

# THE STORY OF THE BIBLE

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VOLUME SEVEN

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Herbert W. Armstrong led the Worldwide Church of God (formerly The Radio Church of God until 1968) until his death in 1986. Hundreds of millions heard his voice and read his literature. God called him in the fall of 1926 and he was converted in the spring of 1927. Over the course of Mr. Armstrong's ministry, God revealed through him a great many true biblical doctrines, which had been lost to the Church through the centuries. After his death, his successors ceased to believe and teach these doctrines. Although copyright law prohibits The Restored Church of God from reproducing and distributing literature produced while he led the Worldwide Church of God, we are committed to the preservation and teaching of all of these truths!

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# INTRODUCTION

by David C. Pack

This is the seventh and final volume of a special series. These books truly represent “THE STORY OF THE BIBLE.” Many have attempted to write various kinds of “Bible Story Books,” but they are usually written only for children, and are primarily designed to entertain instead of *educate* or *inspire*. The reader will see that the wonderful style and artwork of this series capture the spirit of God’s Word, with its intended lessons and vital meaning.

Most children’s versions of the Bible terribly misrepresent important stories that it contains—and they are written with wrong emphasis—and wrong *meaning*! Instead of leading children to the true God, and to the true doctrines of His Word, children are left with the impression that the Bible only contains a *few* stories, and is mostly a book about war, violence, blood, thunder and death.

This is terribly wrong!

In keeping with the modern generation’s obsession with graphic violence, most efforts to reflect the teachings of the Bible “play” to this interest. Youth are given what they *want* to read, not what they *need* to understand. The many stories of the Bible are intended to teach VITAL LESSONS to people of *all* ages. Modern writers miss the mark when they *cater to* children, rather than properly *teach* them what God intends.

If young people learn the Bible in a *wrong* way—with emphasis on the *wrong* things, while ignoring the enormous number of lessons that the Bible contains—at least two bad things result.

First, all these wrong concepts and approaches must be unlearned and replaced by right knowledge and understanding of what the Bible *really* says. Unlearning error is a most difficult thing to do, and is actually far harder than learning the truth correctly the first time, leaving no need to sweep the mind clean of what has been wrong or misunderstood.

Second, young people will later find the stories of the Bible have been trivialized and made irrelevant, and they may find themselves turned off by its message rather than being excited and thrilled about what they are learning.

The modern system of education is morally and spiritually bankrupt! Deluded educators have been biased against God and His Word by the atheistic teaching of evolution poured into them from childhood. They have taught young people for decades that there are “no absolutes” and that they must follow “situation ethics.” They have led the world into a kind of secular humanism—where people are driven by how they *feel* rather than clear definitions of *right* and *wrong*! But there is right and wrong in life—and those who are teaching the children of this world have cut themselves off from this knowledge (Isaiah 59:1-2). They cannot teach what they were never taught!

Also, this world's churches keep young people steeped in traditional pagan philosophies and teachings that have deceived the world for millennia. They have ignored the great spiritual principle of CAUSE and EFFECT that governs *every* aspect of life. They have neglected to teach true *spiritual* values. They have defaulted their responsibility in all the critical areas of leadership—and have utterly failed in their greatest responsibility, which should have been to instill in young minds the marvelous truths of God's Word—to teach youth how to live, not just how to earn a living.

This is a tragic state of affairs!

Many who attempt to study the Bible become confused, frustrated and disillusioned, believing that it is too difficult to understand. As a result, many who *would* seek to teach their children true Christian standards and values, either give up altogether or leave such education to the *many* theological “experts,” who offer no end of differing—and conflicting—views.

Such an approach only serves to further confuse young people about the Bible, thus, in many cases, alienating them from it. But those who truly seek to understand God's Word, without adding their own interpretation (II Peter 1:20), will find that there *is* simplicity in it (II Corinthians 11:3).

Children need to be taught this simplicity! They need to know who and what they are—and why they were born—that they are future sons of God in the making!

You were born for a *reason*. Your life has a SUPREME PURPOSE! The Bible reveals how to be in harmony with the true God—and His purpose for life. The world is ignorant of this. So are most parents. They have no idea how or what to teach their children. No one is guiding parents, because no one knows *how* to guide them. Sadly, though the Bible is a gripping, interesting—even *fascinating*—book of true stories (all part of one great story), most find it dull, dry and boring.

This series is written to completely change this misconception in the minds of people of all ages! It uses language designed to expand your mind through the use of word pictures. Our goal has been to make the Bible *real*—to make it talk directly to parents and children. With only a little explanation, parents will be able to read these volumes to children as young as age three.

In today's world, youth are universally misguided, abused, neglected and ignored and this fuels a variety of rampant, escalating social problems. This is because society as a whole has rejected the SOURCE of true happiness, success, peace and fulfillment—GOD'S WORD. As King Solomon admonished, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

How many are even *attempting* to do this today?

Many true doctrines of God were restored to His Church in the middle of the 20th century. By the 1990s, they had largely been discarded by its new leaders. Part of our commission is to once again “restore what was restored” and to continue to “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6). The Restored Church of God *has* completely restored *all* God's doctrines to the Church!

Under the faithful leadership of Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), various Church youth programs were established as part of the fulfillment of this important responsibility. These included the Y.O.U. program (Youth Opportunities

United—for teens), and the Y.E.S. program (Youth Educational Services—for young children). There was also a *Summer Educational Program* (S.E.P.), providing teenagers with the opportunity to fellowship with other teens and develop many skills and talents in a camp environment.

There was also much youth-oriented *literature*, offered to the young people of God's Church. These included a *Youth* magazine for teenagers, *Youth Bible Lessons* for children from kindergarten through sixth grade—and *The Bible Story* series.

Children are far too precious to ignore or neglect. While parents *must utilize* the tools that are available to them, they cannot do this if these tools have not been created.

As the only true extension of Mr. Armstrong's ministry, The Restored Church of God has re-created these same written tools—as well as the magazines, books, booklets, articles and letters that once taught the full truth of God to millions around the world.

This series has been rewritten to once again make the Bible *simple*, so that the stories in it come to life! But these volumes are *not* just for children! It is our hope that parents and children alike will enjoy and benefit from them. Its forerunner was a six-volume work, once described as “written for children 5 to 105.” The original series is no longer available—but this new one is!

## CHAPTER NINETY-SEVEN

# AHAB MEETS HIS DOOM

**O**ur story thus far: After Israel's King Ahab learned that God was going to cut off his royal line, as well as destroy his evil wife Jezebel, Ahab humbled himself with fasting and mourning. God knew that this show of humility would only be temporary, but He decided to show Ahab mercy nonetheless.

One day, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, came to Samaria to visit King Ahab. Ahab was excited to receive him, for he knew that Jehoshaphat had been blessed with great riches and honor. The king of Israel killed a great many sheep and oxen in order to hold a grand feast for Jehoshaphat and his entourage of military commanders, royal officials, assistants and servants.

For the last three years, an uneasy peace existed between Syria and Israel. Ahab, wanting to gain the upper hand over his Syrian enemies, saw Jehoshaphat's visit as a perfect opportunity to make his desire come to pass.

To do this, he convinced Jehoshaphat's entourage that Judah should join Israel in a military alliance: "With your troops fighting alongside my troops, Israel will reclaim what rightfully belongs to her. We'll begin with Ramoth, in Gilead—it belongs to Israel! Together, we can take that city from the king of Syria!"

Once Ahab had persuaded Jehoshaphat's men, he then asked the king of Judah to join his cause.

With all of his counselors giving him the same advice, Jehoshaphat agreed. "However," the king added, "before we rush off into battle, we need to find out if God will be with us."

"Why, of course," Ahab said. Then the king of Israel summoned 400 false prophets of Baal to be brought before them. "Tell us God's will," Ahab demanded. "Shall Israel and Judah go to battle and take back the city of Ramoth?"

All the false prophets said, "Yes, go to battle, my lord. God will deliver that city into your hand."

Their answer inspired a self-satisfied smile to widen across Ahab's face. But Jehoshaphat was still cautious. He knew better than to rely upon the word of those who did not serve the one true God.

"Isn't there a prophet of the Eternal in your kingdom?" he asked Ahab. "One who can tell us God's will?"

Ahab sighed.

"Yes, there is one man," he confessed. "His name is Micaiah, son of Imla. But I hate him! He never prophesies good things for me, only evil things."

Jehoshaphat said, "No one, not even a king, should ever say such things about one of God's true prophets!" Like his ancestor King David, Jehoshaphat knew that disrespecting the office of a servant of God was the same as disrespecting God Himself.

Though his heart was not in it, Ahab ordered one of his officers to go find Micaiah the prophet. "And bring him back right away!" the king barked.

At the main gate of Samaria, all the false prophets of Baal continued to prophesy before Ahab and Jehoshaphat, who sat on their thrones, wearing their kingly robes. They might have done this in hope that they could persuade Jehoshaphat before Micaiah arrived. Zedekiah, one of Baal's prophets, made a set of horns out of iron. "Thus says the Eternal," he lied. "With horns of iron, you shall push Syria until they are consumed."

All the other prophets lied also, saying, "Go to Gilead and take back Ramoth, and you will prosper. The Eternal will deliver the city into your hand."

While this took place, Ahab's messenger found the prophet Micaiah and told him about the king's plan to battle against Syria. "The prophets are telling King Ahab that success will be his," he explained. "But King Jehoshaphat wants to hear from a prophet who serves the Eternal God, which is why I've come to you. Please come back with me, Micaiah, and tell Jehoshaphat the same good things that the prophets of Baal speak."

Micaiah answered, "As surely as the Eternal lives, I will say whatever God commands me to say—nothing else" (II Chronicles 18:1-13; I Kings 22:1-14).

### **A True Prophet Speaks**

Jehoshaphat was relieved to see that Ahab's messenger had returned, bringing with him Micaiah the prophet. "Now we'll finally hear God's will," the king thought to himself.



The kings of Israel and Judah look on as Micaiah the prophet boldly stands up to an attack from a false prophet.



Ahab, on the other hand, was not pleased with Micaiah's arrival. Expecting to hear only bad news from him, the king of Israel said to God's servant, "Tell us, Micaiah, should we or should we not go to Ramoth and do battle?"

Micaiah knew that Ahab did not really want to hear God's will. So, using sarcasm, he told the evil king exactly what he wanted to hear, instead of what he needed to hear: "Why, of course, go to battle and prosper. Surely, the city will be delivered into your hand."

It was obvious to Ahab and everyone else that Micaiah was being sarcastic and that he did not mean what he said.

"Tell me what God really says," Ahab answered. "How many times do I need to make you swear to say nothing but the truth in God's name?"

Micaiah replied, "If you are truly interested in God's will, then listen to what He has commanded me to say: I saw all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep without a shepherd. And the Eternal God said, 'These have no master. Let each return to his house in peace.'"

Ahab turned to Jehoshaphat: "Didn't I tell you that he would prophesy evil things for me?"

But before the king of Judah could respond, Micaiah said, "Now hear the word of the Eternal; I saw God sitting on His throne in heaven, with all the angelic host standing at His right hand and on His left. Then God said, 'Who will convince King Ahab into waging war at Ramoth so that he will meet his doom?' As the angels spoke among themselves, an evil spirit came forth, and said to God, 'I will entice him. I will go and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all of Ahab's prophets.' God said, 'Very well. I will allow you to entice him.'

"Therefore, King Ahab, take note: God has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all your false prophets. The Eternal has declared disaster against you!"

Not surprisingly, Ahab did not like Micaiah's answer—and neither did the prophets of Baal. In fact, Zedekiah was so mad that he struck Micaiah on the cheek. "If I speak with a lying spirit, then tell me which way it went from me to speak to you?" he sneered.

Though the side of his face stung with pain, Micaiah did not cower away in fear. And despite being vastly outnumbered, the prophet boldly stared into Zedekiah's eyes and said, "You shall see on that day when you shall go into an inner chamber to hide yourself."

"Seize Micaiah!" Ahab ordered. "Take him back to Amon, the governor of the city, and to my son Joash. Tell them to throw Micaiah in prison and make sure that he gets nothing but bread and water until I safely return from battle in peace."

Micaiah said to Ahab, “If you do return in peace, then you will know that the Eternal has not spoken through me.” Then, as he was arrested and led away, Micaiah turned to the crowd of onlookers and warned them: “Take heed of what you have just witnessed” (II Chronicles 18:14-27; I Kings 22:15-28).

### **Ahab Dies in Battle**

Unfortunately, Jehoshaphat did not heed Micaiah’s warning. And so, the kings of Israel and Judah boldly led their combined troops over to Gilead in their attempt to seize Ramoth. But during the march, Micaiah’s words haunted Ahab’s thoughts, turning the king’s self-confidence into worry and doubt.

Ahab said to Jehoshaphat, “Listen, before we sound the alarm to attack and go into the battle, I’m going to disguise myself. Put on my robes so that the enemy thinks that you are me.”

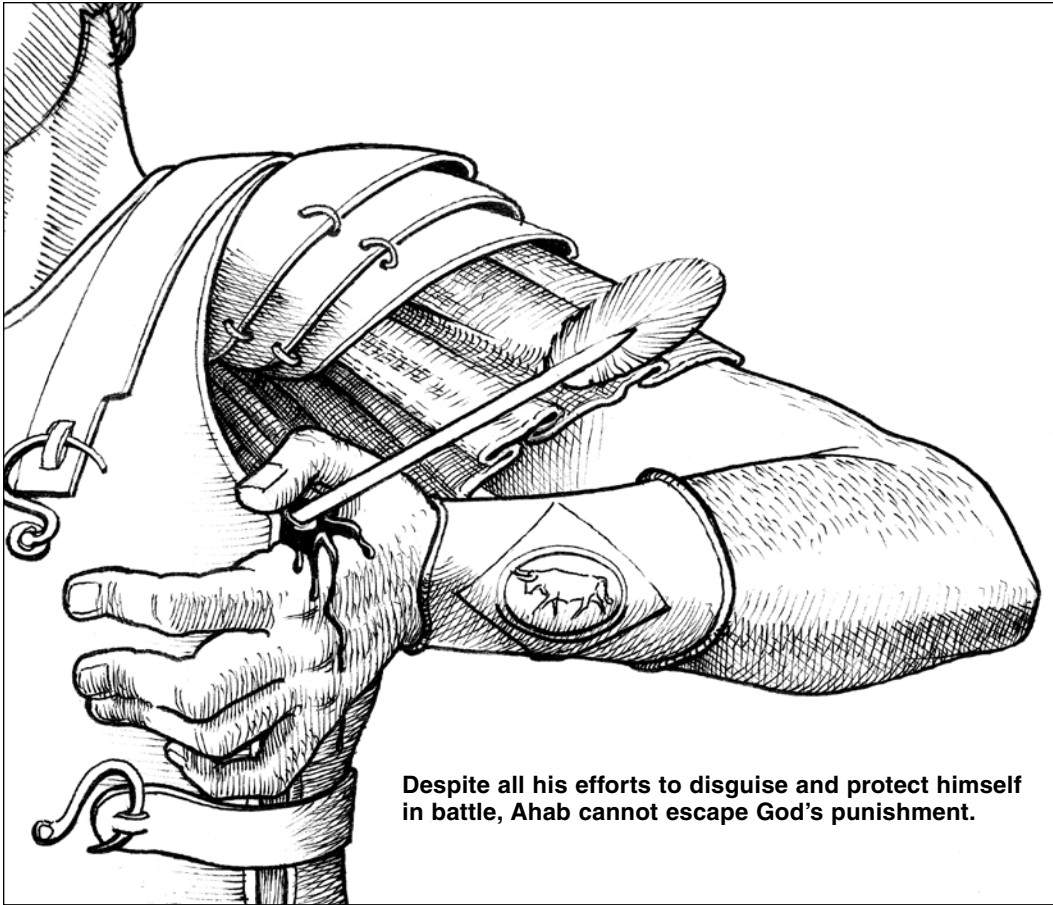
Amazingly, Jehoshaphat agreed to Ahab’s plan. He watched as the king of Israel disguised himself as a low-ranking officer and put on as much armor, padding and protective covering that he could safely wear into combat.

As the opposing sides gathered at opposite ends of the battlefield, the king of Syria commanded his 32 chariot captains to focus their attention on killing King Ahab. “Don’t waste time fighting any of the other Israelite warriors,” he said, “small or great! Your mission is to take out the king of Israel!”

The sound of swords clashing and the cries of triumph and deadly defeat echoed throughout the battleground. As their comrades fought against the enemy, the Syrian captains raced their chariots through the blood-splattered field of the dead and dying, and saw the royal robes that Jehoshaphat wore into battle. Thinking that he was Ahab, they said, “Look!—it’s the king of Israel!” Fighting in unison as though they were one man, the Syrian chariot captains turned aside from the Israelite soldiers and rushed over to surround Jehoshaphat.

The king of Judah cried out to the Eternal for help and deliverance—and God swiftly moved into action. Jehoshaphat’s attackers suddenly realized that they were about to kill the wrong man! They left the king alone and resumed their hunt for Ahab.

Then, a simple Syrian soldier took his bow, pointed an arrow upward, and let it loose so that it would land into the opposing side of the crowded battlefield. Meanwhile, King Ahab stood in his chariot fighting off the enemy, as his driver raced through the heat of combat. As the arrow flew through the air, God guided it so that it pierced into Ahab’s flesh,



Despite all his efforts to disguise and protect himself in battle, Ahab cannot escape God's punishment.

between the unprotected joints of his battle attire.

The king cried out to his chariot driver, "I've been hit! I'm wounded! Turn around and take me out of here!"

As the fighting waged on throughout the day, Ahab remained in his chariot, with blood seeping from his mortal wound. By the time the sun started to go down, the king of Israel was dead. News of his death spread among the troops. No one had the heart to continue on without their leader, and so every Israelite soldier ceased from waging war and returned home.

King Ahab's body was brought back to Samaria, where it was buried.

While the people mourned over the loss of their ruler, servants washed the king's armor and blood-soaked royal chariot. And, fulfilling the curse that God had pronounced against him, dogs came and licked up Ahab's blood (II Chronicles 18:28-34; I Kings 22:29-40).

Ahab's son Ahaziah was made king over Israel, but his reign was cut short. During his two years of rulership, Ahaziah had committed

evil acts before God. Instead of learning from his parent's faults and sins, Ahaziah embraced them. Like Jeroboam and all the preceding Israelite kings, he worshipped and served Baal. This made God very angry (I Kings 22:51-53).

### **Judah Fights Moab and Ammon**

King Jehoshaphat had escaped from the battle at Ramoth and safely returned to Jerusalem, his home. Though he was thankful to have escaped unharmed, God sent Jehu, the son of Hanani the prophet, to deliver a message to the king: "You allied yourself with wicked King Ahab. But ask yourself this: Is it right for you to help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Eternal?"

Jehoshaphat knew the answer was "no."

Before he could speak, Jehu said, "Because you have done this, God's wrath is upon you! Nevertheless, God sees that there are good things found in your character. He knows that you have removed the pagan places of worship from out of the land, and that you have set your heart to seek your Creator."

And so, God showed mercy on Jehoshaphat. Inspired by the Eternal's great compassion and forgiveness, the king set out to lead the people of Judah back to worshipping the one true God. He established judges in all the heavily defended cities of the kingdom and ordered them to carefully judge matters according to God's will.

"Take heed of how you render judgment," he warned them. "Do not judge for men, but for the Eternal—He is with you in your judgment. Let God's fear be upon you whenever you render a ruling. For God is without sin; He does not show favoritism among His people, nor can His judgment be bought with gifts of bribery."

King Jehoshaphat also set up Levites, priests, and some of the chief leaders of Israel to positions of authority. They, too, were charged with addressing controversial matters and rendering God's judgment for the people. He instructed these men to fear God with a faithful and perfect heart. "You shall warn the citizens not to trespass against the Eternal. If you fail to do this," he warned, "His wrath will fall upon you as well as them."

The king also placed Amariah as the chief priest over the Levites, to attend to matters involving religious affairs. And Jehoshaphat appointed Zebadiah, the ruler of the royal house, to serve matters that involved state affairs.

"Deal courageously," he told them, "and God shall be with the good" (II Chronicles 19).

## **Jehoshaphat Defeats Moab and Ammon**

One day, Jehoshaphat's servants told him that the armies of Moab and Ammon, allied with the warriors of Mount Seir, were on the march and on their way to fight against Judah. Fearing for the safety of his people, Jehoshaphat set out to seek God with all his heart. He proclaimed a fast throughout the entire kingdom, calling for everyone to join him in seeking the Eternal's help.

From God's temple, Jehoshaphat stood before a large assembly of his subjects and prayed to the Almighty: "Are You not the great God in heaven—who rules over all the kingdoms of men—whose hand is so powerful and mighty that no one is able to stand up to You? Are You not our God, who drove the Canaanites out from the Promised Land and gave it to us, the descendants of Abraham, Your friend? We stand before Your temple, in Your presence—for Your name and purpose is in this house—and cry to You, as we humble ourselves before You. For we know that You, O God, will listen to our plea and help us.

"The Ammonites, the Moabites and the people of Mount Seir—whom You would not let Israel invade and destroy when You delivered us out of Egypt—behold, they intend to reward us with much evil. They have united against us, to cast us out of the Promised Land, our inheritance. O great and mighty God, will You not judge them? We do not have the might or strength to stand up against this great multitude, nor do we know what to do! But our eyes are upon You—please deliver us!"

Every man, woman and child standing before their king looked to God for help. They knew that they could not rescue themselves.

Then, in the midst of the assembly, God sent His Holy Spirit to inspire the words of Jahaziel, a Levite, who said to Jehoshaphat and to all the people, "Hear the Eternal's words: 'Do not be afraid nor dismayed by the sight of your enemies. Though they have united against you, the battle is not yours—it belongs to Me! Tomorrow, you will face them. They are coming up by the cliff of Ziz, and you shall find them at the end of the brook, before the wilderness of Jeruel. But you will not need to fight in this battle. Just set yourselves, stand still, and see the salvation of the Eternal. Do not fear, nor be dismayed, for I will be with you!'"

The king bowed his head to the ground, and God's people followed his example. Everyone fell down and worshipped the Eternal. Then, the Levites stood up and, in one loud voice, praised God.

Early the next morning, Judah's troops marched into the wilderness of Tekoa. There, Jehoshaphat encouraged the people, saying, "Hear me, Judah, and citizens of Jerusalem: Believe in the Eternal your God,

and you will be established. Believe His prophets, and you will prosper.”

After the king listened to the advice of certain people, he appointed special singers to serve God with heartfelt praise. They went out before the army, singing, “Praise the Eternal, for His mercy endures forever!”

Meanwhile, God had set up an ambush against the enemy forces and caused the Ammonites and the Moabites to attack the soldiers of Mount Seir, utterly destroying them. Then, God caused the Ammonites and the Moabites to attack each other.

From a watchtower that had been set up in the wilderness, Jehoshaphat’s men witnessed the bloody aftermath: Piles of dead bodies were spread across the battlefield. Not one enemy soldier had escaped.

Jehoshaphat and his troops reaped the spoils of war, coming away with an abundance of riches and precious jewels. In fact, it took three days to carry away all the plunder.

On the fourth day, the people assembled in the Valley of Berachah to bless and praised God. Afterward, everyone returned home with great joy, playing harps and trumpets, and singing psalms of praise at God’s temple.

News that the Eternal had fought against the enemies of His people reached the ears of those living in the surrounding kingdoms. And the fear of God fell upon them. Any king who was tempted to attack Judah suddenly had a change of heart.

And God blessed Jehoshaphat and the kingdom of Judah with peace (II Chronicles 20:1-30).

## CHAPTER NINETY-EIGHT

# ELIJAH'S SUCCESSOR

**I**t seems that Jehoshaphat did not learn from unwisely allying with a wicked ruler, for he joined into a business partnership with Ahaziah, Ahab's son, who followed his father's evil ways. Teaming together, Jehoshaphat and Ahaziah built merchant ships, which they used to carry goods from a port at Ezion-geber, at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba. From there, the ships sailed down the Red Sea, which led to the Indian Ocean, where they could travel to East Africa, India, Indonesia and the Far East.

Their business deal was profitable—but God did not approve. The Eternal sent His servant Eliezer to prophesy against Jehoshaphat. Eliezer told the king, “Because you have joined yourself with Ahaziah, the Eternal has broken your ships. They will no longer carry goods to and from Tarshish,” which was, most likely, the island nation of Japan (II Chronicles 20:35-37). And thus, their partnership came to an end.

In the Holy Bible, God warns His servants, “Be you not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion has light with darkness?” (II Cor. 6:14). Friends—whether good or bad—will influence you. And friends who are not striving to live God's Way have a different set of priorities than those who want to obey God. In general, God's servants must avoid having close, personal friendships and extensive fellowship with people who practice the ways of this world (James 4:4)—who do not serve the Eternal or care about obeying Him. This includes business partnerships, clubs, organizations, etc.

### **Respecting the Office of God's Servant**

Learning that Ahab, their enemy, was dead, the kingdom of Moab rebelled against Israel, refusing to pay any more tribute. This was bad news for King Ahaziah, who knew that he had to respond.



Yet the wicked ruler soon had other worries to contend with: Before he could leave, he fell through a lattice in his upper chamber. The fall had injured him so badly that he was left bedridden. Fearing for his life, the king sent messengers to Ekron to inquire of the false prophets of Baalzebub whether he would recover and live.

However, Ahaziah was soon surprised when his messengers returned so quickly. “You couldn’t possibly have gone to Ekron,” he said. “What are you doing back here so soon?”

“A man met us along the way,” they answered. “He told us to return to you with a message.”

“Really?” said the king. “What’s the message?”

“Thus says the Eternal: ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you sent messengers to seek Baalzebub, the false god of Ekron? Because you have chosen not to turn to Me—the God who heals—you shall not leave your bed. You shall surely die!’”

The king said to them, “Quick! Describe the man who gave you this message. What did he look like?”

“He wore a hairy garment,” they answered, “and a belt of leather around his waist.”

Instantly, Ahaziah knew that they had described Elijah the prophet. He ordered one of his trusted military officers to take 50 soldiers and bring back Elijah. “I want to deal with this prophet face to face.”

The captain and his warriors soon found Elijah, who was sitting at the top of a hill. “Elijah, get down here at once!” the officer commanded. “Or else I will drag you down!”

Elijah looked down at the man and his 50 troops, and said, “If I am a man of God, then may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your men.” And that is exactly what happened.

King Ahaziah sent another trusted officer and his team of 50 soldiers to bring back Elijah. Refusing to learn from the fate of the men who dared to oppose themselves against God’s servant, this man said to Elijah, “Man of God, prepare yourself, for the king of Israel commands you to come down right now!”

Elijah answered, “If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your 50 soldiers.” Again, God backed up Elijah’s office and rained fire upon Ahaziah’s men.

Yet, even after losing two captains and 100 troops, the king refused to give up. He sent another team of 50 warriors and their captain to bring back Elijah—but this captain thought twice about ordering around the prophet. Instead of opposing God’s servant with a hostile attitude, this man approached Elijah with humility. He fell on his knees before Elijah, and said, “I know that you are a man of



**King Ahaziah's captain  
wisely approaches  
Elijah the prophet with  
humility and respect.**

God, so I pray that you will see that my life and the lives of these 50 men, your servants, are precious in your sight.”

God respected this man’s humble approach, so the Messenger of the Eternal told Elijah, “Go with this man. Do not be afraid of him.” Elijah obeyed, and the captain and his troops escorted him to Samaria.

When Elijah arrived, he looked into King Ahaziah's eyes and boldly repeated God's message: "Thus says the Eternal: 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you sent messengers to seek Baalzebub, the false god of Ekron? Because of this, you shall not leave your bed, for you shall surely die.'"

Sometime after, King Ahaziah died. Since he did not have a son to replace him as king, his brother Joram ruled in his place (II Kings 1).

### **Elijah's Successor**

Ahab and Ahaziah, the kings to whom Elijah had been commissioned to give God's warning, were dead. God was now ready to replace Elijah as the head of His Work and use him somewhere else. He told His servant that He would take him away in a miraculous whirlwind resembling a chariot.

When the time for his departure drew near, Elijah decided to venture over to Gilgal, where he had established a special school for teaching and training future prophets of God. The old prophet wanted to see the school one last time before leaving for good.

Elisha, his assistant, accompanied him to Gilgal and toured the school with him.

Then Elijah decided to visit another school, which he had set up in Bethel. He told his assistant to wait for him, but Elisha replied, "As surely as God lives, as long as you are still here and alive, I won't leave you." Elijah respected the younger man's determination, so he allowed him to accompany him.

At Bethel, student prophets-in-training, whom the Bible calls "the sons of the prophets," told Elisha that God would soon take Elijah away.

"Yes, I know this," Elisha answered. "But I don't want to talk about it, so hold your peace."

When his tour of the school at Bethel was done, Elijah said to Elisha, "The Eternal is sending me to the school I established in Jericho. Wait here."

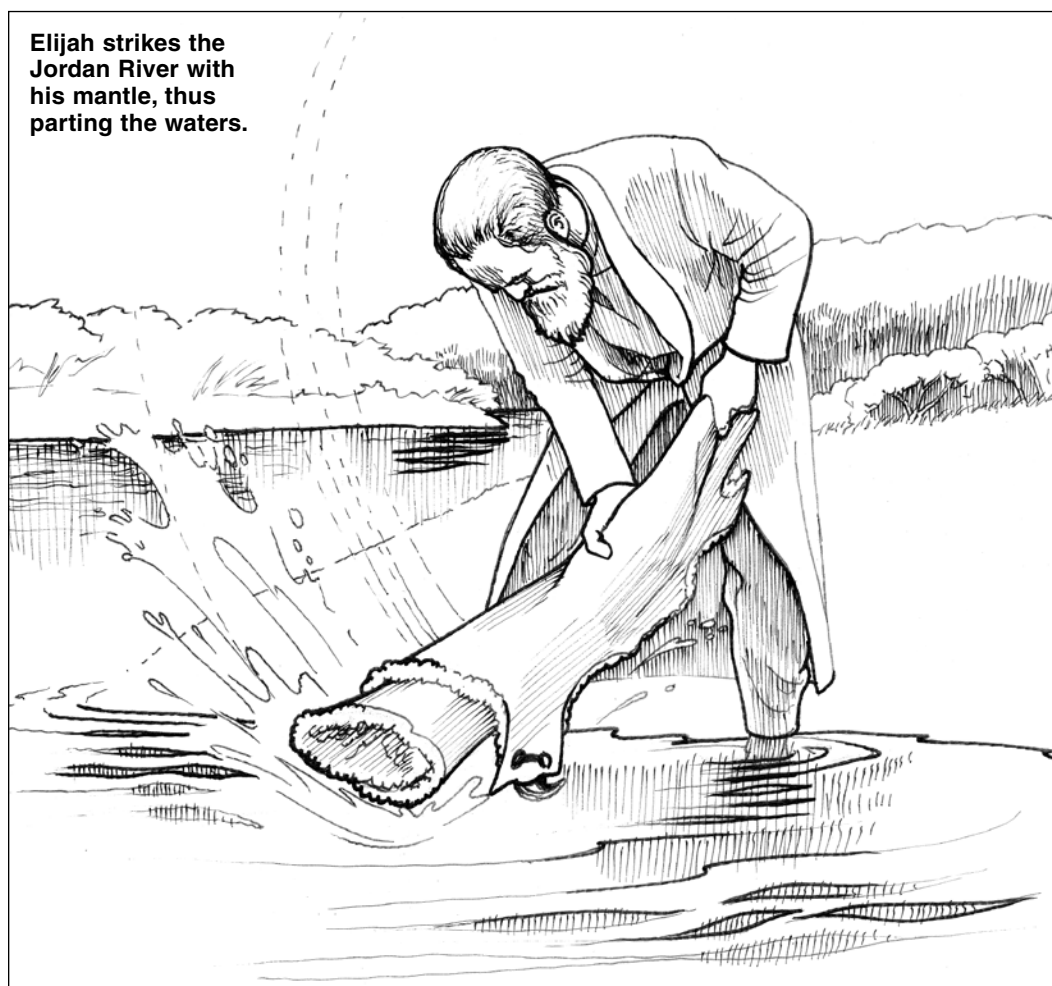
But Elisha wanted to spend every remaining moment he could with his master, so he respectfully refused to leave Elijah's side. The old prophet gave in and allowed Elisha to accompany him to Jericho.

When they arrived, the sons of the prophets, who attended the school there, approached Elisha and said, "Are you aware that the Eternal will soon take away Elijah?"

"Yes, yes, I know this," Elisha answered. "But hold your peace. I don't want to talk about it." Elisha was a humble man, who was more concerned with supporting his master than with taking his place.

Elijah was now ready for God to take him away. He headed for the Jordan River, again telling Elisha to stay behind—but Elisha would not hear of it. He insisted on staying with Elijah to the very end. Elijah appreciated his determination, so he gave in to Elisha’s plea.

From a distance, the two men were followed by 50 prophets-in-training, who wanted to see what would happen next. They saw Elijah remove his mantle of sheepskin and hair, which symbolized his office and authority. Then the senior prophet rolled it up and struck the waters of the Jordan River. Instantly, the torrents of water divided into two parts, providing a path of dry ground for Elijah and Elisha to walk safely across into Gilead.



Elijah turned to his servant and said, “Before I am taken away, ask whatever I can do for you.”

Elisha answered, “Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.” He was not asking for greater miraculous power than Elijah. He

knew that God had chosen him to inherit Elijah's role as a mighty prophet to Israel (I Kings 19:16-21). The "double portion" did not literally mean "twice as much." Rather, like an eldest son who inherits the birthright from his father, Elisha requested that he inherit a generous portion of spiritual power and influence. With such great responsibility about to be placed on his shoulder, Elisha understood that much would be required of him.

"You have asked for a hard thing," Elijah said. "Only God can do this. Therefore, here is how the Eternal will answer: If you see me as God takes me away, then you will know that your request has been granted. However, if you do not see me, then your request will not be fulfilled."

As they continued their journey, they talked about the many problems and situations Elisha would face once Elijah was gone—then suddenly, a chariot of fire appeared, pulled by horses made of fire. It separated the two men, and Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind, high into the sky.

As Elisha watched his teacher and friend being taken away, he cried out for Elijah, staring up into the sky until he could see him no more. Sadness overwhelmed Elisha, and he tore his clothes in two as a sign of his deep sorrow. He knew that he would not see his friend again during his physical lifetime. But Elisha took comfort in God's plan to one day set up His kingdom upon the earth. At that time, all faithful servants of God, including Elijah, will be alive as spirit beings. Elisha looked forward to seeing this day (II Kings 2:1-12).

### **Did Elijah Go to Heaven?**

The Bible states, "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (II Kings 2:1, 11). Reading this verse, most people assume that Elijah was carried up to God's heavenly throne.

Yet, more than 900 years after Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind, Jesus Christ—who was also the God of the Old Testament (I Corinthians 10:1-4)—declared that "*No man* has ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man" (John 3:13)! Therefore, Elijah could not have gone to where God lives.

So where did he go?

Remember, the Bible speaks of *three* heavens, not just one. God the Father and Jesus Christ currently live in the "third heaven," the seat of God's throne. The "second heaven" is the great, vast universe of stars, moons, planets, comets and other bodies in space. And the "first heaven" is the sky above, which is called the atmosphere, the air that surrounds the earth. Right now, you are breathing the air of heaven!

Since Elijah did not go to the third heaven, he must have been taken to one of the other two heavens. The second heaven is an icy-cold vacuum of space and does not contain air. Hence, it does not have whirlwinds. Therefore, when Elijah “went up by a whirlwind into heaven,” he must have been taken to the first heaven—the sky!

But God did not leave him there. He sent Elijah to serve Him somewhere else on earth. Though the Bible does not say where, it does reveal that Elijah sent a letter to the king of Judah—years after being taken away by a whirlwind. We will read of this account in the next chapter.

### Elisha the Prophet

Elisha picked up his master’s mantle, which had fallen from Elijah as he was taken away, and returned to the Jordan River. Staring down the rushing waters, he wondered if God would work through him as He had done with Elijah the prophet. Just as his master had done, Elisha struck the roaring waters with the mantle, saying, “Is the Eternal God of Elijah with me?”

Suddenly, the mighty Jordan River parted in two, allowing him to cross over on dry ground.

The sons of the prophets witnessed this spectacular miracle. Seeing that he possessed Elijah’s mantle, the prophet’s symbol of authority, they said, “The spirit of Elijah now rests on Elisha!” The 50 students went down to greet Elisha, bowing low to the ground out of respect for his office.

Yet amazingly, even though they recognized that God had selected Elisha to be His servant and leader, they were still slow to fully accept Elisha’s authority. They asked for his permission to go look for Elijah,



who they had been accustomed to following. “Perhaps God’s Spirit took him high up some mountain,” they explained, “or down into some valley. We must find him.”

Elisha tried to be patient with them. He said, “No, there’s no need to look for Elijah. He’s gone now. There is no reason to go searching for him.”

But the prophets-in-training were persistent, urging Elisha to change his mind. Elisha soon realized that these zealous, but misguided, men would not stop until they had their way, so he gave his permission. For three days, they wandered the countryside in search of Elijah—but they could not find him.

They returned to Jericho, tired and defeated—and Elisha was waiting for them. “I see you have come back empty-handed,” he said. “Didn’t I tell you not to go?”

The students nodded, and acknowledged that they should have listened to him. They had been so accustomed to having Elijah as their leader that it was hard for them to see another man assume his position of authority (II Kings 2:13-18).

### **God Backs Up His Servant**

The city of Jericho was a prosperous, pleasant place for people to live and raise families. However, Jericho’s water was ruining the health of the inhabitants. In fact, some people even died after drinking it. The water also prevented the soil from producing enough crops for the residents to eat. In desperation, the men of the city approached Elisha and asked if he could help them.

Elisha told them, “Bring me a new bowl, and make sure that you put salt in it.” When they had done so, he brought the bowl to the spring of the waters, its main source, and poured the salt into it. Then he said, “Thus says the Eternal, ‘I have healed and purified these waters; no more shall there be death or barren land.’”

Salt is a natural preservative—it preserves food by drying out water in which harmful bacteria thrive. In the Bible, salt symbolizes purity. God calls true Christians “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). Elisha used salt to symbolize that God would heal Jericho’s water supply by destroying the unhealthy germs living within it. From that moment forward, the waters were clean, and the land was no longer barren.

In performing this miracle, God released Jericho from the curse He had placed on the city long ago, in Joshua’s day (Joshua 6:26; I Kings 16:34).

Deciding it was his time to leave, Elisha headed for Bethel. Along the way, he encountered a wild gang of young hooligans, who came from that city. They were an unruly mob of vandals who did not care for God or His laws. Instead of addressing Elisha with the proper respect that God wants young people to show toward their elders, these hooligans mocked and teased the prophet. They pointed at his head, which was bald on top, and taunted, “Go up, baldy! Go up, baldy!”

“If you’re supposed to be a prophet,” one said, “then why didn’t God take you away like He did with Elijah?”

All the others laughed and repeated their taunts, saying, “Go up, baldy! Go on up!”

The gang of juvenile thugs forced Elisha to defend his office. He turned around and looked at them; and, using God’s authority, he pronounced a curse upon all 42 hooligans. The gang continued to snicker and mock—but their laughter quickly turned into horror when they saw two female bears emerge from the forest. The youths came to a gruesome end. News of their grisly demise became a sobering lesson for future generations of children.

Elisha departed, journeying to Mount Carmel and then Samaria (II Kings 2:19-25).



## CHAPTER NINETY-NINE

# REBELLIONS PLAGUE A REBELLIOUS KING

**I**n the 18th year of King Jehoshaphat's reign, Joram had taken his brother Ahaziah's place as the royal ruler of Israel. King Joram was not as wicked as his father Ahab or his mother Jezebel, for he removed the idol of Baal, which Ahab had made. However, Joram did practice the evil deeds that his forefather Jeroboam had done generations earlier, compromising with idolatry.

Now that the throne was his, Joram set out to deal with the rebellious Moabites. King Mesha of Moab still refused to pay his kingdom's annual tribute: 100,000 lambs and 100,000 rams, and the wool that they produced. Determined to end Moab's rebellion, Joram took a census of his entire kingdom to see how many soldiers he could assemble for his cause. Then he sent messengers to Judah, asking King Jehoshaphat to join him in battle. As he had done with Ahab, Jehoshaphat agreed.

He might have, in his mind, justified doing this when he had heard that Joram had removed Ahab's image of Baal. Regardless of his reason, Jehoshaphat was still compromising God's will. You will find that even the most faithful and obedient of God's flesh-and-blood servants still struggle with overcoming personal faults and weaknesses. God understands this, and is very patient and merciful.

The kings of Israel and Judah combined their two armies and created a strong military alliance. Next, they sent word to the king of Edom to join their cause. (The Edomites were under Judah's dominance and were paying tribute to them. To strengthen their control over Edom, Judah had set over the Edomites a deputy ruler—one who would not dare to rebel against Jehoshaphat.)

Rather than taking the most direct route to Moab, the allied troops journeyed around the southern part of the Dead Sea, down toward Edom, where they joined up with the Edomite army. From there, the three armies would launch a surprise attack into Moab.

However, after seven days of marching in the bleak wilderness, under the scorching heat of the sun, there was no longer enough fresh

water for the soldiers and cattle to drink—and without water, no one can survive. The kings began to worry. In fact, Joram started to panic, caving in to the mounting pressure of despair and thirst. “This is God’s doing!” he said. “The Eternal has called us three kings together only to deliver us into Moab’s hand!”

But Jehoshaphat was not willing to believe that God had abandoned them.

“Wait,” he cautioned. “Perhaps one of God’s prophets is among us, or near by,” he said. “Let’s find him and ask him to reveal God’s will.”

One of the servants of King Joram told them about Elisha. “He was Elijah the prophet’s trusted servant,” the man said.

Jehoshaphat said, “Elisha? I’ve heard of this man. God has given him the gift of prophecy.”

The three kings wasted no time in finding Elisha. And when they did find him, the prophet stared Joram in the face, and said, “What have I to do with you? Go seek the prophets of Baal, like your father Ahab did, and the prophets of Asherah, whom your mother Jezebel listened to.”

Elisha’s sarcasm cut Joram’s pride like a knife.

“Do not rebuke me. God is about to deliver us into Moab’s hands, unless you help us.”

Elisha said, “As surely as the Eternal lives, were it not for King Jehoshaphat’s presence, you would be nothing to me. I would not look at you, nor see you. Jehoshaphat worships the true God—but you worship images made by the hands of men.”

Then the prophet Elisha instructed them to bring him a musician. When the man played his harp, joined with prayer and praise toward the Eternal, God’s message came into Elisha’s thoughts, inspiring him to speak: “Thus says the Eternal, ‘Make this valley full of ditches so that it will hold water. You shall not see wind, nor rain come, but the valley will be filled with water for your men and cattle to drink.’ This will be but a simple miracle for God to perform. He will also deliver the Moabites into your hand. You shall strike every walled city, and every choice city, and shall cut down every good tree, and stop up all the water springs, and ruin every good piece of land with stones.”

The kings followed God’s command and ordered a team of men to dig ditches in the valley. The next morning, when the morning sacrifice was offered to God, suddenly the ditches were filled with water.

Meanwhile, the Moabites had heard that an invasion force of the armies of Israel, Judah and Edom were on their way to attack. King Mesha assembled his troops and stationed them at the border of Moab’s territory. “When they launch their attack, we will be ready,” he assured his men.

Rising early in the morning, the Moabite troops looked down into the valley below and were startled to see water. “How can this be?” they asked each other. “There was no rain last night—where did all this water come from?”

Then they noticed that the water was a reddish color.

“It must be blood!” one soldier shouted. The others agreed, concluding that enemy troops had turned on each other during the night. But the Moabites did not realize that the ruddy color was due to the sun’s rays reflecting off the red sandstone upon which the water lay. What they actually saw was only an illusion.

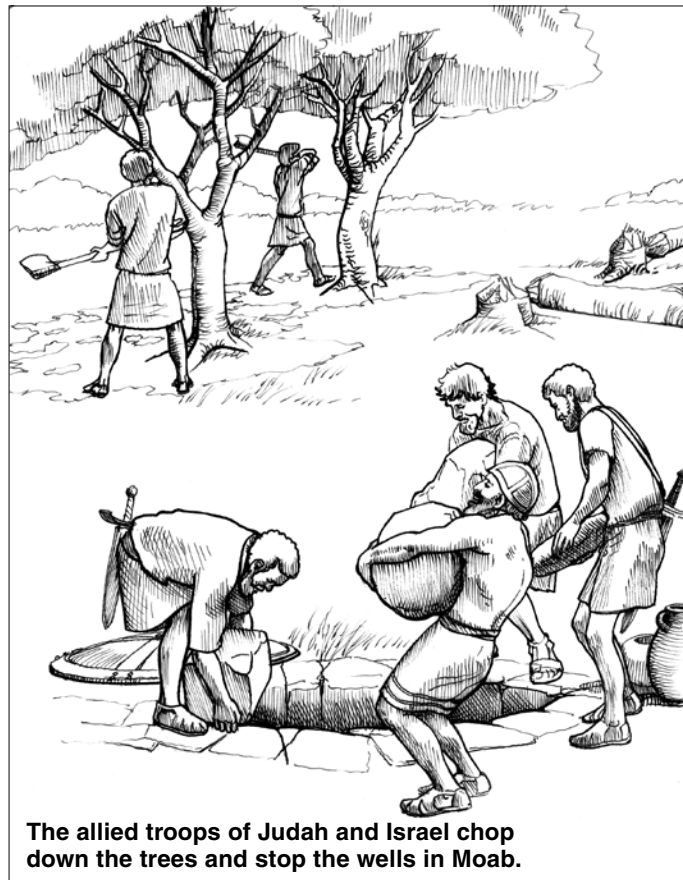
In their excitement, the Moabites rushed down into the valley to claim the spoils of war. Upon entering their enemy’s camp, they expected to see a battlefield littered with dead bodies in all directions. Instead, they were met by the troops of Israel, Judah and Edom, who were very much alive and well!

After a quick and furious struggle, much of the Moabite army was slain. Some troops managed to flee for their lives, but this did not save them, for the allied troops gave chase, entering into Moab and killing as many soldiers as they could capture.

The allied troops tore down Moab’s walled cities and filled the farmlands with stones so that they could not be used to grow much-needed crops. They also stopped all the wells and chopped down all the good trees.

But Kir-Haraseth, a heavily defended fortress, still stood. Joram and Jehoshaphat had their soldiers surround the city and besiege it.

From inside the walled fortress, King Mesha saw that the battle was not going well for him. He decided to launch a bold strategic



The allied troops of Judah and Israel chop down the trees and stop the wells in Moab.

move by leading 700 of his fiercest warriors to break through the king of Edom's defenses. Mesha probably reasoned that, because the Edomites had no choice but to join Judah and Israel in their cause, their hearts were not in this battle. "They are the weakest link in our enemy's line of offense," the king told his officers.

But Mesha soon discovered how wrong he was, for his daring attack failed.

Now he was desperate. Mesha knew that it was only a matter of time before his enemies would break through the city's defenses. But he continued to put his trust in his false god, Chemosh (also known as Molech), hoping that he would somehow save him from utter defeat.

As a last resort, King Mesha took his eldest son—who was in line to inherit the throne—high up on the wall of the city so that everyone, both the Moabites and the allied armies, could see. Then, to the surprise and horror of all the onlookers, Mesha sacrificed his son as a burnt offering to Chemosh, to gain the false deity's favor!

The king also wanted to send his enemies a message—that he would use *any* means, no matter how wicked or cruel, to keep them from being victorious.

Witnessing their prince burn to death as a human sacrifice caused the Moabites to hate Israel even more. Instead of blaming their king for committing such a vile act, they blamed the enemy troops. "Israel and Judah should not have pushed us so far!" many screamed. Thus, the Moabites were inspired to fight even harder. Surrender was not an option.

Sickened by what they had just witnessed and seeing that the Moabites were more determined than ever, Joram and Jehoshaphat decided that it was time to end their bloody siege. And so, every man returned home (II Kings 3).

### **Choosing a New King**

After having faithfully served God and the nation of Judah for 25 years, King Jehoshaphat died. Jehoshaphat was not perfect; he sometimes made mistakes. And despite his efforts in setting a righteous example for his subjects to follow, the pagan high places of worship were not fully removed from Judah. Many preferred to offer burnt incense to false gods rather than to the one true God. But overall, Jehoshaphat had spent his life choosing to obey the Eternal and do what was right in God's sight. And God never failed to deliver him from his trouble.

Before dying, Jehoshaphat chose Jehoram, his firstborn son, to replace him as Judah's king. He also appointed his other sons—Azariah, Jehiel,

Zechariah, Azaryahu, Michael and Shephatiah—to lesser positions of authority, giving them their own walled cities to rule within the kingdom. He also gave them gifts of gold, silver and other precious items of wealth (II Chronicles 20:31-34; 21:1-3; I Kings 22:41-50).

Jehoram was 32 years old when he became king. Unlike his father, he chose to practice the evil and perverted ways that the kings of Israel practiced. His wife Athaliah, who was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, encouraged him to do this.

King Jehoram built pagan high places on the mountains of Judah, leading the citizens of Jerusalem to worship false gods. The rest of Judah followed their rotten example.

Because he did not put his trust in God, Jehoram constantly worried about his safety. Fear and suspicion soon convinced the king that his royal family members were jealous of him and were plotting against him. To ensure that they would not betray him in an attempt to seize the throne, Jehoram murdered his brothers. He also slew a great many of Judah's princes, along with anyone else he felt might be a threat to his reign.

If only Jehoram had sought God with all his heart, as King David and Jehoshaphat had done. He would have learned that the Eternal puts a hedge of protection around His people. Jehoram would have never become enslaved by his fears.

God—who is the ultimate source of justice and goodness—burned with anger toward the king's rebellious ways. Yet, in His abundant mercy and patience, He kept His word and did not destroy Judah or wipe out the house of David (II Chronicles 21:1-7; II Kings 8:16-19).

### **Unrepentant to the End**

Since the reign of King David, the kingdom of Edom had lived under the domain of Judah. But the Edomites had grown tired of paying tribute taxes to the house of David, so they revolted. In the violent aftermath, they replaced the deputy king that Judah had appointed over them, and set up their own king.

When news of the rebellion reached Jehoram's ears, he wasted no time in leading his troops and chariots down to Zair, an Edomite village east of the Dead Sea. But the Edomites, who were not about to surrender to Judah's show of force, surrounded Jehoram and his soldiers, preparing to attack them in the morning. Yet when night came, King Jehoram used the canopy of darkness to his advantage and ordered his soldiers to attack. They caught the Edomite army off guard and, gripped by surprise and confusion, the rebels fled for their lives.

Despite this defeat, uprisings continued to erupt as the Edomites struggled to break free from living under Judah's rule. Adding to Judah's trouble, the people of Libnah also rebelled. God had caused Jehoram's reign to be plagued with rebellions because the king himself was rebellious!

One day, while moping about his problems, Jehoram received a letter from someone who lived far away. Reading it, the king was surprised to learn that it had been written by Elijah the prophet!

Elijah had written, "Thus says the Eternal God of your forefather David: 'You have not walked in the ways of your father Jehoshaphat, nor in the ways of Asa. Instead, you have followed the example of the kings of Israel and have caused Judah and the people of Jerusalem to enslave themselves to worshipping false gods, like Ahab had done. You have also murdered your brothers, who were better than you. Because you have done much evil, I will strike your people with a great plague. Everyone and everything will be affected—your children, your wives, and all your goods. And you, Jehoram, will suffer a great sickness in your intestines, until they fall out.'"

Here was an opportunity for Jehoram to repent—to change from his wicked ways. He must have known through his father that God is quick to forgive, slow to wrath—yet Jehoram would not give repentance a second thought.

And so, God stirred up the anger of the Philistines and the Arabians, inspiring them to team up against Jehoram. They invaded Judah and carried away all the wealth they could find in the royal palace. They also kidnapped the king's sons and wives. When his enemies had finally departed, only Jehoram's youngest son, Ahaziah (also called Jehoahaz), was left.

The king was beside himself in grief. "What could possibly go wrong next?" he cried.

He soon found out, for God struck Jehoram's intestines with a horrible, deadly disease that could not be cured, just like Elijah had warned. For two agonizing years, the king suffered from this painful illness, which had eventually caused his intestines to fall out.

Had King Jehoram faithfully obeyed God and sought His will, like his forefather David had done, God would have helped him solve his problems. But Jehoram continued in his rebellious ways until the day he died.

Jehoram's slow, agonizing pain eventually came to an end when he died from sore diseases. His eight-year reign was finished, and none of the people mourned for him. He had been an unjust and selfish ruler (II Chronicles 21:8-20; II Kings 8:20-24).

## **Elisha and the Widow's Oil**

In the kingdom of Israel, Elisha continued his commission of expressing God's will, through inspired prophecies and serving the needs of His people.

One day, a woman who had been married to one of the sons of the prophets came to Elisha and told him of her problem: "My husband, your servant, is dead. As you know, he feared and obeyed the Eternal. Well, with his death, he has left behind a heavy debt, which I must pay—but I do not have the funds to do so. My husband's creditor wants his money and is about to take my two surviving sons and make them slaves."

"Yes, yes, I quite understand," the prophet said grimly. He knew that the law allowed for creditors to enslave debtors, and even their children, to work off unpaid debts. However, the period of enslavement was to last only six years (Exodus 21:2-4; Deuteronomy 15:12-18).

Elisha said to the widow, "What can I do to help you? Tell me, what do you possess in your house?"

The widow replied, "All I have is a flask of oil, only enough to anoint someone."

"Then go to all your neighbors and borrow from them empty vessels," he replied. "And don't just borrow a few. Borrow all that you can get. After you have done this, return home and shut the door and stay inside, you and your sons. Then take the jar of oil and pour the oil into all the empty vessels. When you are done, every vessel shall be filled with oil."

"But what good will all this do?"

Elisha smiled, and answered, "You will see."

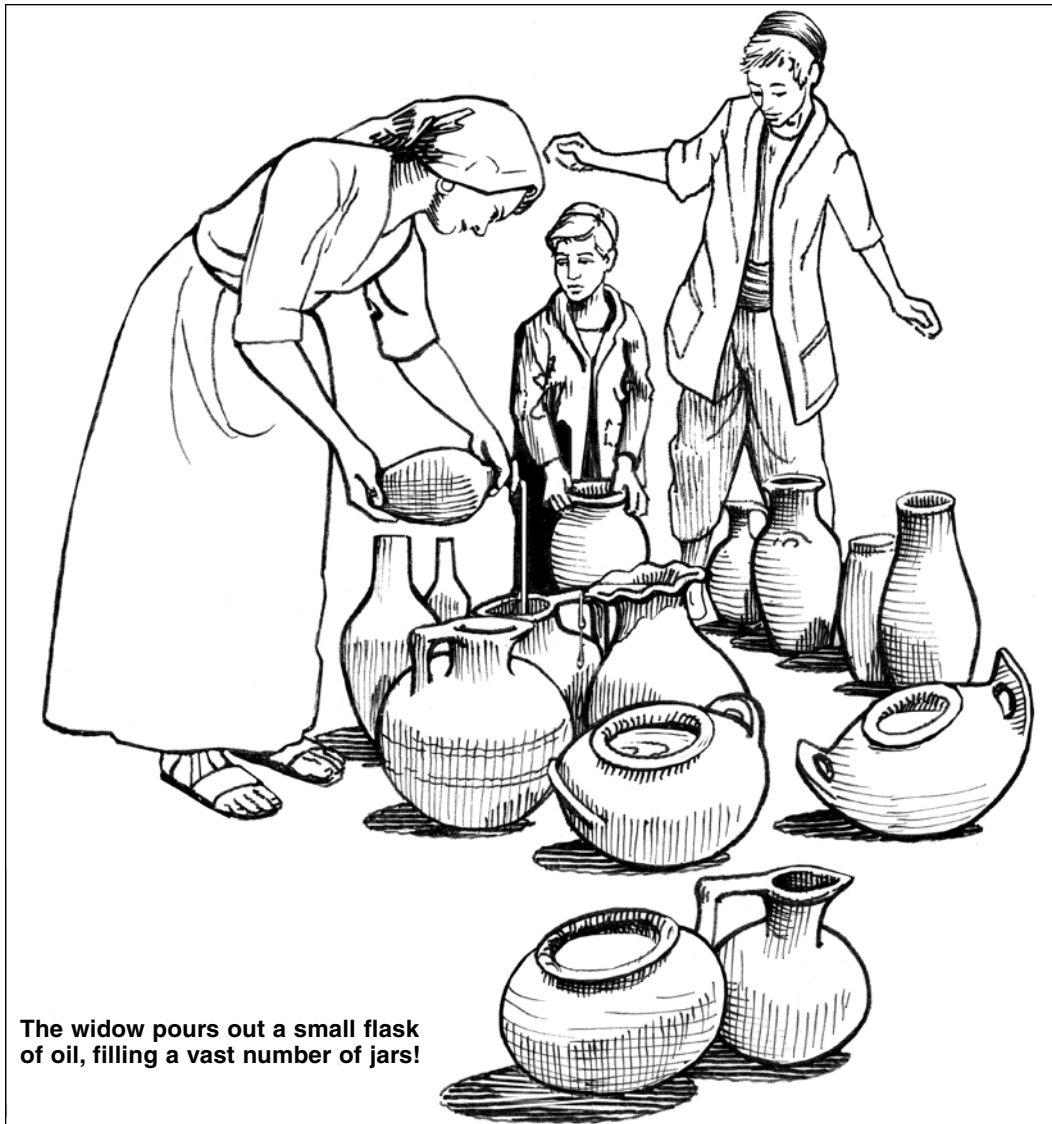
The widow immediately set out to do exactly as Elisha had instructed. She and her sons went from door to door, borrowing all the empty pots and jars that her neighbors would lend. Then she and her sons brought the vessels home, took the lone flask of oil, and began pouring oil into them. To their amazement, oil continued to pour out, filling all the jars and pots to the brim.

"Go bring me another vessel to fill," the widow said to one son.

"But there's no more left," he answered. "Every vessel has been filled with oil!"

And from that very moment, oil ceased to pour out from the small flask.

When the widow rushed out to tell Elisha the miracle that had taken place, the prophet said to her, "Now that you have all this oil, go sell



The widow pours out a small flask of oil, filling a vast number of jars!

it and pay your debt. Then you and your sons shall live on the rest of the oil” (II Kings 4:1-7).

God could have performed this miracle without the widow and her sons doing a thing. However, the Eternal often requires people to *show* Him that they believe Him. A person’s faith must come with actions—works (James 2:14-26).



## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED

# BREATHING LIFE INTO THE DEAD

**E**lisha the prophet traveled to Shunem, a town in the territory of Issachar, where he met a woman of great wealth, influence and social status. She had heard about Elisha, and wanted to know more about the ways of God. With her husband's permission, she persuaded the prophet to be their dinner guest. That evening, she listened to Elisha's every word as he talked about the Eternal and His laws. Afterward, the noble Shunammite woman was so excited about what she had learned that she said to her aging husband, "This man is truly a man of God. Let's give Elisha an open invitation to dine with us whenever he travels through Shunem."

Elisha gladly took them up on their gracious offer, dining at their home anytime he happened to be in their area. Though Elisha was a prophet and had great responsibility laid upon him, he was still a human being. He appreciated every opportunity to fellowship with those who yearned to know more about God.

Over time, a close friendship developed between Elisha and the married couple. One day, the Shunammite woman asked her husband to have an extra room built so that Elisha and his assistant could stay with them during their visits to Shunem.

Elisha felt deeply honored by this woman's generosity, and wanted to return the favor. One day, during one of his stays at the Shunammite woman's home, Elisha told his assistant Gehazi to tell her, "You have shown us great hospitality and care. Tell me, what can I do for you? Would you like me to speak to the king on your behalf, or to the commander of Israel's army?"

She said, "No, I have need of nothing. I live among my friends and neighbors in peace."

When Gehazi told Elisha what she had said, the prophet replied, "Well then, what can be done for her?" In one sense, he was pleased that she did not give him food and shelter in order to get blessings from God. On the other hand, Elisha truly wanted to find a way to serve the

woman. True servants of God constantly practice God's Way of outgoing concern for others.

Gehazi answered, "This woman has no son, and her husband is too old to provide her with one. Most likely, he will die without an heir to carry on his name."

Elisha had a plan. Through his assistant, he told the Shunammite woman, "About this time next year, you shall have a son—your very own son."

Elisha and Gehazi thought that the woman would be overjoyed. Instead, she acted just the opposite. After years of not being able to bear children, the Shunammite woman had grown accustomed to the idea that she would never have one. Fearing that hope would be dashed, she did not allow herself to believe that God would perform this miracle on her behalf. "No, my lord," she said. "You are a man of God, so please do not tell me things that can't possibly come true for me."

Despite her lack of faith, God blessed the woman, and she gave birth to a son several months later (II Kings 4:8-17).

### **Back From the Dead**

One morning, years after the child had grown into a little boy, the Shunammite woman's son went out to see his father, who was overseeing his young workers. They were reaping the harvest fields, cutting and binding the sheaves, and placing them upon carts, which donkeys would take to the threshing-floor.

Suddenly, the boy felt a sharp pain in his head. As he grew weaker and weaker, the boy mustered all his strength and cried out, "Father! My head! My head!"

The father heard his horrifying plea and he and a servant rushed to his side. He felt the boy's skin, which was dry and unusually hot.

"Sunstroke," the father said. He ordered him to carry the boy's almost-lifeless body back to the house so that his body would cool in the shade.

Inside, the Shunammite woman attended to her son, and sat with him all that morning, praying and hoping that he would pull through...yet sadly, the little boy died.

But she was not ready to give up just yet. The Shunammite woman went to Elisha's guestroom and laid the boy on the bed. Then she shut the door and went out to find her husband.

"Quick," she said to him. "Please have one of the servants prepare a donkey for me. I must ride out and bring back Elisha." She did not immediately tell her husband that their only child had just died, for she wanted to spare him emotional pain.

But her husband was taken back by her request. “What’s the hurry?” he said. “Why are you going to see Elisha today? Today is not the Sabbath or any other special day. There are no religious ceremonies going on in which God’s prophets would be teaching the people.”

She could not bear to tell him that their only child had just died. She wanted to spare him unnecessary grief, hoping that Elisha would bring the boy back to life.

“Trust me,” she said. “I must hurry. I will explain later.”

Her husband did as she had requested, and the Shunammite woman departed on her saddled donkey. A servant accompanied her on foot, driving the animal forward and directing its path. “Drive, and go forward,” she told her servant, “and don’t slacken the riding pace for me.”

Several hours later and about 16 or 17 miles away, they found Elisha at Mt. Carmel.

The prophet leaned on his staff, which represented Elisha’s office and authority, and saw someone racing toward him from the distance. He said to Gehazi, “Look out there. Is that the Shunammite woman I see approaching?”

Gehazi squinted with his eyes to get a better look. “Yes. Yes, that’s her! And she’s racing to get to us.”

“She must have something very important to tell me. Go run to her, Gehazi,” Elisha said. “Ask her how she and her family are doing.”

Gehazi rushed off to meet the woman. She told him, “All is well,” but she only said this because she wanted to speak to Elisha face-to-face.

When she was finally within his presence, she bowed to the ground before Elisha and grabbed him by his feet. Gehazi tried to pull her away, but the prophet said to him, “Stop. Leave her alone. Obviously, something is bothering her, and God has not revealed it to me. Let her speak.”

Through her tears, she said, “I didn’t ask you for a son. I even told you not to tell me that I would be blessed with such a miracle. And now my son—my only child—is dead.”

Elisha turned to Gehazi, and said, “Get ready. Here, take my staff and go to this woman’s child. Don’t waste time greeting anyone you might see along the way. I want you to hurry. Once you arrive, lay my staff upon the child’s face.”

Then he said to the woman, “Go with Gehazi. He will minister under my authority and ask God to heal your son. I will stay here.”

But the Shunammite woman replied, “No. As the Eternal lives, I won’t leave your side. You must come home with me; please do this.”

Elisha nodded. He, the woman and her servant headed back for the house.

Meanwhile, Gehazi, who was younger and faster, raced on his journey, arriving well ahead of them. He came to the house, went to the guest-room, and laid Elisha's staff upon the boy's face—but nothing happened. The boy's body remained still. Gehazi did not know what to do, so he raced back to get Elisha, and told him that the child did not awake.

Finally, Elisha arrived at the house. He went in, shut the door behind



him, and prayed to the Eternal. Then Elisha again stretched his body upon the child's to give warmth to his cold, lifeless corpse. Next, he breathed into the boy's mouth, and opened his eyes to see if there was any movement. The child's skin slowly grew warm. Encouraged by this, Elisha again stretched his body upon the child's corpse in order to warm it and bring it back to life. Suddenly, the boy sneezed seven times—his eyes popped open—he was alive!

Elisha had Gehazi call for the Shunammite woman, who hurried into

the room, anxious to see what had become of her child.

The prophet said to her, "Woman, take up your son" (II Kings 4:18-37).

### **"Death in the Pot!"**

Elisha returned to the school at Gilgal, where the prophets-in-training warmly received him. They were eager to sit before him and learn from his wise teachings and instructions.

Due to a famine (which would come to last seven years) that had just struck the land, there was very little food to eat. Elisha



had his servant cook a large pot of stew so that everyone could have a warm and filling meal. Looking for herbs in a nearby field, the servant found a wild vine of gourds. He gathered a lap full of wild gourds, brought them back to the cooking area and sliced them, piece by piece, into the boiling pot. When the stew was ready, the hungry students gathered for their meal and ate. As the men ate the stew, they began to feel as though their insides were about to explode. Out of desperation from the sharp pain in their stomachs, the students said to Elisha, “We can’t eat this—there’s death in that pot!”

The prophet looked around and saw his students squirm in agony as they bent over from pain. Elisha ordered someone to bring him some flour, which he then cast into the pot of stew. Suddenly, a miracle happened: The stew was no longer poisonous. “Serve the stew,” he told his servant. “It is now fine for everyone to eat” (II Kings 4:38-41).

### **Feeding 100 Hungry Men**

One day, a farmer from Baal Shalisha came to Gilgal, and gave Elisha the first fruits of his crops: 20 loaves of barley and a knapsack full of ripe ears of corn. The man knew about God’s tithing law, so he wanted to pay God’s tithes to the one whom the Eternal was using to do His work—Elisha. The prophet gladly received the much-needed food and ordered his servant to deliver it among the students, so that they would survive the famine.

“But there are 100 men here,” the servant said to Elisha. “There isn’t enough food to go around.”

“That’s okay,” Elisha answered. “Go ahead and give the food

to the people. God will provide enough portions for everyone. The Eternal has said, ‘They shall eat, and have some left over.’”

The servant shrugged his shoulders and did as instructed. He set the loaves of barley and the ears of corn before the sons of the prophets, who gratefully ate. And, when they were finished, there was food left over—just as God had said (II Kings 4:42-44).

### **Naaman the Leper**

Over in the kingdom of Syria there was a man named Naaman. He was the commander of the Syrian army, and was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, the king of Syria. Naaman was held in such high esteem because God had used him to deliver military victories to his people. Yet, despite being considered a mighty man of valor, Naaman was also a leper.

One day, the Syrian army returned home from its raiding party campaign into Israel, and brought back Israelite captives. One of them was a young maiden, who was selected to serve Naaman’s wife. Seeing that Naaman was a leper, she told her mistress, “If your husband was in the presence of Elisha the prophet, he would recover from his leprosy.”

Naaman was told what the young girl had said, and, with his hopes raised, he told his master, the king.

The king of Syria said, “Yes, by all means, go see this prophet. I will write a letter to the king of Israel and make the necessary arrangements.”

Naaman and his entourage of servants and military escorts departed for Israel, taking with him ten talents of silver and 6,000 pieces of gold, as well as ten changes of fine garments.

Joram, the king of Israel, was surprised when his servants told him that an important foreign visitor had come to see him. He was even more surprised to find out that his visitor was Naaman. The Syrian army commander boldly approached Joram’s throne and delivered his master’s letter to the king. In it, the king of Syria had written, “Be advised: The purpose of this letter is to introduce my servant Naaman, who I have sent to you so that you may heal him of his leprosy.”

Reading this upset King Joram so much that he ripped his clothes and mourned. “What I am supposed to do? Am I God? Do I have the power to kill someone and bring him back to life? Why has this man been sent unto me to heal him from leprosy?”

He told his chief officers, “You just wait and see—the king of Syria is looking to pick a fight with me.”

News that Joram was sorely troubled by Naaman's visit and request reached the ears of Elisha, so the prophet sent a message to him: "Why have you ripped your clothes? Let Naaman come to me; then he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel."

Joram felt relieved, and sent Naaman to Elisha. In a show of power and authority, the Syrian army commander drove his chariot and team of horses over to Elisha's home, seeking to impress. He thought to himself, "If I go down to Elisha, he will come out to see me. He'll stand before all and call on the name of the Eternal his God. And then he will strike his hand over the diseased parts of my body, and heal me of my leprosy."

However, instead of personally meeting him, Elisha sent a messenger instead. "Naaman, Elisha says that you must wash yourself in the Jordan River seven times. After this, your flesh will return to good health and you will be clean."

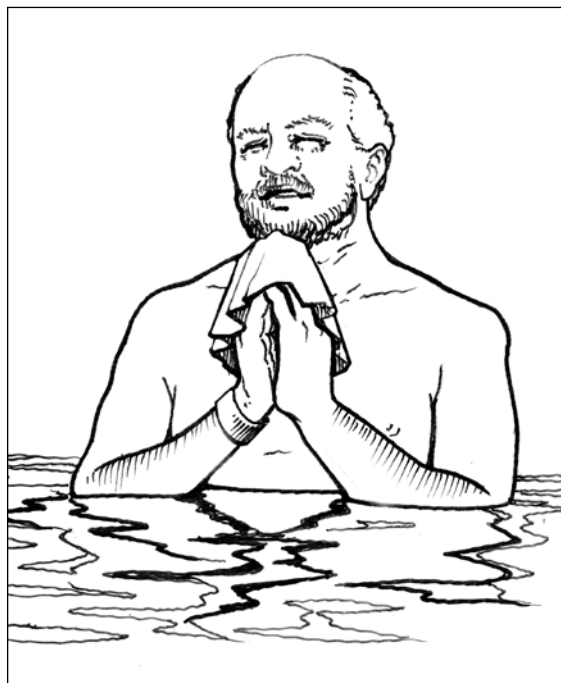
Naaman was angry. "How dare Elisha tell me to come see him and then not meet me face-to-face and receive me! Doesn't Elisha know who I am? Doesn't he realize how important I am? Besides, aren't Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Why shouldn't I wash in them and be clean?"

Naaman had expected Elisha to make a great show of crying out to his God. When this did not happen, he went away in a rage.

But his servants said, "Wait, my lord. If this prophet had told you to do something great, wouldn't you have done it? How much more should you do this little thing and wash in the Jordan?"

Reluctantly, Naaman saw the wisdom in their words, and went down to the Jordan River and dipped himself into it seven times, as Elisha had instructed. Instantly, the diseased parts of his flesh became healthy—like the soft, smooth skin of a little child.

Naaman and his followers returned to Elisha's home. Feeling grateful for God's miracle, Naaman humbly approached the prophet, and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but the One in Israel. Please accept a gift from me, your servant."



Elisha appreciated the gesture, but refused. He did not want Naaman and his men to think a true servant of God was like the priests and prophets of false gods, who were known for offering their services for money.

Though the Syrian army commander insisted on giving him a gift, Elisha continued to refuse. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, wanted to pressure his master into changing his mind, but he knew that the prophet would not give in to greed.

"If you won't accept a gift," Naaman said, "then please allow me to take two mule-loads of earth from Israel. From this moment on, I will not offer burnt offerings or sacrifices to other gods, but to the Eternal." In some ancient cultures, it was believed that a "god" could be worshipped only on the soil of the nation that worshipped it. Naaman intended to carry back to Syria soil from Israel so that he could worship the God of Israel.

"However," Naaman added, "May God pardon me in this one thing: My master, the king of Syria, goes into the temple of Rimmon to worship there; whenever he does, he has me by his side and leans on my hand, and I bow down in the temple with him. May God pardon me in doing this one thing."

Elisha answered, "Go in peace, Naaman."

So Naaman departed on his long journey home (II Kings 5:1-19).

### **The Price for Being Greedy**

Instead of learning from Elisha's godly example in not taking a gift from Naaman, Gehazi allowed greed to cloud his thinking. "Elisha threw away a chance to gain some quick wealth," he said to himself. Gehazi decided that if Elisha did not want Naaman's gift, then he would take it for himself. "Besides," he thought, justifying himself, "Naaman is not an Israelite. He's a foreigner, and his kingdom is our enemy."

And so, when Elisha was not looking, Gehazi ran off after Naaman, and soon caught up with him. Naaman looked down from his chariot and asked, "Is everything well?"

"Yes, all is fine. My master has sent me with a message," Gehazi lied. "Elisha says, 'Two of the sons of the prophets from Mt. Ephraim have come to me, and they are in need. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.'"

Naaman was happy to be of service. "Why, of course," he said. "Take these garments and talents of silver back to your master."

Naaman had two of his servants carry the prized possessions for



Gehazi. When they arrived at a hill by Elisha's home, Gehazi took the gifts and stored them in the house. Then he bid the two men farewell.

Gehazi wondered whether Elisha had been looking for him, so he rushed off to see his master.

The prophet turned to him, and said, "Where were you, Gehazi? Where did you go?"

"Me? I didn't go anywhere."

Elisha shook his head, greatly disappointed. "With God's Spirit, I was able to know that you ran off to see Naaman. God called you to be my servant, Gehazi, and do His work. Is now the time to seek after money and garments? Is now the time to buy for yourself olive groves and vineyards and sheep and oxen, and male and female maidservants, Gehazi? Your greed tainted my office and good reputation, and made a true servant of God look as greedy as the servants of false gods. For this, you must be punished: The leprosy that once plagued Naaman shall now cling to you and to you descendants forever."

From that very moment, Gehazi was struck with leprosy and his skin became white as snow (II Kings 5:20-27).

### **Elisha and the Floating Axe Head**

The living quarters for the sons of the prophets were too cramped. The students felt that they needed extra space, so they told Elisha about their problem. "With your permission, we would like to go to the Jordan River so that we can make larger living quarters for us there." Elisha liked their plan, and agreed. He even decided to go with them to see if he could help.

When they arrived, they immediately set out to cut down enough wood for their needs. As one was cutting down a tree with his axe, the iron axe head came off and fell into the water.

"Oh, no!" the man cried out. "Elisha, the axe head sank into the Jordan." The student was upset because the axe did not belong to him. In those days, iron was costly. Since he could not afford to buy his own axe, he had to borrow it from someone else.

Elisha said, "Where did the axe head fall?"

The student showed him where it had sunk, and the prophet cut off a stick and threw it into the same spot. Defying the law of gravity, the iron axe head floated to the surface as if it was as light as a blade of grass.

"Go on," Elisha said. "Pick it up."

Amazed by the miraculous sight, the student reached out and took the floating axe head. He and his friends sighed with relief, and thanked God for helping them (II Kings 6:1-7).

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED ONE

# AN INVISIBLE ARMY OF PROTECTION

Syrian king Ben-Hadad continued to send raiding parties into the Kingdom of Israel. Desperately wanting to ambush the Israelite army, he consulted with his officers and assistants to determine where the Syrian army should camp.

Yet, despite all the crafty advice they gave him, Ben-Hadad and his army could not seem to catch the Israelite army by surprise. This greatly troubled the king, for it was as though Israel's King Joram and his troops knew about these Syrian ambushes ahead of time, and avoided them.

"And that can only mean one thing," Ben-Hadad said to himself. He assembled his trusted advisors before him and pointed his finger at each man. "One of you is a traitor!" he barked. "Someone has been telling our secret plans to King Joram—this can be the only reason why Israel has steered clear of our ambushes. Now tell me, who among you is working as a spy for our enemy?"

The advisors looked at each other, afraid to say anything and fearful of what would happen next.

Then one man said, "No one has told King Joram of your plans, my lord. This is the work of Elisha the prophet. He is telling Joram every word that you speak in secret, even the words you speak in your private bedchamber."

(Through the power of God's Spirit, Elisha was well aware of Ben-Hadad's secret battle plans. Since God was not ready for Israel to be utterly defeated, He had Elisha send messages to King Joram, warning him every time the Syrian army was encamped somewhere, waiting to catch Israel's troops off guard. Although he did not fully trust Elisha, Joram wisely heeded the prophet's warning, saving himself from certain doom—not just once or twice, but several times.)

"Really?" the Syrian ruler said to the man. "Then find out where Elisha is so I can have him brought back to me."

"Elisha is in Dothan, my lord."

Dothan was an Israelite town in the hills of Manasseh, about 10 miles north of Samaria. It commanded a key mountain pass along a main road that connected Syria and Egypt.

Ben-Hadad wasted no time in sending chariots, soldiers on horseback and a great company of troops to bring back Elisha.

Early the next morning, Elisha's servant woke up to see that the city was surrounded by Syrian warriors. He rushed to tell his master the news, and said, "Everyone in Dothan is trapped! What shall we do?"

Elisha boldly replied, "Do not fear. They that are with *us* are more than they that are with *them*."

Seeing that his servant did not understand what he meant, Elisha prayed. "Eternal God, please open the eyes of this young man so that he may see."

Suddenly, the servant gasped at what God allowed him to see: The mountainous landscape was filled with a heavenly army of horses and chariots of fire, all stationed around Elisha (II Kings 6:8-17).

The Bible reveals that God uses His angels ("ministering spirits" – Hebrews 1:13-14) to serve and protect His human servants, those who will inherit eternal life and the kingdom of God. The Bible also shows that God expects us to be kind to strangers, because He sometimes (though very, *very* rarely) allows angels to appear as physical human beings (Hebrews 13:2). Therefore, we must make sure that we mistreat no one. However, remember that angels are NOT to be worshipped or prayed to. Our prayers and worship should always go to God, who created all angels, people and the vast universe.

### **Heaping Coals of Kindness**

The Syrian troops tried to capture Elisha, but the prophet prayed to God, saying, "Eternal God, please strike this people with blindness." Instantly, the eyes of the Syrian warriors went blind.

As they groped around, afraid and confused, Elisha said to them, "No, not that way. Over here, follow me. I will bring you to the man you seek."

Seeing that they had no other choice, the soldiers reluctantly allowed Elisha to guide them—which he did, straight to Samaria. Then God answered Elisha's prayer to return their sight to them. The Syrians were relieved to suddenly see again—but they were surprised to see that they were in the middle of Israel's capital city, surrounded by their enemies, with King Joram leading them!

Joram said to Elisha, "What should I do with them? Shall I strike them down?"



“No, do not harm them. Would you slay soldiers you have captured in battle? Of course not; that would be uncommonly cruel. Instead, you shall give these soldiers bread and water. After they have eaten, you shall permit them to safely return to their master.”

Joram agreed, and ordered that a great feast be set for them. The baffled enemy soldiers filled themselves with food and drink. Afterward, they returned to camp and reported to their king that Israel showered them with an unusual show of mercy. Israel’s act of kindness led the king of Syria to order his raiding parties to end their attacks (II Kings 6:18-23).

In numerous places in the Bible, God teaches that we must have outgoing concern for others, even for our enemies. God’s Word shows that, instead of treating our enemies badly, we are to “heap coals” of kindness upon them (Romans 12:14, 17-21; also read Matthew 5:38-48).

### **Famine Grips the City**

Unfortunately, the fragile peace between Syria and Israel did not last. Ben-Hadad assembled all of his warriors and launched a massive attack. Before long, the Syrian army surrounded Samaria, blocking anyone from entering or leaving it.

With the citizens trapped within Israel’s capital, food supplies dwindled as a famine spread throughout the city. Things became so desperate that the people were willing to eat just about *anything*—even the head of a donkey! Donkey heads were being sold to the

weak and starving masses for about two pounds of silver each. And for cooking fuel for the ovens, people bought dove droppings for about two ounces of silver for a pint.

The king of Israel paced up and down the top of the city's wall, and worried about how this horrible crisis would end. A woman saw the king and cried out to him, asking that he help settle a legal dispute for her.

Assuming that her problem had to do with the city-wide famine, Joram looked down at her and said, "If God does not help you, where can I find help for you—from the threshing floor or from the winepress? As long as we're all trapped behind these walls, there's nothing I can do about this food shortage."

Then Joram thought it over, sighed, and said to her, "Very well. Tell me what troubles you."

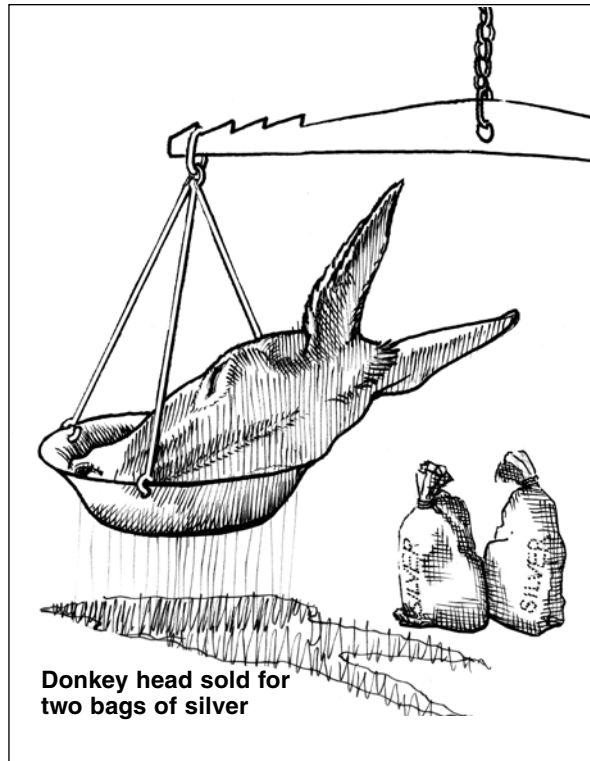
She said, "This woman said to me, 'Hand over your son so that we can eat him. Then tomorrow we'll eat my son.' So I agreed."

Joram's eyes widened in horror as the woman continued her story.

"We boiled my son," she said, "and ate him. The next day, I told her to keep her word and give up her son. Instead, she hid him from me. I kept my word; I expect her to do the same. My lord, make this woman give up her son so we can eat him!"

The king stood silent—shocked by what he had just been told. He ripped his clothes, put on sackcloth and continued pacing atop of the wall while all the eyes of Samaria were upon him. Here was an opportunity for the king to reflect on why Israel had been brought to such despair. Here was a chance for Joram to think about the idolatrous ways that he and his people had embraced—how they had rejected the one true God for "gods" that did not even exist.

But instead of truly humbling himself and seeking God's will, Joram vowed, "May God do to me and more if the head of Elisha



the prophet remains on his body this day.” Rather than take responsibility for Samaria’s horrible situation, Joram blamed someone else.

Meanwhile, Elisha was at home speaking to the elders of Samaria, when the Holy Spirit inspired him to make a startling statement: “Joram, this son of a murderer, has one of his executioners here to take off my head. In fact, my would-be killer will be knocking on the door any minute now.”

The elders exchanged worried looks. “What should we do?” they gasped.

Elisha said, “When you see the king’s executioner coming, don’t open the door. Hold it shut.”

“But surely he won’t be alone,” said one elder. “He’ll have a team of soldiers with him. We can’t hold off the army.”

“All I need you to do is hold the door shut for a few moments. King Joram has changed his mind about killing me, racing to catch up with his executioner before he carries out his orders.”

Just as the prophet had said, the king did change his mind and chased after his executioner, stopping him just as his servant arrived at Elisha’s home.

“Stand down!” said the king. “I will take it from here.” The executioner nodded and stepped aside.

Joram went inside and said to Elisha, “The people are turning into cannibals. I’ve put on sackcloth and fasted, but God does not hear me. The Eternal has sent us this food crisis, so why should I wait for Him to deliver us?”

Elisha answered, “God knows your heart, Joram. He is fully aware that you did not fast to humble yourself and do what is right in God’s eyes. Yet, the Eternal is merciful. Now listen to His words: ‘Normal trade will return to Samaria, allowing food supplies to flow into the city once again. Tomorrow, at about this time, seven quarts of fine flour will be sold for a shekel—two-fifths of an ounce of silver. And fourteen quarts of barley will be sold for the same price, in Samaria’s marketplace, at the city gate.’”

But one of the king’s trusted officers scoffed at God’s ability to do this: “Even if God opened the windows of heaven and poured down grain, how could He possibly provide so much food that things would return to normal in so little time?”

Elisha stared into the man’s eyes and said, “Indeed, you shall see this come to pass with your own eyes. However, since you dare to question the awesome power of the Almighty Eternal God, you will not be around to eat any of the food” (II Kings 6:24-33; 7:1-2).

## The Report of Four Lepers

Four hungry lepers sat at the entrance of Samaria's gate, worrying about starving to death. "Why should we continue to sit here until we die?" they complained. "If we go inside the city, we'll starve to death. But if we stay here, we'll die anyway. What should we do?" Eventually, they decided that it would be better for them to go face the Syrian army. They reasoned that if they were captured, the enemy might give them food, keeping them alive. "And if the Syrians kill us," they thought, "we're as good as dead anyway. What do we have to lose?"

When evening came, the four lepers went out to the outskirts of the Syrian camp—but there was no one was there! The lepers did not know that God had caused the Syrian army to hear the noise of chariots, horses and sound of a great army approaching. Fear drove every man to believe that Israel had hired the kings of the Hittites and the Egyptians to join them against Syria. Panic quickly spread throughout the camp, and the Syrian soldiers fled for their lives, leaving behind their tents, horses and donkeys.

The four lepers went into the deserted camp and searched every tent, eating and drinking the provisions that the Syrians had left in their great haste. The lepers laid claim to the gold, silver and fine garments that remained, and hid the valuable booty.

Then one man said to the other three, "Wait. This is not right. This is a day of good news! If we remain silent and wait until morning to tell the king that the enemy is gone, something bad will happen to us. We must tell King Joram about this right away."

The others agreed, and so they went to the gatekeeper of the city and told him the good news. The gatekeeper passed their message on to the royal household servants, who, in turn, told King Joram.

But the king refused to believe the report: "The Syrians know how hungry we are. They only left their camp to hide in the field. At this very moment, they're waiting in ambush, hoping that we might be foolish enough to leave the protection of our city. And if we do, they'll capture us and invade Samaria."

A servant said, "My lord, what if you allow some men to take five of the horses that are left in city. They shall scout out the situation and return with a report."

Joram thought about this, and then nodded. "That sounds reasonable," he said.

He sent out a scouting party, which soon returned. They told the

king and those in his court that they had seen a path full of articles and fine clothing that the Syrians had cast aside during their hasty flight out of Israel. “The enemy is truly gone,” they said.

Hearing this good news, King Joram assigned his trusted officer, the one who had earlier doubted God’s word, to be in charge of the city gate. “Man the gate,” the king commanded him, “and be ready to close it in case enemy troops return.”

When the people heard that the Syrian army had departed, they rushed out of Samaria—and, in their great haste, trampled the trusted officer to death. The man who had dared to question God’s awesome power did not get a chance to eat the food—just as Elisha had said.

The starving masses searched the tents of their enemies and collected enough foodstuffs and spoils of war to drive the cost of food back down to reasonable prices—again, just as God, through Elisha, had foretold (II Kings 7:3-20).

### **Finding Justice From an Ungodly King**

Years earlier, Elisha had warned his friend, the Shunammite woman, that God was about to unleash a seven-year famine upon Israel. He told her that she and her entire household of family and servants should leave the country and find a safe place to live. “Otherwise, you will suffer from starvation along with the Israelites,” he explained. “Why should you suffer for Israel rejecting God?”

The woman appreciated Elisha’s warning and took it to heart. She and her household packed up their things and departed. They soon found a safe place to live in Philistine territory.

During those seven years of famine, the Shunammite woman longed to return home to her property. And so, when God lifted the seven-year curse and ended the famine, the woman and her family and servants quickly moved back to Israel.

But they were all in for a big surprise: While they had been away, someone else had claimed their house and land! The woman was not about to simply walk away from the land that was rightfully hers. So she made a legal appeal to the king, hoping that he would rule on the side of justice.

Meanwhile, the king of Israel happened to be thinking about Elisha the prophet and desired to know more about him. He knew that Gehazi, Elisha’s former servant, was in the city, so the king ordered that he be brought before him. Since Gehazi had become a leper, the king had to speak to him at a distance, for he did not want to catch Gehazi’s leprous condition.



As Gehazi told Joram the account of Elisha bringing the son of the Shunammite woman back to life, the same woman was speaking with the royal servants, asking for an audience with the king.

Gehazi overheard their conversation. When he recognized her familiar voice, he said to Joram, “My lord, this is the woman I was telling you about! It was her son that Elisha had restored to life!”

The king turned to the woman and said to her, “Is this true? Did Elisha bring your son back from the dead?”

All eyes of the royal court were upon her. “Yes,” she said, and told Joram the account.

The king was amazed by what he heard and meditated on this. Though he was not a man of God, Joram began to fear (at least temporarily) God’s great power and the authority He invests in His servants.

The Shunammite woman took this opportunity to make her legal appeal to the king and get back her property. Joram decided to appoint an officer of the court to help her. “See that this woman’s home and land are restored to her ownership. All that had been hers shall be hers again. And all the fruits that her land had produced during her absence shall be hers as well” (II Kings 8:1-6).

### **Hazael Seizes Power**

Following God’s will, Elisha journeyed to the kingdom of Syria and entered Damascus, its capital city. Because it was a thriving trading hub between Egypt, Asia Minor and Mesopotamia, Damascus was a source of the finest merchandise of the ancient Near East.

Ben-Hadad, the king, was very sick and feared that he was about to die. When his servants told him that Elisha the prophet had just arrived, the king began to see hope.

“This man is a great prophet,” he said within himself. “All Elisha has to do is say the word and I’ll be healed.”

The king of Syria told his servant Hazael, “Take a present to Elisha the prophet and ask to speak to the Eternal for me. Ask this man of God if I shall recover from what ails me.” The gift was actually a bribe, intended to influence Elisha to predict good news. Instead, the king should have learned from his affliction and sought God’s will.

Hazael promptly did as ordered, taking with him camel-loads of every thing of value in Damascus, and presenting them before Elisha.

“What is this?” the prophet asked.

“A gift from your son, Ben-Hadad. The king of Syria knows that you are a great man of God, and has sent me to ask you if he will recover from his disease.”

“Go tell Ben-Hadad that he shall recover,” Elisha replied. “However, God has shown me that the king shall die by another means.”

As Hazael thought about this, wondering what Elisha had meant, he suddenly realized that the prophet was staring straight into his eyes. The young man began to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed—especially when Elisha broke out in tears.

Hazael said, “My lord, why do you weep?”

“Because God has revealed to me the evil that you will do to the people of Israel. You will rise to great power and set their fortified cities on fire. You will slay their young men with the sword, and will do cruel and horrible things to their children and to the Israelite women who are with child.”

“But how can this be? I’m just a dog,” Hazael replied. “I’m no one special in Syria. How could I ever have the power to do such awful things?”

Elisha answered, “The Eternal has shown me that you will be king over Syria.” Years earlier, God told Elijah the prophet that He would do this (I Kings 19:15-17).

Hazael was stunned. “How can this be if Ben-Hadad recovers from his sickness?” he said to himself.

When he returned to his master, the king asked him, “Well? Tell me what Elisha said to you,” and Hazael told Ben-Hadad that he would regain his health.

That night, Hazael dwelled on Elisha’s words, and soon convinced himself that he was someone of great importance. Rather than trusting in God to make him king, Hazael decided to take matters into his own hands. The next day, he took a thick cloth, dipped it in water, and used it to cover Ben-Hadad’s face, as the helpless king lay in his bed. Hazael smothered his master to death, replacing Ben-Hadad and becoming the new king of Syria (II Kings 8:7-15).

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWO

# AN ACT OF TREACHERY

**A**t only 22 years old, Ahaziah, the only surviving son of Jehoram, became the new king of Judah. His mother was Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. Just as she had influenced her husband Jehoram to worship idols, she reared her son to do the same. King Ahaziah was just like his grandfather Ahab: a self-seeking Baal worshipper who thought nothing of rejecting the one true God.

Not bothering to seek the Eternal's aid and wise counsel, Ahaziah joined his uncle Joram, the king of Israel, in waging war against Hazael and the kingdom of Syria. The combined forces of Israel and Judah met the Syrian army in Ramoth Gilead, and, in heat of battle, Joram was severely wounded. He was taken to Jezreel so that he could recover from his injury in safety. When Ahaziah heard what happened to his uncle, he set out to visit him (II Kings 8:25-29; II Chronicles 22:1-6).

### Selecting a New King

Meanwhile, Elisha the prophet commanded one of his students to take a flask of oil to Ramoth Gilead. "When you get there," he said, "look for a man named Jehu. He will be among Israel's soldiers. Take him aside to a private place, away from his companions, and use the flask to anoint his head with oil. You will say to Jehu, 'Thus says the Eternal: "I have anointed you king over Israel."' As soon as you have accomplished this, leave at once—do not delay."

The young man headed straight for Ramoth Gilead. Upon his arrival, he spotted a group of military officers who were sitting outside a house, discussing plans of action. Elisha's student said to them, "I have a message for Jehu."

Jehu stepped forward and said, "I am he."

The young man led the commander into the house, and then took his flask of oil and anointed Jehu's head.

"What's this?" Jehu demanded. "What are you doing?"

“Thus says the Eternal God of Israel: ‘I have anointed you king over My people, the house of Israel. You shall strike down the house of Ahab. In this way, I will avenge the blood of the prophets, and the blood of all My servants whom Jezebel murdered. The whole royal house of Ahab shall perish—just like the house of Jeroboam and the house of Baasha. Not one of Ahab’s descendants shall be left alive. As for his treacherous wife Jezebel, dogs shall eat her dead body, and no one will bury her.’”

Then, without hesitating, the young prophet-in-training departed.

When Jehu came back outside, his fellow officers were waiting for him. “Is all well?” one asked.

Jehu simply nodded, too stunned to speak.

“Why did this madman want to see you?” These men did not respect God’s servants, whom they viewed as “crazy” men who babbled “wild things.”

Not wanting to reveal what the young man had said, Jehu answered, “You know how these prophets spew all kinds of mad talk.”

But the man said, “You’re lying! What are you trying to hide, Jehu? If we are your friends, then tell us what just happened in there!”

Reluctantly, Jehu told them. Each man drank in the news that their friend was about to become the new king of Israel. They thought about what this meant for their future. “Perhaps Jehu will raise us in power and authority,” they wondered within themselves. Convinced that they would greatly benefit, the officers took parts of their clothing and created a makeshift throne, placing the clothes on the top of the stairs for Jehu to sit upon. Then they blew trumpets and proclaimed, “Jehu is now king!”

Jehu knew that having a team of trusted military leaders on his side was a good start—but this was not enough. Rather than waiting on God to show him what to do next, he set out to take the throne of Israel by force.

He ordered that the city of Ramoth Gilead be shut up, in case someone loyal to Joram discovered the conspiracy and tried to warn the king, who was still in Jezreel recovering from his wounds. Then, after assembling enough troops, horses and chariots to launch a surprise attack, Jehu and his men raced over to Jezreel (II Kings 9:1-16).

### **“This Is Treachery!”**

Atop the watchtower at Jezreel, a watchman spotted a company of soldiers off in the distance, racing toward the city. He quickly sent word to King Joram. Thinking that they might be part of the Syrian army, Joram ordered one of his soldiers to go investigate.

The horseman rode out and approached Jehu's incoming forces. As he drew near, the soldier said, "Thus says the king of Israel: 'Identify yourself. Do you come in peace?'"

"What do you have with peace?" Jehu answered. "Turn your horse around and join me." The soldier recognized that it was Jehu and the king's officers, and immediately realized that Jehu had come to seize power. Choosing to save his life, the soldier accepted Jehu's offer and came under his command.

Meanwhile, the watchman saw everything that took place. He thought it strange that the horseman did not return from his mission, and so reported this to the king.

Joram sent another horseman to meet the approaching entourage, but he also did not return. Again, the watchman told the king what he had seen, adding that the company of soldiers and chariots were wildly racing toward the city. "The leader drives as furiously as Jehu!" he said.

Suddenly, it hit Joram—"These were not the Syrians!" he thought. "This is an attempt to seize my crown!"

"Make the chariots and my soldiers ready!" he barked. Then Joram and King Ahaziah, who had come to visit him, exited Jezreel in chariots and went out to face Jehu.

The opposing troops met in the portion of land that Ahab and Jezebel had stolen from Naboth the Jezreelite years earlier. When Joram saw Jehu, he said, "Do you come in peace, Jehu?"

"How can there be peace as long as the wickedness of your mother Jezebel and her witchcraft thrive in Israel?"

Joram turned his chariot around and fled. He called out to his nephew, "This is treachery, Ahaziah! Run for your life!"

Jehu drew a bow and arrow with all his strength and let go—the arrow struck Joram between his shoulders, piercing clean through the king's heart. Joram sank down in his chariot and died.

King Ahaziah saw Jehu and his men surround Joram's body. He knew that his death would be next if he did not escape. He fled by the road to Beth Haggan (the Garden House), a town seven miles away.

Jehu ordered Bidkar, his lieutenant, to take Joram's body and cast it in a plot in Naboth's field. He reminded Bidkar, "The Eternal laid this burden upon him when we rode together behind his father Ahab. God has said, 'I have seen the blood of Naboth and his sons. Thus I will repay you in this plot.'"

Then Jehu and his men chased after Ahaziah. When they caught up with him, Jehu told his warriors, "Strike Ahaziah in his chariot like Joram!"

Ahaziah was wounded at the Ascent of Gur by Ibleam, just south of Beth Haggan. However, he managed to reach Samaria and hid himself there, perhaps thinking that no one would ever think of looking for him at Israel's capital (II Kings 9:14-27).

### Jezebel's Doom

When Jezebel heard that Jehu had slain her son and was now king over Israel, she knew that she would be next. Devising a plan to save her life, the old woman painted her face with makeup and adorned her head to make herself look like a queen worthy of honor and respect. Then she looked out from a window above and waited.

As Jehu entered through the city gate, Jezebel called down from her window: "Do you come in peace, Zimri?" Jezebel compared Jehu to Zimri, who had murdered King Elah and destroyed the house of Baasha. Since Zimri's reign had lasted only seven days (I Kings 16:9-15), Jezebel was implying that Jehu's reign would be short-lived.

The new king stared up at Jezebel, and spotted a handful of her servants looking down at him. He said to them, "Which of you is on my side?"

Two or three of Jezebel's eunuchs raised their hands.

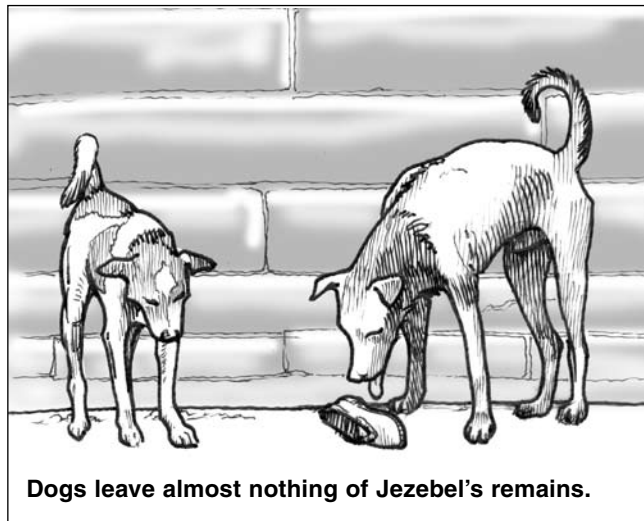
Jehu said, "Prove it! Throw down this woman!"

And they did just that. Jezebel was pushed out of the window, falling to her death. Her blood splattered on the wall and on some horses standing nearby. After driving his chariot over Jezebel's lifeless body, Jehu went inside to eat and drink, and think about his next move.

Reluctantly, he turned to his servants and said, "Go take this cursed woman's body and bury it. Despite her wickedness, she was the daughter of a king and should at least be buried."

The servants set out to do this, but returned almost as quickly as they had departed. "We went to bury Jezebel," they explained, "but there's nothing left of her body, except her skull, feet and the palms of her hands!"

Just then, Jehu remembered the prophecy that God had spoken through



Elijah the prophet: “Dogs shall eat Jezebel’s body by the wall of Jezreel. She will not leave behind a corpse, so that no one can bury her in a grave and say, ‘Here lies Jezebel’” (II Kings 9:30-37; I Kings 21:23).

### **Jehu Kills Ahab’s 70 Sons**

Jehu knew that his life would be in jeopardy as long as Ahab’s descendants lived, for any of them might seek revenge and try to take back the throne.

He sent letters to Samaria, to the rulers of Jezreel, to the elders of Israel, and to those who had reared and educated Ahab’s children and grandchildren. The message read, “As soon as you receive this letter, you shall do the following: Since the sons and grandsons of your master are with you, and you possess chariots, horses, a fortified city and armor, choose the best qualified of your master’s sons and select a king. He shall fight for your master’s house.”

These appointed officials read the message and were deeply afraid. “If two kings couldn’t stand up to Jehu and live, how can we?”

The keeper of the palace, the governor of the city, and the rest of the officials sent word back to Jehu: “Consider us your servants. We will do all that you demand from us. We will not choose a king for us.”

Jehu wrote them another letter, to test their loyalty: “You say that you are my servants. Very well, prove it: Cut off the heads of all of Ahab’s sons and grandsons, and come see me at Jezreel by this time tomorrow.”

The next day, Jehu received a grisly surprise: A messenger came to Jezreel with many baskets, and inside them were 70 heads—the heads of Ahab’s sons and grandsons.

Jehu ordered his men to stack up the heads in two heaps at the entrance of the gate. This gruesome sight made the citizens reconsider any plans of rebelling against their new king.

The next morning, he went out and addressed all the people. “I know what you must be thinking. You are right. I had conspired against Joram, my master, and took his life.”

Pointing to the two piles of heads, Jehu said, “But who slew all these? Know now that not one word God has uttered shall fail to come to pass regarding the destruction of the house of Ahab. For the Eternal has fulfilled the judgment He spoke through His servant Elijah.”

Jehu set out to slay all the survivors of Ahab’s house in Jezreel. He even executed all the important officials, comrades, and priests that

were loyal to Ahab's royal family—those who had been partners with Ahab's wickedness. Not one was left alive (II Kings 10:1-11).

### **Ahaziah's House as Well**

Jehu and his troops left Jezreel and headed for Samaria. Along the way, he encountered a royal entourage of 42 princes at Beth Eked, the shearing house of the shepherds. They were the nephews and cousins of King Ahaziah. "We're on our way to greet our relatives, the princes of King Joram and Jezebel, the queen mother," they explained. They had not heard about the fateful end of Joram and Jezebel.

Jehu ordered his men to seize them, suspecting that these princes posed a threat to him. He reasoned that, if given the chance, they might rally sympathy from the people of Israel and throw support to the few remaining survivors of Ahab's descendants. Jehu felt justified in executing Ahaziah's relatives at the pit of the shearing house.

Next, as they resumed their search for the king of Judah, Ahaziah came out from his hiding place in Samaria and fled to Megiddo. Sadly for him, his escape was short-lived. Ahaziah was soon captured, brought before Jehu and put to death.

Instead of letting the king's dead body rot in a field, Jehu allowed it to be buried in Jerusalem, in the tomb of Ahaziah's kingly forefathers. "He was the son of Jehoshaphat," he explained to his men. "And Jehoshaphat sought the Eternal with all his heart. It is only fitting that we acknowledge this by treating his son's corpse with respect."

After this, the house of Ahaziah was left powerless in Judah (II Kings 9:27-29; 10:12-14; II Chronicles 22:8-9).

### **Destroying the Worshippers of Baal**

After departing, Jehu met a man named Jehonadab, who was well-known in the land for his wisdom and the simple manner of life he chose to live. Jehonadab was held in high esteem, and possessed a great influence among the people. His father was Rechab, the patriarch-leader of the Rechabites, a clan that belonged to the Kenites, who descended from Jethro, Moses' father-in-law.

The Kenites were foreigners who lived among the Israelites in peace. God even allowed them to inherit a small portion of the Promised Land (Numbers 10:29-32; Judges 1:16). While most Kenites gradually came to live in cities (I Samuel 30:29), the Rechabites dwelt at the southern borders of Judah (I Samuel 27:10), living as nomads roaming the desert wilderness.



Jehonadab taught his children and descendants to live according to the customs of their forefathers—to continue living in tents; to survive on the produce of their flocks and cattle; to keep from raising crops; and to avoid drinking wine (which some people tended to abuse rather than enjoy in moderation).

Jehonadab believed that dwelling in tents—as opposed to building houses, or owning, selling or renting property—taught his people to be humble. He did not want them to think about settling down or taking root in worldly cities and towns. He wanted them to learn to endure hardness. The Rechabites observed this simple lifestyle for many generations (Jeremiah 35:1-16).

(Similarly, God commands His people today to observe the Feast of Tabernacles, which is also called the Feast of Booths. True Christians keep this eight-day festival, along with the Last Great Day, by traveling to specific feast sites where God has chosen to place His name, and living in “temporary dwellings,” such as tents, campers, hotel rooms and rented homes. Doing this reminds God’s people that this physical lifetime is only temporary, and that they must set their sights on the kingdom of God, which lasts forever.)

Jehu gladly greeted Jehonadab. Looking down from his chariot, he asked, “Is your heart set to put things right, as my heart?”

Jehonadab said, “Yes, it is.”

Jehu was pleased. “If this is so, then give me your hand and support my cause.” Jehonadab grabbed hold of Jehu’s extended hand, and was pulled up to into the chariot.

“Now come with me,” Jehu said, “and witness my zeal for the Eternal.”

The two men, along with Jehu’s troops, set off for Samaria, where Jehu slew all the surviving members of Ahab’s house, thus fulfilling God’s judgment.

Then Jehu gathered all the citizens of the city and gave them a surprise: “Ahab may have served Baal, but compared to me, he served him only a little! Jehu shall serve Baal much!”

The people were pleased to hear this and were put at ease. They wanted to continue in the wicked lifestyle of idolatry.

“Now call for all the prophets of Baal to assemble before me,” Jehu said. “Let all of Baal’s servants and priests gather so that I can hold a great sacrifice in Baal’s honor. If any man who worships Baal does not come, he will lose his life.”

The people rushed out to spread the news throughout the land—unaware that Jehu was actually setting a trap. The worshippers of Baal soon assembled; not one man failed to come to the sacrifice. Baal’s

temple, which Ahab had built (I Kings 16:32), was jam-packed with servants, priests and false prophets.

Jehu ordered that religious garments be handed out for all of these pagan worshippers to wear. Then, when he and Jehonadab entered the temple, Jehu said to the assembly, “Search among you and see that none of the servants of the Eternal God are here. Only the worshippers of Baal should be at this sacrifice.”

After they did their search, sacrifices and burnt offerings were offered to Baal. Little did these pagan believers know that Jehu had 80 men standing guard outside the temple with orders to seize anyone who tries to escape. As soon as the burnt offering had been given, Jehu ordered the guards to come inside the temple and slay everyone who worshipped Baal. Since the worshippers were wearing religious garments, they were easy to identify.

Next, the guards went into the temple’s inner chamber and brought out the many wooden idols associated with Baal worship, and burned them. They also broke down the pillar image of Baal and destroyed the temple, which quickly became a garbage dump.

With Jehonadab’s support, Jehu removed the wicked system of Baal worship from Israel (II Kings 10:15-28).

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THREE

# THE PRICE FOR LACKING ZEAL

Athaliah, Ahaziah's mother, was tired of being limited to the honorary position of queen-mother. She saw the deaths of her son and the 42 princes as a chance to seize power and rule over Judah. To do this, she set out to destroy all her grandchildren, who, as members of the royal family, posed a threat to her claim to the crown.

But Jehosheba, Ahaziah's sister, took her baby nephew Joash, the king's son, and hid him as Athaliah began her massacre of the house of David. For the next six years, Jehosheba, Joash and his nurse hid in the temple of God, while Athaliah ruled over the kingdom of Judah.

At the start of the queen's seventh year of rulership, Jehoiada the high-priest, husband to Jehosheba, was tired of living under Athaliah's cruel reign. Plus, he could no longer tolerate the Baal worship that she promoted throughout Judah. He knew that Joash was the rightful heir to the throne—and that now was the time to act.

Jehoiada secretly gained the loyalty of the commanders of the elite royal bodyguards and the palace soldier escorts, and entered into a covenant with them. Under his direction, these commanders and their 100-man units went throughout the kingdom and gathered all the Levites, along with the chief elders. Together, they all came to God's temple and entered into a covenant of loyalty and support to little Joash. The young prince was only seven years old.

Jehoiada addressed the crowd, saying, "Behold, the son of King Ahaziah shall reign, fulfilling the Eternal God's promise that the house of David will not end."

Everyone agreed, for Athaliah's murder spree had almost ended the royal line of David's descendants. They eagerly listened as the high-priest told them what to do next.

That Sabbath, the royal bodyguards (one third of the men who were secretly following Jehoiada's commands) came on duty to guard the palace as usual. The priests and the Levites accompanied

them. Together, they were to make sure that news of Joash's surprise coronation did not reach the queen and her loyal servants.

Meanwhile, the two other companies of guards and escorts—who were supposed to go off duty and return to their quarters—stationed themselves at God's temple. Arming them with the spears and shields that had once belonged to King David, which had long ago been stored in the temple, Jehoiada had the men surround the prince and form a tight barrier of security around him. The high-priest gave them orders to slay anyone who dared to lay a hand on the prince.

The priests and the Levites brought Joash out from the temple and crowned him king. They also gave him a copy of God's Law, which every new ruler was to receive upon coming into power. This was done so that the king would be reminded of God's ways, and rule over His people with wisdom, justice and mercy (Deuteronomy 17:18-20).

Since it was the Sabbath, the temple grounds were filled with the usual throngs of followers who assembled every week to observe the seventh day. These spectators expressed tears

of joy as they witnessed Joash officially anointed king of Judah. Musicians blew trumpets, and singers sang praises to God, as cheers of "Long live the king!" echoed throughout Jerusalem (II Chronicles 22:10-12; 23:1-11; II Kings 11:1-12).



### **A Fresh, New Start**

Athaliah and her servants heard the great commotion and rushed to the temple to see what was taking place. She was shocked to see that Judah had a new king, and that he was surrounded by a host of guards, priests, musicians and other people who were rejoicing.

Enraged, Athaliah tore her clothes and cried out, “This is treason! All of you have betrayed me!”

The cheers and joyful music stopped as everyone stared at the queen. Jehoiada barked out a command: “Guards! Escorts! Seize that woman and take her out from the temple grounds. Do not kill her in God’s house. If anyone follows and tries to stop you, slay them with your swords!”

They acted swiftly and Athaliah quickly found herself under arrest. She was taken to an entrance of the palace grounds, where she was slain. Thus ended the queen’s six-year reign.

Jehoiada led the people into a covenant with God and their new king. They promised to serve the Eternal, to be His people, and to support King Joash’s leadership. The king promised to be God’s servant and to serve His people faithfully.

Inspired by the exciting chain of events, the citizens of Judah—who, by this time, were known as Jews—stormed the temple of Baal and tore it apart piece by piece. All the idols and perverse images that were housed within were broken into tiny pieces and the false priest was put to death.

Jehoiada then appointed certain offices to serve at God’s temple. These offices ensured that the burnt offerings would be offered properly, with rejoicing and with singing, as King David had ordained generations earlier. They also made certain that the gates to the temple grounds were guarded by gatekeepers, so that only those who were ceremonially clean could enter.

Then the high-priest led the royal bodyguards and escorts and their commanders, along with the people of Judah, and escorted the young king from the temple to the palace, where Joash took his place upon the throne.

Everyone throughout the kingdom rejoiced. With Athaliah’s death, a new king sitting upon the throne, the destruction of Baal’s temple and a revival of worshipping God at the holy temple, Judah had been given a fresh, new start (II Kings 11:13-21; II Chronicles 23:12-21).

Athaliah yells,  
“This is treason!”



## Repairing God's Temple

Jehoiada the high-priest became like a father to the young king, instructing him in God's laws as he grew into adulthood. Due to Jehoiada's guidance and counsel, Joash did that which was right in God's sight.

When he became a young man, King Joash was inspired to repair the temple of God, which, due to neglect, had fallen into disrepair under his grandmother Athaliah's wicked leadership. He ordered the priests and the Levites to go throughout all the cities of Judah and collect offering money for repairing the temple. But the Levites failed to do this and the repairs were left undone.

Joash called for Jehoiada and the other priests, and devised another plan: The high-priest would take a chest and bore a hole into its lid, and set the chest beside the holy altar, at the temple gate. Guarded under the watchful eyes of priests stationed at the temple door, the chest would become a collection box for offerings. Then a proclamation would be made across all Judah, asking the people to offer contributions to repair God's house.

(However, the monies from the trespass offerings and sin offerings were not to be used; they were for the priests.)

The plan worked. Enough money was collected to pay the workmen their wages and to bring the temple back to mint condition. Judah's leaders and citizens rejoiced at the opportunity to do their part in God's work. Everyone contributed. When the chest was full, the king's royal secretary and the high-priest collected the money. They, in turn, paid hired workers—carpenters, builders, masons and stonecutters—to buy materials and make repairs.

When this was finished, money that was leftover was brought before the king and Jehoiada. It was decided that the money should be used to make the many utensils needed for the temple's use: silver basins, trimmers, sprinkling bowls, spoons, trumpets, and other articles of gold and silver. These special utensils had long been missing from God's temple because Athaliah had stolen them and put them to use at the temple of Baal.

With the holy temple fully repaired, the burnt offerings were continually offered there all the days of Jehoiada.

Nonetheless, not all was perfect in the land. Some people still assembled at pagan high places and offered sacrifices and burnt incense to false gods. Also, though God did not allow husbands to be married to more than one wife, Jehoiada selected two women for Joash

to marry; each bore the king several sons and daughters. Jehoiada may have done this fearing that the house of David would not have enough descendants (II Kings 12:1-16; II Chronicles 24:1-14).

### **Jehu Falls Short**

God commended Jehu for removing the house of Ahab and Baal worship from Israel. He promised Jehu that his descendants would rule over the northern kingdom to the fourth generation.

However, Jehu still fell short of being a faithful servant; he did not set his heart to walk carefully in all of God's ways and laws. In fact, Jehu embraced the sins of Jeroboam, by worshipping the golden calf images that stood in Bethel and Dan. For this, Jehu and the people of Israel had to be punished.

God used Hazael, the king of Syria, to invade Israel and seize portions of the Promised Land—Gilead and all the territory east of the Jordan River, which God had given to the tribes of Gad, Reuben and Manasseh. Through Hazael, the Eternal reduced the house of Israel bit by bit.

Jehu also had trouble with Shalmanezar III, the king of Assyria, and was forced to pay tribute to him.

After 28 years of rulership, Jehu died, leaving his son Jehoahaz to reign in his place (II Kings 10:29-36).

### **Repeating Jeroboam's Sin**

King Jehoahaz reigned over Israel for 17 years. Like his father before him, he did evil in God's sight, practicing the sin of idolatry. Because of his reckless disobedience, the Eternal became so angry with Jehoahaz that He delivered Israel into the hand of Hazael. The king of Syria, and Ben-Hadad, his son after him, became Israel's masters.

Suffering from this humiliating oppression, Jehoahaz stopped and considered his actions. He turned to God and pleaded for His help. As He had done countless times with others in the past, the Eternal listened to the king's pleas and decided to show mercy. God sent Israel a deliverer to help free the people from the hand of the Syrians.

The Syrian oppression had left Israel with a tiny, pathetic army of only 50 horse soldiers, 10 chariots and 10,000 foot soldiers.

Amazingly, despite God's intervention, the Israelites stubbornly refused to turn away from idol worship.

Upon Jehoahaz's death, his son Jehoash reigned over Israel (II Kings 13:1-9).

## Surrendering to Corrupt Ways

Jehoiada continued to serve for many years as King Joash's mentor and counselor, until the high-priest grew very old and died at the age of 130. Seeking to honor Jehoiada for all the good he had done, Joash buried his body in the city of David, which was reserved for the kings of Judah.

With his mentor no longer alive to guide him, King Joash came rely on the advice of the royal princes. These were corrupt men who turned their backs on God and served idols and pagan places of worship. They convinced the king that idolatry was necessary since Jehoiada was no longer around to express the will of God. Because of their wickedness, God's wrath came upon Judah.

Yet, the Eternal is patient and merciful. He always sends His servants to warn those He is about to punish. In this case, God sent His prophets to the people, so that the people might turn their hearts back to Him. Despite all the warnings that the prophets delivered, the Jews refused to listen.

The Eternal inspired Zechariah the high-priest, Jehoiada's son, to warn them. Perhaps God chose Zechariah because He thought that they might listen to the son of a man they all respected.

Zechariah preached: "Judah, why do you break God's commandments and keep yourself from prospering? Since you have forsaken the Eternal God, He has forsaken you!"

Zechariah warned them for their own good, but the people did not like his message—and neither did the king. Joash forgot what Jehoiada had done for him from the king's childhood, and was not willing to extend kindness to Jehoiada's son. The people plotted against Zechariah—and, at the king's command, stoned him to death in the courtyard of God's temple.

The Eternal witnessed this wickedness and was not pleased.

At the end of the year, King Hazael led an attack in Philistine territory and gained control of Gath, one of the five major city-states of the Philistines. With Jerusalem only about 25 miles away, Hazael saw this as his chance to invade Judah's capital.

God decided to use the Syrians to execute judgment against Joash. Hazael had a small company of Syrian warriors attack Jerusalem, slaying all the princes of Judah. Joash, knowing that God does not listen to the prayers of those who disobey Him, gathered all the holy things from God's temple—items that Jehoshaphat, Jehoram and Ahaziah had dedicated years earlier. Joash took these valuables, along with his



own sacred things, and all the gold that was in the temple treasury and in the royal palace, and sent them to Hazael as a tribute. The Syrians gleefully returned home with their plunder.

However, Joash's troubles were only beginning. In the aftermath of the attack, the king was left greatly wounded. Also, his own servants—men he trusted and relied upon—plotted against him to revenge Zechariah's death. As he lay in bed, weak and helpless, they took his life. Joash's 40-year reign had come to a tragic end.

The king was buried in the city of David, but he was not given the honor of being buried in the tombs of the kings.

His son Amaziah took his place as ruler (II Chronicles 24:15-27; II Kings 12:17-21).

### **The Price for Lacking Zeal**

Elisha had served God for many years, and was now old and sickly. Though his life was ending, Elisha did not fear dying. He knew that God would one day raise him back to life, and that he would be a spirit being. Even though this would not take place for thousands of years, he knew that being dead in the grave was like being asleep; time would have no meaning to him. Elisha looked forward to “waking up” from the dead and being born into the kingdom of God.

Knowing that the old prophet would soon die, King Jehoash of Israel wept for Elisha, like a son losing his father, and came to visit him.

But Elisha had one last mission to perform before his death. He told Jehoash to take up his bow and arrows. The king obeyed without question. Then the prophet, as God's servant and representative, placed his hands on the king's hands. This symbolized that, whatever Jehoash was about to do, it would be done by God's strength.

“Now open the window looking east and shoot the arrow.”

Jehoash opened the window, pulled back on his bow and shot the arrow eastward.

Elisha explained, “You have just shot the arrow of the Eternal's deliverance. It symbolizes that God will deliver Israel from Syria—for He has determined that you will destroy the Syrians at the town of Aphek. Now take the rest of your arrows and shoot them into the ground.”

The king nodded. He shot three arrows into the earth and then stopped.

“Why did you stop?!!” the prophet yelled.

Jehoash shrugged his shoulders, wondering why Elisha was so angry with him.

The dying prophet said, “I told you that all this had symbolic meaning—and that it meant that God would deliver you from your enemy! Why didn’t you put your whole heart into it and keep shooting? You should have struck the ground at least five or six times, showing God that you wholeheartedly wanted His help in destroying Syria. But now, because of your lack of zeal, you will only strike the Syrians three times.”

The king was horrified. He had just learned a bitter lesson: Those who expect God to help them had better be prepared to do their part with all their being. God is not a “genie in a bottle” who magically gives people whatever they desire. He freely gives to those who serve His will—those who put their trust in Him and will not hesitate to do their part in serving Him.

Elisha the prophet soon died and was buried. He was a mighty servant of God, whom the Eternal used to perform awesome miracles. And even in death, God used Elisha to perform a miracle.

That spring—the season in which armies traditionally went to war, due to favorable weather conditions—bands of Moabite marauders invaded the land. One day, as family and friends were burying a loved one who recently died, the mourners noticed that the marauders were drawing near. In a haste to end their funeral, they accidentally cast the body against Elisha’s tomb. When the dead man’s body touched the bones of Elisha, he suddenly sprang back to life (II Kings 13:14-21)!

### **Victory Three Times**

Syria’s King Hazael had oppressed Israel throughout King Jehoahaz’s reign. But, despite their evil ways, God had decided to show mercy to the Israelites. He did this to respect the covenant He had made with their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

When Jehoash had come into power over Israel, Hazael was dead. His son Ben-Hadad ruled Syria in his place.

God helped Jehoash to recapture the Israelite cities that Hazael had taken years earlier, and Jehoash defeated the Syrians in war three times—just as Elisha had said (II Kings 13:22-25).

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOUR

# STRONG, BUT SPIRITUALLY WEAK

**D**uring King Jehoash's second year of rulership over Israel, Amaziah, the son of Joash, became the new king of Judah. Amaziah was 25 years old when he was crowned, and ruled over the people of Judah for the next 29 years.

Thanks to being reared by his mother Jehoadan, Amaziah did what was right in God's eyes. As soon as Amaziah came into power, he executed the men who had murdered his father. Yet, unlike what most men would have done, the king did not kill the children of these assassins. He obeyed God's Law, which said, "Fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers. Every man shall be put to death for his *own* sin" (Deuteronomy 24:16).

However, Amaziah did not seek to serve God with all his heart, as his forefather David had done. Like his father Joash, Amaziah failed to remove the high places from the land, even though the people used them to offer sacrifices and burn incense to false gods (II Kings 14:1-6; II Chronicles 25:1-4).

### **"Your Services Are No Longer Needed"**

King Amaziah made plans to bring the kingdom of Edom back under Judah's control. He had his servants go throughout Judah and take a census to see how many able-bodied men lived in the land. Amaziah was able to assemble an army of 300,000 soldiers. He also paid the king of Israel 100 talents of silver (about four tons) to send 100,000 Israelite soldiers to join Amaziah's cause. These mercenaries came from the tribe of Ephraim.

As Amaziah saw his attack plans come together, God sent a prophet to speak to him.

"Do not let the army of Israel go with you into war," the man of God warned him. "The Eternal is not with Israel, nor is He with any of

the people of Ephraim. However, if you insist on having them join you in battle, then prepare to be strong, because God shall make you fall before your enemy. Know now that God has power to help you—and power to cast you down!”

“But what about the money I already paid them?” Amaziah said. “These mercenaries won’t hand it back. And if I don’t take them into battle, I’ll have wasted 100 talents of silver!”

“The Eternal is able to give you much more, Amaziah. Trust Him.”

The king decided to do just that. “You may go back to Ephraim,” he told the commander of the Israelite mercenaries. “Your services are no longer needed.”

“What do you mean?” the commander said. “Are you saying that we aren’t good enough to go into battle with you?”

“No, that’s not at all what I mean. I just don’t...”

In his anger, the commander cut off the king, and said, “We Israelites are better than you Jews, so don’t you forget that! We’ll go home—and we’re keeping the money you paid us, too!” With that, the angry mercenaries departed from Jerusalem.

With 300,000 warriors under his command, King Amaziah and his men marched down into the Valley of Salt, south of the Dead Sea, and attacked Edom. In the heat of battle, Judah captured the city of Selah, known today as Petra, and killed 10,000 Edomites. Another 10,000 were captured alive and taken to the top of a rock, where they were thrown to their deaths (II Chronicles 25:5-12; II Kings 14:7).

## **No Remorse**

When Amaziah returned home victorious, it would have only been natural for him to give thanks and praise to God. But Amaziah did no such thing. Instead, he embraced the false gods of the Edomites and worshipped them!

This act of betrayal made the Eternal God angry. Yet, rather than immediately striking him down—as He surely could have—God sent one of His prophets to see the king.

This man of God said to Amaziah, “Why have you turned your back on the God who delivered victory into your hands, and instead turned your heart after the gods of your enemies? These false gods could not even deliver Edom out of your hand—so why waste time worshipping them?”

Amaziah showed no remorse. “Be careful what you say to me,” he said, pointing his finger at God’s servant. “Who made you the king’s counselor? Take heed, else you might be struck down.”

“Very well, Amaziah. Since you refuse to listen, then I will not waste time warning you. God has decided to destroy you for your betrayal, and for not listening to my counsel” (II Chronicles 14-16).

### **An Embarrassing Defeat**

Amaziah soon learned that, while he and his troops had been away fighting against Edom, the Israelite mercenaries he had dismissed still held on to their resentment toward him and his people. The Ephraimite soldiers-for-hire had attacked the cities of Judah, slaughtering 3,000 citizens and plundering all the valuables they could steal.

Ignoring counsel from God, the king took the advice of his personal counselors, who told him what he wanted to hear (instead of what he needed to hear). Amaziah sent messengers to King Jehoash of Israel, and told him, “If it’s war you want, then come and face me on the battlefield!”

Jehoash sent a message back to Amaziah, which began with a parable: “A thistle in Lebanon sent words to the cedar in Lebanon, saying, ‘Give me your daughter so that she becomes my son’s wife.’ But a wild beast passed by in Lebanon and trampled down the thistle.

“You are that thistle, Amaziah! You boast that you have struck down the Edomites, and now your heart is lifted up in pride. You have overestimated the strength of your military might. Stay home, Amaziah. Why should you play around with trouble and end up falling to your own hurt, and to the hurt of Judah too?”

But King Amaziah was too proud to back down, and God knew that this would be the case. He was using Amaziah’s pride to punish him for seeking after Edom’s false gods.

The armies of Israel and Judah soon faced each other at Beth Shemesh—and the battle ended in Judah’s defeat! Every one of Amaziah’s men fled for their lives. Jehoash and his men captured the king of Judah and brought him back to Jerusalem. The Israelites tore down the city’s wall of defense, and took all the gold, silver and valuable vessels that were in God’s temple. They also took the treasures of the king’s palace, along with hostages, and brought everything back to Samaria (II Chronicles 25:13, 17-24; II Kings 14:8-14).

### **Conspiring Against the King**

During Amaziah’s imprisonment in Israel, the citizens of Judah took Uzziah, his 16-year-old son, and made him king in his father’s place.

Eventually, Amaziah was released and returned to Judah, where he shared rulership with his son for several years.

One day, Amaziah discovered that his people were plotting against him. They blamed him for their embarrassing defeat against Israel and for the great losses that came with it—horrible things that resulted from Amaziah having turned his back on God.

Hearing of their plans to murder him, Amaziah fled for his life. He escaped to Lachish, a town 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem, but his pursuers soon caught up with him and took his life. Amaziah's body was brought back to Jerusalem, and was buried among the kings that had come before him, in the City of David.

Uzziah (who was also known as Azariah) became the sole king of Judah (II Kings 13:9-13; 14:15-21; 15:1-2; II Chronicles 25:25-28; 26:1, 3).

### **Rise to National Power and Dominance**

Instead of learning from the disastrous results of his father's sins, King Jehoash followed the same wicked system of idolatry that all the kings before him had practiced. In fact, Jehoash even named his son after Jeroboam, the first king who led Israel to worship false gods.

Upon his father's death, Jeroboam II became the new ruler. It was during his long reign that the house of Israel reached the height of its national power, wealth and regional dominance. Jeroboam II expanded Israel's borders, restoring eastern boundaries from the entrance of Hamath to the Dead Sea. This happened at a time when Egypt was divided and weak, and the kingdoms of Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Moab and Ammon were no longer a threat to Jeroboam's growing armies. Israel was free to take back the cities, towns, villages and farmlands that once belonged to her.

Also, the fiercest of warrior nations—the Assyrian Empire—was busy dealing with troubles of its own, and thus were not in a position to attack Israel. The Assyrians were greatly feared by many nations—and for good reason, as they were known for their cruelty. They had a reputation for skinning prisoners alive, cutting off body parts (hands, feet, noses, ears), putting out eyes, pulling out tongues, and stacking up human skulls into mounds—all to strike terror into the hearts of their enemies. Whenever the Assyrian Empire invaded a nation, it would break the conquered people's national pride by deporting them to distant foreign lands, where they would live as slaves for the rest of their lives.

After the death of Assyria's King Shalmaneser III, the empire was led by a succession of weak rulers. Thirst for power by ambitious leaders resulted in internal unrest; this kept the Assyrian Empire from invading the nations of the Middle East, including Israel. Without the Assyrians to stand in his way, Jeroboam was able to lead Israel into the most prosperous time since King Solomon's reign.

### Great Spiritual Decline

This great expansion was the result of God's mercy. The Eternal wanted to give His people relief from the years of torment that had been brought by the Syrians, who had stripped Israel's cities and towns of virtually all of its wealth. Although Jeroboam II worshipped idols and was as evil and selfish as past kings, God used him to strengthen and secure the northern kingdom at the right moment in history.

Jeroboam made the neighboring nations pay tribute, which caused his kingdom's treasuries and storehouses to fill up. Israel thrived *physically*—but it suffered *spiritually*. Its national prosperity was so dramatic that the people took it for granted. The Israelites trusted in their military might and growing riches instead of the One who had provided these material blessings. They saw no need to seek the Eternal and obey His laws (Amos 6:1-6; 9:10).

The people, especially those of the ruling classes, focused their lives on gathering as much material goods and power as they could grab.



Princes, princesses and other people of royalty looked out for only themselves. They became accustomed to living in luxurious homes decorated with carved ivory, gold and semiprecious stones, which were used within symbols honoring false gods. They were more concerned with consuming the best wines, oils and meats, and wearing the finest clothing and jewelry than with caring about helping the poor and needy. Fathers led their sons into wickedness and idolatry (Amos 2:7). The wealthy oppressed the poor and sold them into slavery (Amos 4:1; 2:6). Every area of the Israelites' lives was corrupted by sin.

Ironically, the nation experienced a surge in religious worship (Amos 4:4-5; 5:5, 21-23). The Israelites *seemed* to be zealous in seeking God, but it was all for show. They stubbornly refused to *obey* God wholeheartedly. They cared more about gathering wealth and power than in seeking justice and mercy for those in need (Amos 2:6-8; 4:1; 5:11-12; 8:4-6). Jeroboam II had set a rotten example, and the Israelites were delighted to follow in his footsteps.

### **Warning Through Prophets**

During this time of peace and prosperity, God sent prophets to warn His people (Amos 3:7). If Israel continued to reject their Maker and break His Sabbaths and worship idols, then God would bring famine, drought and disease to punish His people severely. If they still refused to obey Him, then God would use the Assyrians as His rod of correction to remove the house of Israel from the Promised Land. The Israelites would be slaves in a foreign land, and would forget their national identity and virtually disappear from the pages of history. It would be as though they had been wiped off the face of the earth (Amos 3:9-11; 4:6-12; Leviticus 26:19-39; Deuteronomy 28:15-68; Ezekiel 5:12-17).

The Eternal commanded the prophet Hosea to marry Gomer, a woman without godly character (Hosea 1:2). Their turbulent marriage became a type of the covenant marriage between God and Israel. Gomer was repeatedly unfaithful and disobedient to her husband; she disrespected him by sharing her affections with rival lovers. Likewise, Israel routinely disobeyed God. Time and again, they rejected Him and put their faith in military alliances with idolatrous nations, and sought after foreign gods. God used Hosea's marriage to express both His disgust and His love for His unfaithful wife Israel.

The birth of Hosea's son, Jezreel, was a sign that the dynasty of Jehu would soon end. The birth of Hosea's daughter signified the end of God's mercy to the house of Israel (Hosea 1:4-6). These proph-



esized events came to pass not long after King Jeroboam's 41-year reign had ended.

Yet, the people would not heed the warning that God preached through Hosea. Nor would they listen to the words of Amos, another prophet. The kingdom was at peace. Riches seemed to flow across the land. For many Israelites, life was going quite well; therefore, they saw no need to change how they lived.

Israel's leaders grew suspicious and came to view Amos's warning message as a conspiracy against the king! Amaziah, the false priest of Bethel, lied against Amos. He sent a message to Jeroboam, falsely accusing the prophet of predicting that the king would be slain by the sword. Then Amaziah ordered Amos to leave Israel. But Amos stood his ground and refused to keep silent. He knew that God's warning had to be heard (Amos 7:10-17).

God called upon another prophet to deliver a warning message—only this message was to be sent to the capital of the Assyrian Empire!

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIVE

# THE RELUCTANT MESSENGER

Early in the reign of Jeroboam II, God commissioned Jonah the prophet to tell the king that He would enlarge Israel's borders and bless the nation with prosperity and military strength (II Kings 14:25).

But the Israelites were ungrateful. They continued to practice idolatry, visiting the pagan shrines at Dan and Bethel, and the many high places and groves throughout the kingdom. Despite numerous warnings from God's prophets, Israel refused to return to Him.

According to Hebrew tradition, Jonah was the child of the widow from Zarephath, whom Elijah the prophet had brought back from the dead (I Kings 17:17-24).

Jonah came from Gath Hopher, which was located about 14 miles west of the Sea of Galilee (Joshua 19:13), in the tribal territory of Zebulun. Most descendants of Zebulun reside in the Netherlands today, and are known as the Dutch.

In spite of the house of Israel's growing wickedness and acts of injustice, Jonah loved his country. He did not want to see his people suffer the judgment that would soon come upon them: national captivity and slavery. He hoped that his fellow countrymen would wake up and put away their sins.

Yet, sadly, Jonah knew that this would not happen.

### Caught in a Violent Storm

One day, God said to Jonah, "You are to go to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. There, you will prophesy against that city and its citizens, for their wickedness has reached the point where I will destroy them if they do not repent. If this happens, I cannot use the Assyrians to punish Israel. Therefore, Jonah, you must warn the people of Nineveh that they are in danger of reaping My wrath."

Jonah was a faithful servant of God, and, like the Eternal, he hated the sins that his fellow Israelites were committing daily. However,

Jonah did not want to see Israel suffer at the cruel hands of the Assyrians. Ironically, Jonah knew that if he preached God's warning to the Ninevites, they might actually repent. They would be spared God's punishment, which meant that God would be able to use them to destroy his homeland. Jonah did not want this to happen.

And so, instead of going to Nineveh, as God had commanded him, he booked passage on a ship traveling in the opposite direction! Jonah wanted to get as far away from Nineveh as possible. The ship sailed off to Tarshish, which may be present-day Spain.

As it sailed across the great Mediterranean Sea, God sent a mighty wind to overtake the vessel. Suddenly, the tiny craft was tossed back and forth in a storm so violent that everyone onboard feared the wooden vessel would break apart! The crew all cried out to their false gods for help. Fearing that the ship might sink, they went into the cargo hold and cast supplies and equipment overboard. Terror and despair plagued everyone aboard—except for one man, who was fast asleep in the bowels of the ship.

It was Jonah.

### **Jonah's Watery Grave**

All were amazed that *anyone* could sleep through the continuous pounding of waves crashing against the hull, and the wild, rollercoaster-like ride of the ship going up and down, up and down, up and down, as the sea tossed it about as though it were just a twig.

The shipmaster awakened Jonah. "How can you sleep through all this?" he said. "Don't you know we're about to lose our lives? Get up and call upon the name of your God. Maybe He will intervene and save us from destruction."

Then someone said, "Perhaps this storm is the result of some god being angry at one of us for sinning against him."

The others agreed. The crew decided to cast lots to find out which man was guilty of sinning against his god. Though these were superstitious men, the Eternal used the lot to reveal that the guilt was upon Jonah.

The men said to the prophet, "You're the guilty one! Tell us what you did to cause this evil to come on us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? Who are your people?"

"I am a Hebrew," Jonah said. "And I worship the Eternal God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

"Why have you done this to us? What have you done to make your God so angry?"

“The Eternal sent me on a mission,” Jonah said, “but I refused to go. I ran away instead. This is why I am traveling aboard your ship.”

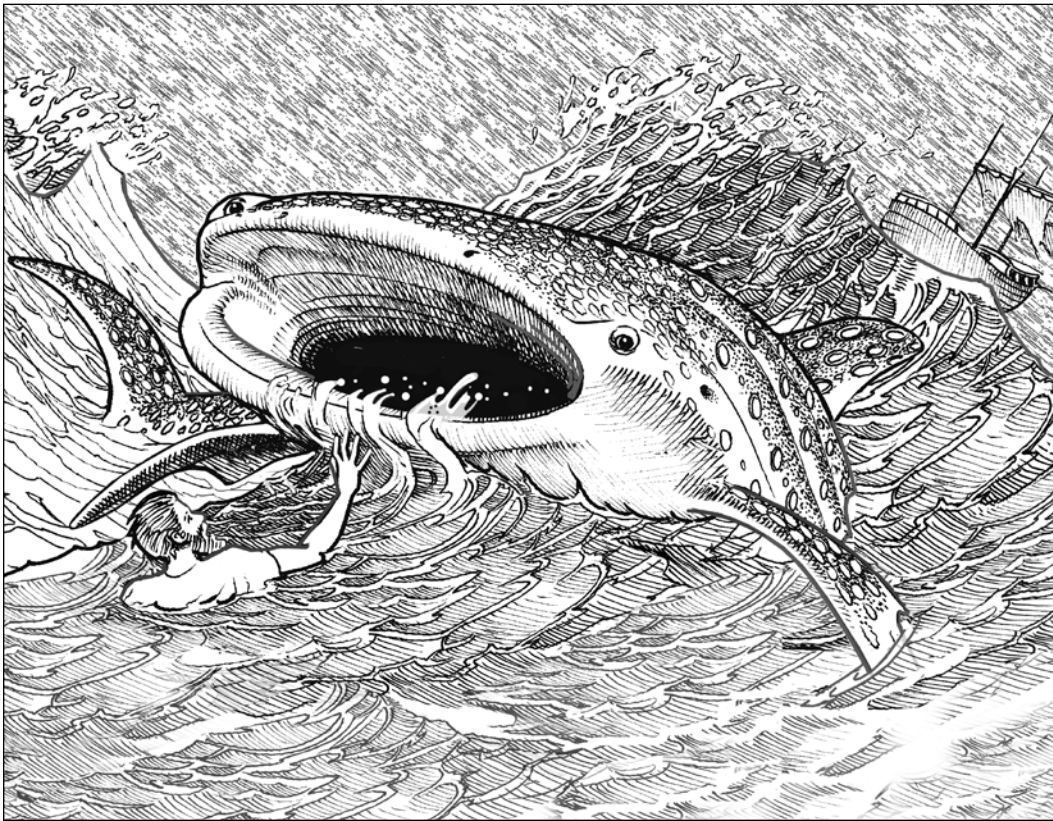
The pagan men grew even more afraid. They had heard tales of the mighty wrath and awesome miracles of the God of Israel.

“What shall we do with you, Jonah? How can we appease your God so the sea will become calm again?”

Jonah told them to cast him into the sea so that God’s anger would be on him only. “It’s the only way to release you from the storm,” he said.

But the sailors were not willing to throw Jonah overboard. Instead, they rowed with all their might, hoping to bring their ship to land. Yet, no matter how hard they worked, they could not free themselves from the grip of the storm.

Realizing that their false gods could not rescue them, these idol worshippers cried out to the Eternal and begged Him not to destroy their lives for Jonah’s sin of rebellion and disobedience.



Then, the crew reluctantly took Jonah and cast him overboard into the sea. Immediately, the violent sea calmed. This caused the men to fear God, even to the point of offering a sacrifice to Him and making vows to obey His will (Jonah 1:1-16).

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the sailors, God had specially prepared a great fish—what we would probably think of as a “sea monster”—to come and swallow Jonah alive! For three days and three nights, Jonah was trapped in the belly of the fish, where it was dark, wet and smelled worse than anything of which you can think.

During those three days and nights, Jonah had time to think about what he had done—how he had rebelled against God’s will, and how he had allowed himself to be just as stubborn and disobedient as his fellow Israelites. When Jonah realized how wrong he was, he prayed to God with all his might.

The Eternal heard his cry and had pity on him. God ordered the fish to expel Jonah from its belly. Jonah came out from his watery grave and struggled onto a beach. As he gasped to fill his lungs with fresh air, he deeply appreciated God’s great mercy and set his mind to obey Him (Jonah 1-2).

### **Arriving at Nineveh**

God gave Jonah a second chance and again ordered him to go to Nineveh. This time, Jonah obeyed. When he arrived at the Assyrian capital, he was amazed by its size and greatness. The city was so large—about 60 miles all around—that it took three days just to walk around it.

Situated at the junction of the Tigris and Khosr rivers, Nineveh was a major hub for trade routes crossing the Tigris. Since the city served as a key link on the great highway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, great riches flowed into it from many kingdoms, making Nineveh one of the greatest of all ancient cities.

The city was about 500 miles northeast of Jerusalem, and was made up of an inner city and an outer district. Together, they comprised 1,800 acres.

The inner city was about three miles long and one and one-half miles wide, situated at the mouth of the Tigris and Khosr rivers. The walls of the inner city reached as high as 100 feet and were 50 feet thick—wide enough to drive four chariots on top, side by side. The inner city was also protected by a moat 150 feet wide and 60 feet deep.

Greater Nineveh (the outer district), which was about 30 miles long and ten miles wide, was a series of villages and suburbs connected by 18 canals, which brought water from nearby hills. The people were protected by three moats and five walls, with 15 main gates. Both within and outside the walls, there were beautiful parks, a botanical garden and a zoo.

Dating back to the time of Nimrod, Nineveh was one of Assyria's royal cities and served as the empire's capital for many years.

Today, its ruins lie at Mosul, Iraq.

### **Warning the People of Nineveh**

As soon as Jonah entered the city, he stood at a spot where he could speak to the largest numbers of people. Then he said, "In 40 days, you and your city shall be overthrown! The Eternal God, the Creator of the universe—the One who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt with awesome signs and wonders, and who brought His people into the Promised Land—will destroy you! Turn from your wicked ways, or else face His fury!"

All the citizens of Nineveh—from royalty, judges, army commanders and merchants to farmers, field hands, servants and slaves—believed God's warning. The king of the city and everyone else, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth and sat in ashes. Then the king made a royal decree, commanding that no one—neither man nor beast—eat or drink anything. He also ordered everyone to stop living his evil and violent way. Though the people of Nineveh had been quite proud of their warrior history, they humbled themselves before God so that He would not destroy them.

It pleased God that they had taken His message seriously and turned from their evil ways. So, He turned away from punishing them. The Assyrians were spared from being destroyed.

But Jonah was far from pleased—in fact, he was angry.

Praying to God, he said, "Didn't I say that this would happen when You commanded me to come here? The Assyrians have repented, and now they'll be kept alive. Their empire will strengthen and flourish. It's only a matter of time when You will use Assyria to punish Israel! This is why I ran away to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a God full of grace and abundant mercy, slow to anger, and of great kindness. I know that You take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. But what about Israel—what will happen to my fellow countrymen? I can't bear to think of their fate. Please take my life—it's better for me to die than to live."

God was patient with Jonah. He said to him, "Is it right for you to be angry, Jonah?"

Upset and depressed, Jonah left the midst of the city and sat at its east side. There, he made a booth for shelter and sat in the shade—waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh.

God prepared a plant and made it grow over Jonah, shading him from the hot, burning sun, and temporarily comforting him in his grief. Jonah came to appreciate the plant.

But the next day, as morning came, God prepared a worm that damaged the plant and caused it to wither. When the sun took its place high in the sky, God sent a scorching-hot east wind. Jonah sweated under the sun, as its rays beat upon his head, and sapped his strength. “If only I could die and no longer suffer from this misery,” he said to himself.

God said to him, “Jonah, is it right to be angry about the plant that withered?”

“Yes, it is!” he answered.

“Jonah, you have shown pity on a plant, which you have not created, nor have you made it grow. It came up in a night and perished in a night. Should I not spare Nineveh, the home of more than 120,000 little children, who are so young and innocent that they do not even know their right hand from their left? And what of all the cattle that lives in the city?”

God wanted Jonah—and us today—to know that He cares about all human beings, especially those who are willing to be taught His ways. The Assyrians may be a war-like people, but they, along with all people, will have a chance to repent (Jonah 3-4).

### **King Uzziah of Judah**

As Jeroboam II reigned over Israel, a new king came to power in Judah: Uzziah, the son of Amaziah. He was only sixteen years old.

Overall, Uzziah was a good king, who sought to obey God and follow His statutes and judgments, just as his father had done. This was partly due to his parents’ upbringing, but also because of the positive influence from a prophet named Zechariah (not the one whom God later inspired to write the prophetic book of Zechariah).

Yet, despite Uzziah’s faithful obedience to his Creator, he failed to remove the pagan high places completely, which the people used to offer sacrifices and burn incense to false gods.

Nonetheless, as long as Uzziah sought God and put His will first, the Eternal caused him to prosper. One of the first things he did as Judah’s new king was to take back the town of Elath from Edom and restore it to Judah.

When the king decided to make war against the Philistines, God enabled Uzziah and his troops to tear down the walls of Gath, Jabneh and Ashdod, major Philistine cities. Then Uzziah had outpost cities erected throughout Philistine territory to keep a watchful eye on the enemy. God also granted Uzziah success against the Arabians and the Mehunims, a nomadic people who lived in Edom. The king triumphed

over the Ammonites as well, who gave him many gifts of tribute. In time, Uzziah had strengthened and fortified his tiny kingdom, and his fame had spread across the region, even down into Egypt.

The king had an army of 2,600 mighty men of valor, and under them was a standing army of 375,000 fighting men, ready to face Judah's enemies. The soldiers were well armed with shields, spears, helmets, body armor, bows and arrows, and slings.

The king had inventors build catapults, which were used in battle to rain huge stones down upon any army that dared to attack the city.

Uzziah created special building projects, constructing towers in Jerusalem, fortifying the capital. He also built towers in the wilderness, and dug many wells for the great herds of cattle he possessed. Uzziah also owned several vineyards and fertile farmlands (II Chronicles 26:1-15; II Kings 14:21-22; 15:1-4).

Like the house of Israel, Judah was being blessed with national security and prosperity. But Uzziah's 52-year reign was not perfect.

### **Pride Comes Before a Fall**

Uzziah's fame went to his head. He began to see himself as important and special. He came to believe that *he* was the reason Judah had risen to power and grew in riches and influence.

One day, he decided to go to God's temple and burn incense upon the holy altar—which only God's priests were allowed to do (Numbers 3:10; 18:7).

“Why shouldn't I be able to burn incense on the altar?” Uzziah reasoned within himself. “After all, I am the king. I'm the most important man in Judah.”

At the temple, when Azariah the high-priest saw Uzziah carrying a holy censer in his hand, he immediately knew what the king planned to do. Azariah, along with 80 of God's priests, went after him and stood their ground against the king at the altar.

“Uzziah, you may be the king, but the Eternal did not give you the authority to burn incense unto Him! That duty belongs solely to the Levitical priesthood. We have been set apart by God to serve priestly duties. Now leave God's sanctuary at once, as you have already sinned! Despite what you may have reasoned within your mind, the Eternal will not honor you for what you plan to do!”

King Uzziah fumed. “How dare you confront me,” he said, defiantly holding on to the censer. “Get out of my way!”

Azariah and the priests watched in horror as the skin of Uzziah's forehead began to whiten, crack and peel.



“Look!” a priest shouted. “He’s turning into a leper!”

Deciding to punish Uzziah for his proud and rebellious attitude, God struck the king with leprosy. The priests scrambled to take Uzziah out of the temple before his leprous condition infected every area of his body.

Uzziah lived as a leper for the rest of his life. Because of his contagious (and humiliating) condition, he had to live alone. He could not be around his family, friends, servants and citizens. King Uzziah’s tragic example became a lesson for everyone: “Pride goes before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).

The king relied upon his son Jotham to represent him in judging and settling legal disputes for the people. This gave Jotham much hands-on training and prepared him to take over as king when his father died (II Chronicles 26:16-23; II Kings 15:5-7).

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIX

# THE FALL OF ISRAEL

Upon the death of Jeroboam II, his son Zachariah became king over Israel. Like his father, Zachariah was an evil king. The final ruler from Jehu's dynasty, his reign lasted only six months.

Shallum, a man who was greedy for power, plotted against the king. In a daring show of force, he killed Zachariah before the people and crowned himself king.

But Shallum's reign lasted only one month, for Menahem, who had been one of Zachariah's army commanders, slew the new king and took Israel's throne for himself.

The town of Tiphseh refused to accept Menahem as their ruler. When Menahem led his troops there, the townsfolk would not open their gates to allow him to enter. Menahem was so enraged that he ordered his soldiers to attack. When the city was defeated and under his control, the king had his men brutally execute all the women who were pregnant. He wanted their shocking, horrific deaths to remind all the Israelites that they had better open their city gates to him—or else (II Kings 14:28-29; 15:8-16).

### **Becoming a Vassal State**

Menahem reigned for ten years and committed all kinds of wickedness.

Meanwhile, the internal unrest that had troubled the Assyrian Empire during Jeroboam II's reign ended. King Pul (also known as Tiglath-Pileser III) was Assyria's leader—and he and his people were hungry for new lands to conquer.

The Assyrian army invaded the kingdom of Israel, spreading fear across the land. Menahem knew that his army was no match against the massive forces of Pul, so he and all Israel submitted to the Assyrian Empire. Menahem even paid them a tribute of 1,000 talents—about 37 tons—of silver, to keep from being utterly destroyed. In order to raise so much tribute money, Menahem had 60,000 wealthy Israelites each contribute 20 ounces of silver.

Tiglath-Pileser was quite pleased with his “gift,” and so returned to Assyria richer than when he had left. For the Assyrians, Israel became a vassal state and a continuing source of riches, livestock and other valuables and material goods.

Upon Menahem’s death, his son Pekahiah became king. He did not depart from his father’s evil ways.

Pekah, one of Pekahiah’s trusted military officers, had been leading the Israelites who lived in Gilead, across the Jordan River. Pekah had maintained an uneasy alliance with Zachariah, Shallum and then Menahem, leading the Gileadites for them. But Pekah and his followers had grown tired of living under Assyria’s rule—so they decided to take matters into their own hands. When he saw his chance, Pekah murdered King Pekahiah in the royal palace, as 50 of his men from Gilead watched with satisfaction. Pekahiah’s rule had been cut short, lasting only two years.

Pekah became the new king and ruled with an evil hand. He did not consider looking to God to help him lead Israel with wisdom. Without God’s protection, Pekah could not stand up to the Assyrian army (II Kings 15:17-28).

### **A Righteous King in Judah**

In the kingdom of Judah, Jotham had replaced his father Uzziah as king. Jotham was a good ruler, one who carefully obeyed God. Jotham avoided going into the holy temple, perhaps because he feared that he might sin and invite God’s wrath, as his father had done.

Yet, despite the king’s godly example, the people continued to live corrupt lives, looking to idols to direct their paths.

Jotham set out to strengthen Judah, first by building the Upper Gate of God’s temple. Next, he constructed several projects on the wall of Ophel. The king also established cities in Judah’s mountains, and set up fortresses and towers in the forests.

When the Ammonites attacked Judah, Jotham and his forces were victorious, for God was on Judah’s side. For the next three years, Ammon paid a tribute of 100 talents (about four tons) of silver, 10,000 measures of wheat and 10,000 measures of barley (II Kings 15:32-37; II Chronicles 27:1-8).

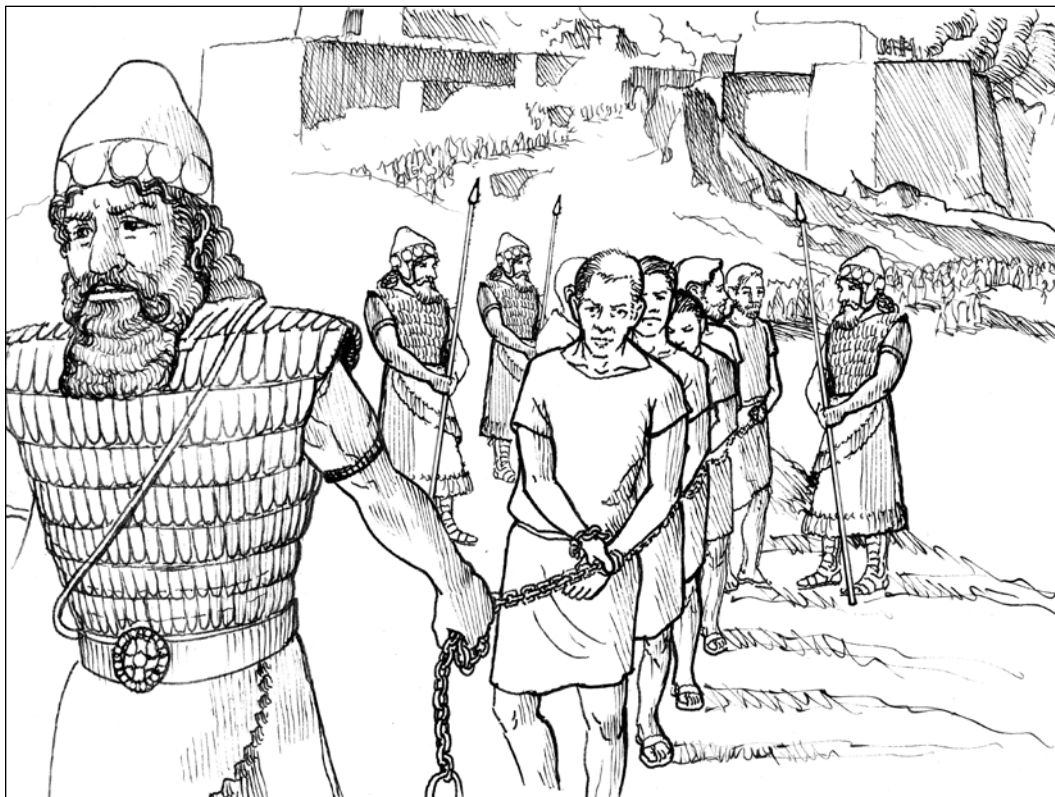
### **A Prophet Intervenes**

Toward the end of Pekah’s reign in Israel, Ahaz, the son of Jotham, became king over Judah. Unlike his father, Ahaz was as evil as the

kings of Israel. While past kings of Judah had tolerated the people worshipping at pagan high places and groves, King Ahaz went further—he worshipped there too. He even sacrificed the lives of his children to worship Molech, the false god of the Moabites!

For such terrible sins, God used the armies of King Rezin of Syria and King Pekah of Israel to punish Judah. Zichri, a mighty Ephraimite warrior, slew three of Ahaz’s top leaders: Maaseiah, the king’s son; Azrikam, governor of the royal house; and Elkanah, Ahaz’s second-in-command. In just one day, 120,000 of Judah’s troops were killed.

The Syrians took a great many of the Jews captive and brought them to Damascus. Pekah and his troops carried away 200,000 captives, mostly women and children, as well as much plunder, and brought everything to Samaria.



The Israelites intended to keep them as slaves, but God did not want this. He sent His prophet Oded to Samaria, where he boldly delivered God’s message: “Behold, Israel! The Eternal God of your fathers was angry with Judah. This is why He delivered them into your hand. But you have slain them in a rage that reaches up unto heaven! And now you plan to keep the Jews, your brothers and sisters, as slaves!”

“Consider this, Israel: If God has punished Judah for her sins, are there not sins among you for which you should receive God’s punishment? Hear me, Israel: Free your captives—or else face the fierce wrath of the Eternal!”

God’s warning rang in the ears of certain leaders from Ephraim. They stood up against the soldiers who had returned from war with their Jewish slaves. They said to them, “Don’t bring these captives here! We’ve already offended God—and now you intend to add to our sins and bring the Eternal’s wrath upon us!”

The soldiers bowed to the pressure and released their captives and the spoil they had taken, leaving them before the crowd of royal leaders and all the citizens of Samaria.

A team of men was assigned to clothe the captives who were naked. They gave them sandals to protect their sore feet, and food and drink, and cleaned them up. Then, they led the weary Jews back home, as far as Jericho, allowing the weakest to ride on donkeys (II Chronicles 28:1-15).

### **Closing God’s Temple**

Though the allied forces of Israel and Syria had done much damage to Judah, they were unable to capture Jerusalem. Rezin decided to change tactics and attack Elath, a key seaport off the Gulf of Aqabah. He captured Elath—the town that Uzziah, Ahaz’s grandfather, had taken years earlier—and drove out the Jews who had settled there.

This was one of many defeats for Ahaz’s kingdom. The surrounding nations decided to take advantage of his setbacks. The Edomites attacked Judah, carrying away captives. The Philistines captured Judah’s cities and villages in the low country and in the south.

Following God’s orders, Isaiah the prophet (who was inspired to write a book of prophecy, which bears his name, in the Bible) went to talk with King Ahaz.

“Hear the words of the Eternal God,” Isaiah said to him. “Take heed, Ahaz, and be quiet. Do not fear. Though the kings of Syria and Israel have plotted evil against you, I will not allow their plans to stand. Within 65 years, the house of Israel, lead by Ephraim, shall be broken and will cease to be a people. Either trust My word—or fall into your enemies’ hands. If you do not believe Me, then ask for a sign and I will perform it” (Isaiah 7:1-12).

But Ahaz refused. Rather than repenting of his wicked practices and crying out to God for help, Ahaz turned to the Assyrian Empire. He sent a message to Tiglath-Pileser, which read, “From this moment

on, I am your servant. Please come and rescue me from the hand of the kings of Syria and Israel.”

To show that he was serious, Ahaz raided God’s temple, stole its silver and gold, took the royal treasures of the palace, and sent these as bribes to Assyria’s king. Tiglath-Pileser was more than willing to come to Judah’s aid—especially when it made him richer and more powerful than ever.

The Assyrians went on the march, spreading across the land like a swarm of hungry locusts. They seized the regions of Gilead and Galilee, and conquered the territory of Naphtali. The Assyrians gathered their new slaves and carried them to Assyria. Meanwhile, Tiglath-Pileser turned Gilead and Galilee into Assyrian provinces governed by royal representatives.

This was known as the Galilean captivity. The Assyrians took away three-fourths of the population of Israel. All that remained were the people of Samaria and the surrounding regions.

Damascus, Syria’s capital, was also besieged, and captured two years later. Tiglath-Pileser executed the defeated King Rezin and deported the Syrian captives to the distant land of Kir.

Ahaz was quite pleased that Israel and Syria were so humiliated. He journeyed to Damascus to congratulate Tiglath-Pileser personally. Ahaz was impressed with a large pagan altar that was being used there. He had his servants draw a detailed sketch of it and then sent the drawing back home to Urijah the high-priest.

Following the king’s orders, Urijah built an altar according to the sketch’s design—building an idol in God’s temple!

Returning from Damascus, Ahaz inspected the workmanship of the new altar and was well pleased. He used it to present burnt offerings, meat offerings, drink offerings and other sacrifices.

Yet, Ahaz was still not satisfied. He reasoned that the bronze altar, which God had approved of back in Solomon’s day (I Kings 8:22, 54, 64), should be moved. Ahaz’s new altar would take its place, while the bronze altar would be moved to a position of lesser status. Then Ahaz ordered Urijah to burn all the sacrifices upon the king’s new altar.

“But what about the bronze altar?” Urijah asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” said the king. “I plan to use it to contact my gods.” This, too, was against God’s Law (Deuteronomy 18:9-14).

As high-priest, Urijah must have known better than to go along with Ahaz’s plan, yet he carried out the king’s orders.

Ahaz made other changes to the temple area. He took away the side panels and basins from the portable stands; he removed the large reser-

voir, called “the Sea,” from atop the 12 bronze bulls and placed it on a pavement of stones; he did away with the “Sabbath pavilion,” a canopy that the kings would use on the Sabbath. He also removed the special entrance from the temple, which past kings had used on the Sabbath and annual holy days (II Kings 16:5-18).

### **Complete Rebellion**

In the end, the king of Assyria did nothing to strengthen Ahaz’s kingdom. Despite this, Ahaz still refused to turn to God.

Amazingly, he offered sacrifices to the false gods of the conquered and humiliated Syrians, thinking that somehow these might restore his realm! Yet, the more Ahaz sought after foreign gods, the more that he and the people of Judah were cursed.

Ahaz set out to keep his subjects from worshipping the true God. He took the holy articles that were in the temple and cut them in pieces so that the priests could not use them. He shut the temple doors so that the people could not attend Sabbath services. Then Ahaz made pagan altars in every corner of Jerusalem and set up high places in all the cities of Judah to burn incense to false gods. This provoked God to become angrier than before.

Upon his death, Ahaz’s body was buried in Jerusalem. However, because of his 16 years of cruel and bitter rulership, he was not given the honor of resting in the tombs of the kings.

Thankfully, Ahaz was replaced by his son Hezekiah, who would prove to be a righteous king (II Kings 16:17-20).

### **Samaria Falls**

Hoshea, the son of Elah, killed Israel’s King Pekah and crowned himself king. Though he did much evil, he was not as bad as the other rulers who had reigned before him.

Shalmaneser, the son of Tiglath-Pileser, was now king over Assyria. He forced Hoshea to serve the Assyrian Empire and to pay an annual tribute.

One year, Hoshea did not bring Shalmaneser a tribute gift. This was because Hoshea had secretly sent messengers to So, the king of Egypt, in a plot to ally together against Assyria. When Shalmaneser discovered this conspiracy, he had Hoshea arrested and imprisoned. Then the Assyrian ruler had his army sweep through the land, attacking Israel’s towns and settlements, including Israel’s capital.

The citizens of Samaria managed to survive constant attacks for

three years. This was due to the city's internal water supply and food that had been stored for such emergencies. But eventually, Samaria fell. The Assyrians, now led by Sargon II, deported their Israelite captives to Assyria, and placed them in various regions.

The Israelites lived as slaves, strangers in a strange land, and were not to return home. They became known as the "lost ten tribes of Israel," for they seemed to have disappeared into the pages of history (II Kings 17:1-6; 18:9-12; Isaiah 20).

### **The Samaritans**

The Assyrians resettled Israel's cities and towns with foreigners they had conquered earlier. Coming from faraway nations such as Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath and Sepharvaim, these foreigner settlers did not know about or fear the Eternal. They worshipped false gods. As they continued their pagan ways in Israel's former homeland, they offended God. So the Eternal sent lions among them, and some of these foreigners were killed.

The settlers asked the king of Assyria for help. "We don't know the God of the people you removed from this land," they wrote to him, "but somehow we have offended Him. This God is angry at us and has sent lions to punish our people."

At the king's command, an Israelite priest was sent back to Israel, who then taught the new settlers how to appease the God of the land.

The foreigners intermarried with the remnant of Israelites who had escaped capture by the Assyrians. Together, they produced offspring who came to be known as Samaritans. The Samaritans created a new religion—mixing their limited knowledge about God with their own pagan beliefs of false gods and idols. They set up for themselves priests and high places in every city throughout the land—a system of worship that counterfeited true religion.

The Samaritans were much like traditional "Christianity" today—seeming to *appear* like God's people, but engaging in customs, practices and traditions rooted in pagan origins—things that the true God hates. Just like the vast majority of professing Christians today, the Samaritans did not truly fear God or keep His commandments, statutes and judgments (II Kings 17:24-41).



## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVEN

# THE GREAT RESTORATION

**I**n the third year of King Hoshea of Israel, Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, co-ruled Judah with his father. Upon Ahaz's death, Hezekiah became the sole ruler, at age 25.

King Hezekiah trusted and obeyed God with the same wholeheartedness as King David. Of all the kings of Judah, none were like Hezekiah—before or after his 29 years of rulership.

In the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the holy temple, which his father had closed, and repaired them. Next, he assembled the priests and Levites, and told them to set themselves apart to serve God, sanctify His temple, and remove the dust and debris that had accumulated over the years.

After the Levites had done so, Hezekiah and the city leaders assembled at the temple. There, the king ordered the priests to prepare a sin offering of seven bulls, seven rams, seven lambs and seven male goats, and to sprinkle the animals' blood upon the holy altar. Hezekiah also directed the Levites to honor and praise God with beautiful music of harps, trumpets, cymbals and singing. After the offering was given, the king and the assembly bowed down and worshipped God.

Hezekiah said to everyone, "Now that you have set yourselves to serve God, bring sacrifices and thank offerings into His temple—and give freely."

That is exactly what everyone did. The people were inspired, and willingly gave offerings of 70 bulls, 100 rams and 200 lambs, as well as 600 oxen and 3,000 sheep.

But there was a problem: Normally, only the priests were allowed to skin animals for burnt offerings, since these would be laid upon the holy altar and consumed by fire. However, there were not enough priests for such a huge offering. In light of this emergency, the Levites were allowed to assist.

These religious services were done decently and in order for the first time in years. King Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced. They

were able to assemble everything in very little time (II Kings 18:1-6; II Chronicles 29; 31:20-21).

### **The Great Passover Festival**

Passover had already passed by the time the priests had ceremonially sanctified themselves, and the people were assembled in Jerusalem. After carefully weighing the matter, King Hezekiah, the royal leaders under him, and all the people of Jerusalem decided to keep Passover in the second month. God's Law permitted this (Numbers 9:9-11).

The king sent letters throughout Judah, exhorting the people to come to Jerusalem and join them in keeping the Passover at the temple. He also sent letters to the few remaining Israelites who had not yet been taken captive by the Assyrians. About one-fourth of Israel remained from the Galilean captivity.

"You are all that is left of the northern kingdom," the message went. "Turn back to the Eternal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and He will turn back to you. Do not be stubborn, as your fathers were. Yield yourselves to God and come to His temple. Serve Him, so that the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you. God is gracious and merciful; He will not turn His face away from you—if you return to Him."

Hezekiah's message was delivered to every settlement throughout Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, Asher, Zebulun and the other former territories of Israel. Most of the Israelite survivors mocked Hezekiah's messengers and laughed them to scorn. Yet, many were encouraged by his letters of hope. Throngs of those left behind in Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves, and headed for Jerusalem.

God moved the people of Judah to follow Hezekiah's decree. An immense sea of worshippers assembled before the temple to keep the spring festival. The Jews also removed the pagan altars that remained in the capital, and threw them into the Brook Kidron. Then the people killed the Passover lamb on the 14th day of the second month.

A great multitude of Israelites arrived at the temple yearning to worship God. Even though they had not ritually cleansed themselves, they were allowed to eat the Passover meal. Hezekiah asked God to forgive them, for they had the right attitude. God was moved by His people's change of heart, and agreed to show them His mercy.

For seven days, the Jews and the Israelites joyfully kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Levites and the priests praised God every day with singing and music, and they taught the congregation about the Eternal and His laws. King Hezekiah gave the congregation 1,000 bulls and 7,000 sheep, and the other royal leaders gave 1,000 bulls and 10,000

sheep. Meanwhile, a great number of priests sanctified themselves. The festival was such a success that no one wanted it to end—so they observed another seven days of rejoicing. It was the greatest time of joy in Jerusalem since King Solomon’s day.

After the festival was over, the people followed Hezekiah’s lead. They returned to the cities of Judah, Ephraim and Manasseh, and destroyed their idols, cut down the groves and removed the pagan high places and altars. Hezekiah also had the idols of Baal and Asherah destroyed, and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made. This was originally a symbol of God’s awesome healing powers, but the people perverted it into an idol (Numbers 21:4-9; II Chronicles 30; 31:1).

### **Supporting God’s Work**

King Hezekiah restored the government’s support of God’s ministry and work, performed by the priests and the Levites. The king set a personal example by devoting portions of his wealth to this cause. Then he commanded the citizens to support the Levitical priesthood and annual festivals at the temple. Through tithes and offerings, the ministry was free to devote itself to teaching and administering God’s laws.

The people of Judah and Israel responded wholeheartedly, bringing in the firstfruits of corn, wine, oil, honey, oxen and sheep. From spring’s Feast of Firstfruits to the Feast of Tabernacles, which was held in the fall, they delivered the tithes and offerings to the temple, and piled them into heaps. Hezekiah and the other royal leaders were stunned by the abundance of contributions that had piled up over the months.

Azariah the high-priest explained to the king, “God has truly blessed His people. Ever since they began to bring offerings into the temple, we Levites have had more than enough to eat.”

Hezekiah ordered that storerooms be built in God’s temple, used to store the contributions. Also, offices of authority were established among the Levitical priesthood, to ensure that the tithes and offerings were properly administrated and distributed (II Chronicles 31:2-19).

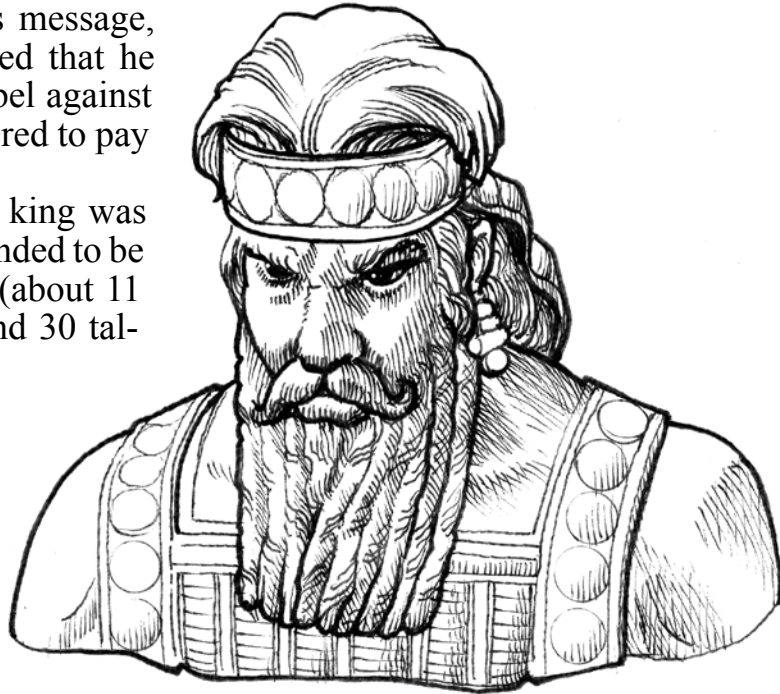
### **Rebelling Against Assyria**

Assyria had grown used to receiving annual tribute payments from Judah when Ahaz was king. But when Hezekiah replaced his father as ruler, he dared to stand up to the Assyrian Empire. Sennacherib, the

next king of Assyria, led a mass invasion into Judah. They attacked all the fortified cities. Unless things changed, the tiny kingdom would end up like the house of Israel.

Hezekiah was desperate. He sent a message to Sennacherib, who was busy attacking the city of Lachish. In his message, Hezekiah admitted that he was wrong to rebel against Assyria, and offered to pay tribute.

The Assyrian king was greedy. He demanded to be paid 300 talents (about 11 tons) of silver and 30 talents (about one ton) of gold! Hezekiah reluctantly agreed. To gather such an abundant collection, he and his men emptied the temple and palace treasuries.



Hezekiah even had the gold stripped off the temple doors and pillars.

The king intended that Sennacherib take the tribute, leave Judah and never come back. But the king of Assyria had other plans. He would not settle for anything less than Judah's complete, unconditional surrender! (II Kings 18:13-16).

### **Boasting Against God**

Hezekiah knew that Sennacherib would soon bring his troops to besiege Jerusalem. After counseling with his princes and valiant warriors, he set out to prepare the capital for attack.

He had the people plug the wells and other water sources outside the city. In this way, the Assyrians would not have fresh water to drink from the local area. Hezekiah also built up the section of wall that was broken, set another wall outside, and made an abundant supply of javelins and shields. Then the king set officers over the people, gathered everyone at the gate of the city, and said, "Be strong and

courageous! Do not be afraid! The king of Assyria may have brought a massive army with him, but there are more with us than with him. Sennacherib's arm is just flesh—but we have the Eternal God to help us! He will fight our battles.”

The people took comfort in their king's bold speech, and set themselves to stay the course.

King Sennacherib sent his three highest officials—Tartan, general of the Assyrian army; Rabsaris, a high palace administrator; and Rabshakeh, the king's spokesman—to Jerusalem to deliver a message. These men were accompanied by a great army, a show of military force that was meant to strike fear into the people and convince Hezekiah to surrender. Upon arriving, Tartan, Rabsaris and Rabshakeh stood by the aqueduct of the upper pool, in the highway of the Fuller's Field (where, years earlier, Isaiah the prophet tried to convince Ahaz to rely on God instead of foreign governments) and called out to the king.

Hezekiah sent three royal representatives—Eliakim, the palace administrator; Shebna, the scribe (or secretary); and Joah, the recorder—to go out and meet with them.

Rabshakeh said, “Tell Hezekiah, thus says the great king of Assyria: ‘What confidence is this in which you trust? You boldly speak as though you can defend yourself—but you are sorely mistaken! Egypt cannot come to your aid; that nation is like the staff of a broken reed: Lean on it, and you will pierce your hand. If you plan on trusting your God to deliver you, your trust will be in vain! Even if I gave you 2,000 horses, your pitiful defenses would still not be a threat to our war machine! Fighting is useless, for your God told me to go up against your land and destroy it.’”

Aware that onlookers were watching from Jerusalem's walls, Eliakim, Shebna and Joah replied, “Speak to us in Aramaic. Do not use Hebrew in the hearing of the people.”

“Why should I care about who listens?” Rabshakeh answered. “You have more pressing matters with which to be concerned. After we are through, you and the men on the wall will consume your own waste!”

Then Rabshakeh cried out in Hebrew, “Listen up, Jerusalem, and hear the words of the great king of Assyria! Thus says the king, ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. Neither he nor the Eternal will deliver you from my hand. If you want to save your lives, then leave your city and make peace with me with a tribute gift. If you do, then every man shall freely eat of his own vine and fig tree, and have fresh water to drink. I offer to take you away to a land like your own, flowing with corn and wine, and bread and vineyards; a land of olive oil and honey. There, you may live in safety and peace.

“But do not listen to Hezekiah when he says that God will come to your rescue. Have any of the gods of the nations I conquered kept their worshippers from escaping my hand? Did the gods of Samaria keep me from conquering your brother Israelites? If the gods of other kingdoms could not stop me, then how will your God stop me from seizing Jerusalem? He is just one of many gods!”

King Sennacherib’s message was answered by stone silence. All who heard his blasphemous words refused to speak, for King Hezekiah had given the command, “Do not answer.”

Eliakim, Shebna and Joah ripped apart their clothes, a traditional sign of great distress, and reported to King Hezekiah every evil thing that Rabshakeh had said.

The king was so grieved by their report that he too tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and went into God’s temple—“the house of prayer” (Isaiah 56:7).

Then he sent Eliakim, Shebna and the chief priests, who also were dressed in sackcloth, to seek Isaiah the prophet. They told Isaiah about King Sennacherib’s message: how he had dared to equate the great God of the universe with lifeless, pagan gods made up in the minds of men.

“Tell your king this,” Isaiah replied. “Thus says the Eternal: ‘Do not fear the words that the servants of the king of Assyria have used to blaspheme Me. Behold, I will send a spirit upon him, and will lead him to hear a rumor that will strike fear into his heart, causing him to return to his own land. And when he arrives, I will cause him to die by the sword’ (II Kings 18:17-37; 19:1-7; II Chronicles 32:1-16; Isaiah 36; 37:1-7).

### **God’s Awesome Rescue**

Rabshakeh learned that Sennacherib had finished conquering Lachish and was now attacking the city of Libnah.

When Rabshakeh met with his master, Sennacherib told him that the king of Ethiopia and his massive army were on their way to face the Assyrians. Sennacherib did not want to risk taking on the Ethiopians without first securing all of Judah under his control. The quickest way to do so was to get Judah’s king and capital to surrender.

So Sennacherib ordered his representatives to head back to Jerusalem. “Tell Hezekiah, ‘Do not let your God deceive you into believing that He will deliver you from my hand. You know my reputation. Whenever the kings of Assyria invade other kingdoms, did the

gods of those nations deliver them from destruction? Think about this carefully, Hezekiah. Surrender is your only way of escape.”

Rabshakeh and his entourage delivered the king’s message and waited for Judah’s response.

Hezekiah knew that surrender meant becoming slaves in a far-off foreign land. He also knew that God was Judah’s only hope. He went into the temple and spread the king of Assyria’s letter before the Eternal. In the most heartfelt prayer he had ever given, Hezekiah praised God, acknowledged His greatness, and asked his Creator and



Deliverer to hear his plea for help.

God quickly responded, inspiring Isaiah to deliver a message of hope. “The king of Assyria will not enter Jerusalem,” God promised Hezekiah. “Nor will he shoot arrows into the city or besiege it. He shall return by the way that he came and shall not enter Jerusalem. For I will defend this city and save it for My sake and for the sake of My servant David.”

That night, the Messenger of the Eternal went into the camp of the Assyrian army and killed 185,000 troops! The soldiers who survived woke up the next morning to discover that their camp was filled with dead bodies. Sennacherib was shocked and humiliated; he knew that if

he did not return home soon, Judah or other nations might attack them. He gathered the rest of his troops and departed for Nineveh.

But Sennacherib was far from safe. One day, as he was worshipping in the temple of his god, two of his sons took a sword and ended his life (II Kings 18:17-36; 19; II Chronicles 32:17-23).

### **Facing an Early Death**

Those were trying times for Hezekiah. In addition to having to endure the threat of being defeated and enslaved by the Assyrian Empire, a poisonous boil had developed on his body. It made him so sick that he was on the verge of dying! Isaiah the prophet broke the bad news to the king: “Thus says the Eternal: ‘Get your affairs in order, Hezekiah, for you shall soon die.’”

But the king was not ready to give up all hope. He turned his face to the wall, and prayed to God with all his being. As tears streamed down his cheeks, Hezekiah said, “O awesome and mighty God, please hear me, and remember how I have walked before You in truth and with all my heart. Recall how I have obeyed You and done good in Your sight.”

Meanwhile, Isaiah was still nearby, in the middle court, when God suddenly spoke to him. “Turn around and go back to Hezekiah. Tell the captain of my people that I have heard his prayer, and have seen his tears. I will heal him, and on the third day, he shall go into My temple. I will add 15 years to his life; I will also deliver him and Jerusalem out of the hand of the king of Assyria.”

Isaiah went back and told the king what God had said. He also told Hezekiah that God would perform a miraculous sign to show him that he would be healed.

“What will this sign be?” he asked.

“The Eternal has decided to leave that up to you,” Isaiah said. “He will either cause the shadow of your father’s sundial to go forward ten degrees, or go back ten degrees. Now which miracle would you like God to do for you?”

(In ancient times, clocks and watches did not exist. People kept track of time through sundials, which created shadows marking the hours of a day.)

Hezekiah answered, “Making the shadow go backward would be a greater miracle than making it go forward. So this is what I choose.”

Isaiah said, “Very well,” then he prayed to God.

As the king of Judah looked on, the shadow on Ahaz’s sundial miraculously moved backward ten degrees—God made the earth rotate



in the opposite direction! Hezekiah was speechless; and he suddenly felt very small as he considered the greatness of the Almighty God.

After following Isaiah's direction to place a medicinal lump of figs onto his boil, the king was healed (II Kings 20:1-11; II Chronicles 32:25; Isaiah 38).

### **A Costly Mistake**

Sometime later, as often happens with human beings, Hezekiah temporarily became reckless and negligent in dealing with foreign ambassadors.

One day, representatives from the faraway kingdom of Babylon arrived to give him a letter and a gift from the prince, the son of Baladan, the Babylonian king. The prince had heard that Hezekiah had been sick, and wanted to express his sympathy. In reality, these ambassadors were also spies.

King Hezekiah was flattered by this royal attention. He gave special care to his Babylonian guests, and decided to show them Judah's great wealth. He took them on a tour and confidently showed off all the treasures of his house: silver, gold, jewels, exotic spices, precious ointments and his armory. When the tour was finished, the Babylonians had seen everything of value that Jerusalem had to offer.

Little did the king know that Babylon was gradually gaining power, and that it would eventually crush the kingdom of Assyria. Hezekiah was unaware that the Babylonians would prove to be a threat to Judah.

Isaiah the prophet went to the king and asked about the visitors. "What did these men say to you?" he said. "Where did they come from?"

"They're from a far country, from Babylon."

"And what have they seen in your house?"

"Everything," Hezekiah answered. "I showed my guests all my treasures."

Isaiah shook his head. "Hezekiah, listen to God's Words: 'Behold, the day will come when all the treasures that are in your house shall be carried away to Babylon, and not one thing shall be left. Your sons will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. However, because you have been my faithful servant, I will not allow these things to happen until you are in the grave.'"

Hezekiah recognized that he had allowed the flattery of the Babylonian representatives to fill him with pride. That is why he was so willing to show off his wealth.

The king accepted God's decision, and said, "The word of God is good" (II Kings 20:12-19; II Chronicles 32:26-31; Isaiah 39).

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHT

# THE LAST RIGHTEOUS KING

**K**ing Hezekiah's 29-year rule came to end upon his death. He was replaced by his son Manasseh. From the age of 12, Manasseh had been groomed to become the next king.

Sadly, he was nothing like his father, for he did not care about obeying God's laws. Manasseh preferred the idolatrous ways of the unbelieving Gentile nations. He built up the high places, which Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal worship and made a wooden image of Asherah, as King Ahab had done. He ignored his father's instructions about the Eternal, and worshipped the stars instead—he even built altars for them in the two courts of God's temple! The new king foolishly went after witchcraft, cast spells, and dealt with demons and wizards. Manasseh became so enslaved to idol worship that he even sacrificed his son as a burnt offering!

The people of Judah followed their leader's example. Like a deadly plague, wickedness spread throughout the kingdom. Manasseh had led God's people to commit acts that were even worse than those of the foreign nations around them. All these wicked acts provoked God to anger (II Kings 20:20-21; 21:1-9; II Chronicles 32:32-33; 33:1-9).

### **A Wicked King Repents**

God sent Isaiah and other prophets to Manasseh and the people, warning them about their idolatrous ways. Through His loyal servants, God said, "Behold, I will bring such calamity upon Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of whoever hears of it will tingle. Jerusalem will be measured by the standard of My Word, just as I had done with Samaria and the house of Ahab—and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipes a dish and turns it upside down. I will forsake My people, the remnant of My inheritance, and will deliver them into the hand of their enemies. They shall become a prey—a spoil to be plundered. For ever since I brought them out of Egypt, they have done evil in My sight and have provoked Me to anger!"

Even with God's dire warnings and the great patience He exercised, Manasseh and his subjects still refused to listen or change. The king even persecuted God's servants and was responsible for a mass killing spree that shed much innocent blood. (According to ancient tradition, the king executed the prophet Isaiah, sawing him in two within a hollow log. Hebrews 11:37 might be a reference to Isaiah's martyrdom.)

To punish Manasseh, God moved the king of Assyria to send his army and top officers to arrest Manasseh. They bound the wicked king with bronze chains and led him away with nose hooks. Manasseh was taken to Babylon, which the Assyrians had conquered after the Babylonians had rebelled against them.

Humiliated, removed from his seat of power, and taken away from his family, friends and subjects, Manasseh was alone and a prisoner in a land far, far away. The shame and agony he suffered caused him to think about all the evil acts he had committed—all the things he had done that led to his disgrace. Manasseh humbled himself and tearfully cried out to God in many heartfelt prayers.

The Eternal saw that Manasseh had changed his attitude and thinking. He was now humble—teachable—willing to obey God and listen to His instruction. So God, who is compassionate and loves to show mercy, decided to rescue Manasseh.

To the king's surprise, he was released from prison and brought back to Jerusalem. This miraculous deliverance left no doubt in Manasseh's mind that the Eternal was indeed the one true God.

For the rest of his life, Manasseh devoted himself to putting God first in his life. He removed the foreign gods he had set up in Jerusalem; he took away the idol he had put in the holy temple; he got rid of all the pagan altars he had built in the temple mount, and in Jerusalem. The repentant king cast these sinful things out of Judah's capital. He repaired God's altar, restored the practice of offering sacrifices upon it, and commanded everyone in Judah to serve God.

Yet, despite his deep repentance and new devotion to serving only God, the citizens refused to follow Manasseh's heartfelt example. The king learned a bitter lesson: It is far easier to lead, teach and inspire people to obey God when a leader does not have a long public history of recklessly rebelling against the Eternal and His laws.

Of those who did respond to Manasseh's change of heart, most decided to compromise. They had grown so used to worshipping at the high places, they reasoned that it was okay to use these pagan worship centers as long as sacrifices were offered only to God. Their human reasoning was similar to that of people today who keep Christmas, Easter and other pagan holidays, claiming that it is "okay" as long as it is done

to worship God. But the Eternal Creator and Lawgiver *hates* this. God expects His people to worship Him HIS way—and *only* His way!

After 55 years of rulership, Manasseh died, and was buried at his home, in the garden of Uzza. His son Amon became Judah's next king (II Kings 21:10-18; II Chronicles 33:10-18).

### **Learning Nothing From the Past**

Amon was 22 years old when he began to rule. Sadly, he learned nothing from the righteous example of his father's latter years. Committing himself to doing evil, King Amon restored the carved images that Manasseh had made, and offered sacrifices to them.

His two-year reign of wickedness came to an abrupt end when his trusted servants schemed against him. They killed Amon in the "safety" of his home. The assassins and those who had plotted with them expected to rule Judah under a new dynasty. But the people wanted to remain under the leadership of the royal house of David. They sought out and executed all the conspirators, and then made Josiah, Amon's son, the new king. He was only eight years old (II Kings 21:19-26; II Chronicles 33:21-25).



### **Another Restoration**

At age 16, Josiah began to seek after God. Following King David's example of putting God first, Josiah learned to obey and please the Eternal with all his might. By the time he was 20, the young king began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of idol worship.

During the reigns of Manasseh and Amon, all the repair work that Hezekiah had put into the temple was undone. When he was 26 years old, Josiah instructed Hilkiah the high-priest to restore

the same Levitical system of collecting funds as King Joash had done. Josiah then used the money to hire carpenters, builders and masons, and supply them with timber and hewn stone to repair God's temple.

Hilkiah told Shaphan, the royal secretary, that he had found the Book of the Law in the temple. (Apparently, Manasseh had destroyed virtually all copies of it during the evil years of his reign.) The high-priest gave it to Shaphan, who then took it to the king.

As Shaphan read aloud from it, Josiah agonized over Judah's guilt of breaking God's laws, and the terrible national curses that would surely come. In his distress, the young king tore his clothes and humbled himself.

He ordered Hilkiah, Shaphan and three other men to seek out a faithful prophet who would tell the king God's will. "God's wrath is like a fire kindled against us," Josiah explained.

The five men went to a woman named Huldah. Like Moses' sister Miriam, Huldah was a prophetess. The Bible shows that God rarely used women to speak for Him, so Huldah must have been very special.

She told them God's message, which they reported back to the king: "Thus says the Eternal God of Israel: 'Behold, I will bring national catastrophe upon Judah and its inhabitants—all the words described in the book you have read—for the people have forsaken Me. They have burned incense to other gods, provoking Me to anger. Therefore, My wrath shall be kindled against this place and will not be quenched!

"However, Josiah, your heart was tender. You humbled yourself before Me when you heard what I spoke against this place and its inhabitants—that they should become a desolation and a curse. You tore your clothes and wept before Me. Therefore, I will not allow you to experience the horrors that will surely come. Instead, you shall reign in peace until the day you die—only then will My wrath fall upon Judah'" (II Kings 22; II Chronicles 34:1-28).

### **Removing Idolatry From Judah**

King Josiah called for the elders of Judah and Jerusalem, along with the priests, the prophets and the inhabitants of the city and assembled them at God's temple. Josiah stood before the people—both small and great—and read aloud all the words of the Book of the Covenant.

Then, as he stood by a pillar, the king led the people to make a covenant with God. They promised to follow the Eternal, to keep His commandments, testimonies and statutes with all their being, and to perform the words of the Book of the Covenant.

Josiah ordered the high-priest, the priests of the second order and the doorkeepers to remove all the unholy articles from the temple that were made for worshipping Baal, Asherah and the false gods of the Assyrians—everything that was devoted to idolatry.

“Take them outside Jerusalem and burn them in the fields of Kidron,” he commanded. “And when you are finished, take their ashes to Bethel, one of the places where Jeroboam had established idolatry in the house of Israel” (I Kings 12:25-33).

The king also removed from God’s temple the wooden image of Asherah. He took it to the Kidron Valley, east of the city, and burned it at the Brook Kidron. In the valley was a cemetery for the common people; Josiah grounded the idol’s burnt remains into ashes and poured them on the graves of those who had given themselves to worshipping false gods.

Certain past kings of Judah had ordained false priests to practice idolatry all around Jerusalem and in cities throughout the kingdom. These servants of evil had deceived the people and led them away from serving God, so Josiah removed the false priests from Judah.

And he drove out all the priests who led the Jews into compromise, and defiled their high places, which they had wrongly used to offer sacrifices to God. These priests were not permitted to minister at the temple. However, because they were Levites, they allowed to be supported along with the rest of their tribe.

The king also tore down the booths (tents) of the perverted men and women who had done wicked things in the temple.

Josiah destroyed the pagan shrines that were at Jerusalem’s gate-towers. He also defiled Topheth, the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom. *Topheth* means “drum”; idolaters used drums to drown out the hapless cries of the little boys and girls who were brutally sacrificed to Molech, the false god of the Ammonites.

Josiah got rid of the horses and burned the chariots that previous kings had dedicated to sun worship at the entrance to the holy temple.

He removed and destroyed the altars that were on the top of the roofs, which past kings had made. And he defiled the high places that King Solomon built more than 300 years earlier, when he temporarily fell away from serving God.

The king broke into pieces pagan pillars, cut down their wooden images, and filled their places with the bones of dead idolaters.

Then, he went into Samaria, opened the tombs of the idolaters at Bethel and burned their bones on the altar they used to worship upon. This fulfilled a prophecy that was foretold about 300 years earlier (I Kings 13:1-32).

When Josiah came to a certain tomb, he said, “Who is buried here?”

The men of the city told him, “It is the tomb of the man of God, who came from Judah. He prophesied the things you have done against the altar of Bethel.”

The king said, “Let this man’s bones alone. He is no idolater.”

Josiah removed the altar and burned it, along with the high place and the wooden image, into ashes.

The king went to the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, and up to Naphtali, and took away the shrines that Israel had used to provoke God to anger. He executed all the false priests and burnt their bones upon the pagan altars.

In all this, he had cleansed Judah and Jerusalem from idolatry.

Josiah returned to Jerusalem, where he ordered that Judah should observe the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Josiah also set the priests in their charges and the Levites to return the Ark of the Covenant to the temple (which Manasseh or Amon had replaced with an idol). Though his great-grandfather Hezekiah had restored this spring festival, there was no Passover like it from the days of Samuel the prophet.

In continuing to remove idolatry from the kingdom, Josiah also put away all those who got involved with demons, witches and wizards, and removed household idols—all of which were abominations in God’s sight (II Kings 23:1-24; II Chronicles 34:29-33; II Chronicles 35:1-19).

### **Judah’s Last Good King**

Like Hezekiah, there was no other king like Josiah, who turned to God with all his heart and committed himself to performing the Book of the Law. Sadly, he would be the last king of Judah to do so.

And, in spite of Josiah’s righteous acts, God’s wrath would not turn away from Judah. All the wickedness that Manasseh had done and promoted had greatly affected the people. They kept up an appearance of being good and seeking after God, but secretly their lives were corrupt.

The Eternal declared, “I will cast off Jerusalem, the city that I had chosen, and the temple, of which I said, ‘My name shall be there.’”

In those days, Necho II, pharaoh of Egypt, allied with Assyria against the rising power of the Babylonian kingdom. Necho and his army headed north toward the Euphrates River to join up with the Assyrian troops at Carchemish—but King Josiah was determined not to let them pass.

Necho sent royal messengers, who said to Josiah, “Hear the words of the king of Egypt: ‘What have I to do with you, Josiah? I have not

entered your land to fight against you; my opponent is up north. God is with me—and He has commanded me to hurry. Stop meddling with God’s affairs so that He does not have to destroy you!””

Throughout history, God has used carnal-minded men to fulfill certain roles in His plan.

Nonetheless, Josiah would not listen. He was determined to stand in the way of the Egyptian army. Disguising himself, the king went into battle in the Valley of Megiddo, an ancient battleground site that has seen more combat than any spot on earth. Egyptian archers shot a volley of deadly arrows at Josiah and the troops around him. Josiah was seriously wounded. At his request, servants took him away in a chariot and carried him back to Jerusalem. Tragically, the king died.

As everyone grieved over the loss of their great king and the end of his 31-year reign, the people of Judah anointed Jehoahaz, Josiah’s son, to rule over them. They quickly discovered that Jehoahaz was as different from his father as night is from day (II Kings 23:25-31; (II Chronicles 35:20-27; II Chronicles 36:1).



## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED NINE

# GOD CALLS JEREMIAH

**D**uring King Josiah's reign, God worked through a number of prophets, such as Habakkuk and Zephaniah, whose prophetic books are in the Bible. But now that Judah was only a few years from utter destruction, God was ready to use a special servant to warn His people. His name was Jeremiah, a Levite from the Levitical town of Anathoth, in the territory of Benjamin. His calling was unique because God set him apart by the Holy Spirit when he was still in the womb! Only Jesus Christ, John the Baptist and Jeremiah were called before birth.

According to tradition, Jeremiah's ministry began when he was only 17 years old, in the 13th year of King Josiah's rule. For several decades and through the reigns of five kings, Jeremiah warned Judah that national catastrophe would come upon them from the north, speaking of the rising Babylonian Empire.

God commissioned and inspired Jeremiah to preach against false religious leaders, who prophesied lies in God's name—against religious hypocrisy—and against idolatry and Sabbath-breaking. God's people were so far off track, they observed the pagan holidays that we know today as Easter and Christmas. There were as many false gods being worshipped in Judah as there were cities, and there were as many pagan altars as there were streets!

The Jews believed that God would never allow Jerusalem to be utterly devastated because His temple—where He symbolically placed His holy name and presence—resided in the city. Led by human nature, the people treated this as license to break God's laws. They justified their wickedness by maintaining a false show of religion.

As he continually cried out against Judah's sins and told the people to return to God, Jeremiah's message became extremely unpopular. In fact, the inhabitants of his hometown plotted to take his life, commanding Jeremiah to stop preaching in God's name—"Lest we put you to death!"

God told Jeremiah not to worry. "I will make you like a heavily-defended wall of bronze to these people," He assured him. "They

will fight against you, but will not prevail, for I am with you. I will deliver you and keep you safe” (Jeremiah 1:1-8; 5:31; 6:13-14; 7:1-11; 11:13, 21; 12:6; 15:15-21; 18:18-23; 20:1-3, 7-18).

### **A Quick Succession of Kings**

King Jehoahaz, Josiah’s son, was 23 years old at the start of his rule. He rejected his father’s righteous example, and unwisely embraced the way of wickedness and selfishness.

Returning from battle, Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II arrested Jehoahaz and imprisoned him at Egypt, where he later died. Jehoahaz’s reign had only lasted three months.

Pharaoh made Eliakim, Jehoahaz’s brother, the new king of Judah, changing his name to Jehoiakim.

Back in Moses’ day, when God led His people out of Egypt, Israel received precious treasures from the Egyptians. But, after generations of repeatedly rejecting God and His laws, God’s people were now forced to pay their former masters. Necho ordered Judah to pay an annual tribute of 100 talents of silver and a talent of gold (II Kings 23:31-34; II Chronicles 36:2-5; Jeremiah 22:10-12).

### **Jeremiah Breaks a Flask**

Jehoiakim’s 11-year reign was much like his brother’s—he committed himself to doing evil and pleasing only himself. He was not the least bit interested in Jeremiah’s preaching. In fact, he was growing ever more annoyed with God’s servant.

Jeremiah, obeying God’s instruction, took a potter’s flask, and gathered the elders and priests at the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom.

He said to them, “Hear the word of the Eternal Almighty, the God of Israel: ‘Behold, I will bring national calamity, for you have forsaken Me for other gods and have filled the streets of Jerusalem with innocent blood. Because of their high places and human sacrifices, I will cause Judah to suffer military defeat, and I will give their carcasses as meat for wild animals. This valley will no longer be called Tophet or the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom—for I will make Jerusalem so desolate that everyone who passes by it will be astonished. And I will strike the city with a famine so severe that its inhabitants will eat the flesh of their sons, daughters and friends.’”

As the elders watched and listened, Jeremiah broke the flask, and said, “God will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s

vessel—which cannot be made whole again! And they shall be buried in Tophet, till there is no more room to bury.”

Jeremiah went back into the city, entered the court of God’s temple and addressed the people there. He told them that, because everyone in Judah had hardened their hearts and would not listen to God, the Eternal would bring doom upon Jerusalem and every town in the kingdom.

Jeremiah’s preaching kindled the wrath of Pashur, the captain of the temple guards. Pashur beat the prophet and bound Jeremiah’s head, feet and legs in stocks. He had to endure insults from taunting spectators who came by to mock him.

The next day, as Pashur released him, Jeremiah said, “God now calls you Magor-Missabib, which means ‘Terror on every side.’ For God will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. And you will watch helplessly as their enemies slay them. God will surely give Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and they will be brought to Babylon as captives. And God will also give all of Jerusalem’s wealth—its produce, its precious things and all the treasures of the kings of Judah—to the Babylonians. As for you, Pashur, you and your family shall be taken to Babylon and die in captivity” (Jeremiah 19; 20).

### **Seized by a Mob!**

Jeremiah went back to standing in the court of the temple and crying aloud to God’s people, hoping that some might change their ways.

“If you will not listen to God,” he said, “and obey His laws, and if you refuse to listen to His prophets, then God will make this temple like Shiloh, which the Philistines devastated long ago. Jerusalem will become a curse to all nations.”

But the people were stubborn. They, the priests and the false prophets were so enraged that they seized Jeremiah. “You’re a dead man!” they said. “Why do you prophesy such things in God’s name?”

The princes of Judah heard about the commotion and came to the temple to investigate. The angry mob they encountered said, “This man is worthy of death! Jeremiah prophesies Jerusalem’s destruction. We all heard it with our own ears.”

Jeremiah addressed his accusers: “The Eternal sent me to prophesy against this temple and this city. If you change your ways and obey God’s voice, He will relent from bringing national disaster.

“As for me, do with me as seems right to you. However, know this: If you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and Jerusalem, for God has sent me to warn you.”

The princes and the people were not willing to rush into foolish actions. Despite the wishes of the priests and prophets, they said, “This man hasn’t done anything worthy of death. Clearly, he has spoken with God’s authority.”

Some of the elders agreed. “In the days of King Hezekiah,” they said, “the prophet Micah warned that the Eternal would utterly destroy Jerusalem. Did King Hezekiah and the people put Micah to death? No! Hezekiah chose to fear God and seek after Him. And because of this, the Eternal changed His mind and did not bring His punishment upon the city. If we execute Jeremiah, we will only bring great evil upon ourselves!”

God was using these men to protect Jeremiah. However, the prophet recognized that, if it were God’s will, he would need to be willing to give up his life.

Jeremiah thought about Urijah, another prophet that God had used to prophesy against Jerusalem and Judah. King Jehoiakim and his men did not like what Urijah preached. Urijah heard that they plotted to execute him, so he ran off to Egypt. But Jehoiakim sent men to bring him back to Jerusalem. When the prophet was brought before him, the king took a sword and killed Urijah. Then he cast his corpse into the graves of the common people, in the Kidron Valley.

Jeremiah understood that, like many other servants of God, he could lose his physical life for preaching such an explosive, unpopular message. But Jeremiah’s hope was in the inheritance that was reserved for him: eternal life.

Jeremiah’s commission was far from finished. God had more things for him to accomplish, so He used Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, Josiah’s royal secretary, to convince the people that they should not kill or harm His prophet (Jeremiah 26).

## **70 Years of Desolation**

Jeremiah’s narrow escape from death did not keep him from boldly preaching God’s warning message to Judah and Jerusalem: “For 23 years now, the Eternal has sent you His servants, the prophets—but you would not listen to them. They told you to turn from your evil ways so that you might dwell in the Promised Land in peace—but you would not take heed. They told you to stop seeking after other gods and provoking the true God to anger—but you still refused to change.”

He warned that God would send all the nations of the north, led by His servant King Nebuchadnezzar to invade and conquer Judah and all the surrounding nations.

“And God will replace the sound of mirth, gladness and merrymaking with the wails of misery and despair. For 70 years, the conquered nations shall serve the king of Babylon. After this, I will punish the Babylonian ruler and his kingdom for their iniquity; it shall become perpetual desolations.”

In a vision, Jeremiah took a cup from the Eternal’s hand. God called it the wine cup of fury, a symbol of His coming wrath against the nations. Judah and all the surrounding nations were to drink from it symbolically, causing them to stagger and fall as Babylon overtakes them.

About four years into Jehoiakim’s rule, the armies of the Babylonian Empire, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, clashed against Pharaoh Necho’s Egyptian army in the famous Battle of Carchemish. Babylon overwhelmingly defeated Egypt, sending Necho’s troops into retreat. Babylon became the supreme world power.

Nebuchadnezzar’s forces swept through Judah, which became subservient to Babylon. The Babylonians (also called the Chaldeans) deported many of Judah’s leaders and thinkers to Babylon; the prophet Daniel was among them (Jeremiah 25).

### **The King Destroys Jeremiah’s Book**

God commanded Jeremiah to write onto a long scroll the warning messages he had preached since he was first called. This would become a book.

“Perhaps Judah will finally hear all the evil that I intend to unleash upon them,” God said. “Then they might turn from their wickedness so that I would forgive their sins.”

Jeremiah dictated to Baruch, his secretary, who wrote everything the prophet spoke. This long process took much time. When the project was finished, Jeremiah told Baruch to go to the temple, in his stead, and read aloud from the book. At the time, Jerusalem was holding a special fast to appeal to God. Jeremiah reasoned that the people might be more willing to hear God’s warning during this fast.

Baruch said, “Yes sir,” and headed for the temple. As worshippers fasted and mingled in the court, he read aloud God’s message.

Michaiah, grandson of Shaphan, told the princes about this. Intrigued, they sent for Baruch to read the book to them in private. When he did so, they were alarmed by the book’s frightening content.

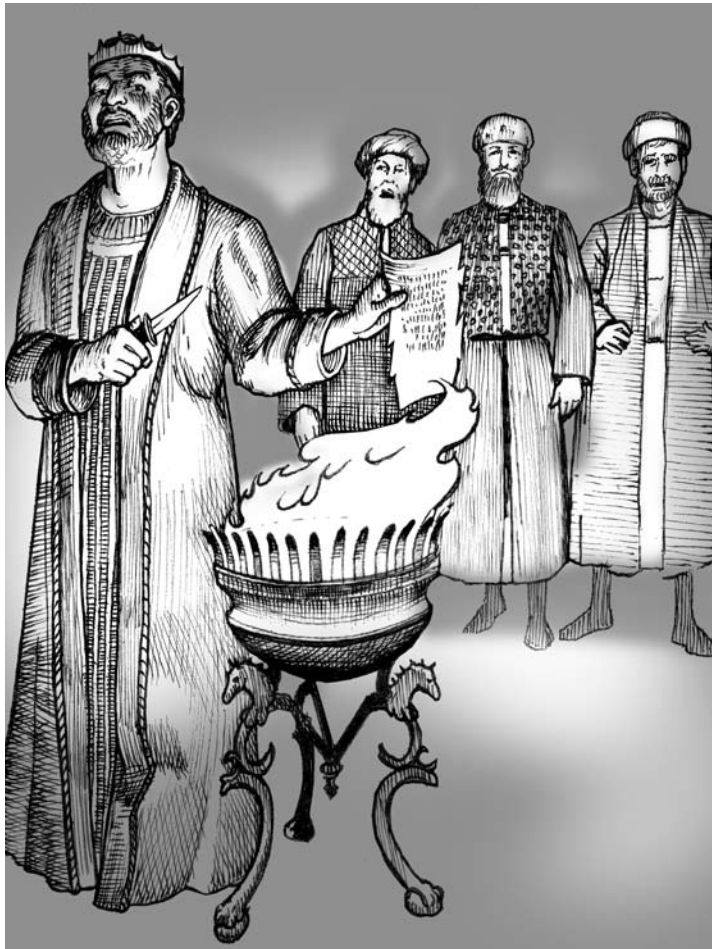
“This is so powerful—so incredible—we must bring it to the king’s attention. It’s our duty. Tell us, Baruch, how did you write all these words? Was it from memory or did Jeremiah dictate them to you?”

The young man answered, “I wrote every word as Jeremiah said them to me.”

The princes nodded and thought about this. Then, fearing how the king might react, they advised Baruch that he and Jeremiah should go into hiding.

The princes went before King Jehoiakim in his royal court and told him about the book. The king wanted to know more, so he ordered that the book be brought to him, and had his servant Jehudi read it aloud. Jehoiakim sat before a hearth and warmed his hands from its fire as he listened to the prophetic warning.

The king did not like what he heard. Whenever Jehudi read three or four columns of text, Jehoiakim took a penknife, cut off the sections and threw them into the fire. Three of the princes—Elnathan, Delaiah and Gemariah—pleaded with the king to stop, but Jehoiakim



would not listen. He continued cutting out sections of the scroll and throwing them into the fire, until the entire book was destroyed. His personal servants looked on with approval.

The king commanded that Baruch and Jeremiah be arrested, but God had already hidden them.

God commanded Jeremiah to write another book to replace the one that was destroyed. Baruch wrote down all the words that Jeremiah repeated from the original book, along with additional material.

Then God sent Jeremiah to tell Jehoiakim that, because he burned the first book and rejected its message, the Eternal would reject his sons from sitting upon the throne of David. “And your dead body

shall be exposed to the heat of the day and the frost of the night. God will punish you, your descendants and your servants for their sins. He will bring upon them—and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah—all the horrors He has pronounced against them” (Jeremiah 36).

### **Jehoiakim’s Rebellion**

Nebuchadnezzar had threatened to destroy Judah unless Jehoiakim promised to be loyal to him and pay an annual tribute. The king of Judah gave in, and kept his word—but only for about three years.

Jehoiakim received news that Babylon and Egypt would soon clash again. Ignoring God’s will and counsel, he stopped paying tribute to Babylon. He gambled that the Egyptians would be victorious and that they would protect Judah from the Chaldeans.

Jeremiah repeatedly warned Jehoiakim not to put his trust in the Egyptians, but he refused to listen. The king soon learned that his gamble did not pay off. Egypt was no match against the Babylonian army, and was not in a position to come to Judah’s aid.

God sent a massive Chaldean invasion force into Judah, along with hordes of troops from Syria, Moab and Ammon, who now served Babylon. Their ancient hatred for God’s people spurred them to wreak havoc throughout Judah—all according to that which God had warned.

Jerusalem was again brought under Babylon’s control. Jehoiakim was bound in chains and eventually died at the hands of the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar carried away to Babylon the king’s family, chief leaders and workmen. He also took the king’s treasures and a portion of the temple’s sacred vessels, which he installed in his temple at Babylon (II Chronicles 36:5-10; II Kings 23:35-37; 24:1-7).

### **Another Short-Lived Reign**

Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim’s 18 year-old son, became the new king, but his reign only lasted 100 days. Nebuchadnezzar, perhaps fearing that Jehoiachin would seek to revenge his father, besieged Jerusalem.

The king, along with his mother, servants, royal leaders and officers, left the city and surrendered. In yet another mass deportation to Babylon, the Chaldeans carried away 7,000 able fighting men, 1,000 craftsmen and smiths, and 2,000 prominent people—the king and his mother, wives, officers and princes, along with priests and prophets. The prophet Ezekiel was among them.

They carried away valuables from the king's treasury and from God's temple. Nebuchadnezzar also cut into pieces all the articles of gold that King Solomon had made for the temple.

Nebuchadnezzar made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, the new king of Judah, changing his name to Zedekiah. The king of Babylon purposefully left behind the poorest people of the land and elevated certain men to positions of power. He did this to ensure that they would be loyal to him (II Kings 24:7-17; II Chronicles 36:9-10).



## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TEN

# THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

**K**ing Zedekiah was a weak ruler who made decisions based on whoever pressured him the most. Failing to show strong leadership, he allowed his princes, servants and subjects to behave as wickedly as they wanted.

For many years, Jeremiah tirelessly preached God's warning message to Judah's rulers. Zedekiah was not surprised that the prophet sought to have an audience with him. Jeremiah warned the king and his princes that they should make yokes and bonds for themselves, "For Judah, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon shall surely come under the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar," he said.

Jeremiah also warned against listening to the lies of Judah's false prophets and priests. They were preaching to the people that all the sacred vessels that were taken from the temple would be brought back from Babylon.

"Don't believe this deception!" Jeremiah said. "If they are truly God's prophets, then let them plead to God that the sacred vessels still remaining in the temple are not also seized. For the Eternal has determined that Nebuchadnezzar will take these away too!"

Jeremiah stood in the court of the temple wearing a wooden yoke around his neck, becoming a living symbol of Judah's future.

As priests and other spectators looked on, Hananiah, the son of Azur the prophet, challenged Jeremiah. He said, "Thus speaks the Eternal Almighty, the God of Israel: 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years, I will return all the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar carried away. I will also bring back Jehoiachin and all the captives who were taken to Babylon.'"

"So be it!" Jeremiah answered. "May the Eternal do all that you have prophesied."

Hananiah was surprised that the prophet would seem to agree with him. He and his supporters grinned, confident that they had gained the upper hand—until they discovered that Jeremiah had more to say.

“Nevertheless,” he added, “listen to these words: The prophets who came before us—Hosea, Joel, Amos and other faithful men—prophesied against many countries and great kingdoms, preaching that war, disaster and disease would surely come. Yet, now you prophesy that Judah shall enjoy peace. Let it be known that when the word of the prophet who prophesies peace comes to pass, *then* shall it be known that God has truly sent him.”

Hananiah desperately wanted everyone to believe his lie. Frustrated, he removed the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and broke it into pieces.

Hananiah said to the growing crowd of witnesses, “Thus says the Eternal: ‘Like that, I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar from the neck of all nations within two years.’”

Jeremiah departed, but soon returned to deliver a message from God: “Listen carefully, Hananiah! God has not sent you—yet you dare to cause this people to trust in a lie. Therefore, thus says the Eternal: ‘You may have broken yokes of wood, but you have only made yokes of iron in their place. For I have put a yoke of iron upon the neck of all these nations, that they serve the king of Babylon—and they *will* serve him! As for you, Hananiah, because you have taught rebellion against Me, I will cast you off the face of the earth. Hananiah, this year you shall die!’”

About two months later, Hananiah was dead (Jeremiah 27 and 28).

### **Breaking a Promise**

Nebuchadnezzar had made Zedekiah swear by God that he would loyally serve the Babylonian king. But, bowing to pressure put upon him by the princes, Zedekiah broke his promise. In doing so, he, in the eyes of Gentile unbelievers, involved God in his lie. But God NEVER lies or breaks His promises (Hebrew 6:18; Titus 1:2).

Angry about Judah’s rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar erected a military base in Riblah and had his troops besiege Jerusalem, Lachish and Azekah, Judah only remaining fortified cities. The tiny kingdom was on the brink of collapse.

King Zedekiah panicked. He sent men to Jeremiah to ask if God would rescue them from certain defeat. But Jeremiah’s answer was not the good news they wanted to hear.

He said, “Tell Zedekiah these words from God: ‘The weapons you are using to fight against the king of Babylon—I will use them against you! I will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a strong arm—and in anger, fury and great wrath! I will strike Jerusalem’s inhabitants, both man and beast, and they shall die of a great disease.

Afterward, I will deliver Zedekiah and the people—all who will survive famine, pestilence, and slaughter from the Babylonians—into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand. And he shall strike them by the edge of the sword; he shall not spare them, nor will I have pity or mercy.

“Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. Whoever continues to live in this city shall die by the sword, famine or pestilence. But whoever leaves and surrenders to the Babylonians, he shall live” (Jeremiah 21:1-10).

### **Half-Hearted Repentance**

God had given Zedekiah and his men a way out, but they stubbornly refused to take it. Yet, amazingly, the king sent men to Jeremiah, asking him to pray to God on Jerusalem’s behalf.

Jeremiah went to the king and boldly preached another warning. “Zedekiah,” he said, “Listen to the word of the Eternal: ‘The king of Babylon will capture Jerusalem and set it ablaze. You will not escape Nebuchadnezzar’s hand—you will be brought before him face-to-face. He will carry you away to Babylon as his prisoner, where you will live the rest of your life. No matter how hard Judah fights against the Babylonian Empire, defeat is certain!’”

Zedekiah made a half-hearted attempt to mend Judah’s ways. He entered into a covenant with Jerusalem’s rich and powerful, who owned fellow Jewish slaves. God’s Law allowed Israelites to hire indentured servants from among their brother Hebrews, but they were to be set free eventually. God’s system of slavery is different—and far better—than man’s system, which is harsh, brutal and often deadly. God ordered that slaves be treated like family members, and not like mere property (Leviticus 25:39-55). Yet, the slave-owners of Zedekiah’s day ignored God’s intent.

The king persuaded them to release their Hebrew slaves. “Perhaps God will show favor upon Judah and turn back His wrath,” he explained.

It was also brought to their attention that the ex-slaves, in order to keep their freedom, would fight much harder against the Chaldeans. The slave-owners agreed, although reluctantly, and released their Hebrew slaves.

It appeared that Zedekiah’s plan had worked. About three months after the siege begun, the Chaldeans heard reports that Pharaoh’s army had left Egypt. Traveling by sea, the Egyptian forces landed up north and took over Tyre and other coastal cities. The Babylonian army would be cut off from the rear if it did not act soon—and so they left Jerusalem.

Everyone inside the city cheered. The former slave-owners, thinking they were no longer in danger, went back on their promise. They rounded up their former servants and forced them back into slavery!

God hates such hypocrisy—and He sent His servant Jeremiah to tell them so: “Thus says the Eternal: ‘I made a covenant with your forefathers when I delivered you out of slavery in Egypt. I commanded them to release every Hebrew slave at the end of seven years of their bondage. But your forefathers did not listen to Me. You turned from doing such evil, and released your enslaved brethren. You even made a covenant before Me in My temple. Now I know that your word is worthless! You have broken your promise and polluted My name!

“‘Because you proclaimed liberty for your brothers and then went back on your word, I proclaim a liberty for you—to the sword, pestilence and famine! By these, I will free you of your lives and cause the survivors to be removed from this land. I will cause your enemies to return to this city, and they shall besiege it and burn it with fire. Thus, I will make the cities of Judah utterly desolate!’”

Jeremiah warned the king not to deceive himself into believing that Pharaoh would come to Judah’s defense. “The Egyptians will go back to their kingdom, and the Chaldeans shall return to Jerusalem and besiege it—but this time they will capture the city and set it on fire. God has already determined the outcome” (Jeremiah 34; 37).

### **Suffering False Accusations**

Since the city was no longer shut up from the Babylonian threat, Jeremiah decided to return to Anathoth and claim a piece of property he had purchased. He was on his way out of Jerusalem when a watch-captain named Irijah stopped him.

“Where do you think you’re going, Jeremiah?”

“To take care of a personal matter back home. Why?”

“Traitor!” Irijah said. “All you do is preach our doom, and that we should submit to Babylon! You’re leaving Jerusalem to conspire with Nebuchadnezzar, aren’t you? Tell the truth! You’re deserting to the enemy!”

Irijah’s shouting caught the attentions of people passing by. Soon, a crowd started to form.

Jeremiah said, “My son, you’re making false charges. I’m no traitor. I only preach what God inspires me to say.”

But Irijah would not hear it, most likely because he wanted to avenge his grandfather Hananiah. Irijah took the prophet and brought

him before the princes. He repeated his false charges, which angered them. They beat Jeremiah and brought him to the house of Jonathan the scribe, which had been turned into a prison. They took Jeremiah down below and threw him into a dungeon cell, where there was little light and the air was stale. He remained there for several days.

When no one was looking, King Zedekiah had Jeremiah brought before him. He did this in secret, fearful of angering the princes and other leaders.

“Is there any word from God?” he asked. “Has He spoken to you again?”

Jeremiah said, “Yes, He has. God has said that you will be delivered into the king of Babylon’s hand.

“Now that I have answered you, answer me this: What offense have I committed against you, your servants or against the people? What have I done to be thrown into prison? And where are your prophets who prophesied that the king of Babylon would not attack?”

“My lord, I told you what would happen, and now it has come to pass. Don’t let me go back to that dark, damp dungeon. I don’t want to die there!”

Zedekiah agreed, though he was not willing to release Jeremiah, perhaps fearing a confrontation from the princes. Instead, the king ordered that Jeremiah be moved to the court of the prison, and that he should receive a daily piece of bread.

The Babylonian army returned and attacked the city, just as Jeremiah had warned. Everyone inside was trapped. Food became scarce. The streets were littered with the bodies of those who starved to death. The dagger-like pains of hunger drove people to do the unthinkable: cannibalism! Mothers boiled their children for food. And, with so many people crowded together, sickness and disease began to spread.

Driven by ever-mounting fear and anxiety, Zedekiah vented his frustrations at Jeremiah. “Why do you continuously prophesy against us, Jeremiah?” he demanded. “All you ever preach is bad news!”

“I told you that there was a way of escape, my lord, but you refused to listen. Besides, there is good news.” Jeremiah told the king that, at God’s direction, he arranged to buy a field in Anathoth from his cousin Hanameel. Baruch, Jeremiah’s secretary, put the property’s title deeds in a potter’s jar and buried it in the ground for safekeeping.

“This transaction,” the prophet explained, “symbolizes that, although Judah and Jerusalem will see utter destruction, there is still hope. God has pledged to one day return His people to their homeland. They will possess houses, fields and vineyards, according to their tribes and families. Judah will flourish again” (Jeremiah 32; 34; 37).

## Saved From the Pit

The princes of Judah thought that prison was too good for Jeremiah. “This man should be put to death!” they said to the king. “His words are treasonous! They weaken the morale of our soldiers and everyone else in the city. This man doesn’t seek after our welfare—but only our hurt.”

As he often did, Zedekiah gave in to their demands. “Very well,” he said weakly, “He’s yours. I can’t stop you.”

The princes took Jeremiah into the dark, dank dungeon of Malchiah, and let him down into a deep pit.

“Let’s see how long the old man survives,” they laughed, as they watched the prophet struggle to keep from sinking into the filth and mire. Jeremiah was alone and cold, without food or drink.

Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs who served in the king’s house, heard what had happened, and he boldly went to the king.

“My lord, these men have treated Jeremiah the prophet with evil,” he said. “Unless we act now, God’s servant will either suffocate in the mire or starve to death!”

Zedekiah nodded weakly, and said, “Go rescue him—and take 30 men with you just in case anyone tries to stop you.”

After gathering the men, the Ethiopian servant went into the king’s house under the treasury and took with him old clothes and rags. Then he and his team went to the pit and let down a rope.

Ebed-Melech shouted down to Jeremiah, “Put these old clothes and rags under your armholes and



then put the rope around you. This will keep you from getting hurt as my men lift you up.”

Jeremiah did just that, and the men pulled together on the rope and lifted him up. Jeremiah shivered as Ebed-Melech wrapped a blanket around him.

The prophet was returned to the safer confines of the court of the prison, where God later told him, “Even though Jerusalem will suffer horrible, merciless defeat, I will protect Ebed-Melech. He put his trust in Me, therefore I will deliver him from the sword” (Jeremiah 38:1-13; 39:15-18).

### **Too Weak to Surrender**

Zedekiah had Jeremiah appear before him again, and said, “I will ask you something. Don’t hide anything from me.”

Jeremiah said, “Why? If I speak the truth, will you not put me to death? If I give you sound advice, will you listen to me?”

The king nervously looked over both shoulders to see if anyone was eavesdropping. Satisfied, he whispered, “As surely as the Eternal lives, I promise not to put you to death, nor will I give you over to those who seek to kill you.”

Jeremiah looked at the king for a moment, and stared deep into his eyes. He knew that Zedekiah was a weak leader, and that his word was as good as stale bread.

But the prophet walked out in faith and said to him, “Thus says the Eternal Almighty, the God of Israel: ‘If you will surrender to the princes of Babylon, who are attacking this city at this very moment, then you will live and Jerusalem will not be engulfed in flames. However, if you fail to do this, then the Chaldeans shall capture this city and set it ablaze. And you will be their prisoner.’”

The king thought about this, but he gave in to fear and human reasoning. “But what of the Jews who deserted over to the Chaldeans’ side? They’ll seize and abuse me.”

“Don’t be afraid of them,” Jeremiah tried to assure him. “They won’t harm you. My lord, please listen to God’s voice; it’s your only way of escape. If you refuse, God has judged that the palace women shall be given to the Babylonian princes. These women shall say that your so-called friends misled you with bad advice; and now that you’re trapped with no way of escape, they have deserted you. Your wives and children will also be given to the Chaldeans, the king of Babylon will seize you, and Jerusalem shall burn.”

The prophet’s words weighed heavily upon Zedekiah’s troubled

mind. He desperately wanted to escape the doom that awaited him, but his character was too weak to believe God and step out in faith.

The king said, “Don’t repeat this discussion to anyone, and you will live. However, if the princes hear that I’ve talked with you, they’ll ask you to tell them what was said—they might even threaten your life. Whatever happens, don’t tell them what we discussed. Simply say that you requested that I wouldn’t return you to the dungeon.”

Zedekiah feared those whom he was supposed to lead and allowed them to rule over him. His lack of true leadership—of standing up for what was right no matter the consequences—would lead to his downfall (Jeremiah 38:14-28).

### **The Fall of Jerusalem**

Nebuchadnezzar’s troops eventually broke through Jerusalem’s fortified walls. As the Babylonians prepared to overrun the city, Zedekiah and his family, officers and soldiers sneaked out of the city by night through the broken wall by the king’s garden. They made their escape into the Kidron Valley and raced through the plains of Jericho, in the Jordan Valley. But the enemy pursued and quickly overtook them.

Zedekiah was brought to Riblah, where he faced Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Judah received no mercy that day, for his sons were executed before his eyes. Sadly, this was the last thing Zedekiah ever saw, because Nebuchadnezzar had his eyes removed. Zedekiah was carried off to Babylon blind, defeated and bound in chains. And there he died in prison.

Nebuchadnezzar executed many other Jewish leaders—Seraiah the high-priest, Zephaniah the second priest, three doorkeepers of the temple, a general, five of Zedekiah’s close associates, the chief recruiting officer of Judah army, and other men.

Nebuchadnezzar had heard good reports about Jeremiah and that he had told Judah to submit to Babylon. The Babylonian king ordered Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, to release Jeremiah from prison and see that no harm came to him.

The Chaldeans removed the sacred vessels, utensils and treasures in God’s temple, along with the treasures of Judah’s royalty. They broke into pieces the bronze pillars, the carts and the bronze Sea, and carried their precious metals to Babylon. They set the temple and all the palaces on fire. They also broke down the walls of Jerusalem, leaving it defenseless.

Of the few who escaped being killed by the military, they were carried away to Babylon as slaves. But the poor and unskilled were left



behind to tend the vineyards and farm the fields. Nebuzaradan made Gedaliah, the grandson of Shaphan, the new governor over the land, and assigned him to take good care of Jeremiah.

For the next 70 years, the land finally enjoyed its Sabbath-rest, just as God has foretold through Jeremiah the prophet (II Chronicles 36:11-21; II Kings 24:17-20; 25; Jeremiah 39; 52:1-30).

## EPILOGUE

# A MESSAGE OF HOPE

**T**HE *STORY OF THE BIBLE* has covered much in seven volumes: the creation of Adam and Eve; Noah and the Great Flood; the call of Abraham and the promises God made to him; the perseverance of Jacob and Joseph; God delivering Israel out of Egypt; the carnal-minded Israelites constantly complaining and rebelling against God in the wilderness; inheriting the Promised Land; the fall of Jericho; the chaotic times of the judges; the tragic life of Saul; the righteous example of King David; the wisdom of Solomon; Israel and Judah splitting into separate kingdoms; the idolatrous history of the house of Israel; the wicked and righteous reigns of Judah's kings; the strong warnings of God's prophets; the fall of Samaria and Jerusalem.

But the story does not end with Israel and Judah's demise. Though God warned His people of His coming wrath, He also gave them a tremendous message of hope.

### Identifying Sign

With the rise of the Babylonian Empire, many Assyrians left their homeland, taking with them their Israelite slaves. Together, they eventually migrated into northwestern Europe.

In Exodus 31, God established a special Sabbath covenant between Himself and Israel. The Sabbath identifies the one true God of the universe and His true worshippers. (Observing the Sabbath does not automatically make someone a servant of God—yet all of God's true servants keep that day holy.) As long as the Israelites remembered and observed the Sabbath, they would remember their national identity and the God they served.

Nonetheless, the house of Israel had stopped keeping God's Sabbath, annual holy days and feasts long before going into captivity. When the Israelites became Assyrian slaves, they took on the pagan customs, practices and traditions of their masters. And because they no longer kept the Sabbath, the Israelites eventually

lost their national identity. They began to believe that they were Gentiles.

Yet, this did not happen with the people of Judah. The Jews, for the most part, remembered to keep the Sabbath. This enabled them to hold on to their national identity during their 70 years of captivity, and after their release, when they returned to Judah.

Today, all nations know who the Jews are. But what about the Israelites? Did they blend into Gentile nations and eventually become lost to history? For years, men have created various theories of who the descendants of the house of Israel are today.

God promised that He would make through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the greatest company of nations the world would ever see, and the single most powerful nation in the history of mankind (Genesis 35:10-13). Together, they would control the seagates of the earth, giving them the ultimate military and economic advantages over all other nations. These birthright blessings were to be inherited by Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph (Genesis 48). The Bible reveals that God cannot lie (Titus 1:1; Hebrews 6:18), therefore He must have kept His promise.

History shows that there are only two nations that ever lived up to Ephraim and Manasseh's prophetic description: the globe-spanning British Empire (with Britain leading Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and other countries) and the United States of America. These two great world-ruling powers, along with most of northwestern Europe, are the modern-day descendants of the "lost ten tribes" of the house of Israel!

Even more amazing, the overwhelming majority of these modern-day Israelites do not even know who they are! They have no idea that they have benefited from the greatest national inheritance God has ever given. This is because, like their ancient ancestors, they do not uphold the special Sabbath covenant of Exodus 31, which identifies God and His people.

### **Biblical Prophecy**

One third of the Bible is prophecy, but only about ten percent of prophesied events have come to pass—leaving 90 percent of biblical prophecy yet to be fulfilled.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and other prophets of God preached that incredible disaster would come upon Israel and Judah. This did happen. But the curses that ancient Israel suffered were only a *type* of the ultimate catastrophe—"the time of Jacob's trouble"

(Jeremiah 30:7)—that awaits the United States, Britain, Canada and all other Israelite nations. The prophecies recorded in God’s Word are actually for the modern-day descendants of Israel, who are committing the same sins that their forefathers had done: idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, preaching lies in God’s name, perverting justice, stealing, committing murder, etc. (Our book *America and Britain in Prophecy* explains this in great detail.) That is the bad news.

However, there is also GOOD NEWS just over the horizon!

### **A Message of Hope**

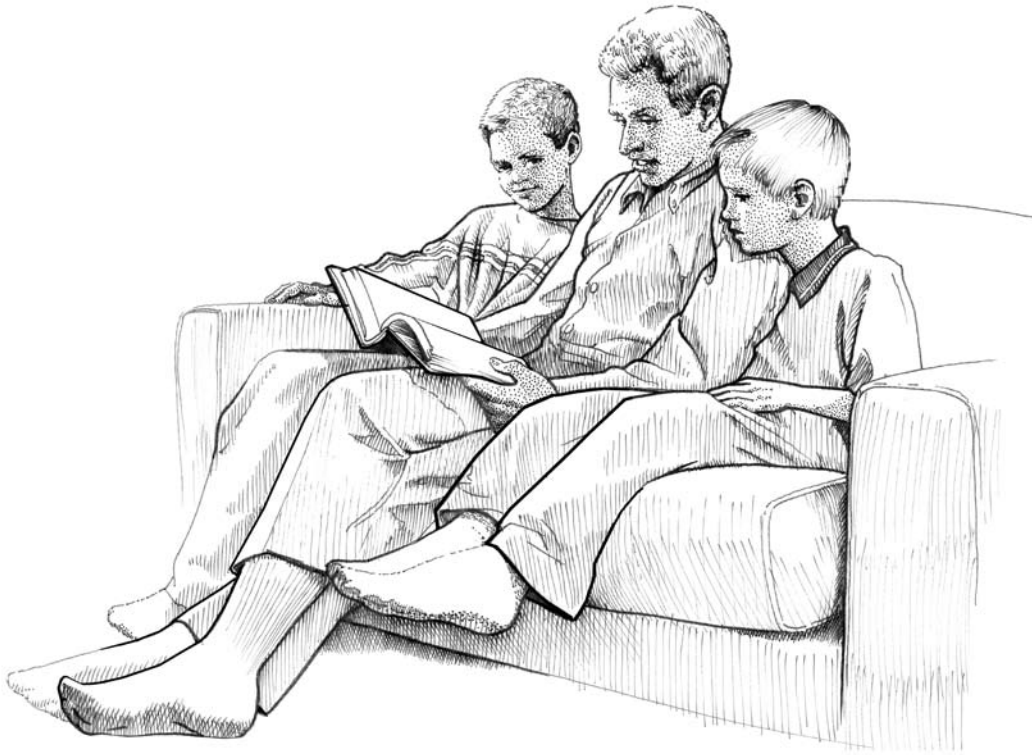
Just as God preserved ancient Israel and Judah through their punishment, He will also preserve the modern-day Israelites through the greatest time of tribulation just ahead. God will make a new covenant with the remnant of His people, and will give them His Spirit. Their stubborn hearts will change. They will no longer rebel against their Creator. Then they will lead the Gentile nations around the world as a model example in the wonderful world tomorrow (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

To help Him do this, God has called a select few (true Christians) who are qualifying for positions of leadership. The Eternal has put His Holy Spirit within their minds, converting their carnal nature into His divine nature. This is a lifelong process involving many tests and trials. A true Christian must learn to conquer the pulls and temptations of (1) human reasoning and the desires of the flesh, (2) Satan the devil, and (3) society. He must strive to obey God and please Him by growing in the fruits of His Spirit (love, joy, peace, patient longersuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control – Galatians 5:22-23). His goal is to mature to the point that he will no longer lie, steal, murder, covet—SIN—no matter what trials, temptations and troubles he might face.

Those who overcome, building God’s holy, righteous character within them, will be changed into Spirit Beings when Jesus Christ returns to set up God’s government upon the earth.

That government—the KINGDOM OF GOD—will teach all men, women and children the right way to live. It will finally bring an end to all wars and establish lasting peace. It will replace poverty with prosperity. It will restore true justice, fairness and integrity in place of injustice and lawlessness. God’s kingdom, with its headquarters at Jerusalem, will lead humanity into a glorious and happy new age.

The underlining theme of *The Story of the Bible* shows that carnal-minded human beings cannot direct their own paths. They need help



from their Creator (Proverbs 14:12; Jeremiah 10:23-24). The Eternal plans to give mankind this help, according to His timetable.

The lifelong examples of Abraham, Moses, David, Hezekiah and other righteous servants show that God will help those who put His Way first. This is the *only* path to true happiness and success—a path that all people must one day take.

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