

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 5

1 KINGS 14:21–16:34

JUDAH UNDER REHOBOAM (1 KINGS 14:21-31)

First Kings 14:21 resumes the record of Rehoboam's reign of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, that left off at 12:24. He had become king at age 41, twice the age of Solomon when he succeeded David. He reigned 17 years, whereas his father and grandfather reigned 40 years each. Judah re-gressed spiritually during Rehoboam.

Judah's most devastating evil, as that of Israel, was the practice of idolatry. The people set up shrines on the high hills and under spreading trees. These places had stones dedicated to various idols or Asherah poles dedicated to Asherah, a fertility goddess of Canaan. They even had male shrine prostitutes and engaged in all kinds of detestable worship practices. They practiced the same kinds of evil as the Canaanite nations that Israel largely had driven out of the land.

The divided kingdom was not strong militarily. After Rehoboam had been king five years, Shishak, king of Egypt, attacked Jerusalem. He took treasures from the temple and the palace, including the gold shields Solomon had made. Rehoboam later replaced them with bronze shields that his guards used whenever the king went to the temple.

Rehoboam and Jeroboam continually were at war. When Rehoboam died, they buried him in the City of David, where they had buried Solomon and David. Abijah his son succeeded him as king. Obviously, this Abijah was not the Abijah who was Jeroboam's son.

Both Rehoboam and Jeroboam were wise enough to seek advice. Unfortunately, both were foolish enough to follow advice without evaluating it in light of God's Word and ways. Their example warns us always to follow advice that is in harmony with God's truth and purposes.

ABIJAH, KING OF JUDAH (15:1-8)

After King Rehoboam's death, his son Abijah reigned for three years. Abijah's mother was "Maacah [MAY uh kuh] daughter of Abishalom [uh BISH uh luhm]" (15:2). "Abishalom" is another spelling of the name "Absalom," David's

son who tried to seize his father's kingdom. Second Chronicles 13:2 describes Maacah as "a daughter of Uriel of Gibeah." Some Bible students have concluded she actually was a granddaughter of Absalom through his daughter, Tamar, who was married to Uriel.

Describing a later descendant as "a son of" or "a daughter of" a particular ancestor, especially one readily recognized, was a common practice. War existed between Abijah and Jeroboam throughout Abijah's reign. Second Chronicles 13:1-22 reports a battle between 400 thousand troops under Abijah and 800 thousand troops under Jeroboam. Abijah and his men defeated Jeroboam because the Judeans "cried out to the Lord" (2 Chron. 13:14). "The men of Judah were victorious because they relied on the Lord, the God of their fathers" (13:18).

However, Abijah did not devote his heart fully to the Lord. He might have started well, but he followed his father Rehoboam's practices and committed all the sins his father had committed. Nevertheless, for David's sake the Lord did not take the tribe of Judah away from Rehoboam or Abijah. God kept His promise to have a "lamp" (meaning a descendant of David; see 1 Kings 11:36) in Jerusalem because of David's faithfulness. When Abijah died, his son Asa succeeded him as king.

ASA, KING OF JUDAH (15:9-24)

Verse 9: Under Jeroboam, the Northern Kingdom had experienced 20 years of golden-calf worship at Bethel and Dan. They sacrificed at the shrines on high places, followed priests who were not descendants of Aaron, observed festivals at times not dictated by Mosaic law, and worshiped idols. Jeroboam did more evil than all who lived before him and led the people of Israel to sin by promoting worship of the golden calves (1 Kings 14:9,16). The Northern Kingdom had a serious sin problem.

Asa was the third king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. His name meant "doctor" or "healing." He tried to "heal" Judah of the illness of idolatry. Under Asa's father Abijah (15:3), his grandfather Rehoboam (14:21-24), and his great-grandfather Solomon (11:4-6), Judah had sinned by practicing idolatry. They worshiped at the high places, before sacred stones, and at Asherah poles on the high hills. The Southern Kingdom also had a serious sin problem.

Verse 10: King Asa's 41 years as king of Judah was simultaneous with parts or all of the reigns of eight kings of Israel, all of whom did evil in God's sight. Asa's grandmother was Maacah, Abijah's mother. She evidently had strongly influenced Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:21) and still had an important influence on the palace. She was the

"QUEEN MOTHER" (1 KINGS 15:13).

Verse 11: Asa chose not to follow in the steps of Abijah, Rehoboam, or Solomon. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his great-great-grandfather David had done. That meant he sought to keep the Lord's commands and to carry out his covenant responsibilities as Judah's king. Asa reigned around 910-869 B.C. Solomon reigned from 970-930 B.C. Asa wanted to change the direction in which Judah had been moving for perhaps 50 years.

Verse 12: The previous kings had filled Judah with idols and idolatrous worship practices. Asa expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land. The Hebrew word translated prostitutes refers to both men and women who practiced sodomy as well as other sexual acts in idolatrous religious rituals. They had been in the land since the reign of Rehoboam (14:24). Asa also got rid of all the idols his fathers (Abijah, Rehoboam, and Solomon) had made.

Verse 13: Maacah was still the queen mother. She was Asa's grandmother. She had built a repulsive Asherah pole. The word translated repulsive means "frightening," "horrible," or "abominable." Some believe the pole was a phallic symbol that was part of the worship of the fertility cult. It was a wooden object standing upright, dedicated to Asherah. Asherah was the wife of the great god El and thought to be the mother of Baal and about 70 other gods.

The account of Maacah's action in 2 Chronicles 15:10-16 seems to suggest Maacah erected the pole after Asa began instituting his reforms. Asa cut it down and burned it in the Kidron [KID ruh] Valley that lay to the east between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem. A king's mother or grandmother had an important role in the palace. She exerted much influence over the people. Maacah's idolatrous example posed a serious problem. Because of Asa's commitment to spiritual reformation, he chose to remove her from her position.

Verse 14: Asa failed to do one thing: he did not remove the

high places. The meaning must be that his efforts to remove those sites of illicit worship was not comprehensive in rural areas (see 2 Chron. 14:3,5). Before building the temple, the people had used such places in worshipping the Lord (1 Kings 3:2), but the high places had been sites of idol worship in Canaanite religion. Over time they became places to worship both the Lord and idols. Eventually, they became places just to worship idols.

Second Chronicles reports other events during Asa's reign. He mentioned other measures of reform that Asa ordered. He removed foreign altars in high places, sacred stones, incense altars, and other Asherah poles. The king built up the fortified cities of Judah. He successfully repelled an Egyptian attack led by Zerah the Cushite by calling on the Lord. He repaired the altar of the Lord that was in front of the temple and led Judah in a time of covenant recommitment to the Lord (2 Chron. 14:2–15:19).

Though Asa did not remove all the high places, his heart was fully committed to the LORD. Out of 14 kings whose reigns are reported in the Book of 1 Kings, only Asa and his son Jehoshaphat (22:41,43) received positive reports. These were two of the five kings (including Solomon) who ruled in Jerusalem over Judah. None of the nine kings mentioned in 1 Kings who ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel did right in God's sight. The key to Asa's reign was that he had a heart for God.

Verse 15: Asa helped strengthen and encourage the practice of worshipping the Lord by bringing into the temple the silver and gold and other articles that he and his father had dedicated. These items probably came from military victories and were used to support those leading the worship activities, to maintain the temple, and to provide for needy people. King Asa demonstrated a strong commitment to the Lord. As long as he kept that focus, his commitment produced a life in accord with God's commands. A strong personal commitment to the Lord will influence every aspect of one's lifestyle.

Verses 16-17: Asa faced a significant problem toward the end of his reign. Baasha [BAY uh shuh] had come to the throne of Israel during Asa's third year of rule in Judah. Asa and Baasha had been at war ever since, probably meaning a state of hostility. At this point, however, Baasha made a bold and strategic attack and captured Ramah [RAY muh]

in the heart of the territory of Benjamin. The city was only four miles north of Jerusalem, Asa's capital.

King Baasha then fortified the town, which was located on the main road connecting the north and the south. Baasha took this action to prevent anyone from leaving or entering Asa's territory. Baasha's taking over Ramah implies he also recaptured the other towns Abijah earlier had captured from Israel (2 Chron. 13:19). Baasha's victory broke communications and travel between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Ramah also was a good base for the further invasion of Judah, especially the capital, Jerusalem.

Asa's total commitment to the Lord did not prevent him from having difficult and life-threatening problems. God's children will always face problems. The key is to choose good solutions in seeking to resolve or to live with those problems.

Earlier in his reign, Asa had faced an Egyptian invasion. At that time, Asa had called to the Lord and said, "LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you" (2 Chron. 14:11-12). In answer to Asa's prayer, the Lord gave the victory to Judah. What solution would Asa choose in resolving this new problem with Baasha?

Verse 18: Asa chose a solution that indicates he had shifted his focus away from the Lord. His solution was strictly political and military with no spiritual aspect. He turned to the king of Aram [A ruhm] instead of the Lord. Aram is a transliteration of the Hebrew word translated "Syria" in the King James Version. The Arameans spoke Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew. Aramaic became widely known throughout the Middle East.

Arameans and Hebrews had a long-standing hostility. David had conquered the main Aramean tribes and had occupied much of Syria. The Syrians had paid him tribute (2 Sam. 8:5-6). In Solomon's day, Rezon had established himself as ruler of Damascus and was Israel's adversary as long as Solomon lived (1 Kings 11:23-25). Asa was turning to a long-standing enemy for help.

Earlier, during Rehoboam's reign, Shishak king of Egypt had attacked Jerusalem and had taken the temple's

treasures, including the gold shields Solomon had made (2 Chron. 12:9). Asa took all the silver and gold he had placed in the temple treasury, as well as what was left after Shishak's raid. Asa added to that his own "silver and gold." Entrusting all of it to some of his officials, he sent it to Ben-Hadad [ben-HAY dad], the king of Aram who ruled in Damascus. Damascus lay to the northwest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Asa was trying to buy Ben-Hadad's help against Baasha. His use of money designated for temple worship to buy help from Ben-Hadad implies he thought Aram's king could help him more than the Lord God.

Verse 19: Apparently, King Abijah, Asa's father, had made a treaty with Ben-Hadad's father. After Ben-Hadad succeeded his father to Aram's throne, Baasha had made a treaty with him. Asa sent a message along with the gift to Ben-Hadad. He wanted Ben-Hadad to become his ally rather than Baasha's. Asa appealed to historical precedent, namely, the earlier treaty between Judah and Aram. Asa asked Ben-Hadad to break his treaty with the king of Israel. The implied meaning was that Asa wanted to hire the Arameans to attack Baasha from the north. That would force the king of Israel to call off his assault on Judah in the south. Israel would not be able to fight a war on two fronts.

Verse 20: Ben-Hadad agreed to Asa's request. The towns he attacked were in the northern part of Baasha's kingdom in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee. Ben-Hadad's victories in the north put pressure on Israel. Baasha had no choice but to deal with Ben-Hadad's assault on his kingdom.

Verse 21: Baasha abandoned his work at Ramah when he learned that Ben-Hadad had attacked in the north. He left Ramah in the south and withdrew to Tirzah [TUHR zah], the current capital of the Northern Kingdom. From Tirzah, Baasha turned his attention to the threat posed by Ben-Hadad.

When Baasha withdrew from Ramah, Asa ordered all of Judah to go to Ramah and carry away the stones and timber Baasha had been using to build up Ramah. They carried the materials to Geba and Mizpah and used them to fortify two of their own military outposts on the border between Judah and Israel north of Jerusalem.

Hanani, a seer (prophet), came to Asa and rebuked him for relying on a foreign alliance rather than on the Lord. Hanani rebuked him for turning to Aram, especially since the Lord had helped defeat a formidable enemy earlier (2 Chron 16:7-9). The prophet said, “You have done a foolish thing” (16:9).

Just before the end of Asa’s life, he contracted a severe disease in his feet. Some suggest it might have been gout from the rich food from his table. Again, Asa acted foolishly. He did not turn to the Lord for help, but only to physicians (16:12). Asa’s sin was not in seeking help from physicians but in not seeking help from the Lord. Asa died about two years later and was buried in the City of David. Jehoshaphat, his son, succeeded him as Judah’s king.

In spite of all the good things Asa accomplished, he failed to guard his focus on the Lord toward the end of his life. Facing a military problem with the Northern Kingdom, he turned to Aram instead of turning to the Lord. Facing a medical crisis, he turned only to physicians, failing to seek the Lord’s help. Asa chose the wrong solutions to two pressing problems. His negative example reminds us to choose the best solutions to problems by staying focused on the Lord and turning to Him for help.

NADAB, KING OF ISRAEL (15:25-32)

In 1 Kings 15:23, the account returns to the reigns of Israel’s kings. Nadab, Jeroboam’s son, succeeded Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:20). Nadab was one of eight kings of the Northern Kingdom who served during Asa’s 41-year reign in Judah. He reigned only two years (909-908 B.C.). He held to his father’s religious solution to the problem of his citizens traveling to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. Thus, he shared the guilt of Jeroboam in leading the people into idolatry. Because the kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel consistently supported the worship of the golden calves at Dan and Bethel, the Bible consistently condemns them as doing “evil in the eyes of the Lord” (1 Kings 15:26,34; 16:33; and so forth).

Nadab and his military forces besieged the Philistine town of Gibbethon. During that campaign, Baasha plotted against Nadab and killed him, thus becoming Israel’s king. Baasha then killed all of Jeroboam’s descendants, eliminating any possible rivals to the throne from the house of Jeroboam. Baasha fulfilled the prophecy of

Ahijah, who had foretold the destruction of Jeroboam’s dynasty (14:10-11). God judged Jeroboam and removed his family because of the idolatry into which he had led Israel. Jeroboam’s sins carried a high price tag.

BAASHA AND ELAH, KINGS OF ISRAEL (15:33—16:10)

Baasha became Israel’s king and continued the hostilities with Judah throughout his reign (908-886 B.C.). His aggression against Asa, King of Judah, was recorded earlier (1 Kings 15:16-22). Baasha was of the tribe of Issachar and established a new dynasty, replacing that of Jeroboam, who was of the tribe of Ephraim (11:26; 15:27). Baasha did evil in the eyes of the Lord by continuing the policies and practices of Jeroboam.

God sent a message to Baasha through the prophet Jehu. The Lord reminded Baasha that He had lifted him from obscurity and had made him king of Israel. Nevertheless, Baasha had ignored the Lord’s leadership and had followed Jeroboam’s practices instead. He had chosen political expediency over loyal obedience to the Lord. The Lord announced that He would destroy Baasha and his entire line. He described that destruction in these words: “Dogs will eat those belonging to Baasha who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country” (16:4).

The Lord had given his prophet Ahijah that same description of destruction when He had pronounced judgment against Jeroboam’s line (14:11). The word picture describes people violently cut down and left lying where they fell rather than properly buried.

Paul R. House in *The New American Commentary* on 1, 2 Kings (p. 200) cites three issues related to Baasha that merit mention. (1) Jehu’s prophetic rebuke shows that God is in charge of history. (2) God’s purpose is primarily that people glorify Him as the Lord. Jeroboam and Baasha were judged because they used their God-given political authority to preserve their own position rather than to glorify God among the people. (3) The text stresses personal responsibility by showing the cause-effect relationship between unfaithfulness to God and His divine judgment. All people are responsible for their choices, all of which have unavoidable consequences.

After a long reign, Baasha died and his family buried him

in Tirzah, his capital city. The main things said about his reign was that he gained the throne by violence, destroyed the house of Jeroboam, and continued the sins of Jeroboam. Although Baasha was God’s instrument of judgment against Jeroboam, his committing the same sins as Jeroboam brought judgment on his own house. Elah succeeded his father Baasha to Israel’s throne in the twenty-sixth year of Asa’s reign. However, Elah reigned only two years in Tirzah, the same length of time that Nadab had reigned (15:25).

Zimri, one of Elah’s military officials, plotted to take the throne. One day, Elah “was getting drunk in the home of Arza, his man in charge of the palace in Tirzah” (16:9). Possibly with Arza’s help, Zimri came into the house and killed Elah. Zimri then proclaimed himself king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Zimri killed off Baasha’s entire family just as Baasha had wiped out Jeroboam’s family (15:29). Zimri thus fulfilled the Lord’s prophecy against Baasha and his house (16:1-4). Baasha had ended Jeroboam’s dynasty, and Zimri ended Baasha’s dynasty. Both kings had “provoked the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger by their worthless idols” (16:13).

ZIMRI AND OMRI, KINGS OF ISRAEL (16:11-28)

Zimri reigned only seven days, the shortest reign of all Israel’s kings. Also, his death was unlike that of any other king of Israel.

Israel’s army was encamped near Gibbethon, the same Philistine town where Baasha had killed Nadab (15:27-28). When the soldiers heard that Zimri had murdered King Elah, they proclaimed Omri, their commander, as king. Omri and his troops returned to Tirzah where Zimri had seized the throne and laid siege to the town.

When Zimri saw he was surrounded, he set fire to the palace around him and committed suicide (16:18). Zimri died, but not just because Omri defeated him but because he too walked in the ways of Jeroboam. Jeroboam’s bad solution to the threatening problem of losing his people’s loyalty continued to influence king after king in the Northern Kingdom.

Omri claimed the throne in Tirzah. However, that claim was contested by Tibni, who also might have been an army of-

ficer. The nation was divided over who should be king. Half the people supported Tibni, and the other half wanted Omri. Omri's support proved to be more powerful.

After four years, Tibni died, probably as a casualty in the conflict (though the cause of death is not directly stated). Counting the four years of conflict, Omri became king in the 31st year of Asa's reign in Judah and reigned 12 years. During the first six, he was in the old capital of Tirzah. Then he bought the "hill of Samaria" from a man named Shemer, built a new capital on it, and named the city after Shemer, calling it "Samaria" (16:24). Samaria continued as the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel for the rest of its national life. Archeological evidence seems to indicate that Omri and his successor, Ahab, built impressive structures there that rivaled those Solomon had built in Jerusalem. Samaria indeed became the royal city of Israel and a short-hand designation for the Northern Kingdom as was Jerusalem for the Southern Kingdom (Amos 6:1).

In 1 Kings 16:27 is a reference to "the things he achieved." Those achievements had great political, economic, and military significance. Omri's 12-year reign brought stability to Israel. Historical sources tell us that Assyria, which began its westward expansion during the days of Omri, for 150 years afterward identified the area of the Northern Kingdom as "the land of Omri." Also, Omri and his son, Ahab, established peaceful relations with Judah, thus ending the border hostilities that had drained both nations ever since the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam.

Material ambitions and worldly achievements may impress historians; but in the eyes of the Lord, Omri's reign was evil. As had the earlier kings of Israel, Omri followed in the idolatrous paths of Jeroboam and committed the same sins he committed. When he died, his family buried him in Samaria. Ahab succeeded him as king (16:28). This study of these kings emphasizes the importance of having one's heart devoted to the Lord. The northern kings illustrate the consequences of failing to be wholly committed to the Lord and guarding that commitment. Asa's experience is especially a strong reminder that believers need to stay focused on the Lord as they seek solutions to problems.

First Kings reports on all or part of the reigns of Judah's first four kings and Israel's first nine kings. Ahab was

the eighth king of the Northern Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom had a relatively peaceful and stable government during those 75 years, but the Northern Kingdom went from bad to worse. Each king did evil in the Lord's sight.

The people of the Northern Kingdom practiced more and more idolatry. They reached their highest level of idol worship under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, who sought to establish the worship of Baal as Israel's national religion. God sent Elijah to confront those involved in Baal worship. He protected Elijah and supplied his needs on that mission. This lesson is about trusting and obeying God during times of need. It can encourage you to rely on the Lord to meet your needs today.

AHAB'S EVIL REIGN (16:29-34)

During this quarter's study of 1 Kings, the lessons have been about staying focused on the Lord. They have emphasized finding that focus and guarding that focus. The last four lessons are about keeping their focus. Ahab followed his father Omri as the seventh king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ahab reigned for 22 years in Samaria. Israel prospered under his rule. He built an ornate palace and fortified various cities throughout his kingdom (22:39). Assyrian records report he contributed 2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers to a coalition that battled Assyria's expansion. His alliance with Phoenicia opened up a prosperous trade enterprise.

Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre and Sidon. These were two strong maritime Phoenician cities and centers of trade on the Mediterranean coast. He was a worshiper of Baal. His name means "with Baal" or "with him is Baal." Nonbiblical records show that Ethbaal murdered Philetas, a king of Tyre, and was the eighth king of Tyre after Hiram (5:1). Some believe he was also a priest of Astarte (the Greek name for Ashtoreth) in the worship of Baalism. Baal was the lord of Canaanite religion and was worshiped in various eastern countries. The name "Baal" means "lord, master, or husband." Baal was a god of fertility and a god of the weather.

Religion flourished in the Northern Kingdom during Ahab's reign. Many worshiped the golden calves of Jeroboam, at best an idolatrous form of worshiping the Lord and at worst outright idolatry. Under Jezebel's influence, Baal worship grew. Ahab provided whatever she wanted for her

worship of Baal. Ahab built a temple with an altar for Baal in Samaria, the capital city. He also made an Asherah pole and set it up as an object of worship. Asherah supposedly was a fertility goddess, the mother of Baal and the wife of the chief god of all Canaanite gods. She was the mother of 70 gods, of whom Baal was the most famous.

All the idol-gods connected with Baal worship had to do with weather or fertility, both highly significant in an agricultural society. The immoral sexual practices connected with their worship were thought to ensure the fertility of families, crops, and animals. Ahab began to serve Baal, and Jezebel worked to replace the worship of the Lord God with the worship of Baal. She had the Lord's prophets killed and established prophets of Baal in Israel. Once, Obadiah hid and provided food and water for 100 prophets (18:2-4).

"Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him" (16:30). Also, Ahab "did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him" (16:33). The idolatry angered and grieved the heart of God.

Ahab probably married Jezebel for political, military, and commercial reasons. Often, a king would marry a princess or someone of royalty from the palace of a king with whom he wanted a political or military treaty or a commercial arrangement. The marriage would ensure that the nations would not attack each other, or they would enter commercial trade agreements beneficial to each. Solomon and the pharaoh of Egypt had such an alliance through Solomon's marriage to the pharaoh's daughter (3:1). The alliance or treaty helped to strengthen both nations against the growing influence of Damascus of Aram (Syria). While strategically wise, Ahab's marriage proved to be a spiritual disaster for the nation.

During Ahab's reign, he authorized Hiel of Bethel to rebuild Jericho. Jericho was a border town between the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. It stood at an important intersection of two trade routes—one north-south and the other east-west. Restoring Jericho violated an order by Joshua that no one was ever to rebuild Jericho. People had continued to live in Jericho, but the town had not been built up and fortified since Joshua had captured it. Joshua had prophesied that whoever tried to rebuild the

city would do so at the cost of his firstborn and youngest sons (Josh. 6:26).

Hiel laid the foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub. Some scholars believe Hiel practiced the use of "foundation sacrifices" with his sons, offering the oldest as a sacrifice when he laid the foundations and the youngest when he set the gates. In either case, Joshua's prophecy was fulfilled.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 12

1 KINGS 17–22

ELIJAH'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF DROUGHT (1 KINGS 17:1-6)

Elijah's coming on the scene of the Northern Kingdom was sudden. The author of Kings laid no specific groundwork before his report of the first action by Elijah. The Lord sent Elijah to Ahab because of the growing worship of Baal and the effort to make Baalism Israel's national religion.

Verse 1: The name Elijah means "Yahweh is my God." "Yahweh" is the personal or covenant name of God, often translated as "LORD" (in small capital letters). Elijah's God was the God of Israel, not one of the many idol-gods. Elijah was from Tishbe in Gilead, thus a Tish-bite. The location of Tishbe is uncertain. Gilead was in the north central section of the highland area east of the Jordan River. The area was about 50 miles north to south and 20 miles east to west. The word Gilead can be translated "rugged." Much of the country of Gilead was rugged terrain.

Rugged Elijah came from rugged Gilead. He probably was dressed in his garment of hair with a leather belt around his waist (2 Kings 1:8). A true prophet of God, he was an important person in Israel's history. Whether he was from one of the companies or schools of prophets at Bethel, Jericho, and Gilgal is not clear (2 Kings 2:3,5; 4:38). He worked miracles and fought against Baalism. We have few reports of the ministry of a true prophet in the Northern Kingdom until God sent Elijah.

The forerunner of the Messiah was prophesied to be an Elijah-like person (Mal. 4:5). James wrote that Elijah was as human as we are but was a great man of faith and prayer (Jas. 5:17-18). Elijah and Moses appeared before Jesus and talked with Him on the Mount of Trans-figuration (Matt. 17:3). Moses represented the law and Elijah the prophets.

Elijah came to Ahab, who was probably in Jezreel (18:45; 21:1). Ahab evidently had a residence in Jezreel as well as his palace in Samaria. Elijah announced the next few years would see neither dew nor rain . . . except at his word. Because of the nearness of the Mediterranean Sea, dew could be heavy. God's people saw both rain and dew as blessings from God. Moses had prophesied the promised

land would be "a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew" (Deut. 33:28).

Apparently, the drought already had afflicted the land for six months. Elijah announced it would continue "a few years." First Kings 18:1 refers to the "third year" of drought, and Luke 4:25 and James 5:17 mention "three and a half years." Since the land already was suffering from drought, Elijah's announcement of no rain except at his word was not what the king wanted to hear. Significantly, it was a direct challenge to Baal, who was viewed as the storm god who brought the rain. This explains why the Lord had to hide Elijah from Ahab and Jezebel for the next three years.

Elijah had begun his announcement to Ahab with an oath—As the LORD, the God of Is-rael, lives. Ahab had at least 400 prophets at his shrines in Dan and Bethel (22:6), and Jezebel had 450 prophets of Baal and 400 of Asherah (18:19). Elijah made clear to King Ahab that Elijah served the covenant God of Israel, not Baal. He served neither an earthly king nor a powerless idol. Elijah also indicated that the God of Israel was a living God. He was not an inanimate stone, a wooden pole, or a golden statue.

The prophet's announcement of a prolonged drought was bad news indeed. Israel, an agricultural nation, depended on adequate rain for grain and fruit crops as well as nourishment for animals. The land of promise had two seasons for rain. The early rains fell in October-November; the later rain in February-March. Dry weather was not uncommon, but extended droughts were devastating.

This particular drought was the Lord's judgment on the people of Israel for their sin of idolatry. Through Moses, the Lord had warned Israel—"Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain" (Deut. 11:16-17).

The drought also was a showdown between the Lord and Baal. Baal was supposedly the god of fertility and storms. Baal worshipers believed Baal gave them the rain for their crops. They had to have an explanation of the periods between the early rains in October-November and the later rains in February-March. The worshipers believed that

Baal submitted to Mot, the god of death, each year which produced the dry times. Anat, Baal's sister and goddess of war, would defeat Mot and free Baal to restore fertility. The pagan sexual practices connected with the worship of Baal were thought to contribute to the power of their idol-god.

Verses 2-3: The LORD had sent Elijah to Ahab with a dangerous message. Elijah would need protection. The Lord who gave Elijah the word also provided protection after he proclaimed that word.

First, the Lord said, Leave here. God wanted Elijah out of Israel and away from Ahab and Jezebel. The Lord told him to go eastward and hide in the Kerith [KEE rith] Ravine, which was east of the Jordan River. Jezreel, where Elijah had met Ahab, was on the west side of the Jordan. Kerith also is spelled "Cherith." This location was a brook or wadi on the same side of the Jor-dan River as Elijah's home in Gilead. (A "wadi" is a valley or bed of a stream that usually is dry except during the rainy season.) The Kerith Ravine was a safe hiding place for God's prophet.

Verse 4: The brook flowed through the Kerith Ravine. The Lord also promised Elijah that He had ordered the ravens to feed him at his hiding place. Ravens are birds that made their homes in rocky crags. They are capable of flying long distances. For Elijah, the ravens became a symbol of God's love, provision, and mighty power over nature.

Elijah showed his trust in the Lord by obeying Him. He traveled the 15 miles from Jezreel eastward to the Kerith Ravine and stayed there. He was out of sight and out of the reach of Ahab. Just as the Lord had promised, the ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and each evening. He drank water from the brook.

This experience reminds us how the Lord fed the people of Israel with manna and quail on the way from Egypt to Canaan. He gave them quail in the evening and manna in the morning. The Lord's purpose in feeding them was to make the people know that He was their God

(Ex. 16:11-12). God's care of Elijah must have assured him that the Lord was with him. Elijah had followed the Lord's instructions twice. He had gone to the powerful and wicked king with God's announcement of no dew or rain. He then had obeyed the Lord by going to Kerith Ravine in

faith that God would send ravens to feed him. Elijah was obedient to the Lord's instructions, and God was faithful to keep His promises to His servant (17:5-6). God wants all believers to obey Him, whether His instructions seem to make sense or not. When His people obey, they also can trust Him to provide what they need in a fashion and time of His choosing.

ELIJAH'S TIME OF SECLUSION (17:7-24)

Verse 7: The drought Elijah announced had its effects on Kerith Ravine. As was typical in dry times, the brook dried up. Without water, he no longer could remain in that place and survive.

Verse 8: Sometimes our situations may seem impossible, but the Lord's plans and purposes are not frustrated by our circumstances. Nothing that happens to us is a surprise to Him. He knew what He wanted His servant to do, and He gave Elijah precise instructions.

Verse 9: The Lord's first choice of a place for Elijah to hide from Ahab had been the ravine in Gilead. The Lord's next choice sent Elijah into the heart of Baal country. The Lord God would protect him and supply his needs among Baal worshipers whose false god was able to supply them nothing. Zarephath [ZAR ih fath] of Sidon [SIGH duhn] was located on the Medi-terranean about 100 miles northwest of Kerith Ravine. It was just south of the city of Sidon in Phoenicia. Phoenicia was the home of Jezebel, a Sidonian, and also a strong center of Baal worship. Ahab's father-in-law Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, ruled the area. The Lord would demonstrate to His prophet that He had power not only in Gilead but also in a land devoted to Baal.

We do not know much about the widow. She and her son were a poor family in a country bordering Israel. Baal was not supplying their physical needs, but the Lord could and would.

Verse 10: Gilead, the first place the Lord sent Elijah to hide, was a part of Israel. Zarephath was in a neighboring country, Phoenicia. The Sidonians were allied with Ahab's kingdom through his marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of the Sidonian king. The Lord had led Elijah to the last place in the world Ahab would think to search for Elijah.

The town gate of Zarephath was the entrance to the city.

Elijah saw a widow gathering kindling for a cooking fire. He asked her for a little water to drink. The journey had been long from Kerith Ravine. Also, the drought had made water scarce. Elijah was asking the woman for a precious commodity.

Verse 11: Elijah was thirsty and also hungry. Bread and water was the basic diet for the poor. The widow did not hesitate to share water with him. His request for bread was another matter.

Verse 12: The words as surely as the LORD your God lives are an oath by which the woman sought to assure Elijah that she was telling the truth. This particular oath seems to show that the woman recognized Elijah as an Israelite and that she knew about Israel's God, even though she lived in Zarephath. She used the name LORD (Yahweh), the personal and covenant name by which God revealed Himself to Israel. People often knew about the gods of other nations, whether or not they worshiped them.

The poor woman declared that she had only a handful of flour and a small amount of oil left in her house. Women made flour out of finely crushed grain, such as wheat or barley. Barley was cheaper and used by many poorer families. She was in the process of preparing the last of her food for her and her son, and then she knew they would die of starvation. Elijah's request was for more than she reasonably could provide.

Verse 13: A cake of bread was usually flat and round. A normal-sized cake was a half-inch thick and 12 inches in diameter. Elijah's request was not just a matter of hospitality; it was a matter of life and death for the widow. Elijah understood the woman's response. He no doubt could read the fear in her eyes at what awaited her son and herself. In what on the surface seems an arrogant and selfish demand, he insisted she prepare food for him before preparing any for herself and her son. The words "don't be afraid" along with his tone of voice and manner must have communicated a calm confidence. Elijah continued to speak to her.

Verse 14: Elijah explained what lay behind his instruction to the woman. The LORD, the God of Israel promised the jar of flour would not be used up and the jug of oil would not run dry until the day the Lord gave rain. God's com-

mand for Elijah to ask for the widow's last cake for himself must have tested Elijah's faith again. He had trusted the Lord to supply his own needs. Here he had to trust Him to supply the needs of two others.

Often it is easier to trust the Lord when you are the only person involved. To trust Him in matters that have consequences for other people is another matter. Nevertheless, Elijah showed no hesitancy about trusting God to supply the needs of the widow and her son as well as his own.

This verse is packed with implications. The Lord, the God of Israel, is not just Israel's God; He is sovereign over all nations. God cares for all people, not merely the nations of Israel and Judah. He is the true Lord over the Sidonians, not Baal. The Lord is Lord of nature. He can keep a jar of flour from being used up and jug of oil from running dry. Baal is not the lord of fertility and the harvest. The Lord would give rain in Phoenicia as well as in Israel. Baal is not the god of rain either in Phoenicia or in Israel.

Elijah had chosen to believe the Lord's promise of provisions at Kerith Ravine. He also believed the Lord in Zarephath. Elijah challenged the widow to believe that the God of Israel would provide for her and her son. For her to believe, she would have to give up the last of her food. She would have to deny herself and her son's need for food in order to feed a stranger. All the assurance she had was a promise from the Lord God. For Elijah and for her, that promise was enough. They believed the Lord's promise. The Lord continues to meet the needs of those who believe His promises to them.

While the Lord's promise to the widow and Elijah was made to them alone, God's Word contains many promises to believers today. You probably have your favorites. In times of difficulty, the Lord says in Psalm 46:1—"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Verses 15-16: The woman acted on the Lord's promise that Elijah had spoken to her, and the Lord kept His word. In the days that followed, Elijah, the woman, and her son had enough food. The Lord performed a miracle of provision in Zarephath, a town outside of Israel.

The New Testament says that "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (Jas. 2:17). Believing in God's promises is active, not passive. If the woman had

said she believed God's promise but had refused to bring Elijah some food, she would have revealed she really had no faith. Her actions revealed her faith in the Lord and His promise.

Later, the widow's son became ill and died. Calling Elijah a "man of God" (17:18), the widow accused him of punishing her for her sin. She mentioned no specific sin. Probably she was assuming that the illness and death meant God was punishing her for some wrongdoing.

A similar situation occurred in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus denied their implication by saying no one's sin caused the blindness. Rather, the man's blindness would allow the display of God's work in his life. Jesus then healed him.

Elijah did not answer the woman's question. Instead, he took the boy to his room. He was staying in a separate room on the roof, approached from an outside stairway. Elijah prayed for the boy's life, and the Lord answered his prayer. The boy's death became an opportunity for God to display His love and power to a Sidonian woman in a country given over to the worship of Baal.

When the woman saw that her son was alive, she made two observations. She said she knew Elijah was a man of God. She also said that the word of the Lord that came through Elijah's mouth was the truth. God had done several miracles for Elijah. Now, He had done a miracle through Elijah.

God has given believers "very great and precious promises" (2 Pet. 1:4). He also is a God of miracles today. Sometimes He acts directly in a situation of need. More often, He acts through impressing fellow believers and/or family members to give generous help. He might make available extra work opportunities or even a new job. Sometimes He helps by teaching us better money management skills. Many Christians testify that the Lord helped them see the folly in using credit cards unwisely or in operating family finances without a carefully thought-out spending plan.

For both Elijah and the widow, their steps of faith involved risk. They had to act on God's promise without being able to see or even explain how everything would work out.

They listened to God's promises, believed He would do as He promised, and then began to obey the Lord's instructions. God took care of their needs. Their actions set an example for all of us in a world filled with uncertainty. The testimony of countless Christians today is that God still keeps His promises when we act in faith and obedience to Him. My wife and I testify to that wonderful truth after 50 years of seeking to follow the Lord and serving Him.

God sent Elijah to Ahab, the idolatrous king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, with the announcement of a prolonged drought. The Lord hid His prophet and provided for him in Gilead and in Phoenicia. Then God told Elijah to return to Ahab for a special confrontation with the leaders of Baal worship. The Lord wanted to lead Ahab and the Northern Kingdom away from the worship of Baal and back to the sole worship of the Lord God of Israel.

First Kings 18 presents Elijah's actions involving Obadiah, Ahab, the prophets of Baal, and his prophecy about the end of the drought. In each of these situations, Elijah trusted the Lord and took his stand in obedience to Him.

ELIJAH AND OBADIAH (18:1-15)

The events of this lesson took place at the end of the drought. First Kings 18:1 mentions the "third year." Two New Testament passages say the drought lasted three and a half years (Luke 4:25; Jas. 5:17). The half year seems to have been the period before Elijah announced the extended drought to Ahab.

The Lord spoke to Elijah at Zarephath and told him (1) go to Ahab and (2) the Lord would send rain on the land. Elijah had prayed that it would not rain; later, he would pray that it would rain (Jas. 5:17-18). Both prayers were answered. Of course, the Lord was the one who sent the drought and then sent the rain. God chose to send the drought and then the rain when Elijah prayed for them. Elijah's prayer was for the instruction of the Ahab and the people, a visible and audible way to let them know the Lord God was at work. The Lord had planned the time of the drought and its end before He sent Elijah to announce those events and to pray that they would occur.

Ahab had chosen a man named Obadiah to be in charge of his palace. (This Obadiah is not the prophet who wrote

the Old Testament Book of Obadiah.) Obadiah probably had the same office that Ahishar had in Solomon's palace (1 Kings 4:6). With the exception of Jezebel, Ahab's wife, Obadiah was probably the second highest ranking officer in Ahab's court. Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord. His name means "Yahweh's [the Lord's] Servant." He once hid 100 prophets of the Lord in two caves when Jezebel had determined to wipe out all the Lord's prophets. He also supplied them with food and water. Obadiah was in a dilemma, serving the Lord on one hand and serving Ahab on the other. Hiding the Lord's prophets was one way he found to serve the Lord.

In the extended drought, finding pasture and water for Ahab's horses and mules was growing more and more difficult. The king sent Obadiah one direction as he went another to find grazing for his animals. On the road, Obadiah met Elijah. We do not know whether Obadiah already was acquainted with the prophet or simply recognized him from Ahab's description (perhaps by his hairy garment, 2 Kings 1:8). The official fell to the ground before Elijah, a sign of great respect and humility.

Elijah instructed Obadiah to go and tell Ahab "Elijah is here." Ahab had been searching for the prophet everywhere, even in surrounding nations. Elijah was ready to be found. Obadiah was reluctant to take that assignment, for he was totally convinced that Elijah was capable of dropping out of sight. The official was afraid that, if Ahab came to that place expecting to see Elijah and the Lord again had hidden him, Obadiah's life would be forfeit. Obadiah told the prophet that he already had risked his life in hiding the Lord's prophets. Elijah was asking him to risk it again.

God's prophet swore to Obadiah he would appear before King Ahab that very day. Elijah knew the Spirit of the Lord would not hide him from the king that day because the Lord had commanded Elijah to present himself to the king.

Elijah's oath was in the name of "the Lord Almighty" (1 Kings 18:15). That name means "Lord of the heavenly armies," the one who has great power to conquer or rule. Obadiah feared Ahab, an earthly king of an earthly army. Elijah served a heavenly King who had an army more powerful than that of any earthly kingdom. The Lord Almighty was in charge, not Elijah, Obadiah, Jezebel, or Ahab.

Obadiah needed to believe God's Word through Elijah and act on it regardless of the risk.

ELIJAH AND AHAB (18:16-19)

Obadiah did what Elijah instructed him to do, and Ahab came to meet Elijah. When the king saw the prophet, he asked, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" (18:17). Ahab blamed Elijah for the drought, saying he was the one agitating and causing turmoil in Israel. Possibly, Ahab thought Elijah had angered Baal and caused Baal to withhold the rain. Actually, it was the other way around. Ahab had angered the Lord God, causing Him to withhold the rain.

Elijah identified Ahab and his father Omri as the true troublemakers of Israel. Omri and Ahab, father and son, had brought on the drought because they disobeyed the Lord's commands and worshiped the Baals. They turned from the true God, whose power was real, to a false god who had no power at all.

Elijah's accusation showed the battle was between the worship of the one true God and the worship of many gods or Baals. This plural form of "Baal" probably means Elijah had in mind the many village shrines, each to a particular local Baal (18:18).

The name "Yahweh" (translated "LORD") is the personal and covenant name the living God revealed to Moses. The name "Baal" meant a pagan idol or idols that the people claimed to be a god. These were people who did not know the true and living God, who had revealed Himself to Israel. They worshiped Baal in willful ignorance.

Elijah asked Ahab to summon all of Israel to meet him on Mount Carmel. He also asked the king to bring the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to Mount Carmel. Mount Carmel is near the Mediterranean coast between the Plain of Acco to the north and the Plain of Sharon to the south. The mountain had many peaks and ravines. Israel and Phoenicia debated over who owned various parts of the mountain. Also, the Canaanites believed Mount Carmel was the dwelling place of the gods. Elijah planned his confrontation with Baalism in an appropriate spot. The outcome would become known both in Phoenicia and in Israel.

ELIJAH AND BAAL'S PROPHETS (18:20-40)

Verse 20: Ahab did as Elijah suggested. He sent the word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Asherah are not mentioned further in the account, so we do not know whether they were among those put to death at the end of the day. The name Carmel means "the garden land." Guides show tourists today a place where tradition claims the encounter occurred. It is a plateau large enough to hold a large crowd. The brook Kis-hon still flows at the foot of this plateau. On its peak one can see the Mediterranean Sea. Many springs are in the area.

Verse 21: After everyone had assembled, Elijah addressed the people. His words remind us of Joshua's challenge to the Israelites after they conquered the promised land (Josh. 24:15). Elijah asked the people, How long will you waver between two opinions? The word translated waver is from a root word that means "hop." This same word is used to describe the ritual dance of the Baal prophets (18:26). In 18:21 it is used in the sense of "limp." The description is of an indecisive frame of mind. The Israelites could not decide the appropriate object of worship. The nation stumbled back and forth from the worship of God to the worship of Baal. Elijah called on them to commit themselves to the one who truly is God. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. The people remained silent, still undecided.

The word translated follow means "to walk, go, come." Figuratively, it can refer to a person's lifestyle. Elijah was asking the people of Israel to make up their minds. Only one could be the only true and living God. Choose that one and then follow through with a lifestyle consistent with that one's nature and teachings.

The people of Israel had to decide for themselves whether the LORD or Baal was God. A similar decision faces each of us. The challenge is deeply personal and to the point. The choice is most important because only one God is the true and living God who can help us in this life and the life to come.

That which we truly worship in our hearts indeed leads us, determining the direction of our walk. If money is our god, then our focus is on the bottom line and we do whatever is necessary to ensure gaining more. We may view shady

practices as good business, dishonesty as making a good deal, and truth as a deceptive financial statement that looks good. Read Psalm 15 to see the lifestyle of one whose life direction is guided by a genuine worship of the Lord God. Let us follow Him.

Verse 22: After Elijah issued his challenge to the people, he described himself as the only one of the LORD's prophets left. Jezebel had four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. (Since the Scripture does not mention anything more about the 400 Asherah prophets being on the mountain with Elijah and the prophets of Baal, some Bible students conclude they did not accept Elijah's invitation to come to Mount Carmel.) What courage God's prophet needed to face that many prophets of Baal alone. He was challenging them and all the people of Israel to see who was the real God. The answer would be the one who consumed a sacrifice by fire. Elijah had great confidence because he knew Baal was nothing but a man-made idol and the Lord was the living Almighty God.

Verse 23: The people of Israel used bulls in their sacrifices to the Lord (Judg. 6:26). Pagan religions did also. The bull was closely associated with the worship of Baal. Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal would offer a sacrifice familiar to them and to the people watching them.

Verse 24: The rules of the contest were clearly spelled out. In Hebrew thought, name implies the character or essential being of the one named. The prophets of Baal were to offer a sacrifice and call on their god to receive it by sending fire to consume it. Elijah was to do the same, calling on the LORD. Whoever answered would reveal Himself to be the true God. The people liked the test, evidently viewing the proposition as fair.

Nothing is said about how Baal's prophets felt about the proposal. Probably they never had seen fire fall from above to consume a sacrifice. Yet, they believed Baal was the storm god and could send down lightning. Israel knew about fire falling. Fire had fallen in the temple of the Lord as recently as Solomon's dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 7:1-3; see also Lev. 9:24; 1 Chron. 21:26).

Elijah's stand for the Lord against the Baal prophets took courage. He was one against 450. Actually, he and His Lord stood against 450 prophets and their idol. Times

come when believers must stand courageously for the Lord, even when the odds are heavily against them.

Verse 25: Elijah wanted the test to be fair and the results obvious. He let the Baal prophets go first, even giving them choice of the bull. His comment about their number was a way to emphasize that the contest was between 450 prophets for Baal and one for the Lord God.

Verse 26: The length of time, from morning till noon, suggests that Elijah gave them plenty of time to get a reply from Baal. The word translated morning means “dawn”; noon means “midday.” Though they shouted and performed ritual dances to attract Baal’s attention, they received no answer. Often Christians find that opposition is powerless to hinder them when they take a courageous and faithful stand for the Lord.

At midday Elijah began to taunt the Baal prophets. At first he told them to shout louder. He suggested that Baal might be deep in thought and not listening. Or he might be too busy to hear. He could be traveling and not at home, or he might be sleeping and must be awakened. Baal worshipers believed their god(s) failed to respond to them for such reasons.

Elijah’s taunts drove the Baal prophets to shout louder. They even began to cut themselves with swords and spears to try to get Baal to answer. Self-mutilation was a part of Baal worship. Cutting or hurting themselves was an attempt to receive pity from their god or to convince him they were sincere. How different is the Lord God who takes the initiative to bring help to His children!

They continued their frantic actions until the hour of Israel’s evening sacrifice. “There was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention” (18:29). The prophets may have been sincere, but they were sincerely wrong. They tried everything they knew to get an answer from their god. A god who does not exist cannot answer.

Elijah then invited all the people to come closer, perhaps so they would not be able to accuse him of setting fire to his sacrifice. The prophet chose for his sacrifice the site of an altar that had been used in worship of the Lord. It was in ruins, maybe destroyed by the agents of Jezebel as they sought to wipe out the Lord’s prophets. Elijah took 12

stones, symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel, and rebuilt the altar in the name of the Lord. Though the Lord had taken 10 tribes from the house of David in judgment, all 12 tribes still were to worship only the Lord. Elijah’s altar was a rebuke to the worship of Baal and the worship of Jeroboam’s golden calves. The Lord continued to be God of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms.

After building the altar, Elijah dug a trench around it large enough to hold about 13 quarts of water. He arranged the wood, prepared the bull for sacrifice, and laid the sacrifice on the wood. He instructed some of the people to pour four large jars of water on the offering and the wood. After pouring the water on the offering the third time, the water had soaked the altar and filled the trench. Elijah’s actions further assured the people and Baal’s prophets that he was not performing a trick.

Verse 36: The evening sacrifice was an important time for the Israelites. The morning sacrifice was at dawn and the evening sacrifice was at twilight (Ex. 29:38-41). The evening sacrifice on Carmel was an ideal time to offer the Lord a sacrifice, to renew a total commitment to the Lord as their God, and to seek atonement for their sin of idolatry.

Elijah’s prayer was brief. He addressed the Lord as LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. LORD translates God’s covenant name. Elijah addressed God as the covenant God of Israel, a relationship that God began with Abraham and continued through his sons Isaac and Israel (Jacob). His prayer acknowledged the Israelites’ spiritual heritage.

First, Elijah prayed for God to let everyone know He was still the God in Israel. Elijah was concerned that the people had been deceived into believing Baal was a real god. He also wanted the people to know that he was the Lord’s servant. All he had done and said was in obedience to the Lord; the prophet was not acting on his own. Elijah was taking the focus off himself and putting it on the Lord, for whom the prophet was a mere servant. Standing nearby were the prophets of Baal. The people needed to know that Elijah was God’s servant, not those prophets. This would let the people know to listen to him.

Verse 37: The test question was—Who is the true God, Baal or the Lord? Elijah asked God to reveal the answer to that question. The Hebrew word translated know in

this context means “to perceive, discern, to know on a personal level.” Scripture uses the word to describe a personal relationship with God. This knowledge is experiential knowledge, not just head knowledge.

God must reveal this kind of knowledge. When Simon Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus told him that “this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Matt. 16:17). Only the true and living God can enable an individual to know Him personally.

Elijah wanted the people to know God was turning their hearts back again to Him. The Lord had instructed Elijah to do everything he had done so far. God inspired the prayer Elijah prayed. Elijah knew what the Lord was seeking to do with His people. God wanted to turn them from worshipping Baal to worshipping Himself. So Elijah prayed that the people would hear God’s call and return to Him in their hearts and actions. The prophet did not want a miracle just for a miracle’s sake or to vindicate himself. He wanted a miracle that would point the people to the Lord and turn them back to Him.

Verse 38: The Baal prophets had prayed all day and nothing happened. They shouted, danced their ritual dances, and mutilated themselves trying to induce Baal to answer. When Elijah finished praying his short and pointed prayer, the fire of the LORD fell. Everything was burned up, even the stones and the water. God answered by fire that He was indeed the Lord God (18:24).

The Lord often used fire to symbolize His presence. On Mount Sinai when He gave the Ten Commandments, the Lord “descended on it in fire” (Ex. 19:18). The people trembled because they knew the Lord was present by the appearance of fire. When the priests began their ministry in the tabernacle and offered sacrifices, fire came from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering. The people shouted for joy and worshiped the Lord (Lev. 9:24).

Verse 39: The people of Israel had been watching and listening all day. Then at the moment of worship during the evening sacrifice, God answered. To fall prostrate indicates bowing before God in fear and awe. Their repeated cry identifying the LORD as God was the desired outcome of the day’s contest.

The people made the right response, however briefly and inadequately they may have followed through on their professed commitment. The text does not indicate that Ahab was one of the people who confessed that the Lord is God rather than Baal.

Elijah had remained firm in his commitment to the Lord throughout the years he had waited on the Lord to end the drought. Under God's direction, he had taken a courageous stand against Baalism. The Lord honored his stand. When believers obey the Lord by taking a stand for Him, they present a convincing testimony for the Lord. Others will see that the Lord honors such commitment, and some may believe on the Lord.

Then Elijah commanded the people to seize the prophets of Baal, to take them down to the Kishon Valley below, and to kill them. They obeyed His command. God had told Israel to destroy the Canaanites totally lest they turn Israel away from following the Lord to serving other gods (Deut. 7:1-4). The Lord also had instructed Israel to put to death wicked men who tried to lead them to worship other gods (Deut. 13:1-18). Elijah's command likely was rooted in those two teachings.

God was working to make Himself known in several ways. He had announced a drought through Elijah to Ahab, and the drought came. He hid Elijah and provided for him during the drought. Baal, the so-called storm god, did not provide for anyone during the drought. God answered His servant's prayer and sent fire to consume the sacrifice. Baal, a mere figment of superstitious and licentious imagination, could not. The Lord had protected Elijah from Ahab, but Baal could not protect his prophets from Elijah. Shortly, God would send rain in answer to Elijah's prayer, a feat Baal had been unable to do for three and a half years. Baal was a fake god. Only the Lord is God, and He is the Sovereign God of all.

ELIJAH'S PROPHECY (18:41-46)

After having the false prophets put to death, Elijah gave a prophecy from the Lord to the king. He told Ahab to eat and drink because a heavy rain was coming. Then Elijah and a servant climbed to the top of Mount Carmel where they could see the Mediterranean Sea. The rains usually came from the west and southwest from the sea and swept across the land of promise. Elijah bowed down to

the ground in a posture of humble reverence, worship, and prayer.

As Elijah prayed, he sent his servant to look for signs of the approaching rain. Seven times the servant looked. On the seventh time the servant reported that he saw a cloud the size of a man's hand rising from the sea. The size of the cloud might have indicated that it was a good distance from shore at that point. Elijah instructed his servant to go and tell Ahab to hitch up his chariot and get off the mountain or the rain would stop him. Elijah told the king twice that rain was coming (18:41,44).

What a dramatic scene that must have been! For three and a half years Israel had looked for rain. They had not even seen any dew. Suddenly, black clouds darkened the sky; the wind roared through the mountains ahead of the rain, and then a heavy rain began to fall. Ahab rode off in his chariot to Jezreel. The power of the Lord came upon Elijah. He tucked his long outer garment into his belt and ran ahead of Ahab the 17 miles to Jezreel. Jezreel was a northern city and Ahab's winter residence.

God sent the drought in answer to prayer by Elijah (Jas. 5:17). Then He sent the rain also in response to his prayer (5:18). Elijah had informed Ahab early in the drought what God was doing and why. The Lord gave Ahab plenty of opportunity to return to the God of his fathers and to denounce Baal worship. Ahab refused to humble himself before the Lord.

The stands God requires us to take are typically far less dramatic than that taken by Elijah. The elements, however, remain the same. The Lord convinces us of the stand we should take. Usually, we have to take an unpopular stand, sometimes alone. We may be misunderstood and accused of false motives or wrong behavior. On the surface, our stand may seem pointless or ineffective. Nevertheless, the Lord honors our faithfulness and works through us to advance His purposes in ways we may or may not see. Let us follow Elijah's example and trust God for the courage we need to stand for Him who is Lord of lords and King of kings.

Elijah had defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. God had answered his prayer and consumed his offering with fire. The people had proclaimed that the Lord was

God, not Baal; and they had put to death the Baal prophets. Then Elijah prayed for rain, and it came. All of those events gave Elijah a literal and a spiritual mountaintop experience.

The Lord led His servant from Mount Carmel to Ahab's palace in Jezreel, where Jezebel was waiting for news of the day. What she heard sent her on the warpath against Elijah. He fled south beyond Beersheba, where he prayed for death. This lesson explores how God helped Elijah to refocus on Him and to follow His leadership after a time of apparent defeat.

ELIJAH FLED TO HOREB (19:1-9A)

Verse 1: The contest on Mount Carmel did not end the struggle between the worship of Baal and the worship of the Lord. Baal's prophets were dead, but Jezebel was still alive. Ahab had not changed, and Jezebel was still committed to establishing Baal worship as Israel's state religion. The destruction of Baal worship in Israel would not take place until a future king, Jehu, led a crusade against it. Ahab's reign was from 874-853 B.C. Jehu ruled from 841-814 B.C. That means Baal worship would still flourish for a number of years.

Verse 2: Queen Jezebel was furious at Elijah for what he had done on Mount Carmel. Baal's prophets had been Jezebel's prophets. She had fed all 450 of them from her table (1 Kings 18:19). They had served her god Baal, leading in worship at the temple of Baal in Samaria (16:32) and probably at other places throughout the land. Jezebel sent a death threat to Elijah. The message began with a common curse formula. Eli once used it with Samuel (1 Sam. 3:17), Saul used it with Jonathan (14:44), and King Solomon used it with Adonijah (1 Kings 2:23). The curse began with the formula—May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely. Whereas the people of Israel were supposed to believe in one God, Israel's queen believed in many gods. She invoked them all in her curse. She called a curse on herself if Elijah was not as dead as the prophets of Baal by this time tomorrow. In other words, she threatened to kill him within the next 24 hours.

Verse 3: This verse presents a different Elijah. The confident and bold prophet who had challenged and defeated 450 false prophets found himself running for his life. He traveled as fast as possible to Beersheba [bee ehr-SHEE

buh], about 100 miles from Jezreel in the extreme southern part of Judah. A look at the map shows that Elijah traveled south from Jezreel in the Northern Kingdom through the entire Southern Kingdom of Judah. The servant was the one who watched for the rain coming across the Mediterranean Sea while Elijah had prayed (1 Kings 18:43). Elijah probably had decided his days of needing a helper were over.

Verse 4: A day's journey was another 20 to 25 miles. The desert was the region to the south called the Desert of Zin. At the end of the day, Elijah sat under a broom tree and prayed to die. The broom tree was a bush that grew 10 to 12 feet high and was large enough to provide shade. Travelers in the desert also used its limbs and roots for fuel.

Though defeated and depressed, Elijah did not hesitate to pour out his feelings in prayer. He had had enough; He wanted to die. When Elijah left Mount Carmel, he thought national re-vival had broken out on that mountain. In Jezreel, Elijah was shocked to learn nothing fundamentally had changed. Jezebel's prophets may have been defeated, but not Jezebel. She was not about to back down from her stance for Baal. She vowed to kill Elijah before another full day passed. He must have felt his efforts had been in vain. Jezebel, not the Lord, seemed to have had the last word. Perhaps believing his ministry was a failure and thus was over, he asked God to take his life.

Elijah was not unlike believers today. James said he was a "man just like us" (Jas. 5:17). Most Christians can identify more with Elijah's hopelessness and depression in chapter 19 than they can his unshakable faith and powerful praying in chapter 18. Depression is no respecter of persons.

Verse 5: Elijah lay down under the tree and slept. His sleep was the sleep of physical and emotional exhaustion. God sent an angel to minister to him. Angels are God's messengers who deliver His messages and do His will. The angel awoke him and told him to take nourishment. The Lord was continuing to care for His prophet. In Kerith Ravine He had sent ravens to feed him. At Zarephath He supplied all the flour and oil that he, a widow, and her son needed to survive the drought. Here in the desert, the Lord sent a ministering angel. This was the Lord's way of showing He had not forgotten Elijah nor was He through carrying out His work through him.

Verse 6: The angel provided a hot meal and a refreshing drink. The angel apparently heated a round, flat stone in a fire made from some limbs of the broom tree and baked the bread on the stone. The bread was probably the same kind the widow had baked for him. Elijah ate and drank and went back to sleep.

Exhaustion typically is a factor in depression. Elijah had reason to be tired. He had weathered three and a half years in exile during the drought. He had experienced an exciting emotional and spiritual victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Then, he had traveled more than 100 miles from Jezreel to the Desert of Zin. He needed rest and food; the Lord provided both.

His experience is instructive for Christians today. When we feel defeated, depressed, and burned out with our Christian service, we probably need to do as Elijah did. When we are worn out, we lose perspective and do not make good decisions. We need to back off, rest up, and eat properly to begin to recover. Our bodies and our emotions call for a "time out."

A second time the angel awoke Elijah and provided food. This time, the angel told him he needed nourishment for the long journey he had before him. Either Elijah had decided to go to "Horeb, the mountain of God" (19:8) or the Lord had told him to go there. The journey was around 170 miles as the crow flies, but much longer for one traveling on land.

Horeb is in the southern part of the Sinai peninsula. Horeb is called also "Mount Sinai." The word "Sinai" probably means "shining," and Horeb means "waste" or "wilderness area." The name Sinai fits the many important revelations God made there to Moses and Israel. The name Horeb fits the massive, rocky granite cliffs that characterize the mountainous area. Elijah ate and drank. Then he traveled for 40 days and nights to Horeb. The expression "forty days and forty nights" (19:8) can be understood literally or as a way of saying "a long, long journey" or "a long, long time" (Ex. 24:18). At Horeb, Elijah went into a cave and slept.

THE LORD SPOKE TO ELIJAH (19:9B-18)

Verse 9b: The word of the LORD is a technical expression

for a prophetic revelation. Word translates a word that can mean "message," and it can refer to mental or oral communication. How this particular word came is not indicated. Sometimes, the word came through a dream or a vision in which God appeared to a person. At other times, it came through a prophet or impressions or revelations in a person's heart and mind. However it came, Elijah knew it was a word from God to him. The Lord was asking His prophet to explain why he was in a cave at Horeb. He wanted Elijah to state the motivation behind his recent actions.

Verse 10: Elijah's reply was a full disclosure of everything that was depressing him. First, he confessed that he had been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. Elijah's zeal was demonstrated in the great risks he had taken in the Lord's service. Second, the people of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, had been just the opposite, especially their king, queen, and the religious and tribal leaders. They all had rejected the Lord's covenant. The covenant was God's agreement with the people of Israel to be their God and for them to be His servant people. Third, the Israelites had broken down the Lord's altars and built altars to Baal. Fourth, they had killed the Lord's prophets (18:13). Fifth, Elijah lamented—I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.

God's servant was honest and open with the Lord. He confessed exactly how he felt and what he believed about his situation. The Lord was not disappointed or angered by Elijah's frank confession. On the contrary, God asked for his thoughts, not once but twice (19:9,13). We do not offend God when we tell Him truly how and why we feel as we do. Instead, we open an honest dialogue with Him through which He can help us.

After Elijah's confession, the Lord told him to go outside the cave and stand on the mountain "in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by" (19:11). The scene reminds us of Moses' experience with God on that same mountain. Moses asked to see the glory of God. God told him: "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen" (Ex. 33:21-23).

As Elijah was leaving the cave, the Lord sent a mighty wind that ripped into the mountains, shattering the rocks; but the Lord was not in the wind. Next, the Lord sent an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then He sent a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire either.

The storm winds, earthquake, and fire seem to be symbols of God's judgment on the sins of the Israelites. However, that message of judgment was not the word God wanted to leave with Elijah on this occasion. That word came in a "gentle whisper" (1 Kings 19:12). The Lord makes His presence and will known most often in words whispered to our hearts, not in cataclysmic and dramatic events.

Elijah covered his face and stood at the mouth of the cave. He knew the Lord was there, and he knew he could not look upon the face of God (Ex. 33:20). The Lord asked Elijah a second time why he was there on Horeb. Elijah gave the same answer he had given earlier (1 Kings 19:10,14). After Elijah's answer, the Lord revealed Himself anew to His prophet. In a gentle whisper, the Lord revealed His continuing plans for His servant.

Verse 15: God was very patient and gentle with His defeated prophet. After ministering to him, the LORD gave Elijah new marching orders. I once heard an evangelist say that there are three things Christians can do when they experience defeat and discouragement. (1) They can "re-sign" or drop out. They can give up following the Lord. (2) They can become "resigned." They can keep serving God, but in an attitude of defeat and resignation. (3) They can be "re-signed" to their contract with the Lord. They can go to the Lord and let Him reissue His call and reaffirm His promises. Elijah was at the point of being "re-signed."

Elijah had thought he was finished, that Jezebel's edict spelled the end of his ministry. He needed to be reminded that Jezebel was not the Lord God Almighty, though she acted as though she were. The Lord told His servant to go back the way he had come. God had no ministry for Elijah to perform at Horeb, but He did have a ministry for him elsewhere. The Desert of Damascus is northeast of Jezreel, east of the Jordan River.

Hazael was to become a powerful and ruthless king of the city-state of Damascus in Aram [A ruhm] (Syria). Damascus was about 60 miles east of Sidon, Jezebel's hometown.

Hazael would be God's instrument of judgment on the people of Israel and of Judah for their sins. God was not overlooking Israel's sins. Elijah was to anoint Hazael king over Aram.

Verse 16: The Lord also told Elijah to anoint Jehu [JEE hyoo] . . . king over Israel. Jehu was a military commander under Ahab and his son, Joram. Second Kings 9–10 reports how the Lord used Jehu to wipe out the whole house of Ahab as God's judgment on Jezebel for killing His prophets and other servants. The Lord did not forget the blood of those martyred for His Name in Israel. Jehu also eliminated the Baal prophets, tore down the temple of Baal, and demolished other Baal worship sites and structures. He virtually destroyed Baal worship in Israel (2 Kings 9–10).

The Lord further instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha [ih LIGH shuh] as his successor. Second Kings records Elisha's ministry. God's plans would be carried on through Elijah's successor. Workers come and go, but God's work goes on.

The biblical record shows that we are to understand the commands to anoint in 1 Kings 19:15-16 figuratively. Elijah "anointed" Elisha by throwing his cloak around him (1 Kings 19:19-21). The "anointing" of Hazael and Jehu was done by Elijah only in the sense that he "anointed" Elisha. Elisha, as Elijah's God-chosen successor, was directly instrumental in Hazael's becoming king of Aram. He did not literally anoint Hazael, but he precipitated Hazael's seizing the crown by prophesying that he would become king (2 Kings 8:7-15). Elisha later sent a young prophet to privately anoint Jehu king of the Northern Kingdom (9:1-8).

Verse 17: The thrust of this verse is the totality and completeness of God's judgment. Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha all would be involved in the events through which the Lord would bring judgment on Israel and the Baal worshipers. The role assigned Elisha in this verse probably is to be understood figuratively. His weapon was the word of the Lord.

Verse 18: Then the Lord gave Elijah a more realistic picture of the status of godly religion in Israel. Elijah thought he was the last of the faithful in that land. Not so. The Lord had seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal or whose mouths have not kissed his image as an act

of worship. The seven thousand could be a rounded number of the faithful. Because the number seven represents perfection, it might signify the faithful remnant in Israel who had not listened to Jezebel or worshiped her god.

God's commands put Elijah back to work. He became active again and began to carry out his new ministry. Jezebel might have defeated him temporarily, but that defeat did not disqualify him for further service. The Lord helped him with his disappointment and depression and sent him back into the battle renewed and committed. Believers need to continue seeking the Lord and following His leadership in spite of times of seeming defeat and discouragement.

THE LORD CALLED ELISHA (19:19-21)

Elijah left Horeb and returned to northern Israel. Along the way he found Elisha plowing in Abel Meholah [AY buhl-meh HOH luh] (1 Kings 19:16), a community in the territory of Manasseh near the Jordan. He had 12 yoke of oxen plowing, an indication of his family's wealth; he was working one of the pairs himself. Elijah threw his cloak around him. The prophet's cloak was a symbol of his prophetic office. This action thus indicated that God was bestowing prophetic powers on Elisha and calling him as Elijah's successor.

Elisha asked Elijah for permission to properly bid his parents goodbye. Elijah replied, "Go back . . . What have I done to you" (19:20)? The prophet might have been testing Elisha by seeming to withdraw the prophetic call. More likely, Elijah was simply telling Elisha that he had done nothing to prevent him bidding his family goodbye. Elisha slaughtered his oxen and cooked the meat over a fire fueled by his plowing equipment. These acts marked a clean break with his old life of farming. Elisha knew God's call demanded a lifetime commitment. After feeding the people of the household, he joined Elijah "and became his attendant" (19:21). An "attendant" was one who rendered personal service to an important person. One way God encourages us is by calling others into His service. We do not stand alone in serving the Lord.

BEN-HADAD ATTACKED SAMARIA (20:1-12)

The scene shifts again to King Ahab. Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, marched against Samaria, Ahab's capital city. Thirty-two kings with their military forces joined the Aram

king in besieging the city. The kings probably ruled over independent cities or regions in Aram.

Ben-Hadad demanded that Ahab give to him his silver, his gold, and his best wives and children. Probably as a compromise to end the siege, Ahab agreed. Ben-Hadad then announced he would send his officials to search the palace and the houses of Ahab's officials and seize everything they valued. Ben-Hadad planned to ransack Samaria.

Ahab's elders advised him to resist. An exchange of messages followed, each more defiant than the last. Finally the king of Aram ordered his men, "Prepare to attack" (20:12).

AHAB DEFEATED BEN-HADAD (20:13-34)

The Lord in His mercy came to the aid of Ahab and Israel. An unnamed prophet came to Ahab with a message from the Lord. The message declared that the Lord would give Ahab the victory over Ben-Hadad's vast army that day. Then Ahab would know that the Lord truly is God. The Lord was giving Ahab another strong message to abandon Baalism and to worship the Lord God.

When the prophet told Ahab God would deliver the Aramean army into his hands, Ahab asked how and by whom. The prophet said Ahab's young officers of the provincial commanders would win the battle, and Ahab would lead it. So Ahab led 232 young officers and 7,000 Israelites against Ben-Hadad and his forces at noon while they were drinking. Noon was a traditional time of rest. Ahab and his men overpowered the Arameans and pursued them as they fled. The Arameans suffered grievous losses, but Ben-Hadad escaped on horseback with some of his horsemen.

The prophet came again to Ahab and told him Ben-Hadad would come against him the following spring. Ahab needed to do what was necessary to be prepared. Ben-Hadad's officials analyzed the Aramean defeat. They concluded that Israel's gods were gods of the hills. If Ben-Hadad fought Israel on the plains, he would win. So the king of Aram selected new officers and raised a new army. When spring came, they challenged Ahab by camping at Aphek near the Sea of Galilee. Ahab and his forces moved to confront the Arameans.

As they positioned for battle, the man of God brought Ahab a message from the Lord. Since the Arameans thought the Lord was a God of hills and not valleys, the Lord would again give Ahab the victory. Once more the Lord was showing Ahab that He was Israel's God (20:13). This is another example of God's mercy and patience with Ahab and His efforts to win him.

On the first day of battle, the Arameans lost 100 thousand men. In Aphek, a wall collapsed and killed 27 thousand more. God defeated the Arameans decisively. Ben-Hadad, fearing for his life, hid in Aphek. The Aramean king's officials suggested that Ben-Hadad throw himself on the mercy of King Ahab. They would go to Ahab on behalf of their king dressed as mourners with ropes around their heads, signs of their total submission. The ropes indicated that Ahab could hang them if he so chose. The plan worked. Ahab drew up a treaty with Ben-Hadad. In return for his life, Ben-Hadad would return the cities his father had taken from Ahab's father (15:20). He also gave Ahab access to markets in Damascus. On the basis of that treaty, Ahab let Ben-Hadad go.

God's greatness is seen in His gracious acts toward those that oppose Him and His purposes. He is truly a redemptive Lord.

THE LORD CONDEMNED AHAB (20:35-43)

The Lord sent a word to Ahab through one of the sons of the prophets. This unnamed man was one of the prophets who gathered together in schools or communities in different parts of Israel. After having a fellow prophet strike and wound him, the man went to a road where he knew he would meet Ahab. He disguised himself with a headband or possibly a bandage down over his eyes. The prophet called out to Ahab and told him a false story about how he was wounded. The prophet used the story much like Nathan used one with David after David's sin against Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 12:4).

The prophet told Ahab that he had been commanded to guard a captive with his life. If the captive got away, he would have to die or pay a heavy fine. Then the prophet said that man escaped while he was distracted by other duties. The man's story seemed to be an appeal for royal pardon. King Ahab offered no solace. He told the presumed soldier that he had pronounced his own sentence—either he had to pay the fine or die. Getting the response

that he wanted, the prophet removed the headband and delivered the Lord's message. Ahab recognized him as one of the prophets. In the message the Lord told Ahab that he had set free a man God had determined should die. Therefore, Ahab must pay with his life for Ben-Hadad's life and with his people for Ben-Hadad's people. "Sullen and angry," Ahab stalked off to his palace in Samaria (20:43).

In Israel, when the Lord led His people into battle, they considered the battle a holy war. God was fighting an enemy He wanted destroyed. Since God sent Ahab to battle Ben-Hadad, Ahab should have destroyed both his men and the king also. God's battles were judgments on His enemies for their sins and their crimes against other people. Ahab let a king live whom God was bringing to judgment. Therefore, God pronounced judgment and death on Ahab.

God had extended mercy and grace to Ahab time and time again. The king hardened his heart and continued on the path that would lead to personal and national destruction. As always, the Lord ultimately is in control. We need not fear or be discouraged.

Though the Lord had demonstrated His sovereignty on Carmel and had given Ahab successive victories over Ben-Hadad, Ahab's heart was unmoved. He continued to lead Israel into sin through promoting idolatry. This included the worship of the golden calves as well as the worship of Baal. Elijah pronounced judgment on Ahab and Jezebel for their conspiracy against Naboth to gain his vineyard (chap. 21).

This lesson focuses primarily on a prophet named Micaiah (chap. 22). When pressured to compromise God's message, Micaiah chose to be true to the Lord. He gave to Ahab God's message even though it was opposite the message 400 other prophets had given the king.

ELIJAH CONDEMNED AHAB OVER NABOTH'S VINEYARD (21:1-29)

Some time had passed since Ahab's victories over Ben-Hadad of Aram. Ahab was at his palace in Jezreel. He set his heart on obtaining a nearby vineyard and using it as a vegetable garden. Naboth, the owner, refused to part with the ancestral property (see Lev. 25:23).

Ahab became "sullen and angry" at Naboth (1 Kings 21:4).

The word translated sullen means “peevish, heavy, sad.” The word for angry can mean “displeased.” “He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat”—a sad description of Israel’s king (21:4).

When Jezebel learned the reason her husband was in such a pathetic state of mind, she assured him that she would get him what he wanted. She would give him a demonstration in the use of royal authority. The queen sent letters to the elders and nobles of Jezreel under Ahab’s seal, that is, with royal authority. The letters instructed them to declare a day of fasting. Such a called fast implied that the community was in trouble, evidently from someone’s sinful behavior. As people assembled for the day of fasting, the leaders were to make sure Naboth was seated where all could see him. They were to place near him two men who, for a price, had consented to falsely accuse Naboth of cursing God and the king. Then they were to have Naboth executed by stoning, thus supposedly purging the community of the guilt. The community leaders carried out her orders, and Ahab took over Naboth’s vineyard.

Jezebel’s plan may have fooled the people, but not the Lord. God sent a message to Ahab through Elijah. He condemned the king and declared he would die a violent death, as would Jezebel. Also, the Lord would end Ahab’s line—his descendants and every male in his family, slave or free, would be wiped out as were the houses of Jeroboam (14:10-11) and Baasha (16:3-4). The Lord destroyed their dynasties because they had sinned and caused Israel to sin. Putting to death every male ensured that Ahab would have no descendants to assume Israel’s throne.

Concerning the king, the Lord’s message was—“In the place the dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!” (1 Kings 21:19; see 22:34-38). Concerning the queen—“Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel” (21:23; see 2 Kings 9:30-37). Dogs also would devour the members of Ahab’s family who died in the city, and birds would feed on those who died in the country. These prophecies indicated their deaths would be violent. The situation would not allow for properly burying the dead, a terrible disgrace in Hebrew thought. (Second Kings 10:1-17 reports the deaths of Ahab’s descendants.) First Kings 21:25-26 is a parenthetical evaluation of Ahab.

None could compare with him; he was worse than his pre-

decessors. He “sold himself to do evil” in the Lord’s eyes, indicating his being a willing slave of sin. Jezebel urged him to that kind of lifestyle, but he was responsible for his attitudes and actions. Apparently, he wanted to do all that she pressured him to do. He behaved in the most detestable manner by worshiping idols. All of the Northern Kingdom’s kings continued the idol worship at Dan and Bethel, but Ahab was the absolute worst of all. His behavior was typical of the Amorites’ way of life. The term “Amorites” in 21:26 refers to the tribes that occupied the land of promise before the Israelites drove them out.

After Elijah’s dire prophecy to Ahab, the king humbled himself before the Lord. He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, fasted, and went around meekly. These were signs of mourning and/or repentance (1 Kings 21:27-29). As an expression of His great mercy, the Lord sent a word to Elijah saying He would not bring disaster on Ahab’s house until the days of his son.

AHAB PLANNED TO RETAKE RAMOTH GILEAD (22:1-12)

For three years after Ahab’s two victories over Aram, the last of which resulted in a treaty at Aphek, the two nations were at peace. The 41-year reign of King Asa in Judah ended, and his son Jehoshaphat [jih HAHSH uh fat] succeeded him (15:10,24). Jehoshaphat allied himself with Ahab by his marriage to Ahab’s daughter, Athaliah (2 Chron. 18:1; see also 2 Kings 8:18, 26-27). During that third year of peace, Jehoshaphat visited Ahab in Samaria. Ahab asked Jehoshaphat to help him retake Ramoth Gilead. Ahab already had discussed the matter with his officials, who must have agreed Israel should reclaim Ramoth Gilead from Aram.

Ramoth Gilead was about 30 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee. The city probably was one of those Ben-Hadad had promised to restore in the treaty with Ahab (1 Kings 20:34). Apparently, he had not done so. The king of Judah agreed, saying, “I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses” (22:4). This statement illustrates the implications of their alliance by marriage. However, Jehoshaphat wanted Ahab to seek counsel of the Lord about such a plan. Such a request by Jehoshaphat is in line with a later description of his reign over Judah (22:41-50)—he walked in the ways of Asa and did right in the eyes of the Lord.

Ahab brought together 400 prophets and asked whether he should go to war against Ramoth Gilead. Because these prophets spoke for the Lord, these apparently were prophets related to the worship centers at Dan and Bethel. To a man they told him to fight, promising that the Lord would give Ahab victory. Their quick answer seems to indicate they knew what their king wanted to hear and were committed to tell him just that. They had a vested interest in pleasing the king.

Jehoshaphat asked Ahab whether a prophet of the Lord was available. His question indicated he did not accept the 400 as true prophets of the Lord. The text refers to the 400 simply as “prophets” by vocation (22:6); Jehoshaphat wanted a God-called “prophet of the Lord” (22:7). Ahab’s reply reminds us of his childish self-centeredness in pouting over Naboth’s refusal to sell the vineyard. We almost can hear his whining tone as he acknowledged one prophet of the Lord was available but that he hated that prophet. Why? Because he never prophesied good about Ahab, only bad. King Ahab liked prophets who told him what he wanted to hear, not what he ought to hear. Jehoshaphat gently chided Ahab for saying what he did about the Lord’s prophet. Ahab identified this prophet as Micaiah and sent word for his officials to bring him before the kings. The scene for the meeting of Micaiah and the kings was impressive.

Both kings were dressed in their royal robes and were seated on thrones by the gate of Samaria. The 400 prophets of the Israelite religion were prophesying before the kings. One prophet, Zedekiah [ZED uh KIGH uh], had made a set of iron horns and prophesied, “With these you will gore the Arameans until they are destroyed” (22:11). The other prophets were saying the same thing, telling the kings to attack for the Lord would give them victory.

MICAIAH PROPHESED AHAB’S DEATH (22:13-28)

Verse 13: Meanwhile, Ahab’s messenger found Micaiah [migh KAY yah]. He told the true prophet the question of the day and that the 400 prophets had been unanimous in predicting success in retaking Ramoth Gilead. He urged Micaiah to follow their lead. We do not know whether the messenger was speaking on the prophets’ behalf, on the king’s behalf, or on Micaiah’s behalf. Whatever his motivation, he was putting pressure on the prophet to speak favorably. This brought a firm response from Micaiah.

Verse 14: Micaiah replied with a solemn oath that indicated the truth of whatever followed it and the sincerity of the entire statement. Micaiah declared that his business was not to please kings or to get along with other prophets. His business was to proclaim only God's re-vealed truth.

God's prophet was being pressured to tell Ahab exactly what all the other supposed prophets were saying. Those prophets were among those who "follow their own spirit and have seen nothing" (Ezek. 13:3). Also, Micaiah was to prophesy before two kings. He was keenly aware of the danger Ahab posed. Ahab already had killed Naboth to get something he wanted. His wife Jezebel had killed many of the Lord's prophets in her zeal to promote Baal worship. Most believers experience various kinds of pressure to compromise Christian convictions. Let us follow Micaiah's example and take a firm stand on God's Word, doing only what He wants us to do.

Verses 15-16: On the surface, Micaiah's answer to the king's question was what Ahab wanted to hear. Micaiah told him to attack. That answered whether or not Ahab should seek to reclaim the disputed city from Aram. He also prophesied the outcome would be advantageous. He said the LORD would give the city to Ahab.

Ahab clearly understood that the prophet was not speaking sincerely. Micaiah might have given his answer sarcastically, mockingly, or overenthusiastically. Perhaps he spoke mechanically, merely parroting the other prophets. Also, Ahab knew from the way Micaiah spoke that the prophet's true answer would not be favorable. Ahab admonished Micaiah to tell him the true message God had given to him.

Micaiah's initial answer to Ahab was his way of acknowledging the pressure he was under to please the king by telling him what he wanted to hear. It also was his way of declaring to the king that what he wanted to hear was far from the truth he needed to hear. When the king demanded the truth, the prophet was ready to give it to him.

Verse 17: Micaiah described to Ahab a vision the Lord had given him—the people of Israel without a master (king) were scattered as sheep without a shepherd. Some Bible students view the vision as meaning Ahab was not the

true leader of Israel and therefore the people should not follow him into battle at Ramoth Gilead. More likely, the vision means Ahab would be killed in the battle and Israel would be leaderless. The people would go home defeated; the city would remain in Aram's hands.

Ahab commented to Jehoshaphat that Micaiah's prophecy simply illustrated that the prophet never would prophesy anything good for Ahab. His comment shows that he dismissed God's message through Micaiah as originating in the prophet's bias against him.

Verse 19: Micaiah called for Ahab to hear (and heed) the word of the LORD to him. He related a second vision in which the Lord was on his throne with all the host of heaven in attendance. The position of God on his throne implies God is Sovereign over all people and events. He is in control. The heavenly host are His servants who wait on Him, ready to do what He commands.

Verse 20: The word translated entice carries the meaning "to delude." God already had predicted Ahab's death (20:42; 21:19). The battle at Ramoth Gilead would be the place where the death sentence would be carried out.

Verses 21-22: The lying spirit represented God's judgment on Ahab. The Lord would use the wrong advice of the prophets to lure Ahab into the battle that would take his life.

Verse 23: Bible students have struggled with the idea of the holy LORD of hosts putting a lying spirit in the mouths of the 400 prophets. The text focuses primarily on God's sovereignty. Nothing escapes His notice or operates outside His control. In this vision and remarkable revelation, Micaiah sees and hears God's sovereign awareness that the lying prophets would continue their established pattern of lying and that Ahab, whose established pattern was to reject God's messengers, would continue to believe the false prophets' lies. Yet the Lord also warned Ahab he would not succeed in battle (1 Kings 22:28). The Lord's foreknowledge is clearly evident in this passage. Ahab was deceived by his own perverse heart, not by prophets. He already had made up his mind to try to take Ramoth Gilead. Jehoshaphat, not Ahab, called for a word of the Lord from prophets. The message of Micaiah's vision was not at all deceptive. He said plainly: The LORD has decreed

disaster for you.

Even though the Lord knew what Ahab would do, He patiently and mercifully sent His true word to Ahab through Micaiah. God gave the king an opportunity to hear the truth and to act on it. Micaiah even told Ahab that the 400 prophets were lying to him. Ahab's hardened heart and self-will determined his decision. His choice brought God's judgment on him to completion.

Did God compel Ahab to reject His word? No, that was Ahab's own choice. Did God compel Ahab's prophets to prophesy what Ahab wanted to hear? No, that was their own choice, rooted in their desire to stay in the good graces of Ahab. As sovereign Lord, God chose to use all of this to accomplish His sentence of death on Israel's unfaithful and disobedient king.

Micaiah resisted the pressure to compromise God's message. He refused to take a popular and easier path. God expects us to hold to and live by His revealed truth despite any pressure to do otherwise. Micaiah suffered immediate consequences for standing by his convictions, but God ultimately vindicated him.

After Micaiah finished speaking, Zedekiah, who seems to have been the spokesman for the 400 prophets, slapped Micaiah. A slap was a grave insult. Zedekiah asked how God's Spirit had moved from him to Micaiah. Zedekiah thus implied that he had prophesied under the Lord's leadership and that Micaiah was the lying prophet. Micaiah answered that Zedekiah would realize who had God's Spirit when he found himself hiding after Aram defeated Israel at Ramoth Gilead (22:24-25). Infuriated at Micaiah, Ahab ordered him imprisoned and fed only bread and water until he safely returned from battle (22:26-27).

Verse 28: Micaiah was applying to himself the standard Moses gave for determining who was a true prophet (Deut. 18:21-22). The mark of a true prophet was that what he prophesied would happen. A false prophet's words would not come true. Coming events would prove Micaiah's message was from the Lord. Even in face of prison, he stood on God's word. His stand is a challenge for us to base our behavior on the teachings of God's Word, regardless of worldly pressure to do otherwise.

AHAB DIED IN RAMOTH GILEAD (22:29-40)

Disregarding God's warning through Micaiah, Ahab and Jehoshaphat led their forces to Ramoth Gilead to battle the king of Aram and his army. Ahab must have suspected that Micaiah's proph-ecy could be true. He decided to enter the battle disguised as a regular soldier but had Jehoshaphat wear royal robes. The two kings led their men into battle. The king of Aram's strategy was to assign Ahab as the solitary target for his 32 chariot commanders. Seeing Jehoshaphat's royal robes, the charioteers attacked him. Under orders to attack only Ahab, they stopped when they realized he was not the king of Israel.

During the battle, the Lord's announced judgment on Ahab took the form of an Aramean arrow launched at no particular target. It struck Ahab between sections of his armor. Ahab told his chariot driver to get him out of the fighting because he had been wounded. For the remainder of the day, Ahab's men propped him up in his chariot facing the Arameans to encourage the Isra-elite troops. His wound continued to hemorrhage, and the blood pooled on the floor of his char-iot. By evening he was dead. Since they had no leader, Ahab's army cried, "Every man to his town; everyone to his land!" (22:36). That cry echoed Micaiah's prophecy (22:17).

Ahab's body was taken to Samaria and buried. When Ahab's blood was washed out of the chariot, dogs licked it up just as the word of the Lord had declared (21:19). During Ahab's reign, he had built a luxurious palace liberally decorated with ivory. Archaeological discoveries have uncovered ivory panels at Samaria. He also fortified various cities in his kingdom. The author of Kings reported that the book of the annals of the kings of Israel recorded other events of Ahab's reign.

JEHOSHAPHAT REIGNED IN JUDAH (22:41-50)

The account of reigns of Judah's kings resumes with 22:41. The death of King Asa was reported in 15:24. Asa's son Jehoshaphat succeeded his father and became king of Judah at age 35. His reign lasted for 25 years, from 873 to 848 B.C. Second Chronicles gives a fuller report of his reign (chaps. 17-20).

All of Israel's kings had done evil in the sight of the Lord, so the report that Jehoshaphat did right is refreshing. Though Jehoshaphat followed the Lord as had his father

Asa, he did not remove the popular high places. Therefore, people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there. During his reign, he enjoyed peace with Israel, probably because of the alliance created by the marriage between his son and Ahab's daughter. Jehoshaphat rid the land of the remaining male shrine prostitutes who remained in Judah after Asa's death. He established control over Edom and possibly appointed the deputy who ruled Edom. Taking a cue from Solomon's reign, Jehoshaphat built a fleet of trading ships; but they were wrecked at Ezion Geber before they ever sailed.

Second Chronicles reports that the Lord was with Jehoshaphat because in his early years he modeled himself after King David. He did not turn to the Baals for leadership but rather sought God. He was careful to obey the Lord's commands (2 Chron. 17:3-4). To educate the people of Judah in the Word and ways of the Lord, he sent teachers to all the towns (17:7-10). He also established a just judicial system throughout his kingdom, insisting that judges understand they were acting for the Lord and needed to depend on Him (19:4-11). He also fought and defeated both Moab and Ammon when they tried to attack Judah (20:1-30). Jehoshaphat's sup-port of Ahab against Aram did not please the Lord, but Jehoshaphat did set his heart on seeking God (19:1-3). God blessed him and gave him a righteous and fruitful reign.

Jehoshaphat died and his family buried him with his fathers in the city of David. His son Jehoram succeeded him. Second Kings 8:16-24 records Jehoram's reign.

AHAZIAH REIGNED IN ISRAEL (22:51-53)

After Ahab died, his son Ahaziah became king of Israel in Samaria. His reign lasted only two years, but he was a chip off the old block of Ahab. He followed the steps of his father Ahab, his mother Jezebel, and also Jeroboam. Ahaziah worshiped and served Baal, provoking the Lord to anger just as his father Ahab had done. Second Kings reports Ahaziah's worship of Baal and his encounters with Elijah (1:1-18).

Let us affirm that we will base our words and deeds on God's revealed truth.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 19

2 KINGS 1:1–6:7

AHAZIAH'S DEATH (2 KINGS 1:1-18)

The transition of power necessitated by a king's death always was a dangerous time in ancient monarchies. The first priority of a new king was to secure his throne against internal rivals. Therefore subjugated peoples saw such an occasion as a prime opportunity to attempt to gain freedom. During the reign of Ahab, Israel governed Moab. When Ahab's son Ahaziah became king, the Moabites immediately revolted.

Before Ahaziah could end the Moabite rebellion he was injured in an accident. He sought to discover from the Philistine god Baal-zebul if the injury was fatal. This inquiry of a foreign god provoked the Lord's wrath. He sent the prophet Elijah [ih LIGH juh] to pronounce judgment against the idolatrous king. Twice when the king attempted to arrest the prophet, Ahaziah's troops were destroyed by fire from heaven. The third patrol sought God's mercy and was spared. Ahaziah could not thwart God's verdict and less than two years after his coronation, he died from the injury.

Having no heir, his brother Joram became king in his place. The meaning was clear. The Lord is God and the Lord demanded that His covenant people be faithful to Him alone.

ELIJAH'S TRANSLATION TO HEAVEN (2:1-12)

The prophet Elijah dominated the scene in Israel in the ninth century B.C. His name means "the Lord is God." The name epitomized his message. His complex and enigmatic personality preferred life in the desert, but his calling demanded that frequently he travel to the capital city to counsel and confront kings. He was assertive in the presence of powerful men, yet gracious to a lonely foreign widow. He could bravely challenge a host of enemies to an incredible public contest, then tremble in fear after the Lord gave him victory.

Elijah had opposed the political and religious policies of Ahab and his pagan wife Jezebel. Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Sidon. She was devoted to the storm god Baal and campaigned for her religion in Israel. The erotic

nature of Baal's fertility cult was attractive to the sensual nature of many apostate citizens. So Jezebel enjoyed widespread success.

However, Elijah consistently thwarted her in her goal of converting the entire population to Baalism. He relied on the Lord's power, a power she and her prophets could not match.

Elijah spoke as the Lord willed and rain did not fall for a few years (1 Kings 17:1). On Mount Carmel the prophet called down fire from heaven when the prophets of Baal could not. The confrontation humiliated Jezebel's religious aspirations and damaged her public image. The event also sparked a massacre of her clergy. Despite her striving, Elijah escaped Jezebel's attempt to kill him. When Elijah became discouraged because of Jezebel's threat to take his life, the Lord gave His prophet some specific tasks to carry out. One of those assignments was to anoint Elisha as his successor (19:16).

Verse 1: The time for the great prophet's departure was at hand. Apparently Elisha [ih LIGH shuh] knew that God would take Elijah away on this particular day. Indeed the knowledge that Elijah's exit was imminent seems to have been widespread among the sons of the prophets. The reader of 2 Kings learns that God will use a whirlwind to take Elijah into heaven. However, the biblical narrative does not suggest that Elijah and Elisha were aware of this method for re-moving the senior prophet. Clearly they expected that something extraordinary would occur. However Elisha's later astonishment at the actual event implies that he at least lacked detailed information about its specifics. Elijah anticipated his departure with joy. His work was over and soon he would be with the Lord. The younger man's anticipation was more stoical. He was distressed because he was losing his teacher. Both men, however, were acutely aware that a sovereign God was orchestrating the events.

After the Lord had instructed Elijah to appoint Elisha as his successor, the senior prophet walked up to him as Elisha plowed in the field. Instead of speaking, Elijah took off his mantle and draped it over Elisha. The hairy cloak symbolized the office of prophet. Placement of the garment on Elisha indicated that God had designated him to be Elijah's successor.

Thereafter Elisha killed the oxen pulling his plow. He sacrificed them on a fire by burning the plowing equipment. He irrevocably walked away from his vocation in agriculture in order to be the Lord's prophet. Since the day of his calling, the younger man had served Elijah.

On the day mentioned in 2 Kings 2:1 the two prophets were walking from the town of Gilgal [GIL gal]. Although several towns were named Gilgal, their journey's origin may well have been the site of Israel's first camp in the promised land. It was an important worship center. The location may remind readers of Joshua's succession of Moses that occurred in that same area (Num. 27:18-23; Josh. 1:1-11).

Verse 2: Elijah broke the heavy silence. He made a polite request, not a harsh command. He asked his companion not to proceed further. He himself intended to go to Bethel as God had instructed. Abram had built an altar near Bethel after he arrived in Canaan (Gen. 12:8). The Israelites had taken Bethel along with Ai shortly after the destruction of Jericho. So the destination recalled God's promise to give the land to the patriarchs' descendants and Israel's conquest of the territory under Joshua. After Israel's separation from Judah, the town's religious sanctuary emerged as a primary rival of Jerusalem's temple. It had become a focal point of the Northern Kingdom's religion.

Elijah's request presented his younger companion with a test of Elisha's determination to follow the elder prophet. Elijah was going to Bethel in obedience to God's instruction. What would Elisha do? Would he continue or would he return to Gilgal? His decision would disclose his suitability for the prophetic office. Obedience to the Lord was mandatory for discharging that responsibility. Nothing—not even the advice of a trusted teacher—should interfere with a prophet's determination to obey God's call. If God had called Elisha to be Elijah's successor, God would require him to follow Elijah. Would he listen to God or would he listen to Elijah?

Elisha's answer was unequivocal. He chose to follow his master as long as possible. Only if the Lord ceased to be God (an utter impossibility) or only when Elijah died would Elisha cease following his mentor. Elisha's commitment was firm.

Verse 3: When the two arrived in Bethel the sons of the prophets met them. These were members of a prophetic community associated with Elijah. Their exact function is not clear. They may have been apprentices in training similar to students in seminary today. They also may have been the prophet's assistants. In any case they were aware of Elijah's impending departure. They inquired of Elisha if he knew that today was the day he would be separated from Elijah. The designation of Elijah as your master called attention to Elisha's servant status. He did what Elijah instructed him to do. Elisha asserted that he knew and commanded the sons of the proph-ets' silence. His refusal to discuss the matter further presumably reveals his apprehension over losing Elijah.

Once again Elijah requested his protégé not to follow him farther. Again Elisha insisted that he would never leave his master (v. 4). After leaving Bethel they journeyed to Jericho, another site associated with Joshua. Once more Elijah repeated his appeal for Elisha to go no farther. Elisha's answer did not change. Finally, Elijah instructed Elisha to remain behind because the Lord was sending him to the Jordan. For the third time, Elisha refused. Three times Elisha had been tested. Three times he had passed the test. He could not be dissuaded. Each step of the journey had been in response to directions from the Lord.

Verses 7-8: When the two travelers reached the banks of the Jordan, 50 sons of the prophets stood some distance away and watched to see what would happen next. Possibly because of Elisha's reticence, they decided to follow the two prophets so that they might learn what would happen to Elijah. Their presence made them witnesses to a specific sign that God had chosen Elisha as Elijah's successor.

Although various fords exist in this region, the Jordan River could be a formidable barrier. During the spring when Israel crossed it under Joshua the river rose to near flood level making its fords impassible (see Josh. 3:14-17). The water level on this occasion is unknown. For Elijah the depth of the water was irrelevant. He removed his mantle. The mantle signified divine authority manifested through prophetic ministry. When Elijah had placed it on Elisha earlier (1 Kings 19:19), he symbolically transferred that authority to Elisha. On the occasion recorded in 2 Kings 2:8, Elijah demonstrated the extent and power of that

authority. He rolled up the garment as if it was the rod of Moses and struck the water of the Jordan. The river parted immediately, and the two walked across on dry land. An earlier parting of the Jordan by Joshua allowed Israel to cross on dry land. That event paralleled the incident where Moses had parted the Red Sea. Joshua's crossing denoted a continuity of the exodus from Egypt. It confirmed Joshua's calling as the successor to Moses and served as a sign of his authority. More importantly, it stressed the continuity of the power of God. God was present in both events. He also was present on this occasion.

Verse 9: The two prophets' time together was drawing to a close. Elijah sensed that Elisha had been so persistent for a reason. Therefore Elijah asked his student if he could do anything else for him before he departed. Elisha responded by asking for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. The Hebrew term translated spirit literally means "wind, breath, mind," or "spirit." In some contexts the word refers to physical life. However, the unique feature of human life is the spiritual not the physical. God had breathed life directly into humanity at creation. Thus spirit came to denote the entire immaterial consciousness of one's life. In the case of Elijah it encompassed his special relationship with God. He was a Spirit-filled and empowered prophet of God. Elisha wanted to be like his master. God had called him to be Elijah's successor. The thought must have been overwhelming. Elisha realized that the task exceeded his capabilities. How could a mere farmer stand before the nation and declare "this is what God says" about the issues facing his society?

The significance of Elisha's request has its background in Deuteronomy 21:17. According to the law, a firstborn son was entitled to a double portion of his father's inheritance. He was the primary heir to both wealth and status in the family. Hence if Elisha was to carry out the enormous task ahead of him, the mighty power that worked in Elijah must continue to work through him. Perhaps Elisha desires both Elijah's spiritual strength and his responsibilities, or he may be simply asking for the spiritual strength to do the job that he has known would someday be his (see 1 Kings 19:16,19-21).

Verse 10: Elijah realized that granting Elisha's request was beyond his ability. Only God had the power to fulfill Elisha's request. Prophets were not appointed by other

human beings. God called them. If God had chosen Elisha to be his successor, then God would equip and empower the eager would-be prophet. If God had not called him, anything that Elijah might say would be meaningless. Therefore, Elijah's answer left the matter between Elisha and God. If God granted the younger man the privilege of witnessing Elijah's departure, and if Elisha was heedful of the revelation, then God would bestow on Elisha the power to become Elijah's successor.

Elijah modeled prophetic ministry for Elisha. The novice desired to follow in his master's footsteps. Since that day in his parents' field, Elisha had followed Elijah. The older prophet had taught his younger assistant about the role of a prophet. As their time together drew to a close, the teacher continued to instruct his pupil. Sensing his attendant's spiritual sensitivity to God, Elijah had persisted in mentoring Elisha and preparing him for his future tasks. Christians can become so absorbed in their own ministry that they become insensitive to less experienced believers. If the church is to continue its ministry through the generations, experienced believers must be sensitive to God's activity in the lives of new converts. They need to mentor them and to point them in the appropriate direction.

Verse 11: The two men continued their journey. For one, the end of the road was just ahead. For the other, the road was only beginning. As they walked they continued to talk. Without warning a chariot of fire with horses of fire rapidly swept between them. Their conversation was ended. Elijah's ministry was finished. He had accomplished all that God had commanded. He had not been a perfect follower. On one occasion he had become discouraged and had run from Jezebel. The Lord, however, had encouraged his prophet and had given him new assignments. Elijah had continued in faithful ministry until he was transported into heaven in the whirlwind.

Verse 12: Elisha watched in astonishment. The suddenness of the episode stunned him. He watched as the unbelievable display vanished above him, carrying his companion in its rush of wind. Elisha kept calling out, "My father, my father." In ancient Israel the overruling relationship was family.

Central to every family unit was the father. He enjoyed

the ultimate authority over all family members. He was respected, and sons desired to be like him. Elisha's designation of Eli-jah as his father was an extreme compliment that reflected deep devotion. It described an influential relationship. Elisha had left his physical parents to become a prophet. Since then Elijah had become his family. Now the great prophet was gone.

The reference to the departing prophet as the chariots and horsemen of Israel was pro-found. The real strength of the nation lay not in military technology or armed forces but in the prophetic word. Unquestionably Elisha had been reminded of the nation's history as he traveled with Elijah. Too often the monarchy relied on treaties with other nations and strong military forces for protection. However, the nation's real security came from God who spoke through His preachers the prophets. Elijah had been a prophet with unusual prophetic power and spiritual depth. Later Israel's king would use the same expression when Elisha died (2 Kings 13:14).

The wind died and the fiery chariots disappeared. From that moment Elisha saw Elijah no more in this life. In his anguish he tore his outer garment. Ripping clothing was an expression of grief. The end of such an illustrious spiritual leadership produced distress, especially in one who recognized the significance of its absence.

ELIJAH'S SUCCESSION TO PROPHETIC MINISTRY (2:13-18)

Verses 13-14: Elijah's prophetic mantle had fallen to earth. Elisha picked it up. A new era of prophetic proclamation had begun. Elisha was not Elijah. The personality of each was unique. The circumstances they faced varied. Yet both were great men of God. Greatness results from allowing God to work through one's own distinctiveness. When people simply attempt to duplicate another person they only become inferior copies. Elisha would become an outstanding prophetic voice in Israel. But his ministry would be uniquely his, not merely an imitation of his mentor's ministry.

Elisha carried the mantle back to the bank of the Jordan, to the same place that he had earlier crossed with Elijah. One wonders at his thoughts as he stood at the edge of the water. Did he look across the river and imagine that moment in history when these waters had parted to allow Israel to cross under Joshua? Assuredly Elisha remem-

bered his previous crossing. The prophetic garment is described as the mantle Elijah had dropped. It was the same garment with which he had struck the water earlier. Elijah's ministry was over. Elisha had become God's voice to apostate Israel. Elisha asked, "Where is the LORD God of Elijah?" His designation of God as the LORD God was comprehensive. The LORD (Yahweh) was God's personal name. The name revealed His desire for intimate personal relationships with people. The term God recalled that He is sovereign Creator. Where was the God who had rained fire at Carmel when Elijah prayed? The text does not indicate if the question was intended for Elisha or for the sons of the prophets who stood nearby. Conceivably it was for both. Elisha then did as Elijah had done. He struck the waters with the mantle. Once more the water divided and exposed a dry path across its bed. Elisha stepped into the passage and walked across the river. He had duplicated the miracle of his mentor. Elijah was gone but his God was still present.

The presence and power of the Lord God of Elijah had not diminished with the departure of the great prophet. Just as Joshua fulfilled his ministry after Moses' death, Elisha would fulfill his after Elijah's departure. The sons of the prophets who had witnessed Elijah's demonstration likewise testified of Elisha's. God had confirmed to the prophet and to his audience that Elisha's calling was authentic.

A new employee had completed her training for the company. She was ready to assume the job that she had been hired to do. However, the supervisor who trained her lacked important management skills. She constantly would come to the girl's desk and do her work for her. The new employee quickly became discouraged. She felt as if her supervisor did not trust her. She questioned her own ability. Finding no fulfillment in her present position, she soon sought and found employment with another company.

Many people have endured similar frustrations in the secular world. It also happens within the body of Christ. For a variety of reasons, those who mentor other Christians never allow them to use what they have learned. Then the mentor wonders why he or she is always the only person doing that work. When a Christian mentors another believer, eventually the mentor must release the student

to perform the task he or she has been mentored to do.

ELISHA'S HEALING OF THE SPRING (2:19-22)

When Elisha came to Jericho, he discovered that the city's water supply was polluted. The new prophet performed a ritual in which he threw salt into the spring, probably to symbolize a break with the past. He then pronounced the word of God and purified the town's bad water supply.

ELISHA'S CURSE ON THE YOUNG MEN (2:23-25)

Some bears mauled a group of boys who mocked the prophet. Their taunts of God's prophet in reality ridiculed the God who had commissioned him. Elisha's appointment by God was indisputable. In the years ahead Elisha would fulfill the work entrusted first to Elijah and then to him.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST MOAB (3:1-20)

When Ahaziah died without an heir, his brother Joram became king. The new king ruled more effectively than his deceased brother. Joram's reign lasted 12 years. To some extent he reformed the aggressive religious policy of his parents. Whether because of religious conviction or political expediency, he moved toward religious toleration. Joram removed at least one offensive public symbol of Baalism, a stone pillar that his father Ahab had erected. However Joram's reformation stopped far short of any real substance. Baalism continued to flourish. Israel's king continued to maintain the religious sites at Dan and Bethel. Jeroboam son of Nebat had erected these shrines after Israel's separation from Judah (1 Kings 12:26-31). The golden calves at those two sanctuaries directly violated God's prohibition against idols. The establishment of new temples conflicted with God's choice of Jerusalem as the place for legitimate worship.

Furthermore the priests at these locations did not come from the tribe of Levi and therefore disregarded God's promise to that tribe concerning the priesthood. God's final evaluation characterized Joram's reign as wicked. While it was not as evil as his father's, nonetheless it continued in the pattern of rebellion against divine sovereignty established by Jeroboam I.

Joram also was determined to reassert Israelite authority over rebellious Moab. Moab's annual tribute consisted of 100,000 lambs and the wool cut off 100,000 rams! The

loss of this lucrative income seriously threatened the royal treasury. To insure success the Israelite king formed a military alliance with the kings of Judah and Edom. The three monarchs met and formulated a plan for defeating the insubordinate Moabites. Mesha, king of Moab, had seized various towns on his border with Israel. He had fortified these and stationed numerous troops in the region. Therefore rather than risk a frontal attack from Israel, the three kings decided on an un-expected maneuver. They planned to invade Moab from Edom.

The strategy worked. The three armies set out to capture Mesha and to destroy his army. After marching for a week, their water supply was depleted. Death from dehydration loomed. Joram bitterly presumed that the Lord was responsible for their predicament. His cynical allegation spurred Jehoshaphat, the godly king of Judah, to offer a suggestion. He proposed that they seek a prophet and inquire about the Lord's plan. A servant observed that Elijah's former servant, Elisha, was nearby. The three kings agreed and quickly confronted Elisha. The prophet sarcastically suggested that Joram should look to Baal for help.

Joram, however, insisted that the Lord had brought the three kings together. Largely because of Jehoshaphat's presence, Elisha through the Lord's power produced water for the army and its livestock. The miraculous intervention of the prophet demonstrated the Lord's sovereignty over all three nations and His active participation in their destiny. Furthermore, it authenticated Elisha as God's prophets.

VICTORY OF ISRAEL (3:21-27)

In response to the invasion of the allied nations, Moab mobilized every male, including young boys and old men. Its army gathered and marched to repel the invaders. When the Moabites saw the flooded site where the armies of Israel, Judah, and Edom were camped, the reflection of the sun on the wet ground deceived them. They wrongly concluded that it was blood that had been shed when the three nations turned against each other. Their premature jubilation was soon shattered. Rather than assault the enemy camp, they prepared to loot it. Before they could do so, Israel and its allies attacked.

Despite their large military mobilization, the Moabites

lacked the means to thwart the fierce attack launched against them. The army was slaughtered and the territory of Moab was laid to waste. The Moabite survivors under King Mesha fled to the fortified town of Kirhatesh. When the allied force laid siege to the city, Mesha took desperate steps to avert catastrophe. First he led a counterattack with his elite troops. When the charge failed, the king publicly sacrificed his firstborn son, the heir to his throne, on the wall of the besieged city. Seeing his brutal act, the invading forces unexpectedly withdrew.

In that era most people associated the power of a deity with the geographical area where the god or goddess was worshiped. Apparently Joram and his advisors gave credence to the erroneous conclusion that the gods of Moab were stronger within the boundaries of Moab than the gods of other geographical locations. Superstitious troops within the coalition likely feared what Moab's god Chemosh might do in response to Mesha's plea. Clearly their retreat demonstrated that the military and political leaders of Israel, Judah, and Edom failed to grasp the comprehensive nature of the Lord's authority and power. Failure to trust the Lord is always costly.

The Moabite record of these events has survived on what has been called the Moabite Stone. A German missionary discovered this famous stone in 1868. On it King Mesha inscribed major accomplishments of his reign. In these inscriptions he boasts of winning the nation's independence from Israel. Apparently after the withdrawal, Joram made no further effort to reclaim revenue from Moab.

MIRACLES OF ELISHA (4:1-44)

Despite the skepticism of the secular leaders, Elisha had emerged as undisputed leader of the citizens in the Northern Kingdom who remained faithful to the Lord. Since the priesthood in that nation belonged to the apostate state cult, people could not look to the priests for spiritual guidance. Instead the prophets directed those who sought to do what was right. They enjoyed the high esteem of the small minority of common people devoted to the Lord. Among these prophets, Elisha was foremost.

The entreaty of a widow revealed Elisha's great status in the religious community. Her husband had been a prophet, but his death had left her destitute. Her creditors were coming to sell her children as slaves. She appealed

to Elisha for help. An inquiry into her resources revealed that her only asset was a jar of oil. The prophet told her to borrow as many empty jars and other containers as possible. She then was to empty her jar into the borrowed vessels. The instructions seemed absurd, but she did exactly as the prophet prescribed. Her obedience to God's spokesman reflected her deep faith in God. Miraculously the oil from her jar continued to flow until every container in the room was full. She then sold the oil. Her conformity to Elisha's instructions provided her sufficient cash to pay her creditors and to purchase necessities in the future! God's instructions do not always seem logical. Sometimes He asks us to do what we may think is foolish or impossible. However, what is impossible for us is possible for God. He works as our faith in Him leads to obedience.

Verse 8: The village of Shunem [SHOO nem] was located about 15 miles southeast of Mount Carmel. Elisha repeatedly traveled through the town on his preaching circuit. A certain woman in Shunem was described as prominent. The Hebrew adjective can mean old in years or great in importance. Either meaning fits the context here. However, since the reference to age in the text concerns her husband rather than herself (v. 14), and the addition of a guest room to her house suggests affluence, the latter sense may be preferred. At any rate this woman extended hospitality to Elisha on more than one occasion. He quickly established a friendship with her and her husband and thereafter routinely dined with the couple whenever he was in the area.

The woman recognized God's presence in the prophet and desired to do more for him. She persuaded her husband to construct and furnish a permanent room on the roof of their house. Her motivation for a separate structure seems to have arisen from the prophet's status as holy. The term indicated that the man had been removed from the ordinary and set aside for divine service. That which belonged to God, including His preachers, needed to be given the best care. The room would provide the prophet with shelter and protection.

One day while visiting the couple, Elisha summoned the woman. When she came to his room, the prophet asked if he might repay her generosity by speaking to the king on her behalf. However, she insisted that she was happy living among her own people and required no special favors.

The contentment revealed in the woman's response left Elisha somewhat puzzled. How could he show his appreciation to her? Gehazi [gih HAY zigh], the prophet's servant, interrupted the conversation. Gehazi's motives here are not clear, although he later would prove to have a selfish nature. However, he called Elisha's attention to the fact that the woman did not have children and that her husband was elderly. In ancient Israel, a woman without children was considered cursed by God. Other people ridiculed barren women. For this woman the lack of children no doubt was a source of public shame and emotional pain.

Verse 16: Gehazi's information presented Elisha with an opportunity to show his gratitude. Since the woman had given so much to God's servant, God would grant her greatest desire. The prophet abruptly announced that within a year she would give birth to a son. His prophetic words addressed the woman's deep, unexpressed longing for a son. Elisha divulged her emotional dream with compassionate assurance. He promised the woman that in another year she would be tenderly cuddling her own infant.

The prediction startled the kind woman. She quickly demanded that the prophet not tease her in this way. At the same time her words of address acknowledged Elisha's role as a spokesman for God. Yet the harsh reality of human experience told her that if she and her husband did not already have children, they would never have children. On the other hand she did not deny that God could make the prophet's prediction possible. God could translate her deepest hopes and dreams, too impossible even to be spoken aloud, and transform them into reality.

God's promise of a son to the Shunammite [SHOO nuhm ight] woman and her husband was a particular promise in a particular setting. It was an expression of His love for a hospitable woman who showed kindness to His prophet. God's promises are not always universal. Some—like this one—are unique to specific individuals. Nonetheless the principle behind all His promises is universal—God always can be trusted to do what is best. God may not give every childless woman a baby. But God will always love her. He will always care for her and accomplish His will for her life, if she will but trust Him.

Verse 17: The words of the prophet were accurate. God rewarded the woman's devotion and compassion toward His servant by granting her a special gift. Shortly after the woman heard Elisha's announcement, she learned that she was pregnant. She gave birth precisely as Elisha predicted. God spoke powerfully through His prophet to kings and thereby determined the course of human history. But God also cared about ordinary people.

The prophecy to the Shunammite woman disclosed that God's concern for the dreams of an elderly lady in a small town was as substantial as His involvement in the affairs of nations. Every individual is important to God, and nothing in their lives is too insignificant or too great for His intervention.

Through God's goodness, believers often enjoy the realization of their hopes and aspirations. Nonetheless we must be careful to avoid raising false hopes to people concerning their desires. God does not always give us what we want, but He always gives us what is best in accordance with His will for our lives. In the end we simply must trust Him whatever He chooses to do. He is a good and loving God, and He always does what is best for us, even if we cannot understand His activity at a particular moment in time.

Verse 18: In time the baby grew into a healthy young boy. When he was old enough, he followed his father as he conducted the family business. Ancient Israel was an agrarian society and harvest was a critical time of the year. People generally lived in the security of walled towns. The entire community worked the fields to gather the produce and grain. Each morning before daylight they walked to the fields that surrounded the city. While the boy's father certainly had servants laboring with him (vv. 19,22), the term harvesters probably included the man's extended family and his neighbors as well. One can only imagine the pride that the father experienced as he watched his only son helping in the family field and learning about agriculture. At the same time the responsibility of harvest demanded his attention.

Verses 19-20: Unexpectedly the boy complained to his father. He screamed in agony, "My head! My head!" The child apparently suffered sunstroke. The hot climate and strenuous physical activity during harvest season could

quickly impact the body. Dehydration from the heat was a familiar danger. Deaths were not uncommon. The boy's father immediately realized the gravity of the situation and instructed a servant to carry the boy back to his mother. The servant hastily scooped him up and raced back into town. When the boy's mother saw her son in deadly distress, she gathered him into her lap. Today medical science easily can restore bodily fluids intravenously. But that technology was not available in ancient Israel. Doubtlessly the mother sat there reassuring her son with her words and asking God to spare his life. As the sun reached its zenith in the sky, however, the boy died.

Verse 21: The Shunammite mother took the corpse of her dead son and laid him on the bed in the room from which Elisha previously had predicted his birth. Her reaction surely seemed irrational to others. She did not wail loudly as was customary. The ancient Israelites believed that people should give full vent to their emotions on such occasions. Without shame the community normally would express unrestrained grief at the sorrowful farewell created by death. The mother whose child had died might be expected to grip the body—as if to say I cannot let my child go—and weep bitterly. Instead of expressing such emotion, this woman deliberately shut the door behind her as she left the prophet's room. She resolutely determined not to accept her son's death as the final word. Laying his body on the prophet's bed clearly pointed to the fact that she had placed her hope in what God could do through His prophet.

Verse 22: At once the woman summoned her husband from the field. Upon his arrival she did not reveal that his son had died. Instead she presented him with an odd request. She asked for a donkey and a servant so that she could travel to the prophet Elisha. Time was critical. She needed to act promptly. When her husband inquired about the urgency of her trip, she responded with an evasive declaration, "Everything is all right" (v. 23). Literally the phrase translates a single Hebrew word, shalom. The word was used as a customary greeting. It also had strong theological significance and conveyed a sense of wholeness. Such wholeness came from being right with God and living in covenant with Him. This Shunammite woman repeatedly had demonstrated her faithfulness to her covenant relationship with God. Stubbornly she refused to start the traditional customs surrounding death. Rather

than show sadness, she was resolved to recover her loss. Today we might label her behavior as denial, but in this situation it reflected genuine faith in God. She believed God would give her back her son.

Before the woman reached her destination, Elisha recognized her coming down the road. Her unexpected arrival indicated to him that something was amiss. Elisha quickly dispatched Gehazi to inquire about her and her family. Her only response to the servant's questions was to repeat what she had said to her husband previously (vv. 23,26). However, when she reached the prophet, she fell down and grasped his feet. Shocked by her unseemly action, Gehazi attempted to dislodge her. The prophet rebuffed him. Elisha detected the woman's anguish but realized that God had not revealed its source to him.

The woman's pain finally found release. Her words recalled the day Elisha promised her a son (v. 28). She emphasized that she did not request a son on that occasion. Instead of responding to her words, the prophet took action. He issued specific instructions to his servant and charged him not to acknowledge any person until he had completed his mission.

Gehazi placed Elisha's staff on the boy's face. The staff represented the instrument of power. This symbolic action presumably indicated that Gehazi conveyed Elisha's authority. However, Gehazi's effort proved ineffective. The boy's corpse did not respond.

Gehazi told Elisha that the boy did not wake up. The Bible often refers to the death of God's people as sleep. The analogy reminds us that death is not the end. Just as one awakens from a night's rest, God's people arise to new life in the resurrection.

Verses 32-33: When Elisha entered the room where the boy lay, the prophet confirmed that the child was dead. Inside the room he directed his attention to the only One with the power to restore life. He prayed to the Lord. Here LORD denotes the covenant name of God. Implicit here is the covenant relationship between God and the people involved. When circumstances threaten the hopes of those who have a personal relationship with Him, they are to direct their questions to God and to the people through whom He is working.

Verse 34: After he had prayed, Elisha got on the bed and lay down on the lifeless body. He placed his mouth on the boy's mouth, his eyes on the boy's eyes, and his hands gripped the boy's hands. Several factors illuminate this mysterious act. First, it symbolized the transfer of life from the prophet to the deceased. Second, since the prophet was God's spokesman and only God has the power to give life, it indicated that God transferred the life from Himself to the dead body through the vehicle of His prophet. God, not the symbolic act, restored life. Third, it confirmed that Elisha was the legitimate successor of Elijah since Elijah had performed a similar miracle of healing (1 Kings 17:17-24).

Verse 35: Elisha arose from the symbolic activity, left the scene, and paced back and forth. He may have continued praying about the situation. Or he may have sought relaxation after intense physical and spiritual concentration. Whatever his reasons, after a short time he was ready to resume his effort. This time the boy sneezed and opened his eyes. The sneezing indicated the presence of breath in the boy. The open eyes attested that the body once again functioned properly. Life had returned to the victim by means of prayer and personal contact.

The prophets were noted for their inflexible condemnation of sin. They repeatedly proclaimed God's judgment and pleaded for their audience to repent. In the restoration of the child's life we learn that the prophets also were agents of God's compassion for those who hurt. God cares about every aspect of human existence.

Verse 36: In response to Gehazi's call, the Shunammite woman entered the room. The prophet directed her to pick up her son.

Verse 37: Upon entering the room and observing her son alive, the Shunammite woman bowed at Elisha's feet. Her response showed both respect and gratitude. When God restores one's hope, the appropriate response is gratitude and adoration.

After the restoration of the Shunammite's son, a famine struck the region. The prophetic group that assembled around Elisha gathered wild vegetables for a meal. Elisha's actions associated with the deadly stew (vv. 38-41) teach that God is concerned about the daily provisions of His

people.

Another incident further stressed this truth (vv. 42-44). Elisha dispensed loaves of bread to the starving population. In a miracle that foreshadowed what Jesus later did, the limited number of loaves was sufficient to satisfy everyone's hunger. God truly does care about people.

LEPROSY AND RESTORATION OF NAAMAN (5:1-16)

Verse 1: Naaman [NAY uh muhn] was a highly successful soldier. Ben-Hadad II, the king of Aram, had appointed him commander of the nation's army. His military ability enabled the Arameans to dominate the region. The king recognized the significance of Naaman's leadership in achieving his nation's present status in the world and duly commended him. He regarded this officer as an irreplaceable member of his government and its aggressive foreign policy.

Naaman is described as a brave warrior. His victories not only resulted from his brilliant leadership and tactics, but also from his inspiring presence on the battlefield. His personal bravery was well known and likely demonstrated repeatedly in the battles along the Israelite frontier. The inspired writer observed that the real source of his victory over Israel was not his courage or skill. His victory came from the Lord. This startling statement announces that God enabled a pagan general to defeat God's covenant people! Notwithstanding the initial shock produced by the statement, it clearly reveals God's sovereignty over all human beings, over all nations, and over the ultimate course of all world history. It just as easily could have been stated that Israel's defeat was the consequence of the nation's worship of Baalism, the idolatrous religion of Jezebel.

Israel's sinful religious activity had reaped divine judgment. Unless the nation turned back to God, it could not depend on His protection. Instead Israel would face enemies whom God had empowered to defeat His apostate people. Despite the career success enjoyed by Naaman, the notable leader struggled with a physical condition that threatened his future. The exact form of Naaman's skin disease is not clear. The Hebrew word translated skin disease often is translated "leprosy," a term that apparently covered everything from psoriasis to cases involving the loss of fingers and toes.

Naaman's affliction presumably was the initial stages of the debilitating disease. What-ever the medical diagnosis, the illness was not yet severe enough to keep the general from all of his duties but it was serious enough to distress him greatly. The ultimate suffering associated with leprosy was well-known. The disease involved discoloration of the skin, swelling, loss of sensation, and weakness of muscles. Bones in the hands and feet deteriorated. The disease was long-lasting. Today medical treatment is available, but in the Old Testament era no cure existed. Therefore lepers were isolated from the rest of society.

Verse 2: Apparently Naaman had tried every known remedy for his condition without success. Much of his energy, however, remained focused on his responsibilities as army commander. The border with Israel remained troublesome. At the time of the events recorded in 2 Kings 5, Aram contented itself with small raids into the disputed territory. Captives from these incursions ended up on the auction block in the slave markets of Damascus. It is not clear if the particular raids referenced in this verse were carried out by Naaman's troops for political purposes or by semi nomadic tribes seeking financial gain.

In any case, one of the captives taken was a young girl. Whether as booty consigned to the general or as a purchase from the slave market, the girl ended up in the home of Naaman as a servant for his wife. The distraction of such affairs did not prevent Naaman's disease from progressing. Whatever might happen on the international scene, the general was keenly aware of his personal fate. The commander's physical condition did not escape the notice of this foreign girl who was sensitive to and concerned about her master's illness.

Verse 3: Apparently Naaman and his wife treated the young girl well for she showed no rancor over her captivity. God would use her to direct the afflicted soldier toward Him. Daily in the privacy of his house she observed the pain that Naaman experienced. Presumably the subordinate, but close, relationship that she enjoyed with her mistress allowed the slave girl from Israel to become his wife's confidant. The boldness with which she spoke suggests that repeatedly her mistress may have expressed profound sorrow and anxiety over her husband's condition to the young girl.

The long struggle between the Lord God and Baal had propelled the prophet Elisha to national fame. While he had failed to completely alter the religious policy of Israel's monarchy, he had won the confidence of many common people. The young captive's own personal misfortune had not lessened this prophet's esteem in her eyes. Like the first readers of 2 Kings she was an exile in a foreign land. Like them she maintained her faith in God. Unlike many of them (see Ps. 137) she did not shrink from sharing about her God. Like Joseph, Daniel, and others she boldly sought to promote the physical and spiritual well-being of her captors. She believed that Elisha could help Naaman.

The servant girl pointed Naaman to God by telling his wife about God's prophet in Israel and stating that the prophet would heal her master's skin disease! Although she did not call the prophet by name, the text clearly implies that she spoke of Elisha. In her eyes the political tension between Aram and Israel was secondary to the need for her master's physical healing. She assumed that if her master wanted to be healed, God would make it possible.

Naaman glimpsed a ray of hope in the servant girl's words. Perhaps it was her certainty that the prophet could do what no other person or treatment had been able to accomplish. Maybe it was the grasping of straws that despair and desperation produce. At any rate he quickly reported the conversation to the king of Aram. Travel to a hostile nation would require royal permission. Even then the journey would be risky. What would be the reaction of Israel's government to a military hero of its bitter enemy?

Naaman could hardly expect a warm welcome. More than likely, even if not publicly expressed, the Israelites would be delighted that the commander of an army that so recently had humiliated them suffered such a terrible fate. The king of Aram, however, cared about his general. Therefore he granted permission for him to see the prophet and drafted a letter of introduction to Joram, the king of Israel (see 1:17; 3:1; 9:24). The letter was intended as an instrument of introduction and demand. In the document the king identified Naaman as an official of his government and asserted the purpose of the man's travel into Israel. The king of Aram also provided Naaman with appropriate gifts to offer the hostile head of state.

The letter, however, had one significant flaw. Whereas the

pagan prophets in Aram were subservient to the king of Aram, the prophet Elisha answered only to God. The king of Israel had no control over this religious thorn in his side. Not understanding this spiritual reality, the king of Aram assumed that Joram would order Elisha to carry out the request for healing. Therefore, he made no reference in his letter to anyone other than his peer, the king of Israel.

The reaction of the king of Israel was understandable. Since the manuscript was addressed to him, he assumed that the king of Aram was demanding that he heal the Aramean officer. He did not know about the general's personal pain nor the servant girl's great faith. He knew only that he did not possess either the skill or the power to cure a person of leprosy. He was not divine. He was only human. God might choose to cure a leper, but he could not. Therefore Joram concluded that the whole episode was staged as a pretext for war! Tearing of garments was an ancient symbol of grief or anguish. Here it demonstrated the anxiety that the king experienced in this apparently hopeless situation. He could not heal the foreign general. His enemy would use his failure as a pretext for war, a war that he recognized he could not win. He clearly foresaw terrible trouble in his future and he felt powerless to prevent it.

The visit of the foreign general and the letter that he carried caused an immediate national crisis in Israel's capital. Word of the reaction of Joram quickly spread throughout the city of Samaria. When Elisha learned of the situation, he sent word to the king to send the visitor to him. His message contained both a rebuke for the king's behavior and an explanation for the prophet's own confidence. He intended to make plain to Naaman that unlike the situation in Aram, a genuine prophet ministered in Israel. A prophet is one who speaks for God. In Israel the single phrase that most characterized the man and his calling was, "Thus says the LORD." Evidence that a genuine spokesman for God existed in Israel confirmed that Israel's God also was genuine. In other words Elisha would show Naaman that the Lord was God.

Verse 9: Having received permission and information from his host, Naaman traveled to Elisha's residence. As a visiting dignitary, an appropriate entourage accompanied him. When the party reached the house where Elisha dwelt, it halted. The great warrior stood at the door and waited with

anticipation. Naaman expected the great prophet to soon appear, and if his servant girl was right, he would be free of the dreaded disease that threatened his future.

Verse 10: When the door opened, however, Naaman was not met by a prophet, but by a servant. The prophet did not come out. Nor did he invite his guest inside. Instead he commanded the Aramean soldier to travel to the Jordan River and wash himself, not once, but seven times! Numerous interpretations of Elisha's aloofness have been proposed. He may have intended the gesture as evidence that he did not work for hire or that he desired no political involvement with Aram. Certainly he implied that he was not impressed or frightened by the great military hero. He served One greater than this army commander or his pagan king. Nevertheless, the most probable reason for Elisha's action was to test the visitor's faith. He unmistakably promised Naaman that if the soldier did as instructed, he would be cured.

The completeness of the cure Naaman could experience can be observed in the words of Elisha's message. Naaman's damaged skin would be healed. The sores would disappear and new skin would cover his body. He himself would then become clean. In the Old Testament, everything existed in one of three states. People, animals, and things that were set apart from the ordinary for divine use were holy. They belonged to God.

At the other end of the spectrum was those people or things that had been separated from normal relationships or usage because of some inherent flaw. Such people or things were designated unclean. Most individuals and things were categorized somewhere between these two extremes. This common state was called clean. It was where everyday life was lived. The leprosy had cast Naaman into a state of uncleanness. If he was not healed, matters would get worse, not better. Eventually he would die a horrible death and he would be alone when he did.

Verse 11: Naaman's initial reaction is not surprising. He perceived the prophet's manner and message as a calculated insult. He expected the servant girl's prophet to come to him and perform some type of ritual. He regarded the man as his social inferior. Protocol dictated that the prophet show the Aramean commander proper respect. Surely the holy man at least would pray to his God, loudly

calling out the name of the Lord. Surely some type of magical hand gesture over the wounds on his skin should accompany his prayer. But from Naaman's perspective this foreign religious leader did nothing even approaching reputable conjuring. Instead he attempted to lure Naaman into an act that would humiliate the proud warrior. The army commander was determined not to allow this mockery to develop. He turned and headed toward home. His journey to Samaria had proved to be another dead end, a bitter disappointment because it had seemed to offer so much hope.

Verse 12: As the column moved away from the prophet's house, the offended soldier continued to rant. He remembered his home city. Two rivers flowed through Damascus. They made the city one of the most fertile areas in the region. It was an oasis in the desert. The Abana [AB uh nuh]—today known as Barada—moved swiftly from the snow-capped peaks of Mount Hermon to the city. It was regarded as the Golden River by the Greeks.

The Pharpar [FAHR pahr] perhaps is the modern Nahr el 'A'waj, which also originates on Hermon but flows approximately ten miles south of the city. In Naaman's eyes both of these rivers were superior to the Jordan River. The Jordan also had its headwaters on Mount Hermon. It then meandered through a series of twists and turns for over two hundred miles, terminating in the Dead Sea. While Naaman's negative assessment of the Jordan may have been influenced by national pride, the Jordan River was not a notable stream. It was neither wide nor deep. Its waters were often muddy.

Naaman's disappointment quickly and visibly turned to rage. The Hebrew term suggested intense heat or poison. It implied an intense anger that burns within, poisoning one's whole being. The desperate leper had humbled himself and journeyed into the land of his enemy. There he had asked only to be healed by some religious ritual associated with a God that he did not even worship. Instead of receiving the treatment he had anticipated, the army commander had become the object of ridicule and rudeness. What did he think as his chariot headed back toward Damascus? Perhaps he said to himself, "The next time I come back here it will be at the head of a conquering army. I'll teach you never to play games with me." Naaman misinterpreted the test of faith the prophet had set before him.

He viewed the way he had been treated as an insult.

Verse 13: Naaman obviously was an individual who inspired great loyalty among those who knew him. Without hesitation his king had supported his desire to seek healing in a rival nation. The young slave girl who served his wife had cared enough about him to share the news about the prophet who could cure him. On the occasion described in verse 13, Naaman's servants traveling with him attempted to help him by confronting his pride with common sense. They reasoned that if Elisha had instructed the army commander to attempt some extremely difficult task, he would have complied without question. Instead the prophet of Israel had commanded him to do something relatively simple. Should he not likewise give the simple demand an opportunity to verify the prophet's prediction? If washing in the Jordan failed, no real damage would have occurred. The warrior's pride might suffer if the washing failed, but the prophet's prescription in fact might work. If Naaman refused to try it, the prognosis was clear. The commander would not improve. Sound reasoning then dictated that he must at least attempt what he had been told would cure him. Pride must not be allowed to prevent deliverance.

Verse 14: The servants' logic was undeniable. Naaman changed course and traveled to the Jordan River. He dismounted from his chariot and walked into the water. There he obeyed instructions Elisha had given him. Seven times—exactly as specified—he dipped his body beneath the waters of the river. The number seven was generally recognized as a number of completion.

In this verse Elisha is identified as the man of God. The designation shifts the attention of the reader from the human prophet to the God who called him. Naaman's healing was the result of faith in God as demonstrated by his obedience to God's servant. When the army commander came out of the murky waters of the Jordan, the change was apparent. His skin was no longer afflicted. He had been healed. Indeed, his skin no longer appeared as the callous hide of a veteran soldier. Instead, it looked and felt like the soft tissue of a small child. The anxiety and anguish that drove his quest ended in the Jordan. The prediction of his wife's servant girl was accurate. The restoration of his health was evident.

Verse 15a: Naaman's changed physical condition was not the only or even primary im-pact of the event. Another more profound transformation had occurred. His cure from leprosy led him to conclude correctly that the deity Elisha worshiped must be the true God. No other god in the world had been able to do what Elisha's God did. Therefore, Naaman realized that they were not gods. Only one true God actually existed and He was the God of Israel. Naaman would serve only Him.

Naaman's actions support his profession of faith. He and his party returned to Elisha's house where the commander offered Elisha a gift. The prophet repeatedly refused to accept any gratuity, lest it be misunderstood as payment for his own services. The Lord, the one true God, not His human servant the prophet, had cured the foreign general.

GREED OF GEHAZI (5:17-24)

Naaman had accepted the reality that the God of Israel was the only God. His was one of the great Gentile conversions in the Old Testament. Like Rahab and Ruth he turned his back on the past and determined to follow the God of Israel. His decision had altered his destiny, but some of his old beliefs remained. Too often today we fail to recognize that new converts must be taught the basics of their new life in Christ. Everything is not magically imposed on a believer at conversion. That is why Jesus said that we make new disciples by teaching them what He commanded (Matt. 28:19-20).

In the ancient world gods or idols were connected with nations or geographic locations. Away from the places where a deity was worshiped, the god's power was viewed as diminished. Because the Lord was the God of Israel, Naaman wrongly surmised that God must be worshiped in Israel. Since his nationality and occupation made routine travel to Israel impossible, Naaman sought to solve this dilemma by asking for two mules loaded with dirt! He would carry part of Israel back home with him. Then he could worship the God of Israel.

Naaman asked for indulgence on one issue. His position in the government required his participation in state rituals. These rituals included the worship of the Aramean god Rimmon. Rimmon was the Aramean equivalent of Baal. Naaman asked for forgiveness by stating that his participation in the rites of his government was civil rather than

religious. He seemed to indicate that this worship was not real since he had confessed the Lord's sole existence and sovereignty. Even here his request placed him under the authority of Elisha as God's spokesman. Elisha understood the career soldier's dilemma and did not place an impossible burden on the new convert. Had the prophet been too lenient? (See also 1 Kings 18:1-15.)

As Gehazi [gih HAY zigh], Elisha's servant, watched the departure of the grateful for-eigner, an all too human attitude overwhelmed him. If Elisha did not want any of Naaman's wealth, perhaps Elisha's servant or attendant could acquire some of it. Quickly Gehazi raced off in pursuit. He fabricated a story as he ran. He would say that Elisha had been unaware of a new need for benevolence when he declined Naaman's offer. Cash and clothing were needed immediately.

Ignorant of the false nature of Gehazi's request, Naaman provided far more than was re-quested. The gift required two of the army commander's servants to transport it back to the house where Gehazi stashed his booty. It included both silver and clothing. As the two servants left, the greedy servant of the prophet must have breathed relief. He had shrewdly acquired more wealth than he had imagined and no one knew about it.

PRONOUNCEMENT OF JUDGMENT (5:25-27)

After Gehazi hid the silver and clothing, he returned to Elisha. The prophet persisted in quizzing his guilty servant. Although the greedy Gehazi continued to lie, Elisha knew his attendant's deceit. The prophet called attention to the special insight he possessed.

An opportunity for ministry was not an occasion for financial gain. Certainly this incident was one of those rare occasions in the Old Testament when a member of God's covenant community had an opportunity to help a foreigner experience deliverance from idolatry and turn to worship the true and living God! As such, it was an occasion for rejoicing and worship, not one for personal profit. Yet rather than bow in awe of what God had done, Gehazi focused on the convert's wealth. Too often God's people today miss what God is doing around them because they concentrate on selfish and materialistic matters.

Gehazi's greed did not go unpunished. In addition to

Naaman's riches, he also acquired Naaman's leprosy! The army commander had experienced the reality that career success and personal affluence do not satisfy one's deepest need. When presented with an opportunity to follow God, Naaman had chosen to do so. In contrast, Gehazi chose material assets over the truth. He would experience the agonizing consequences of his choice. God offers salvation to those who seek Him. If an individual rejects God's offer, however, that person will experience the consequences.

MIRACLE OF THE FLOATING AX HEAD (6:1-7)

Elisha's servant Gehazi had contracted leprosy because he acted with greed instead of with faith (2 Kings 5:26-27). In stark contrast an unnamed member of Elisha's prophetic community is re-warded for his faithful behavior. The sons of the prophets presumably were students or disciples who attached themselves to the great prophet for training. In many ways they were like seminary students today. Apparently they lived together in a single building or complex. However, the place became crowded and they requested permission to build additional housing. When Elisha granted authorization to do so, they asked him to accompany them while they acquired the necessary building materials.

The party traveled to the Jordan River where they began to cut timber. While one of them was cutting down a tree, his iron ax head separated from its wooden handle and flew into the river. The startled son of the prophets cried out to Elisha for help. He explained that he had borrowed the ax. Iron was an expensive metal and the loss of the tool was serious. As a student prophet, the man lived in poverty. Almost certainly he would have to go into serious debt in order to replace the ax. Not seeing the splash, Elisha asked where the ax head had fallen into the water. After the frightened apprentice pointed out the spot, the prophet cut a stick and tossed it into the water at the location the ax head had gone down. To the amazement of those present, the iron instrument suddenly floated to the surface of the water. The grateful apprentice reached out and easily picked it up in his hand.

Some skeptical Bible students have suggested that Elisha "fished" the ax head out of shallow water with the stick. However, the text does not support such an interpretation. The narrative clearly depicts a miracle, an event contrary

to the laws of nature. The prophet acted as the voice of God in his contemporary world. Therefore the event demonstrates God's sovereignty over even the most basic principles of nature. On occasion God will apply His authority and power in a manner that is contrary to scientific fact in order to accomplish His purposes. Here, despite the laws of physics, a solid iron object floats showing God's concern and His intimate involvement in the daily life of an insignificant apprentice. God cares about every aspect of our lives. Nothing is too great for Him. Nor is anything too trivial for Him. In the midst of the great international struggles between Israel and Aram, God still was concerned about the impact of losing a borrowed tool on an unnamed student.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 26

2 KINGS 6:8–10:36

PLOT AGAINST ELISHA (2 KINGS 6:8-14)

Verses 8-9: The tension along Israel's disputed border with Aram eventually exploded into open warfare. The king of Aram assembled his staff and advisors to plan a military campaign into Israel. Likely the operation still was only a limited border raid. It differed from some earlier enterprises in that this particular raid clearly was planned and executed by the head of state. It may have been on a larger scale involving larger numbers of troops. Furthermore, it seems to have been intended to damage the power and prestige of Israel's king more than to gain monetary wealth or slave labor. However, it stopped short of a full-scale invasion of Israel.

The plan did not succeed. God revealed its features to Elisha. The prophet approached the king of Israel with this God-given knowledge and advised him what steps to take to evade defeat. Repeatedly the plans of the Aramean king were thwarted. The prophet Elisha sent word of each Aramean plan to the king of Israel. The precise nature of the Aramean plans is not clear from the Hebrew text. The Arameans may have been planning an ambush, possibly to kill the king of Israel, or a surprise attack against an unguarded village. Whatever the case, the prophet disclosed the enemy presence in the area thereby spoiling the possibility of an Aramean victory.

Verse 10: When the king of Israel received a warning from Elisha, he immediately sent word to the location of the Aramean threat. The defenders were alert and ready, preventing assault on unsuspecting villages. Nor did an alerted population allow the invaders opportunity to catch small, poorly defended parties in an ambush. Thus the mission of every Aramean raiding party was unsuccessful. Such fruitless military operations were costly to the royal treasury and damaging to the national prestige. The prophet of God had rendered the military and political power of Aram null and void without a major battle.

Verse 11: The repeated failure of the Aramean army to carry out the king's objective led the king to reach a disturbing conclusion. Obviously the king of Israel knew precise details about Aramean troop movements in ad-

vance. Only the highest military officers and government officials—the men who participated in the king's planning sessions—were privy to such information. Therefore, one of his close advisors must be an Israelite spy! However, the king's conclusion was completely erroneous. He erred so dramatically because he applied faulty logic. He neglected to consider one possible explanation that was in fact reality—the God of Israel revealed the information to the Israelites.

The Aramean king, like the engineers that designed the ill-fated bridge, neglected one possibility, and it was the key to the situation. When we look at any situation without faith, we make an equally flawed choice. When we eliminate divine participation in any circumstance, we remove a critical component of the event. God is active in every situation, and we need to recognize how He is working.

Verse 12: When the king of Aram charged a member of his advisors with treason, one servant stepped forward to deny the accusation. The term servants indicated subjection to the higher authority of the king. The servant who shared the information may have been a high-ranking army officer, civilian counselor, or a personal attendant. The Bible does not explain how this Aramean knew the source of the king of Israel's knowledge of Aram's plans. Perhaps the population of Israel taunted retreating Aramean troops with boasts about their prophet's supernatural knowledge. The king of Aram could not keep secrets from such an infinite ability to penetrate his security. Even the privacy of the king's bedroom was not protected. Since God is every where, God is aware of every decision.

Verses 13-14: The king accepted his servant's report and immediately set into motion countermeasures. First he instructed his intelligence-gathering agents to determine the location of the prophet of Israel. Next he prepared units from his army for a raid into Israel. Their mission was to capture Elisha and bring him back to Aram. Reconnaissance ascertained that Dothan [DOH thuhn] was the current residence of the prophet. The city was west of the Jordan River, about 11 miles northeast of Samaria, the capital city of Israel. Dothan lay in the central part of Israel's territory. Moving armed forces so deep into enemy territory would be risky. The king of Aram needed a relatively large military force for this mission. It would need to travel rapidly and still be strong enough to handle

any potential encounter with Israelite troops. Cavalry and chariots provided the force with mobility and firepower. Therefore although the number of soldiers involved was large, the speed of their movement would enable them to reach their destination without being detected. Initially the force enjoyed complete success. Without warning they arrived under the cover of darkness and surrounded the city of Dothan.

The confident invaders expected the city to fall quickly. Furthermore, the mere fact that such a large, hostile force had penetrated so deeply into Israel without detection surely indicated that the Israelite army could not defend its border adequately. The prospects for this mission and for the future of the war with Israel appeared bright to the military officers awaiting sunrise.

GOD'S PROTECTION OF ELISHA (6:15-23)

Verse 15: An unnamed attendant of Elisha was one of the first people in Dothan to wake up that morning. He stepped outside and was terrified at what he saw. Aramean soldiers were drawn up in battle array. His immediate reaction of dismay was natural. He felt nothing could prevent the destruction of the city. Perhaps he also wondered in light of recent experience how the enemy had reached Dothan without his master's knowledge. Nonetheless, immediately he called out to the prophet for direction in this desperate situation.

Verse 16: Calmly the voice of the prophet reassured his servant. There was no need to panic. The force defending the city was greater than the Aramean invaders. The servant must have looked around searching for his master's promised defenders. Outside the city he could see chariots filled with archers, horses standing nervously in battle formation, and sunlight reflecting off helmets and spear tips. Inside the city he may have observed signs of panic—women screaming and children crying. But his eyes saw nothing that might slow the Arameans, let alone stop them from taking the city.

Human logic dictated that soon—if he lived long enough after the assault began—he would witness a horrific nightmare. He would hear the loud sounds of thundering hoofs, followed by metal smashing bone and the pitiful shrieks of dying people. He would stumble over corpses lying in the streets. He would smell the pungent odors of

bleeding flesh and burning buildings. But the unruffled guarantee of the prophet demanded that the attendant see with faith, not logic. The prophet was the voice of God. Therefore the words of Elijah were a summons to abandon human senses and trust without reservation the Lord God of Israel.

Verse 17: Recognizing that his words demanded a great deal of a weak, human being, Elisha prayed for his servant. He addressed his prayer to the LORD. Note that the English word is printed in large and small capital letters, indicating that the Hebrew text has the personal name for God—Yahweh.

Elisha did not speak to an abstract deity. He spoke to the one true God. He knew this God by name because he enjoyed a personal relationship with Him. The Hebrew term here translated prayed often denotes intercessory prayer. Elisha asked God to grant the attendant the ability to see what physical sight could not observe. God answered His prophet's petition. Note that the second occurrence of the title LORD in this verse also appears in large and small capital letters. The personal relationship was mutual. God had a relationship with the prophet.

The eyes of Elisha's attendant were opened. The mountains around the city were covered with another army. It outnumbered the Aramean forces. Like them this new force employed chariots and horses. But this army was unmistakably different. The chariots and horses are described as of fire. The chariot that had carried Elijah to heaven was described in a similar manner (2 Kings 2:11). An angelic army had gathered to protect God's prophet. While we may not always see how, God protects His people. We must trust His wisdom and power and view circumstances through eyes of faith. When we choose to look at life through faith, God enables us to recognize His presence with us.

The Arameans advanced toward the city. Again Elisha interceded in prayer. He did not call down fire from heaven to destroy his enemies. Rather he asked God to strike the Aramean troops with blindness. God granted his request. Struck by sudden blindness, the invading army halted. Elisha offered to lead the soldiers to the man for whom they were searching. They had little choice. They followed the man speaking to them with such authority. Elisha guided

his captives down the road to Samaria, the capital city of Israel, a journey of approximately 12 miles.

Verse 20: Once the travelers from Dothan were inside the city walls of Samaria, Elisha once more spoke with God. He asked that the blindness be removed from the foreign army. Once again God granted the request of His prophet. To the Arameans' dismay they were inside the walls of Samaria. While not stated explicitly, the implication is that the alarm had sounded and the Israelite army was assembled for battle. The situation had changed radically since the hours before dawn. Then the Arameans had expected victory. Now they anticipated their destruction. Frightened eyes stared into the self-assured faces of their enemies. Sweaty hands gripped weapons but dared not use them lest they provoke the Israelites to assail them.

Verse 21: The stalemate was broken by the voice of the king of Israel. Joram asked Elisha if he should exterminate the enemy. The king's question and his addressing the prophet as father indicated the subservience of the king to God's representative.

Verse 22: God's judgment against the enemies of His people was plain. In response to the prayer of His minister, the prophet, He blinded them.

When Elisha led them to the place of certain death, God showed mercy through His prophet. Elisha denied the king of Israel permission to slaughter the captives. They no longer were a threat so their deaths were unnecessary. Instead the prophet commanded the king to show hospitality and feed the enemy forces. This incident illustrates God's basic nature. He possesses the power to utterly destroy those who reject Him. However, He desires to act differently. God offers mercy even to those who have been blinded by sin. If they repent, He will spare them His judgment. The king gave his prisoners a sumptuous feast. After they returned to Aram, they surely reported the kindness that had been shown to them in Israel. For a brief period peace existed between Israel and Aram.

SIEGE OF SAMARIA (6:24-7:2)

The respite was brief. At a later date Aram invaded Israel. The purpose of the new invasion was not to capture Israel's prophet but to overthrow Israel's government. The destination of this army was Samaria, not Dothan. The

king of Aram personally led this attack. He is identified as Ben-hadad. It is uncertain if the term is a personal name or a royal title. It means "son of (the god) Hadad." Hadad was the chief deity of the ancient pantheon of Aram. Whether the actual name of the king or his title, the designation sets the stage for this military campaign to be a confrontation between the gods of Aram and the Lord.

The movement through Israel went well for the Arameans. The Israelite army retreated to its capital. The Aramean army followed and laid siege to Samaria. Battles in the field generally offered opportunity for the defeated army to retreat. Escape allowed the nation to continue its existence.

However, in siege warfare no escape was possible. The enemies surrounded a besieged town. They prevented food supplies from entering the city and its residents from leaving. The troops laying siege built fortifications before the walls and erected ramps to the top of the walls. Heavy equipment, such as battering rams, was used to breach the wall. If the enemy failed to break into the city, its inhabitants eventually would starve to death. Sieges usually lasted long periods that could be measured in months or even years. Frequently when enemy troops finally entered the city, their violence was unrestrained. Old men, women, and children were killed as freely as were soldiers. Rape and looting were common. Stone walls were toppled and wooden structures burned. Survivors might be carried away as slaves.

The Aramean siege of Samaria was typical of ancient sieges. The food supply inside was quickly eaten. The Aramean army prevented more food from being brought into the city. Starving people searched for any form of nourishment. Exorbitant prices were paid for such items as a donkey's head and bird's dung. The donkey's head was a source of protein. The dung likely was used as fuel, although it is possible that it too became a part of the inhabitant's diet. Eventually some inhabitants of Samaria resorted to cannibalism.

When Joram learned of the cannibalism, he ripped his clothing, a public sign of grief. Such a visible expression of distress hardly strengthened the morale of his subjects. In response to their gaze, the king asserted that he would execute Elisha. Such a catastrophe as loomed before

Samaria must be from the Lord. The only means Joram had to strike out at the Lord was to kill the Lord's prophet. His motivation is uncertain. Clearly he blamed the prophet for his present circumstances. Whatever the king's reasoning, he dispatched a servant to Elisha's residence, probably to assassinate the prophet. The king's failure to trust in God had caused him to erroneously believe that his greatest asset, God's messenger, was his greatest liability.

Elisha was sitting in his house, hosting the local leaders of the community. Divine insight allowed him to see what was happening. He instructed his guests to shut the door and not allow the king's messenger inside. The messenger ascribed blame for the present crisis to God and asked why he should continue to trust God for deliverance. According to some translations, the king spoke these words. Elisha seized the messenger's tirade as an opportunity to demonstrate God's faithfulness. He declared God's Word. He promised that in 24 hours food would be cheap and plentiful. The king's military advisor or aide was unconvinced. This man's doubt about God's promise brings a sharp rebuke. He would witness the changed circumstance but he would not live to eat any of the food.

DELIVERANCE OF SAMARIA (7:3-20)

Outside Samaria's main gate four pathetic figures huddled together. Their situation was even more desperate than that of those inside the city. The four men had a skin disease, probably lep-rosy. Because of their disease they could not enter the city. In the early days of the siege, people tossed food to them. Despite the end of such provisions and constant danger from hostile fire, the four had survived to date. However, it was obvious that they could not remain in their existing condition much longer.

The four discussed the situation and concluded they had nothing to lose. Either they would die of starvation or the enemy would kill them. So they decided to venture into the Aramean camp in search of food. As the sun sank below the horizon, they crept toward the en-emy camp. To their surprise no sentries were posted.

Prior to the entrance of the four diseased men, God had intervened. The Aramean soldiers had heard the arrival of a mysterious army. Panic seized their ranks. They wrongly concluded that the larger nations of Egypt and the Hittite Empire must have come to assist the Israelites.

Therefore they retreated without equipment and supplies. The Aramean camp was left intact. The four seized the great fortune and gorged themselves on the abundant, abandoned rations. Once their hunger had been satisfied, they gathered large amounts of treasure and hid them for their own future assets. Eventually the group paused and reflected on what they were doing.

They were Israelites. Their families and neighbors desperately clung to life a short dis-tance away, totally ignorant of the fact that their fear no longer was valid. These men knew that they must go back to the gate of the city and announce the turn of events.

When word was delivered to the king of Israel, he concluded that it was an ambush. However, one of his advisors suggested that the Israelites send out a small patrol to investigate the report. If the patrol was slaughtered, everyone would know that the Arameans were still in the vicinity. If the news were true, no danger would befall the patrol. Two chariots were sent out. They drove to the Jordan without any sight of the enemy.

The gates were opened and the hungry citizens of Samaria rushed out to plunder the de-serted camp. The price and abundance of food was precisely as Elisha had predicted. The soldier who maintained that God could never fulfill the promise Elisha made was placed in charge of maintaining order at the gate. In the dash for food and other loot, he was trampled to death. The Word of God spoken by God's prophet was true in every detail. God's Word remains dependable today. We can rely on it as we look to Him with faith.

RESTORATION OF THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN'S LAND (8:1-6)

Verse 1: One of the tools that God used to call Israel to repentance was famine. While God afflicted the nation as a whole, His providence continued to care for those individuals who re-mained devoted to Him. The Shunammite woman already had demonstrated her loyalty to God. She and her husband routinely extended hospitality to God's prophet and eventually provided him with a private room for his visits to the area.

Later God gave her a son after she had given up hope of having children. When the son died of a heatstroke, God

restored the life of that son because she refused to give up hope (2 Kings 4:8-37). In the midst of divine judgment against the nation as recorded in 8:1, the prophet came to her with specific instructions from the Lord. She was told it would be necessary for her and her family to leave the country completely. The famine had just begun and it would last seven years.

The reference to the woman's household rather than her husband may indicate that he had died. He is conspicuously absent in this narrative and the behavior of the woman is characteristic of a widow in ancient Israel.

Verse 2: Having heard God's message from the prophet, the woman immediately obeyed. She made the necessary preparations and migrated with her family to the coastal plain. There she lived seven years among the Philistines [fih LISS teens]. Although David had broken their mili-tary power and subjected them to Israel's control, by this time they had reasserted their inde-pendence. The woman's absence from her native community allowed the monarchy of Israel temporarily to seize her property. The real estate would be held in trust until the lawful owner returned and made a legal claim for the land. Until then the king received the profit from culti-vating the property.

When the woman returned to her home, she discovered its confiscation by the govern-ment. Without a husband she was at the mercy of the political system. Therefore she made a di-rect appeal to the king. Prior to her arrival in Samaria, Elisha's servant Gehazi was reciting to the king some of the great deeds accomplished by his master. When he was narrating the incident about Elisha's raising the woman's son from the dead, she appeared before the throne to present her case. When the king discovered her identity, he restored her property and the profits it had earned in her absence.

HAZAEI'S REIGN OVER ARAM (8:7-15)

Before Elijah was translated into heaven, God had given him three specific tasks (1 Kings 19:19-21). He only completed the first, to anoint Elisha as his successor. The responsibility for carrying out the other two fell to Elisha. One of those two remaining tasks was to anoint Hazael as king of Aram. Hazael was an important official of the Aramean court. Elisha traveled to Damascus, the capital of Aram. The purpose of the visit is not clear. He may have

been motivated by the desire to accomplish the unfinished mission of anointing Hazael. It is equally possible that some other obligation might have led him to this capital of Israel's enemy. Nonetheless, the prophet would seize the opportunity to complete the task.

Recent events had convinced the Arameans that Elisha was not an insignificant religious personality. He acted with awesome perception and power. The king of Aram treated him like a visiting dignitary. Hazael was sent to greet Elisha and present him with a gift. Forty camels were required to carry the tribute.

The king was Ben-hadad who had ruled for nearly 40 years. He had taken ill recently and saw the arrival of the prophet as an opportunity to discover his prognosis. When Hazael inquired about his king's fate, Elisha instructed him to tell the king that the disease was not fatal. Then he added that nevertheless the king would die before he recovered. The last fact was to be kept from the king. The penetrating stare of the prophet made the moment awkward. The gaze turned into unrestrained weeping so Hazael asked what was wrong. God had allowed Elisha to see the true character of the Aramean soldier and the cruelty that he was about to unleash on Israel. His armies would destroy many Israelite cities and bring about massive casualties in the armies of Israel. But his reign of terror would not be confined to the battlefield. Innocent women and children would perish in barbaric fashion. Hazael's hypocritical modesty failed to hide a burning ambition. The phrase "a mere dog" (v. 13) was self-deprecating slang equating himself to a "nobody." Elisha assured him that he would soon be king and therefore in a position to fulfill the prophet's predictions.

The prophet's cryptic message was not deceptive. Subsequent events revealed that it was extremely accurate. The illness of the king was not fatal. He would have recovered from it. However, Hazael assassinated him first. Since the king was already sick, his murder by suffocation appeared to be the natural consequence of his infirmity. The king's murderer was elevated to the throne. Assyrian records describe the new king as "a son of a nobody," a clear indication that they did not consider him to be a legitimate ruler. Nonetheless Hazael would rule Aram for over 35 years. Throughout his reign he maintained military supremacy over Israel.

REIGNS OF JEHORAM AND AHAZIAH (8:16-29)

The names of the kings confuse many readers at this point. The king of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and the king of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, both are named Jehoram. However in most of the narratives the king of Israel generally is identified by the shortened form of the name, Joram. Here the narrative focuses once more on Judah and the dynasty of David. At the death of Jehoshaphat [jih HAHSH uh fat] his son Jehoram became king of Judah and reigned eight years. Unlike his father, Jehoram was a very wicked ruler. He married Ahab's daughter and followed Ahab's evil ways. The Lord refrained from destroying Judah because of His covenant with David. Nevertheless, God permitted Judah's prestige and power to wane significantly. Edom successfully revolted and established itself as an independent state. The inspired writer provided few details of Jehoram's regime. Instead he referred the reader to the official court documents. Unfortunately for our curiosity, these no longer exist.

When Jehoram died, his youngest son became king because the older sons already had died (2 Chron. 22:1). Like the description of his father's reign, the account of Ahaziah's government is brief. The information not only characterized his rule but also serves as background information for later events that were even more profound in their impact (or potential impact).

Ahaziah's mother was Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab. Others view her father as Omri (2 Kings 8:26, KJV). Athaliah would soon play a more direct role in events. Because she was Ahaziah's mother, she shaped his values in life and so the king behaved like her evil family. The family ties to Israel's monarchy induced him to join Israel in its war against Aram. This military alliance ultimately would lead to his death and threaten the future of the Davidic family's control of Judah's throne. When his relative, King Joram of Israel, was wounded in the fighting with Aram, Ahaziah traveled to his sickbed in order to visit him. He had been king for about one year.

JEHU'S REIGN AS KING OF ISRAEL (9:1-10:36)

Verse 1: The final task that Elisha inherited from Elijah was to anoint Jehu [JEE hyoo] as king of Israel. He designated one of the student prophets to carry out this assignment. From a human perspective the act seems to be a conspiracy to overthrow the legitimate government. However,

in Judah and Israel the legitimacy of the monarchy rested on the discretion of God. God had selected Saul as the first king over the unified tribes and God replaced him with David when Saul failed to obey God's instructions. On that occasion the anointing ceremony had occurred privately at the residence of David's father, Jesse (1 Sam. 16:1,13). Thus from very early in the nation's history a precedence was established for anointing a future king apart from a public observance. One major difference between the character of David and that of Jehu is revealed by the reaction of the two individuals to similar events. Whereas Jehu mounted an immediate rebellion, David refused to harm Saul even after the king forced him into exile.

The instruction to tuck your mantle under your belt reflects the serious nature of the mission. Pulling up the hem of a garment and tucking it into the belt signaled preparation for activity. Loose garments hung down around the ankles and limited the mobility of the wearer. When the skirt was pulled up and tucked into a belt the legs were exposed and one could move quickly without restraint. The young prophet would need speed and courage to carry out his assignment. If supporters of Joram discovered his purpose, the young prophet would be executed as a traitor.

The novice prophet was to carry a flask of oil with him. Olive oil was the most common type of oil used. The application of oil on the head of a king or priest signified his official appointment to office and symbolized the power of God's participation in the event. The whole act was permeated with a mysterious sense of awe. People perceived the rite as divine intervention in the affairs of men.

The prophet was told where he could locate Jehu. Ramoth-gilead [RAY mahth-GIL ih uhd] was located east of the Jordan in northeast Gilead. This important city had changed hands several times as Israel and Aram sought domination over the area. At this time Israel occupied the town. Jehu commanded a force that was defending the site against new assaults from Aram.

Verse 2: After arriving in the city of Ramoth-gilead, the prophet was to locate the commanding general of the army. The name Jehu means, "the Lord is He." His father's name Jehoshaphat [jih HAHSH uh fat] means "the Lord judges." The two names suggest that both Jehu's father and his grandfather Nimshi [NIM shigh] worshiped God

rather than Baal. The prophet was told to isolate the military leader in a private room. There the two men would not be disturbed.

Verse 3: Elisha's instructions were clear and complete. Once inside, his disciple was to pour the contents of the flask on the head of Jehu and then repeat a prescribed communication. The formula "This is what the LORD says" asserts that the words spoken by the prophet were not his own. They were an accurate repetition of something spoken by God Himself. God, not Elisha or his delegated messenger, had made Jehu king. Finally Elisha warned the messenger to flee quickly as soon as he completed the task. His mission was to deliver a message, not to become involved in a coup.

Verse 4: Two features characterize the individual Elisha selected. First, he was young; hence he lacked experience. Undoubtedly, the impact and gravity of this particular mission was far greater than any previous action that had been entrusted to him. Second, he was a prophet. God had chosen and called him to this ministry. Therefore, his inexperience was irrelevant. Human weakness is an opportunity to reveal divine strength.

Verse 5: When the young prophet entered the camp, he found a group of army officers sitting together, perhaps planning for the defense of the city. The prophet went directly to Jehu and spoke to him. He addressed Jehu as commander, presumably a military rank. Each member of the group held this title, so the title alone did not specify the individual that was to receive the message. Since the new arrival in camp seemed to address him, Jehu sought clarification. The messenger identified Jehu as the one that he came to see.

Verse 6: Jehu arose and the two men went inside the house. There was nothing unusual about an army commander talking to messengers in private. The nature of his office made secrecy important. However, most messengers were military or members of the royal court. This messenger wore the peculiar attire of the Lord's prophets. His garment was pulled up as if he were working in the fields. He left a negative impression (v. 11). In the privacy of the house the young man did as Elisha had commanded. He poured the oil over Jehu's head and announced that as God's representative he had anointed Jehu king. The

young prophet's words recorded in verses 6b-10a are more detailed than the statement reported in verse 4. Some scholars have concluded that the young man expanded the original message on his own initiative. If so, he based his remarks on a previous prophecy by Elijah (1 Kings 21:23-24).

However, unlike the incident where Gehazi failed to conform to Elisha's instructions, no punishment or condemnation is reported in the text. Therefore it seems more likely that verse 4 merely is a summary of the message's content. It is then recorded in more detail in verses 6b-10a. At any rate the messenger's declaration was an accurate description of subsequent events.

Verse 10b: Having completed the mission, the young prophet rushed out of the house and ran toward home. His sudden departure must have grabbed the attention of those awaiting Jehu's return. The consequences of the prophet's secret action were about to be made public. Even though God's direction to us may involve personal danger, we should respond immediately in a courageous manner. A Southern Baptist international missionary who had survived numerous life-threatening situations once said, "The safest place in all the world is the center of God's will." As we obey God, God will take care of us.

Verse 11: When Jehu returned to his master's servants, his comrades, they immediately began to inquire about what had occurred. Was anything wrong? Why had the prophet come? The Hebrew term rendered crazy was a derogatory term for prophets. It probably reflected the mockery and skepticism of worldly people toward individuals who claimed to speak for God. Or here it may reflect the messenger's bizarre behavior. Likely both factors were involved. Initially the description allowed Jehu to evade their questions. Such ideas easily could disrupt the military routine of his army. He also may have been uncertain how his lieutenants would respond. Would their loyalty be to the king or to him?

Verse 12: Jehu's fellow officers recognized his evasion. They insisted that he tell them what had occurred behind closed doors. Their persistence was eventually rewarded. Once Jehu revealed God's communication, those who heard would be forced to decide where their loyalty lay. Would they continue to defend the existing monarchy? Or

would they shift their allegiance to Jehu? God's prophet had made God's choice clear. The choice came down to accepting or rejecting a word from God!

Verse 13: Jehu's fellow officers openly and visibly demonstrated their response to the announced plan of God. The removal of garments and laying them on the steps before Jehu was a sign of submission. People made the same gesture before Jesus when He rode into Jerusalem on the Sunday prior to His crucifixion. Jehu's fellow commanders welcomed the possibility of re-moving Joram from the throne. They quickly proclaimed to the world the news they had heard. Trumpet blasts communicate commands within a military organization. The blowing of the ram's horn was accompanied by verbal communication as well. There could be no misunderstanding of the intent. The ascension of Solomon to the throne had been accompanied by the same mode of proclamation (1 Kings 1:34). Jehu would use military force to translate the words of the young prophet into political reality.

Those who receive direction from God must be prepared to respond in a visible fashion if appropriate. Serving God rarely allows no response. Nicodemus visited Jesus under the cover of darkness. He was the first to hear the words of John 3:16 and he heard them from the lips of Jesus Himself! Yet at that time he apparently was unwilling to come forward and follow Christ publicly. However, we do know that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus' body after receiving Pilate's permission (John 19:38-40). Their action was tantamount to a public declaration that they were disciples. There may be times when God tells us to be silent, but even then our silence is a discernible demonstration of obedience. More often divine commands demand more visible expressions of obedience.

Having seen the reaction of his officers and soldiers, Jehu swung into action. First, he sealed the city of Ramoth-gilead. Joram had been wounded in the fighting and had been evacuated to Jezreel for treatment. While the allegiance of a majority of his troops seemed clear, Jehu could not take for granted that every soldier and civilian in town would back his coup. If one individual escaped and warned the king, the success of the coup could be in doubt. A bloody civil war might delay or even prevent Jehu from becoming king. Therefore no one must leave town. Next Jehu moved to strike down Joram at Jezreel. Time

was critical to success. Infantry would slow the march and allow Joram an opportunity to resist Jehu's attack. So he personally led an elite chariot and cavalry force to surprise and capture the city quickly. The unexpected approach of a rapidly moving military force alarmed the city. A horseman was dispatched to discern the identity of the force. The soldier asked Jehu his intention. In essence Jehu replied that it was none of the soldier's business.

Jehu outranked him. The horseman joined Jehu's ranks. A second rider was sent out with the same results. By this time those on the walls of Jezreel had distinguished Jehu's reckless style of driving a chariot. Joram jumped into his chariot and went out to meet Jehu. Ahaziah, the king of Judah, who was visiting the wounded king, also mounted his own chariot and followed. They encountered Jehu in the vineyard that once belonged to Naboth (1 Kings 21:1-29). Joram asked Jehu if he came in peace. The usurper replied that the prostitution and witchcraft associated with the religious policy of Joram's mother Jezebel made peace impossible.

Despite the virtuous ring of Jehu's words, his purge moved beyond reform and became a series of bloody atrocities. He killed Joram. He reminded his aide of Elijah's prophecy and ordered his soldiers to toss Joram's body into Naboth's vineyard. He then ordered his army to kill Ahaziah. The men shot arrows at the king of Judah as he attempted to escape. The king reached the city of Megiddo where he died from his wounds. Ahaziah's remains were taken to Jerusalem and buried.

Inside the city of Jezreel, Jezebel awaited the inevitable after learning of her son's assassination. She put on cosmetics, fixed her hair, and waited for the rebel in her royal residence. When Jehu appeared beneath her widow, she charged him with treachery. Jehu ordered Jezebel's attendants to throw her out the window. Blood splattered everywhere. Jehu worsened the grisly scene by riding over the carcass. With no sign of sympathy he callously went inside to eat. After completing his meal, he ordered Jezebel's body buried. However, attracted by the scent of blood, a pack of wild dogs had gorged themselves on her flesh. All that remained was her skull and portions of her hands and feet. God's Word came true just as Elijah had predicted.

Since Jehu had seized the throne of Israel, he acted to secure it. He executed every living relative of Ahab and Jezebel who resided inside the kingdom of Israel. When the heads of 70 members of the royal family were delivered to him at Jezreel, he ordered them displayed publicly in a pile at the gate of the city. On his march to Samaria, the capital city of Israel, Jehu encountered 42 relatives of Ahaziah. He captured them and then murdered them.

Jehu gained the support of Jehonadab son of Rechab. The descendants of this man were known as Rechabites, a sect that abstained from drinking wine. Jehu, accompanied by Jehonadab, deceptively gathered all the worshippers of Baal together in the temple of Baal and had them slaughtered. The temple site was converted into a latrine. Jehu ruled Israel for over 25 years. Because of his obedience in removing the dynasty of Omri from the throne of the nation, God promised his own dynasty would last four generations. However, because he continued in the pattern established by Jeroboam the son of Nebat and did not comply fully with the law of God, Israel continued its sinful ways. Therefore, God began to reduce the geographical size of the nation. The vast territory east of the Jordan River that had been part of Israel since the time of Moses was lost along with its rich resources.