested. In naming Mordecai, Ahasuerus specifically identified him as a Jew (6:10). Haman hated Mordecai for never bowing to him and arranged to have Mordecai and every other Jew killed although he had concealed his true motive from the king. Haman had ordered the building of a gallows on which to hang Mor-

decai and had arrived early at the palace specifically to secure Ahasuerus's permission to kill Mordecai. However, Ahasuerus forced him to honor his mortal enemy.

Haman reluctantly honored Mordecai in every way he had suggested. Ahasuerus probably had no idea of the hatred Haman felt toward Mordecai, but many of the people did. As they watched Haman lead the king's horse on which Mordecai sat dressed in the king's robe and proclaim the king's pleasure with Mordecai, they could not believe what they were seeing. The powerful court official who openly hated Mordecai was paying public honor to him. Haman felt completely humiliated (6:11).

Haman had believed he was the one in whom the king delighted. Having to speak words honoring Mordecai brought him shame and grief. He traveled home with his head covered. In contrast, Mordecai returned to his station unfazed by the event. He did not let the honor he received go to his head. For Mordecai, nothing really had changed. His people and he still faced destruction. He still waited to see how God would intervene (6:12).

When Haman returned home, he told his wife and his friends what had occurred. After hearing about his invitation to the private banquet the day before, they had encouraged him to ask that Mordecai be hanged. After hearing of Haman's honoring Mordecai, they offered discouraging words. They told Haman that if Mordecai was Jewish, Haman could not possibly overcome him. Centuries before when Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel as the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan, Balaam could only bless Israel as God instructed him (Num. 22:1-24:25) and proclaim destruction for Amalek (Num. 24:20). As the God of Israel had defeated Amalek and its king Agag in the past (see Ex. 17:8-16; 1 Sam. 15:1-35), so God would defeat Haman the Agagite (Esth. 3:1). Haman had begun his fall, and his defeat was certain (6:13).

While Haman's wife and friends discussed the turn of events with him, Ahasuerus's eunuchs arrived and rushed Haman to the banquet with the king and Esther (6:14). Haman must have trembled in fear the entire way to the palace. He must have wondered what the next few hours would bring.

Haman thought he controlled events. He believed he had

engineered the destruction of Mordecai and the Jews. However, Haman dramatically discovered God controls events and works them toward accomplishing His purposes. We need to recognize God's sovereignty and our limitations. We need to serve with humility, following God and treating all persons with respect.

#### **THE KING EXECUTED HAMAN (ESTH. 7:1-10)**

**Verse 1:** Perhaps by the time Haman arrived at the banquet, he had regained his composure. Soon, however, his past deeds would catch up with him.

**Verse 2:** When Ahasuerus, Esther, and Haman had eaten their meal and the king was drinking wine, Ahasuerus asked Esther what she wanted. By agreeing to attend the banquet, Ahasuerus had agreed to grant Esther's request (see 5:8), but he still had no idea what she desired. Perhaps he expected her to ask for material possessions. He was ready to grant whatever she asked and indicated his favorable disposition toward her by again using the formal language of the royal court.

**Verse 3:** Esther made her request more personal by using the second person possessive pronoun *your* and the first person possessive pronoun *my* in addition to referring to him in the third person as the king. While Esther was a subject of the king, she also enjoyed a personal relationship with him as his wife. Her reminder of their relationship would make her revelation to the king all the more horrifying to him.

Esther then asked Ahasuerus to spare her life and the lives of her people. Although Esther stated two separate requests, both comprised one plea. She identified herself as part of a group marked for destruction.

**Verse 4:** Esther told Ahasuerus she and her people had been sold out. The phrase *sold out* sometimes indicated being handed over or betrayed and implied treachery. Esther then used words that call to mind Haman's decree (see 3:13), as she informed Ahasuerus that she and her people had been marked for destruction, death, and extermination.

Ahasuerus had given his royal signet ring to Haman to authorize the slaughter. Since he had not inquired regarding the identity of the marked group, he may have forgotten

about the decree. If he remembered it, he certainly had no idea the order threatened Esther.

Ahasuerus's failure to gather information regarding the identity of the people Haman wanted to slaughter and investigate the charges placed guilt on him, but Esther carefully worded her statement to excuse the king. By using the passive voice (*have been sold*), she placed the blame on someone other than Ahasuerus.

Esther then stated that if she and her people had been simply marked to be sold as slaves, she would never have bothered the king. As slaves Esther and her people could still have served the king, but if she and her people were exterminated, the king would suffer great loss. The bribe of 375 tons of silver that Haman had offered the king (3:9) seemed an enormous sum, but the loss of a substantial group of people either as workers or taxpayers would cost the king a greater sum over time.

Ahasuerus may have forgotten the decree, but Haman had not. We can only imagine the thoughts racing through Haman's mind as Esther presented her request and referred to the decree he had written. Haman had never dreamed Esther was a Jew! He had not imagined his death decree would mark the queen for slaughter!

**Verse 5:** Horrified, Ahasuerus asked the identity of the one who dared to jeopardize the life of his queen. Esther rested in Ahasuerus's favor. Anyone who dared to kill her would face his wrath.

**Verse 6:** Esther identified Haman as the enemy. She realized she presented Ahasuerus with a difficult choice. The king could believe her, his beautiful, favored queen, or Haman, his trusted advisor. Ahasuerus remembered Haman's charges against an unidentified people and his request to destroy them. He had not realized then that the order placed his queen in danger.

Like Mordecai, Esther had helped him foil an enemy's plot. Complete terror gripped Haman as he stood before Ahasuerus and Esther. His evil had been exposed and his fate seemed certain.

Esther provided Ahasuerus not just with Haman's name but also with all the information Ahasuerus needed to

understand the situation and act. When we seek to defend individuals or groups, we also need to do the required research and then plan how to present the information to those who can help. By speaking the truth clearly and compassionately, we can work with God in helping those in authority to help people in need.

Ahasuerus typically turned to his advisors for advice, but Haman, his most trusted advisor, had proven to be his enemy. Not knowing what to do and confused by the turn of events, Ahasuerus left the room where he had dined with Esther and Haman and retreated to the palace garden to think and calm down. Haman, knowing he faced the wrath of Ahasuerus, remained behind to plead with Esther to spare his life (7:7).

As Esther reclined on her couch, Haman fell down on the couch pleading for his life. He probably grabbed her feet and kissed them. Haman had first become angry when the Jew Mordecai refused to bow before him (3:5). Yet Haman bowed before the Jew Esther in hopes of escaping death (7:8). Ahasuerus then reentered the room and accused Haman of assaulting his wife. In the ancient world, kings viewed a man who made sexual advances to the queen as traitors who were trying to steal the throne (see 2 Sam. 16:21-22). Haman did not intend a physical or sexual assault, but Ahasuerus, already furious with him, saw Haman's action as the last straw.

As soon as Ahasuerus had spoken, "Haman's face was covered" (Esth. 7:8). Based on Greek and Roman texts some Bible students suggest a condemned criminal's face was covered, but no evidence exists that Persians practiced the custom. Haman had earlier covered his own head in shame when he came home after being forced to honor Mordecai (6:12). Perhaps Haman again covered his head or perhaps the words mark him as guilty.

**Verse 9:** Harbona, one of Ahasuerus's royal eunuchs (1:10), suggested a fitting punishment for Haman and provided another reason he deserved the death penalty. Harbona noted the gallows on which Haman planned to hang Mordecai who had saved the king. Ahasuerus immediately condemned Haman to be hung on the gallows he had built.

**Verse 10:** Biblical proverbs support what happened to Ha-

man. Those who plan the destruction of others often fall prey to their own plans (Prov. 26:27). The wicked will fail and the righteous will witness their fall (29:16). Haman's arrogance and pride caused his downfall (16:18).

Esther risked her life to save her people. While God preserved the lives of Esther and Mordecai, other believers throughout history have died attempting to defend others. While God does not guarantee our physical safety, He guarantees His presence with us to give us courage, wisdom, and compassion. Believers also have the certainty of life with Him after death. Acting may bring only partial success, but not acting brings total failure. We need to do all we can to defend helpless and vulnerable people, as we trust God to use us to help them.

Ahasuerus [uh haz yoo EHR uhs] gave Esther [ESS tuhr] Haman's [HAY muhns] estate and promoted Mordecai [MAWR duh kigh] to Haman's former position. Since Haman's decree remained in effect, Esther begged Ahasuerus to revoke Haman's order. Ahasuerus reminded Esther a decree written and sealed with the king's signet ring could not be revoked, but he empowered Esther to write what she wanted to save the Jews and affix his seal to it. Mordecai wrote a decree allowing Jews to assemble and defend themselves against their enemies on the exact day, the 13th of Adar [AY dahr], Haman had determined to annihilate the Jews. Mordecai sent the decree throughout the Persian Empire causing the Jews and others to rejoice (Esth. 8:1-17).

When the 13th day of Adar arrived, the Jews destroyed their enemies, including Haman's 10 sons, but did not keep their enemies' possessions for themselves. When Ahasuerus received the news of the loss in Susa, he asked what else Esther desired. Esther asked for an additional day for the Jews in Susa to deal with their remaining enemies. Ahasuerus granted her request. Mordecai wrote a summary of all the events that had occurred and sent a copy to all the Jews so they would understand what God had done and why they needed to celebrate Purim. Esther wrote and sent a second letter confirming Mordecai's words (9:1-32).

Ahasuerus imposed a tax across his vast empire. Persian records detailed his accomplishments and those of Mordecai. Mordecai served Persia as second only to

Ahasuerus and worked tirelessly for the welfare of the Jews (10:1-3).

### **KING AHASUERUS'S SECOND EDICT (ESTH. 8:1-17)**

Typically in the Persian Empire, the state seized the estate of a traitor or condemned criminal. Haman must have possessed great riches, so his estate would have been quite valuable. His estate probably included his property, possessions, servants, and perhaps even his family. In a generous gesture Ahasuerus gave Haman's estate to his beloved queen (8:1). The intended victim inherited the wealth of the criminal.

After Ahasuerus had dealt with the traitor, he turned to honor the one who had earlier saved his life and who Ahasuerus learned served as Esther's guardian. Ahasuerus elevated Mordecai to Haman's former position and gave Mordecai the signet ring Haman had worn. The ring indicated power and trust. Haman's lust for power had rendered him untrustworthy. Knowing Mordecai's character, Ahasuerus knew he could trust him with power and responsibility. Esther then placed Mordecai in charge of Haman's estate (8:2). Everything Haman had possessed passed to Mordecai.

**Verse 3:** While Ahasuerus had executed the Jews' enemy Haman and rewarded Esther and Mordecai, Haman's decree remained in effect. The Jews still faced annihilation. Saving Esther had been Ahasuerus's chief concern. He may have forgotten the threat still facing Esther's people, but Esther had not. She fell weeping at Ahasuerus's feet and begged him to revoke Haman's decree. She could not be content with her own deliverance when her people still faced death. Only when the Jews were out of danger would justice be served.

As Ahasuerus had before (see 5:2), he extended his royal scepter toward Esther, thus indicating his favor and allowing her to approach and make her request (8:4). Esther used great diplomacy in appealing to Ahasuerus's best interests and to his love for her. She suggested saving the Jews would both please the king and be a just action, something his subjects would respect. She also reminded her husband of his appreciation for her beauty and his love for her. In making her request, she used the term "documents" to refer to Haman's order rather than "law," because she knew a Persian law could not be revoked. In

addition, she blamed Haman alone for jeopardizing the Jews, absolving Ahasuerus (8:5).

**Verse 6:** Finally, Esther appealed to her identity as a Jew. While Ahasuerus had saved her and Mordecai, the annihilation of her people would destroy her. Esther asked Ahasuerus to demonstrate his love for her by acting to preserve her people.

**Verse 7:** Ahasuerus reminded Esther that he had already executed Haman for endangering her and given her Haman's estate. The king probably believed he had done enough, yet his response also indicated he was favorably disposed toward Esther. Having protected her and given her Haman's estate, he would allow her to act as she saw fit.

**Verse 8:** Ahasuerus gave Esther freedom to deal with the problem in any way she desired. Earlier Ahasuerus had offered his wife whatever she wanted, even half his kingdom (5:3,6). He authorized Esther and Mordecai to write whatever they wished to save their people and then seal it with the royal signet ring he had given Mordecai. The king's response far exceeded Esther's request. She hoped for a simple revoking of Haman's decree, but Ahasuerus gave her great authority in the matter. Whatever she ordered would be done; but he warned her that once written, a Persian law could not be revoked.

Approximately 70 days following the writing of Haman's decree (see 3:12), Mordecai summoned the royal scribes to write his decree. Mordecai intended to send the edict to every satrap, governor, and official in Persia's 127 provinces. As Haman had instructed the scribes to write his decree in every language (3:12), Mordecai ordered the same, emphasizing the use of the Jewish script and language for the copies sent to them. When the scribes had completed the copying, Mordecai sealed each document with the royal signet ring and sent the documents by couriers riding the king's fastest horses (8:9-10). Knowing Jews throughout the empire were mourning their fate and their enemies were counting the days until they could attack and plunder the Jews, Mordecai wanted the edict delivered as soon as possible to bring hope to the Jews and instill fear in their enemies.

**Verse 11:** Mordecai's decree gave Jews across the empire

the right to assemble and defend themselves from any enemy. Using the same words as those in Haman's decree (3:13), the Jews had permission to destroy, kill, and annihilate any enemy, including women and children, that attacked and take their enemies' possessions for themselves as spoils of war. Mordecai's decree, however, set limits to the Jews' actions. Mordecai's decree confined the Jews' right to defend themselves to one day, the 13th day of Adar, the exact day Haman had determined to exterminate the Jews (3:13). Mordecai nullified Haman's decree by empowering the Jews to defend themselves on the day Haman had chosen to annihilate them (8:12). Those who intended harm to the Jews would think twice before striking.

Esther and Mordecai sought a just solution within the Persian legal system. Mordecai carefully wrote an edict that would nullify Haman's and save the Jews. Neither Esther nor Mordecai used the law for personal, ethnic, or religious advantage. They strove to use the law to bring life rather than death. Christians in democratic societies have responsibility not only for obeying laws but also for doing what they can to influence just and equitable legislation. We need to support legislation that demonstrates God's care for all people.

Couriers delivered copies of the decree to every province of the empire (8:13-14). Everyone needed to know. The Jews needed to know so they could rejoice at God's deliverance and prepare to meet any threat. Non-Jews needed to know so they could abandon plans to destroy and loot. Mordecai left the palace clothed in garments appropriate to his new position. After receiving Haman's decree, the citizens of Susa had experienced confusion (3:15). Mordecai may well have been popular and Haman's decree may have upset many in Susa. Mordecai's promotion and the new decree brought joy. Throughout the empire Jews rejoiced in their deliverance. God had turned their mourning and fasting (see 4:3) into ecstatic joy! Mordecai's edict also made many non-Jewish individuals claim to be Jewish out of fear (8:15-17). They wanted to preserve their lives by joining with the favored Jews. While most of these people did not convert to Judaism, perhaps some eventually came to know the God of the Jews and followed Him in faith.

God worked to preserve His people by softening Ahasuerus's heart and allowing Mordecai to write a new edict

that permitted the Jews to defend themselves. National laws may not always protect us as believers, but God's presence remains with us in all circumstances and impels us to seek to protect others through just and equitable laws.

### **JEW'S VICTORIES AND CELEBRATION (ESTH. 9:1-32)**

**Verse 1:** Eleven months had passed since Haman's decree (3:12) and almost nine months since Mordecai composed and circulated his edict (8:9). The two conflicting edicts must have caused confusion and speculation throughout the empire as people waited to see what would happen. Those committed to slaughtering the Jews may have waited expectantly for the 13th day of Adar to enact Haman's decree (see 3:13). Instead, when the 13th of Adar arrived, the Jews overpowered their enemies. As God turned Balaam's planned cursing of Israel into a blessing (Deut. 23:5), so He turned a day of defeat into a day of victory for the Jews.

Throughout Esther's life, God had turned the tables. Haman desired honor (Esth. 3:5), but his enemy Mordecai received honor (6:11; 8:15-16). Haman plotted to kill Mordecai (5:14) but was executed and his body displayed on the very gallows he had constructed to hang Mordecai (7:10). In a final reversal, the Jews, marked for death, experienced victory and deliverance.

**Verse 2:** The Jews had ample time to prepare for the 13th of Adar. When the day came, they acted, legally assembling throughout the empire to attack their enemies (8:11). The phrase to attack translates the Hebrew phrase "to send a hand against." The phrase is used elsewhere in the Book of Esther to describe the eunuchs' plan to assassinate Ahasuerus (2:21; 6:2) and Haman's desire not just to do away with Mordecai but to destroy all the Jews (3:6). The phrase those who intended to harm them translates the Hebrew phrase "seekers of their evil," a phrase used to describe individuals who sought to destroy others (Ps. 71:13,24). Though Haman had died, the Jews faced additional enemies who desired to annihilate them. The statement not a single person could withstand them does not imply no one attacked the Jews, but rather no one could prevail against them. The Jews had received legal permission to deal with their enemies, and they had used their time wisely in preparation.

Throughout history believers have faced times of persecution with no legal recourse. At other times believers have enjoyed at least some legal protection. When legal protection exists, God helps believers take advantage of the available legitimate means to protect themselves and defeat their persecutors. We can rely on the Lord to help His people take advantage of legitimate means of defeating those who would harm them.

As the 13th of Adar approached, power in Persia clearly shifted from Haman and his followers to Mordecai and the Jews. Haman's edict promised royal troops to help in the slaughter of the Jews, but Mordecai's rise to Haman's position and his edict made royal help improbable. Mordecai had become a powerful person in Persia. As his fame and authority became known in the time leading up to the 13th of Adar, support for the Jews grew and royal officials became reluctant to enforce Haman's decree (Esth. 9:3-4).

On the 13th of Adar the Jews destroyed their enemies. Some groups, like professional soldiers loyal to Haman and individuals who shared Haman's hatred for the Jews and hoped to profit from the plunder, probably attacked the Jews. The Jews also conducted preemptive strikes against their enemies to defend themselves. The Jews knew the identity of their enemies because after Haman's decree, they had revealed themselves and prepared to kill the Jews in their areas. Their commitment to the destruction of the Jews would not diminish, and thus they provided a continuing threat. Mordecai's edict authorized the Jews to defend themselves against all who attacked them or sought to destroy them. The Jews acted legally to defend themselves by removing their enemies (9:5).

While most in Susa supported the Jews (8:15), some did not. The Jews killed 500 enemies in Susa, a significant group, but not a high percentage of the city's population. Among the 500 killed were Haman's 10 sons. They had lost their father and their inheritance. They would remain enemies of the Jews as long as they lived and continue their father's ways. With the death of Haman the Agagites [Agagites] sons, his line came to an end, and Saul's failure to destroy King Agag and the Amalekites was rectified (9:6-10a).

In war, the victor took the spoils. When the people of Israel entered Canaan and engaged in holy war, they were

commanded to kill the inhabitants, burn all that could be burned, and place gold and silver in the tabernacle treasury because God would fight for them and they were not to profit from God's victory. The Jews in Persia also recognized God brought them victory, and they refused to take the spoils that belonged to Him. The Jews fought for justice, not to enrich themselves (9:10b). Their action stands in direct contrast to that of Saul, who disobeyed the Lord by taking plunder from the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:17-23).

Ahasuerus learned the death toll in Susa and reported it to Esther. The king also prepared to give Esther whatever else she wanted (9:11-12).

Esther made two further requests of her husband. First, she asked permission to allow the Jews in Susa an extra day to deal with their remaining enemies. Second, Esther asked permission to hang the bodies of Haman's sons to indicate their humiliation and disgrace. Ahasuerus granted permission (9:13-15).

Outside Susa the Jews killed 75,000 enemies, a number that reflects God's great victory. As in Susa, the Jews throughout the empire did not seize the plunder. After their God-given victory, the Jews feasted and rejoiced on the 14th of Adar, celebrating the rest God had provided (9:16-17). Purim [PYOO rim] originated as a celebration of God's victory over the Jews' enemies. Since the Jews in Susa fought for two days, they celebrated on the 15th of Adar, while the Jews outside Susa rested and celebrated on the 14th of Adar. With Esther as queen, Mordecai as Ahasuerus's top official, and their enemies dead, the Jews could enjoy a peaceful time of rejoicing, feasting, and gift-giving (9:18-19). Giving gifts constitutes a wonderful way to celebrate a sacred event and share with others the generosity we have received from God.

**Verse 20:** Mordecai summarized the events from Haman's initial hatred of him and edict to destroy the Jews to Mordecai's edict and the Jews' victory over their enemies. Mordecai then sent copies of his summary to every Jewish community in the Persian Empire so all Jews would know what God had accomplished.

**Verse 21:** Mordecai's letter intended not just to inform the Jews regarding the events of the past year but also

to establish a permanent, annual celebration. Mordecai instructed Jews throughout the empire to celebrate both days in commemoration of the victory God had given.

**Verse 22:** Purim celebrated the great reversal God had accomplished. The Jews marked for destruction triumphed instead over their enemies. God turned sorrow and mourning into unrestrained joy and celebration. God had saved His people by delivering them from their enemies even in exile. To celebrate the Jews gave gifts to one another emphasizing their community as a people of faith.

Celebrations help us remember what God has done for us. Mordecai wanted the Jews of his generation and those to come to remember and celebrate God's goodness, so he instituted a permanent celebration. As believers we need to celebrate on a regular basis what God has done for us as individuals, in our local churches, and in His world. Regular celebrations help us retain a sharp and vivid memory of God's gracious acts.

The Jews made the 14th and 15th of Adar an annual religious celebration. The celebration received the name Purim from the Hebrew word *pur* based on the Babylonian word meaning "lot" (9:23-26a). Haman used the lot to determine when to annihilate the Jews. The Jews named the celebration Purim, the plural form of *pur*, as a reminder of how God had changed their fate and brought victory. The plural may refer to the two days of the celebration or to the two fates of the Jews; namely that Haman plotted death, but God decreed life.

The brief summary of events (9:24-26a) omits the role of Esther and Mordecai in saving the Jews. Instead, Ahasuerus became the hero who reversed Haman's plan and executed him.

The Jews of Mordecai's time and since have celebrated Purim in remembrance of God's victory in Esther's time (9:26b-32). Typically Purim occurs in March with the day before Purim being the Fast of Esther. On Purim Jews gather for the reading of the Book of Esther. The celebration includes feasting, joy, and gift-giving.

We all need opportunities to celebrate the goodness of life and God's blessings. As believers we can joyously celebrate God's provision of salvation at Christmas and

Easter, but we also need to find other ways to celebrate God's gracious acts in our own lives and churches.

### **MORDECAI'S VINDICATION (ESTH. 10:1-3)**

The end of the Book of Esther returns us to the beginning by emphasizing Ahasuerus's vast empire and wealth. The book began with the king demonstrating his greatness by giving lavish banquets (1:3-9; 2:18). The book ends with Ahasuerus maintaining his great wealth and power (10:1).

As Ahasuerus's second in command, Mordecai participated in his greatness and entered the historical records of the Persian Empire. Yet, Mordecai did not employ his power for selfish reasons. He used his position and influence to work for the good of the Jews (10:2-3). No doubt Esther did the same as queen. Through these two faithful individuals, God worked to deliver His people and bring them peace and security.

Mordecai's vindication indicates God's commitment to and involvement with His people. God continues to act in our world today. His activity has blessed and sustained us and given us hope and direction. Let us remember His works and celebrate.