

SUMMER 2020

The Living Word

SERIES

God Is Faithful



Lesson Manual

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GOD IS FAITHFUL

by Jonathan McClintock



Some people cannot be counted on. Perhaps that is why it is refreshing to find people who do what they say they will do. But if we are honest with ourselves, no matter how many times we do come through on our word, there will be moments in time when our promise to do a particular thing will end in disappointment. Why? Because we are humans, with limitations, and we are unable to control every circumstance and situation we face. No matter how faithful we want to be, our humanity will fail us at times.

On the eve of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus looked at Peter and told him that before the rooster crowed in the morning, Peter would deny Jesus three times. Upon hearing this, the bold apostle looked back at Jesus and declared, "I will never deny You." In fact, Peter's declaration did not stop there. He even insisted that not only would he not deny Jesus, but he would die for his Lord if it came to that.

But only a few short hours later, Peter found himself in a situation he had never anticipated. The pressure around him began to build. The heat was turned up as he stood by the fire and tried to deflect

the probing questions of those gathered in the courtyard. And in a few moments of weakness, Peter denied he even knew who Jesus was. The third and final denial was punctuated with profanity, only seconds before the sound of the crowing rooster reverberated in his ears. In his moment of weakness, Peter's faithfulness faded.

However, when the Bible tells us God is faithful, we can be certain of that fact. When pressures squeezed Jesus, He remained faithful. When the heat was turned up on Jesus, He remained faithful. And when others were unfaithful to Him, even then He remained faithful to them. Nothing challenges the faithfulness of our God.

John the Revelator gave us a picture of the unending faithfulness of our God. While in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, John caught a glimpse of our triumphant Savior, proving that even at the end of time, He will still be faithful: "And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11). His faithfulness will endure to the end.

LESSON MANUAL

This Lesson Manual has been developed with the goal of providing teachers numerous options to assist in preparation and delivery of each lesson.

In each lesson you will find a Focus Thought, Focus Verse, and Lesson Text that lay a foundation and give direction for the material that is to be presented. Questions are dispersed throughout the body of each lesson to provoke thought and spark discussion. We urge teachers to use these questions as a means of helping students apply each portion of the lesson.

» *How does God being “all knowing” bring you comfort?*

STUDENT WORKBOOK

The Student Workbook has been organized in such a way that students are given the tools to not only follow the major points of each lesson but will also have a tool to further their personal discipleship and devotion throughout the week.

1. The Focus Thought, Focus Verse, and Culture Connection have been included in the Student Workbook.
2. The Lesson Outline has also been included to give the student a template to follow as the lesson is being taught. In addition, certain parts of the outline correspond with the daily discipleship prompts in the Approach section. This is designed to show what part of the lesson corresponds to the particular day’s lesson text and application questions.
3. The Approach section is designed to give the student daily discipleship prompts by including portions of the lesson and application questions. The flexibility of this section allows for the student to follow along and interact during class, to become familiar with the lesson content before class, or to spend time in review during the week following class.
4. The Ask and Apply questions are presented for the purpose of helping the student contemplate the truths of Scripture and the content of the lesson. The first of the questions in each set is taken directly from the Lesson Manual, while the second question in each set is an additional prompt designed to help the student apply what is being taught.

POWERPOINTS

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God Will Supply

FOCUS THOUGHT

God takes care of His people.

»» FOCUS VERSE

I Kings 17:16

And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Elijah.

»» LESSON TEXT

I Kings 17:1–4; 8–16

1 And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.

2 And the word of the LORD came unto him, saying,

3 Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan.

4 And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there.

.....

8 And the word of the LORD came unto him, saying,

9 Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee.

10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.

11 And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand.

12 And she said, As the LORD thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die.

13 And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son.

14 For thus saith the LORD God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the LORD sendeth rain upon the earth.

15 And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.

16 And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Elijah.

CULTURE CONNECTION

GOD PROVIDES IN EVERY SITUATION

Marcus and Renee Brainos were on their first deputation as UPCI missionaries to France. They had planned to spend part of the winter in Canada and had outfitted their three children with warm outerwear. But Marcus only had an older coat, and Renee did not really have anything warm enough for the trip. The kids were taken care of, so Renee had decided to manage until she could find something without straining their budget.

One Sunday, after ministering at a church in Arkansas, the pastor's wife gave Renee a package from a lady in their church. That morning, as this lady was leaving for church, the Lord spoke to her about a very warm Italian leather coat she had in her closet. "That coat belongs to the wife of the missionary couple at church today. Take it to her."

When Renee was given the coat, she was shocked and then became a little nervous that it would not fit. But she immediately thought, *If God sent this to me, then why would it not fit?* Not only did it fit, but there were also very warm gloves in the pocket. The lady had started to remove them but felt instructed to leave them as well.

God knows our every need and is faithful to provide. Sometimes He asks us to go into situations that require things we do not have, but He knows those needs before we do and already has a plan.

OUTLINE

I. ELIJAH PROPHESED

- A. No Dew or Rain
- B. Sometimes God Gives an Unpopular Word

II. ELIJAH AT THE BROOK CHERITH

- A. Ravens Fed Him
- B. The Lord Takes Care of Those Who Trust Him

III. WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH

- A. Gave Her Last Meal to the Prophet
- B. Meal and Oil Never Ran Out
- C. The Lord Takes Care of Those Who Put Him First

IV. GOD WILL SUPPLY

- A. We Must Trust in the Lord
- B. We Must Put God First

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

On May 25, 1961, United States President John F. Kennedy told Congress of his intentions to send a man to the moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of the decade. The challenge to do such a

thing was monumental since the technology to achieve such a task had not yet been invented. Ultimately, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) would receive billions of dollars in funding to ensure they would have all they needed to achieve the goal of reaching the moon. Though there were tragedies and setbacks along the way, on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon, successfully completing the challenge that had been set forth.

After President Kennedy's challenge, the US government supplied the needs of NASA. As Christians we often trust God to provide for our needs. Yet some believers feel, at times, that God withholds or does not provide for our needs. Philippians 4:19 states, "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." This promise is written and cannot change. Then why do we feel God is not providing for our needs at times? We often experience tragedies and setbacks on the road of life. But through it all, we can trust God will still provide what we need.

I. ELIJAH PROPHESED

A. No Dew or Rain

The prophet Elijah boldly stood before King Ahab and delivered a message declaring the judgment of God was going to fall upon Israel. In modern society, standing before a world leader expressing your opinion without fear of retribution seems reasonable. In the days of Elijah, a strongly worded opinion to the ruler of the land could bring swift and brutal punishment, even death. Elijah had the task of telling King Ahab that his nation would suffer from drought, seeing no rain or dew for the foreseeable future. Knowing the king's heart, God gave Elijah personal directions to flee the area after giving the message to the king. Not only did God give Elijah an opportunity to avoid the wrath of Ahab, but God sent Elijah to a place where he would find protection and provision. This mission must have been difficult for Elijah, but his obedience to God gave him the courage to go forward and complete the difficult task he had been given.

B. Sometimes God Gives an Unpopular Word

Jonah received an unpopular word from God. God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the people to repent or face His wrath. This word did not sit well with Jonah as there was a contentious history between Israel and Nineveh. Instead of going to Nineveh as directed, Jonah went to Joppa and boarded a ship sailing for Tarshish. A storm arose, which caused the ship and crew to be in peril. When Jonah confessed his responsibility, the crew tossed Jonah overboard into the sea. Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, where he spent the next three days and nights. Once Jonah was delivered from the fish, he went straight to Nineveh and completed the task God had originally given him.

Elijah was far more obedient than Jonah. However, this did not make his task any easier. There are times when we as individuals—or as the collective body of Christ—receive an unpopular word from God. Sometimes the Word of God that comes from the pulpit of our local assembly is not popular. In Jonah 4 we see the prophet proclaiming his discontent with the task God had given him. Eventually he submitted to the authority of God and obeyed, just as Elijah had obeyed God.

» ***How do you handle an unpopular word from God, with compliance or disregard?***

II. ELIJAH AT THE BROOK CHERITH

The expression “God works in mysterious ways” is applicable to Elijah’s situation. Why would the God of all things tell His prophet to go and hide by a small creek? Certainly God could destroy or vanquish anyone who stood against His chosen prophet. This situation demonstrates how God operates with divine understanding. The word Elijah received was to tell Ahab about the impending judgment and then

hide at the Brook Cherith. Elijah did not question God. He simply complied with the directive he was given by the Creator.

A. Ravens Fed Him

The irony is thick when looking at the choice God made in the way he would feed Elijah. The raven has long been associated with darkness or evil doings. Many stories and poems have been written using the raven as a symbol of evil or darkness. Most famous in modern times is the poem “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe. It portrays a raven talking to a man distraught at the loss of his love and grappling for sanity. Even more ironic in the case of Elijah is that wild animals, or wild birds in this case, approached a human being to bring him food. Birds are always skittish around humans and other creatures that approach them, and rarely do they feel comfortable approaching humans.

The Bible does not give many details on what happened to Elijah during his stay at the Brook Cherith, only that he was fed by the ravens. Imagine if someone had come across the prophet during his stay at the brook. What would this person have witnessed? Elijah was healthy and vibrant during a time of drought and famine. Even more amazing were the ravens bringing him food. A person who saw ravens as evil creatures might be overcome with fear seeing them freely approaching and bringing food to the prophet. That vision alone could cause men to stay away for fear the prophet held some power over creatures associated with darkness. Yet God used ravens to feed His prophet. With this in mind, we can see some logic in why God would have used this method to care for the man He was protecting. In His own way, God provided both nourishment and protection for Elijah.

» *How has God provided for you or others in a manner you could only describe as miraculous?*

B. The Lord Takes Care of Those Who Trust Him

Elijah had good reason to trust in the Lord. Not only had the Lord given Elijah direction to hide, but He gave Elijah safe passage and supplied his needs. Further study of the prophet provides numerous examples of the awesome power of God. Elijah was no different than any other human being. He simply obeyed and trusted in the Lord. Only when we trust in God can we be witness to greater miracles. Our trust grows as our relationship with the Lord develops into something more than just the occasional prayer.

David is another good example of a man who trusted God. We see the divine hand of the Lord protecting and providing for David. Each miraculous event in the life of David was greater than the last. These demonstrated how God prepared David for greater challenges and how David was growing in his trust in God. Our trust in God must grow beyond all human reasoning. Our trust in God is not optional. For Him to operate in our lives, we must trust Him and submit to His will. Psalm 9:10 states, “And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, LORD, hast not forsaken them that seek thee.”

III. WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH

Elijah received a word from God commanding him to leave the brook and go to a place called Zarephath. There he would find a widow God had instructed to care for the prophet.

She was a God-fearing woman based on two facts from Scripture. First, God told Elijah He had commanded a widow to take care of him. Only those in relationship with God would likely heed His voice. Secondly, when Elijah asked her for bread, she told him she did not have enough. When the prophet told her the word of the Lord, she immediately left to make him bread. Her obedience demonstrated the depth of her faith.

A. Gave Her Last Meal to the Prophet

A closer look at the interaction between the widow and the prophet reveals how our human nature can give us pause when trusting God. The initial request by Elijah was simply for a vessel of water. The widow immediately set out to fulfil his request. As she was walking away, Elijah called out to her and asked that she bring him some bread. This request caused her to hesitate for a moment as she informed Elijah she only had enough meal to make bread for herself and her son. She further stated she had come to gather two sticks in order to prepare the bread “that we may eat it, and die” (I Kings 17:12). In other words, she had enough meal to make one small morsel of bread; then she and her son would resign themselves to die from starvation. Elijah commanded her to make him some bread first, assuring her God would make sure her barrel would never be empty. In obedience to the word of God, she made the bread.

Hesitation in the face of imminent danger or uncertainty is an instinctive human reaction. Firefighters train to run toward dangerous situations in order to overcome the instinctive fear to flee. Their training is long and arduous, so when the moment arises, they can perform their duties. The widow demonstrated the natural hesitation of her humanity, yet when the word of God came forth, she immediately relied on her spirituality to overcome her fear. We must work daily in prayer and study to grow our faith in God.

» *What are you doing to grow your faith in God?*

B. Meal and Oil Never Ran Out

Imagine a drought and famine so severe that it would cause a widow to proclaim the impending death of herself and her son for lack of food. Elijah asked her to trust in the Lord and first make a morsel of bread for him; then the Lord would provide an abundance of meal and oil. I Kings 17:15–16 states, “And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Elijah.” Because of her faith and obedience, God was able to perform the miracle proclaimed by His prophet.

Faith and obedience are inseparable. The Bible tells of a man named Naaman, a powerful man within Syria who also happened to be a leper. Naaman heard about the prophet Elisha and was told this man of God could heal his leprosy. He journeyed to the house of Elisha, only to be greeted by a messenger. II Kings 5:10 states, “And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.” Naaman was not pleased with this situation, but he was desperate. Verse 14 explains, “Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” If Naaman had refused to obey what God had told him to do via the prophet, he would not have been healed of leprosy.

C. The Lord Takes Care of Those Who Put Him First

Every character in the Bible who put God first has always enjoyed God’s provisions. Even when the situation is less than desirable, God still provides for those who put Him first. Joseph was betrayed by his own brothers and sold into slavery. They had become jealous of Joseph being held up as the most blessed son of their father. Joseph ended up living many years as a slave, and his father thought he was dead. Joseph worked hard and was held in high regard by his master, Potiphar. One day Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, but he fled. She lied to her husband saying Joseph had attacked her. Joseph was sent to prison an innocent man and remained incarcerated for years. But because he was able to interpret dreams, Pharaoh called Joseph to his court to tell Pharaoh what his dreams meant. When Joseph gave the interpretation to Pharaoh, he elevated Joseph to the second most powerful man in Egypt. When Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt looking for food, Joseph was in a position to help save his family and was eventually reunited with his father. Joseph was obedient to God throughout his ordeal. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph told his brothers, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

» *Why is it difficult to put God first when it may feel like He has put you last?*

IV. GOD WILL SUPPLY

God will supply our needs if we trust in Him and put Him first. This sounds easy, yet we struggle with it daily. It is imperative to understand we must first trust God and then choose to put Him first in every aspect of our lives.

A. We Must Trust in the Lord

Trust in God is the first step of faith. We cannot be saved without putting our trust in the Lord. Even when we do not understand all that is happening, we must trust He has our best interests at heart. Too often we reason ourselves out of trusting God by interfering with His work. Moses told the Israelites to “stand still, and see the

salvation of the LORD” (Exodus 14:13). As human beings we always try to control every aspect of our lives and circumstances. This is impossible. Trusting God enables us to rely less on ourselves and more on Him. Proverbs 3:5–6 states, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

B. We Must Put God First

The New Testament records Jesus saying, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). Today’s society rejects the idea of putting anything or anyone before oneself. Yet God teaches us to put Him first and He will supply all our needs. We must be cautious and understand that what we need and what we want can be two very different things. Sometimes we overlook the thing we need and focus on the thing we want. Often we want material things, positions of power or prestige, or a particular romantic partner; these make us lose focus. We must remember, if we put God first, He will supply all we need.

» ***What indicators demonstrate someone is putting God first?***

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

If you saw someone drowning and swam out to assist, could you save the person if the person fought your efforts? It is highly unlikely you would be able to pull that person to safety because in the struggle you would become fatigued and put your own self at risk of drowning. In the height of panic, people often neglect assistance because they do not trust those who are offering help. If the drowning person does not submit to your direction, allowing you to help, the person will simply drown.

This principle can also be applicable to us spiritually. If we do not trust God, He cannot help us. The world often criticizes God for not forcing help upon us. God has given us free will. His love will not force us to submit to anything we do not wish. Therefore, we must build our relationship with God to the point of trusting Him beyond reason. His Word promises in Deuteronomy 31:6, “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”

God Hears Elijah's Prayer

FOCUS THOUGHT

God honors His preachers' prayers.

»» FOCUS VERSE

I Kings 17:24

And the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.

»» LESSON TEXT

I Kings 17:17-23

17 And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him.

18 And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?

19 And he said unto her, Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed.

20 And he cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?

21 And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again.

22 And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.

23 And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy son liveth.

CULTURE CONNECTION

BAYOU BARTHOLOMEW

In July of 1989, Jerry Self and his brother-in-law were faced with the reality that in three hours, five-hundred acres of sweet potatoes would be under water. Twelve inches of rainfall had pushed the Bayou Bartholomew out of its banks, and it had reached the edge of Jerry's farmland. In desperation he called his pastors, A. J. and Dwight Fulton, to come pray for a miracle.

Both pastors arrived quickly. The men sat on a log that had floated to the edge of the field out of the bayou, and they began to pray.

After the pastors left, Jerry continued to monitor the water and found it had stopped rising. Believing the water had crested, Jerry checked the water levels north and south of him, only to learn the water was still rising.

Jerry continually checked the gauges and spoke with other farmers, again to receive the same report: the water was still rising. He went back to his fields, wondering what he would find, but the water continually stayed back.

For thirty days the water threatened, but it never rose higher than where the four men had sat and prayed.

Just as God heard Elijah's prayer, He hears the prayers of those He calls to watch over His people.

OUTLINE

I. CRISIS IN THE ERA OF THE KINGS

- A. The Rise of King Ahab
- B. The Rise of Idol Worship
- C. The Demands of Obedience Never Change

II. THE PORTRAYAL OF ELIJAH

- A. A Man of Purpose
- B. A Man of Prayer
- C. The Importance of Spiritual Authority

III. THE POWER OF A PRAYING PREACHER

- A. The Widow First Trusted Elijah
- B. The Widow Was Led to Trust in God
- C. The Importance of Spiritual Integrity

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

It is no secret that, in every sector, United States society is experiencing a crisis of authority. From the childhood vaccination debates to the election of President Trump, skepticism of the “tried and true” and “the expert” has gripped the nation. In 2017, secular social scientist Tom Nichols published *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*, exploring the troubling aspects of this trend. For Nichols, this “death of expertise” is rooted in “a rejection not only of knowledge, but of the ways in which we gain knowledge and learn about things. Fundamentally, it’s a rejection of science and rationality, which are the foundations of Western civilization itself” (thefederalist.com).

However, Nichols’ analysis, though intriguing, seems to miss the real issue. The ultimate source of this growing skepticism is not a loss of faith in “expertise,” as such, but a loss of faith in “experts.” The crisis of authority is not a crisis of scientific rationality but a crisis of personal integrity.

I. CRISIS IN THE ERA OF THE KINGS**A. The Rise of King Ahab**

After the death of the Northern Kingdom's first king, Jeroboam, the nation almost instantaneously plunged into a protracted civil war. Baasha, of the tribe of Issachar, overthrew Jeroboam's son Nadab after two years (I Kings 15:26–28), only to have his own son, Elah, assassinated after two years by his captain Zimri (I Kings 16:8–10). Zimri himself reigned a grand total of seven days before being overthrown by another military captain Omri, who was able to finally bring stability (I Kings 16:15, 23). What is missing entirely in the story of Omri's rise to power is any sort of “prophetic mandate” for his actions. Even the ill-fated Zimri had at least the credible authorization of the prophet Jehu ben Hanani for his attack on Elah. (See I Kings 16:1–4, 7).

Though little is said of Omri in the Bible, his greatest military accomplishment (conquering Moab) is mentioned in the famous Moabite Stone. In other words, Omri and the dynasty that followed him were among the first kings after Solomon to have an international reputation and pivotal role in the ancient Near Eastern geopolitical drama. A key part of the reason for Omri's power and prominence was his alliance with the king of Sidon, which made the Northern Kingdom a vital link in international trade, bringing Israel into a new era of wealth and political influence.

B. The Rise of Idol Worship

None of this is mentioned in the Bible narrative for a very specific reason. The way Omri sealed his covenant with the king of Sidon was to have his son, Ahab, marry the Sidonian princess Jezebel. The Sidonians were worshipers of the false Canaanite god Baal. For the writer of Kings, this spelled disaster for the nation, for it meant the reintroduction of a loathsome false god into Israel's national life.

That is why the writer of Kings included the following note in the narrative of Ahab's ascension to power (I Kings 16:34): “In his days did Hiel the Beth-elite build Jericho: he laid the foundation thereof in Abiram his firstborn, and set up the gates thereof in his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Joshua the son of Nun.” Not only does this text demonstrate the prophetic stature of Joshua, but it also symbolizes “the striking reversal between Israel's triumph under Joshua and their tragedy under Ahab” (Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*). Under Ahab, Baal worship was not simply tolerated—it was promoted as the official “state religion” of Israel. (See I Kings 16:31–33.)

God's explicit purpose for giving the Israelites the Promised Land was to punish the Canaanites for their false worship. (See Genesis 15:13–16; Joshua 3:10.) The marriage of Ahab and Jezebel represented the very “undoing” of Israel's conquest of the land under Joshua, even to the rebuilding of the evil city of Jericho.

C. The Demands of Obedience Never Change

There are two important lessons to draw from the story of Ahab's rise to power. First, God is not impressed or moved by worldly standards of success. Most historians agree that Omri and Ahab were two of the most powerful kings Israel had ever known. In fact, at the Battle of Qarqar, King Ahab was able to field an army of ten thousand infantry soldiers and two thousand chariots and was essentially the military leader of the coalition that confronted the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*). However, despite the military and economic might of Omri and Ahab, they failed the one test of "good success" (Joshua 1:8)—they were not faithful to God or His covenant.

The second important lesson to draw from these stories is that God's demands for obedience never changed. Though centuries separate the time of Joshua from the time of Ahab, God still abhorred the gods of the Canaanites and all that their worship entailed. Not the "cultural shift," nor the "need for economic stability," nor the desire for "international recognition" were sufficient reasons for sacrificing Israel's strict loyalty to God. The actions of Omri and Ahab were sinful because they were rooted in a lack of trust in God to provide those things in His own way and time.

» *Why are worldly definitions of success both so attractive and so dangerous?*

II. THE PORTRAYAL OF ELIJAH

A. A Man of Purpose

Into this charged religious and political arena stepped the mysterious man Elijah. Perhaps what is most noticeable is how little we know about him. No one is quite sure of the whereabouts of Tishbi, Elijah's hometown. The writer of Kings does not provide us with the name of Elijah's father or even the tribe to which he belonged. The only thing we know about Elijah is the meaning of his name: "Yahweh is my God." And perhaps, in the end, that is all we need to know about him. Elijah's name was his mission: he was a prophet raised up by God to combat the state-sanctioned rise of false worship.

B. A Man of Prayer

The only other thing we know about Elijah is he was a man of prayer. A grand total of fourteen separate prayer sessions are recorded in I Kings 17–19. Three things are noteworthy about Elijah's prayers. First, his prayers are striking in their simplicity. The Bible is no stranger to lengthy prayers. (See, for example, I Kings 8:22–53.) However, Elijah's prayer in chapter 17 was almost breathtakingly brief. "O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again" (I Kings 17:21). Later, in Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus extolled this kind of prayer: "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him" (Matthew 6:7–8).

Second, Elijah's prayers are notable for their honesty. Especially in his encounter with God on Mount Horeb in I Kings 19, Elijah was very open with his own feelings of isolation and perhaps even despair. Like David and the other psalmists, Elijah demonstrated honesty to be the hallmark of fervent prayer. In his honesty Elijah became for the apostle James a "model" man of prayer (James 5:17).

Finally, Elijah's prayers were notable in their persistence. He prayed three times for the widow's son to be resurrected (I Kings 17:21); he prayed seven times for the rains to fall and end the three-year-long drought (I Kings 18:43). In Luke 18:1 we find Jesus' Parable of the Unjust Judge was intended to teach this very lesson, "that men ought always to pray, and not to faint."

» *Besides honesty and persistence, what are two or three other keys to effective prayer you have discovered in your own life?*

C. The Importance of Spiritual Authority

In the Old Testament, Elijah was an iconic example of spiritual authority. It is often forgotten that Baal's role in the Canaanite pantheon was as the god of storms (lightning and rain). When Elijah announced: "As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word" (I Kings 17:1), he was directly challenging Baal's claims. According to the Canaanite Baal myth, drought signaled the "death" of the god; in effect, when Elijah stormed into Ahab's presence that day, Elijah, through Yahweh's power, "killed" Baal.

Elijah's spiritual authority may have been demonstrated in miraculous signs and wonders, but it was clearly rooted in Elijah's prayers. Charles H. Kraft was correct in saying, "Spiritual authority is in direct proportion to spiritual intimacy" (*The Evangelical's Guide to Spiritual Warfare*). As with all other forms of authority, spiritual authority comes with associated responsibilities. A pastor who has been granted spiritual oversight of a congregation has a spiritual obligation to uphold his congregants in intercessory prayer. At the end of his life, Samuel, the prophet and judge, said to the children of Israel: "Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you" (I Samuel 12:23).

There is one final truth about the nature of spiritual authority revealed in the Elijah stories: spiritual authority must grow and develop. The stories recorded in I Kings 17 show a definite progression in terms of the prophet's own authority. As Richard D. Nelson puts it: "Elijah moves from passive to active readiness. In the first story he simply obeys and is fed. In the second, he reports what God will do. In the third, he takes an active role and the Lord listens to him" (*First and Second Kings*). If Elijah had not undergone these three tests of faith—each increasing the level of required trust exponentially—it is more than likely he would not have been adequately prepared for the showdown with the false prophets of Baal in I Kings 18. The raising of the widow's son convinced Elijah once and for all that God does hear and answer prayer, and He can do miracles that have never been seen before.

III. THE POWER OF A PRAYING PREACHER

A. The Widow First Trusted Elijah

The stories recorded in I Kings 17 form a kind of interlocked narrative, united by their focus on the problem of imminent death and the divine gift of life via miraculous means (Nelson). One cannot tell the story of the resurrection of the widow's son without including, in some way, the prior story of the miraculous provision of food for the prophet, the widow, and her son (for over two years). It must be noted that Zarephath was in Sidonian territory, the “heart” of Baal's country. Elijah had taken his fight against the false god to the god's own “homeland.”

The text makes it clear this widow prepared the meal Elijah requested with the last bit of food she had been saving for her and her son. She had so much faith in the prophet's words that she was willing to risk starvation in her obedience. The text is also clear that the widow acted “according to the saying of Elijah” (I Kings 17:15). Prior to her encounter with the prophet Elijah, this woman had been a worshiper of Baal; she did not know nor worship Yahweh, the God of Elijah. She acted, at least at first, on her faith in the prophet. There was something about Elijah himself that inspired trust, hope, and courage in this woman.

» *Do you think you would be able to trust in and act upon a word from a man or woman of God like this widow did? Why or why not?*

B. The Widow Was Led to Trust in God

Because of her courageous act of obedience to God's word through the prophet Elijah, miraculous provision occurred. However, an even greater miracle is that this poor Sidonian widow came to be a believer in the God of Elijah. This can be seen in her grieved petition after the death of her son: “What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God?” (I Kings 17:18). The widow then recognized that Elijah's spiritual authority came from the one true God, not from himself or from any of the gods of the Sidonians who had proven unable to provide sustenance during the drought and famine.

What followed was the first recorded resurrection story in the Bible. Because of this Sidonian widow's faith and the prophet Elijah's persistent prayers, God performed a miracle He had never performed before—raising a person from the dead. It was this final miraculous sign that elicited the widow's full confession of faith: “Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth” (I Kings 17:24).

C. The Importance of Spiritual Integrity

It is important to notice that the woman believed in the prophet before she believed in the prophet's God. The trustworthy character of the prophet led the woman to trust in the character of the God whom the prophet proclaimed. If the widow had not trusted Elijah, she would have continued with her original plan, and that meager

meal would have been her last. But because she chose to trust the prophet, her life and her son's life were saved.

In addition, the widow's decision to trust required that Elijah present himself (and his God) as trustworthy. In other words, Elijah's character and demeanor in these stories are crucial to the widow's discovery of the true character of God. Elijah was not simply called to represent God by performing mighty signs and wonders in His name; more fundamentally, Elijah was called to represent God by exhibiting His characteristic faithfulness to His covenant promises.

A life of spiritual authority is rooted in a life of spiritual integrity. And a life of spiritual integrity can only be rooted in a quest to consistently model the character of God revealed fully in Jesus Christ. Without the integrity of Christ-like character, spiritual authority becomes a weapon that is wielded for one's own benefit rather than for the cause of Christ and His kingdom. Sadly, many have been driven away from God because those who claim to represent Him do not display spiritual integrity. We should thank God every day for the blessing of spiritual leaders who lead with integrity.

» ***Name two or three ways spiritual integrity might be differentiated from integrity of character. Can one exist without the other? Why or why not?***

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A baker in a little country town bought the butter he used from a nearby farmer. One day he suspected that the bricks of butter were not full pounds, and for several days he weighed them.

He was right. They were short of the advertised weight, and he had the farmer arrested. At the trial the judge said to the farmer, "I presume you have scales?"

"No, your honor."

"Then how do you manage to weigh the butter you sell?" inquired the judge.

The farmer replied, "That's easily explained, your honor. I have balances and for a weight I use a one-pound loaf I buy from the baker."

Warren Buffet, chairman and CEO of the investment company Berkshire Hathaway, once said: "In looking for people to hire, look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don't have the first one, the other two will kill you." We live in a world that is hungry for leadership with integrity, especially spiritual leadership. We also live in a world where that kind of leadership is in increasingly short supply. Today the world of Christendom is being rocked by abuse scandals that make the televangelist scandals of the 1980s appear tame and almost trifling.

At its root this cultural "search for integrity" is the cry of a heart that longs for something to believe in that will not disappoint or fail. We know the only fulfilling end for such a quest is a relationship with God, the only one who is ultimately trustworthy and unchanging.

The Lord, He Is God

FOCUS THOUGHT

God is God alone and has all power.

»» FOCUS VERSE

I Kings 18:39

And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.

»» LESSON TEXT

I Kings 18:30–39

30 And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down.

31 And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name:

32 And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.

33 And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.

34 And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time.

35 And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.

36 And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word.

37 Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.

38 Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.

CULTURE CONNECTION

A GRANDPA'S PRAYER

On Friday, December 8, 2017, Rick Carter received a call that his four-month-old grandson was admitted to A. I. duPont Hospital for Children. He was having trouble breathing, his heart was racing, and he was running a fever. Twenty-four hours later the doctors still had no diagnosis and were struggling to stabilize him.

Two days later, on Sunday, December 10, Pastor Steven Beardsley preached a sermon entitled “The Test.” What grabbed Rick’s attention was his pastor’s emphasis that to pray for miracles and healings, a pastor is not always needed because we serve the same God and have the same power within us.

By Monday evening the doctors had diagnosed Bryce with RSV, but he was not better and was looking at another week in the hospital. Rick told his daughter, “I’m coming to pray.”

Rick stood alone in the room, holding Bryce. Rick laid his hand on the baby’s chest and began to pray. “God, I am stepping out in faith and enacting what my pastor preached. I am Your servant and if You choose not to heal Bryce, You are still God. Please heal Bryce and let him be released tomorrow.”

Instantly Rick felt the warm presence of God lay upon his hand and go into Bryce’s chest. Bryce began to convulse in his arms and scream. He was shaking and moving so much, Rick thought he was going to drop him. At that moment, the alarms started going off, alerting the nurses’ station that there was a problem.

As this was happening, Rick could hear nurses and doctors running to the room. When the first hand touched the doorknob, Bryce was at complete peace and smiling at Rick. The next day, Bryce was released from the hospital at 10:00 AM; all his vital signs were normal and stabilized.

OUTLINE

I. SAMARIA HAD TURNED TO FOLLOW BAAL

- A. Ahab and Jezebel Led the People to Follow Baal
- B. Leaders Can Influence the Hearts of Their Followers

II. SHOWDOWN ON MOUNT CARMEL

- A. The God Who Answers by Fire
- B. We Can Be Confident That Our God Will Answer

III. PROPHETS OF BAAL BUILT AN ALTAR

- A. Offered Their Sacrifice
- B. Those Who Serve False Gods Have No Hope

IV. ELIJAH REBUILT AN ALTAR

- A. Prepared His Sacrifice and Prayed
- B. Those Who Serve the True God Have Hope

V. THE LORD, HE IS GOD

- A. We Serve the One True God
- B. We Have Hope Because God Has All Power

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

During the 1960s a family accepted a global missions assignment to a remote African village. Several Christian missionaries had tried unsuccessfully to establish a church in that particular area, but the village witch doctor held great power over the people of the village. They had seen him do mystical acts that brought them into submission under his power. He was successful in driving off the previous missionaries, and the people of the village were witnesses to these acts. Believing him to have special powers from numerous gods, they were understandably hesitant to embrace another religion.

The missionary family arrived and set up a small hut for church. They held services faithfully, worshiped, sang, prayed, and preached. They interacted daily with the villagers, who welcomed them. However, the villagers did not discuss religion or attend any functions the

missionaries offered. The witch doctor told the missionaries that their God was weak and they would leave within ninety days. This family was not weak in faith and knew with all confidence they served the one true God. A full calendar year passed, and the missionaries continued faithfully in their duties, holding services each week. Desperate for a move of God, they sought an answer from God in prayer to confirm their calling to this place that seemed hopeless to receive God.

One Sunday the entire village showed up for service. While the missionaries were ecstatic, they were also puzzled by the sudden turnout. Every villager was baptized that day, even the witch doctor. After a few days, the missionaries were approached by the witch doctor. They asked him what had happened to bring about the sudden change of heart. The witch doctor told them that like their predecessors, he began to slowly poison their water supply the first day they arrived in the village. It usually took a few weeks before the missionaries would be so physically ill they had no option but to leave their work and the village to seek medical assistance. The witch doctor went on to say that not only had he poisoned their water, but he had continued to increase the poison each week for the past year.

The amount of poison he last put in the water was enough to kill a herd of elephants, yet this family never suffered one day of sickness throughout the entire year. When the villagers asked him what was happening, he told them, “Surely they serve a true God that He has protected them from certain death.” So He led the entire village to their service to learn about their God.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. SAMARIA HAD TURNED TO FOLLOW BAAL

I Kings records the plight of Israel as each leader took them further and further away from serving God. I Kings 16:30–31 tells us, “Now Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him. And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshiped him” (NKJV).

A. Ahab and Jezebel Led the People to Follow Baal

Ahab inherited a kingdom that had been led astray for generations. The significance of his tenure was not because of his disobedience so much as it would be the time God would reveal His might and power to the people of His promise. Ahab’s marriage to Jezebel brought the situation of Israel’s sin to a greater depth. I Kings 16:32–33 states, “He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him” (NIV). The people of Israel followed along as if they had forgotten what God had done for them.

Much like in our society today, the gift of salvation purchased at Calvary seemed to have been lost on a generation seeking self-pleasure and personal fulfillment

through the lust of the flesh. Much like in I Kings, humanity today suffers from short-term memory based on carnal desires passed from generation to generation.

» *What are some ways our world today reflects the days of King Ahab?*

B. Leaders Can Influence the Hearts of Their Followers

The Bible gives us numerous examples of leaders who influenced their subordinates—some for good, others for evil. Ahab and Jezebel must have given the people of Israel some false sense that Baal would offer them hope and peace like they had never known. Perhaps the idea of living and fulfilling any desire was appealing. Whatever the reason, the people received and followed the influence given by their leaders. Only a few of the prophets would stand strong for the law of God in the face of adversity. Many of us today are facing similar circumstances; our beliefs are questioned and mocked by those who proclaim faith, yet they serve a different master entirely.

» *How do our world leaders influence people today?*

II. SHOWDOWN ON MOUNT CARMEL

Every good story has a showdown between good and evil. The characters are developed through the story line, culminating in a climactic showdown at the anticipated moment of suspense. The Bible is unique in this literary technique in that the timing of the showdown is never when we anticipate. Lamentations 3:25–26 tells us, “The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.”

It would be over four hundred years before God would deliver the children of Israel from the bondage of the Egyptians. Waiting on the Lord often brings out the worst in humanity. When Moses was on Mount Sinai, the children of Israel became impatient and made an idol to worship. This act was within a short time of the Red Sea crossing. As Ahab came into power, the Israelites had once again turned their backs on God. The prophet Elijah would stand as the representative of God.

In I Kings 18:19 Elijah told Ahab, “Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel’s table.” The stage was set. Elijah would stand before all of Israel and declare that the Lord, He is God.

A. The God Who Answers by Fire

Fire is unlike any other natural element that destroys. It is a force of nature with unlimited destructive power. God has unlimited power. Just like Moses before him, Elijah knew God could demonstrate His power in any way He deemed fit for the occasion. He knew God would use fire to consume the offering He would present before the Lord. The situation concerning Israel’s disobedience in worshiping Baal had come to a point where only a massive demonstration of the power of God would

turn them back to worshipping Him. Only an all-consuming fire would vanquish the enemies of God.

The Bible tells us Hell will be a place of unquenchable fire, a place where all the enemies of the Lord will spend eternity. Yet the Bible also uses fire to demonstrate the all-consuming power of the Holy Ghost. Matthew 3:11 records the words of John the Baptist, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” This fire consumes us and gives us authority and power to profess the Word of God and demonstrate His power through signs, wonders, and miracles.

B. We Can Be Confident That Our God Will Answer

The Bible promises God will never forsake us, even though it also gives examples of His people feeling forsaken by God. This is where our faith must come into play. Our relationship with God must be made strong through daily prayer, worship, and Bible study. Only then will our faith hold up when we feel forsaken. During those times we must rely on the words given to us by divine Scripture. Psalm 86:7 states, “In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee: for thou wilt answer me.”

The examples of holy men in Scripture demonstrate that each had a relationship with God that was nurtured faithfully. When we see faithful men and women of God today doing miraculous things, we can infer they have a faithful relationship with God. Often they speak of hearing from God, giving testimony to what He has spoken into their lives and ministries. It is important to understand that any time God speaks to us, it will always comply with the Word He has given us through the Scriptures.

» *Have you known someone to claim to have received a word from God, but it went against Scripture? Explain.*

III. PROPHETS OF BAAL BUILT AN ALTAR

The Bible does not give a detailed description concerning the particular altar the prophets built for Baal; it only tells us an altar existed where they placed the bullock. We can assume that with four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, it most likely was a sizable structure. The various means of worship and sacrifice to the false god would have been taken into consideration during construction. There is no mention of any particular material that was used or any particular manner of design. Simply stated, an altar existed for the Baal prophets to offer their sacrifice to their god.

Our modern society has many “altars”; some have a specific design, while others do not. Some people worship technology, while others simply worship the theories and discoveries offered by science. There are too many “altars” to name, yet we all know of the false gods we encounter every day.

A. Offered Their Sacrifice

The prophets of Baal must have been pleased at this opportunity to demonstrate the greatness of their god. They were great in number, so surely this proved their god was great also. The Bible records that after they prepared the bullock, they began to cry out to Baal. After some time had passed with no response, they began to climb on the altar and cry out even more. After more time had passed, Elijah began to mock them, saying their god must not be able to hear them. Perhaps he was on a long journey and was not available or perhaps he was sleeping so deeply they would need to cry louder to arouse him from his slumber. After several hours of no response, Baal's prophets began to cut themselves in desperation. At no time during this process does the Bible declare they ever gave up on Baal.

Too often in society, people will "go down with the ship." In other words, they will not relent from their position, even in the face of certain destruction or failure. Pride is the reason many people will not concede a position. Blinded by their arrogance, they often go to greater extremes to prove themselves superior or not in error. We have seen this behavior in the church when men and women have failed to humble themselves and repent. Proverbs 16:18 states, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."

B. Those Who Serve False Gods Have No Hope

Jeremiah 10:2 states, "Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them." There is no hope in anything outside the one true God. Those who serve Him are consistently blessed with goodness, while those who serve false gods and idols are consistently wrought with sin and the consequences that arise from it. God has declared that we should serve no other gods. Deuteronomy 12:30 tells us, "Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise." Israel had fallen into Baal worship, and God would stay true to His Word by destroying those who served Baal.

» *Can you list some things people worship that will not offer them hope?*

IV. ELIJAH REBUILT AN ALTAR

The first thing we should notice when Elijah proceeded to build his altar to the Lord is the deliberate actions he executed. The New Testament declares in I Corinthians 14:40, "Let all things be done decently and in order." God has a design in everything He does. The Scriptures give no detail on how the altar to Baal was constructed, yet when we read about Elijah's altar, we are given a list of details. I Kings 18:31-32 records, "And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name: and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD: and he made

a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.” There is purpose in the details and the order in which things are presented before the Lord. Throughout all sixty-six books of the Bible, God demonstrates order and purpose.

It is noteworthy that Scripture states Elijah built the altar before the people of Israel. It implies that the altar of God was in a state of disrepair. Elijah worked to restore it to service. It is also important to note that it took some labor on the part of the prophet to restore the altar. When we fail God, often our prayer life goes into disrepair. We must work and repair what has been broken by our disobedience. Yet God will restore us time and again because of His love for us.

A. Prepared His Sacrifice and Prayed

Restoring the altar to God was only the beginning for Elijah. I Kings 18:33 states, “And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.” Once again Elijah performed his task of preparing the sacrifice according to the law of Moses. In painstaking detail the prophet went about his duties preparing the sacrifice and the elements of the altar to be presented to the Lord at a prescribed time. One detail was not part of the sacrificial ritual—Elijah had the altar and sacrifice doused in water three times. The altar, wood, and sacrifice were completely wet. This would make it impossible for any human to ignite the sacrifice with fire. When the time came, Elijah offered up his prayer to God. He prayed the Lord would turn the hearts of His people, so they would know He was God. The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the sacrifice, the word, the stones, the water, and even the dust. When the people of Israel saw it, they fell on their faces and declared, “The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God” (I Kings 18:39).

B. Those Who Serve the True God Have Hope

Romans 5:3–4 states, “And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope.” Those who serve the Lord have always had hope, even during times of great tribulation. The children of Israel had the hope of a deliverer during the four hundred years they were held in bondage by Egypt. Jesus has come, and we now have the blessed hope of salvation and eternal life. No one can escape the consequences of sin, yet we can all overcome by the sacrifice of God through His Son, Jesus. The glorious hope we have is recorded by miraculous events in the Old and New Testaments. No other religion, philosophy, or even science gives the promise of eternal life. The hope found in serving God is beyond comprehension.

V. THE LORD, HE IS GOD

Psalms 100:3 states, “Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” The idea of only one God has lived long beyond the multiple false gods of antiquity. There are some religions that still serve multiple gods, yet the significance that one God

made Himself known to the world has caused many religions to embrace only one god. They may still serve a false god, yet the impact of the power of the one true God cannot be denied.

A. We Serve the One True God

Many claim to serve the one true God. Therefore, it stands to reason that the Lord would validate Himself to those who serve Him. God has always revealed Himself to His people in some fashion. Since the Day of Pentecost, He has revealed Himself to the individual believer through the infilling of the Holy Ghost. No other religious group outside of Christianity makes such a claim, to have the Spirit of God living within the believer. This unique characteristic not only sets us apart from others because it is different, but it sets us apart because of the power it gives us. Deuteronomy 4:35 states, “Unto thee it was shewed, that thou mightest know that the LORD he is God; there is none else beside him.” Once we have received His Spirit, there is no doubt whom we serve.

» *Have you ever struggled with doubt? How did you overcome it?*

B. We Have Hope Because God Has All Power

Our hope comes from God. Romans 15:13 states, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.” God created all things in Heaven and in Earth. He spoke it all into existence, yet He has a love for humanity that surpasses all understanding. The Creator could have easily destroyed humanity after the Garden, yet He instead chose to redeem them. The power of love is greater than any power we know. It influences us to make choices that defy logic, that go beyond logical reasoning. I John 4:8 states, “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” You cannot know God if you do not love others as He does.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The witch doctor from the village mentioned at the beginning of this lesson witnessed firsthand the power of the one true God. Neither he nor the other villagers could deny what they had witnessed. When God puts His Spirit within us, we cannot deny that something miraculous has occurred. Ezekiel 11:19–20 states, “And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: that they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.” Elijah was faithful to God and led Israel to a place where they would see His awesome power in full demonstration. Just like the men and women of Israel from that era, we can know today that the Lord, He is God.

God Sees All

FOCUS THOUGHT

Because God sees all things, we should seek to please Him with our actions.

➤➤ FOCUS VERSE

I Kings 21:20

And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the LORD.

➤➤ LESSON TEXT

I Kings 21:1–7, 17–20

1 And it came to pass after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard, which was in Jezreel, hard by the palace of Ahab king of Samaria.

2 And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house: and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it; or, if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money.

3 And Naboth said to Ahab, The LORD forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.

4 And Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him: for he had said, I will not give thee the inheritance of my fathers. And he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread.

5 But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said unto him, Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread?

6 And he said unto her, Because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him, Give me thy vineyard for money; or else, if it please thee, I will give thee another vineyard for it: and he answered, I will not give thee my vineyard.

7 And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.

.....

17 And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,

18 Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, which is in Samaria: behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, whither he is gone down to possess it.

19 And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the LORD, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the LORD, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine.

20 And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the LORD.

CULTURE CONNECTION

A GOD OF DETAILS

Wendy's husband passed away unexpectedly while they were pastoring. After gaining the strength to move on with her life, she moved to New York. The move was a good change, and God provided her with a nursing job, at which she excelled.

Wendy's son Keith had been waiting for a heart transplant for almost four years, but he had no way of acquiring the level of care he would need after the surgery. While Wendy was in town visiting him, she asked, "Am I going to need to come here for you to get your transplant?" Keith was quite startled and in his gentle, kind way, he responded that he would never ask her to make that sacrifice.

As they were talking, the pastor walked over and joined the conversation. After hearing their conversation, the pastor told them of a recent meeting he had been in. That very week a group of church leaders had been trying to formulate a plan to get Keith the help he needed. They decided it would only work if they could somehow get Wendy to help, but she would need to quit her job and move back to the area.

Within two weeks of that conversation, Wendy was offered two jobs. Both made it possible for her to work from home and move back to help Keith through the transplant process. Within a few months, Wendy moved and Keith's transplant was a success.

God sees the needs of His people, and when we seek to please Him and care for one another, He works out all the details.

OUTLINE

I. GOD IS OMNISCIENT

- A. Knows All Things
- B. His Knowledge Should Bring Us Comfort

II. NABOTH HAD A VINEYARD

- A. An Inheritance from His Fathers
- B. Ahab Wanted Naboth's Vineyard
- C. God Knows the Enemy Wants to Take What We Have Been Given

III. JEZABEL DEVISED A PLAN

- A. Naboth Was Falsely Accused and Stoned
- B. Ahab Let the Injustice Happen
- C. God Knows the Enemy Will Try to Steal, Kill, and Destroy

IV. GOD REVEALED THE TRUTH TO ELIJAH

- A. Nothing Is Hidden from the Lord
- B. We Must Seek to Please the Lord

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The only survivor of a shipwreck was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed fervently for God to rescue him. Every day he scanned the horizon for help, but no hope was in sight. Exhausted from the effort, he finally resigned himself to living out his life on the island all alone.

Eventually he managed to build a little hut out of driftwood for protection from the elements and to store his few possessions. One day after scavenging for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. Just when he thought things could not possibly get any worse, they did. Suddenly everything he had was lost. He was stunned with grief and anger. "God, how could you do this to me?" he cried. He simply could not believe God would allow this to happen to him with all that had already gone wrong in his life.

Early the next day, however, he was awakened by the sound of a ship approaching the island. He could hear its foghorn blaring from beyond the coastline. Soon a small group of sailors

arrived in a rowboat. They had come to rescue him. “How did you know I was here?” the weary man asked the sailors. “We saw your smoke signal,” they replied.

It is easy for us to forget that God sees what we do not see. Our human eyesight is limited by barriers, walls, doors, and horizons. In our humanity we may forget God is not limited by what limits us. Regardless of how bad life gets at times, we need to remember that God sees it all and is working for our good beyond what we can see.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. GOD IS OMNISCIENT

It used to be that if we were assigned a research paper in school, we would go to the library and pull books off the shelf for research. We were limited only by the number of books available.

Today we simply search Google for a topic, and more resources are at our disposal than we could possibly ever read through. Computer technology and the internet have expanded our ability to acquire information and knowledge, almost beyond comprehension. Even at that, we are finite and are limited in what we actually know. The smartest among us still does not know everything there is to know.

But God is omniscient. There is nothing unknown to Him. He knows what Google knows and even more. Isaiah 40:13–14 states, “Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?” (NIV).

A. Knows All Things

Omniscience is defined as “the state of having total knowledge; the quality of knowing everything.” For God to truly be sovereign over His creation, He has to be all knowing. The Bible tells us His knowledge is so vast, He even knows the minutest details, like the number of hairs on your head or every time a sparrow falls to the ground. No detail is so small that God does not know it. No knowledge or thought is so deep that it is beyond Him.

Psalms 139:15–16 declares to us just how omniscient God is when it comes to our person: “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (ESV). Can you imagine that? Before you were even formed, God knew the design of the days that would be in your future. We make our plans and think we know what we are going to do or what is going to happen. But really, only God knows with certainty what tomorrow holds.

» ***Does the fact that God knows everything bring you fear or bring you comfort? Explain.***

B. His Knowledge Should Bring Us Comfort

Realizing God knows everything should be the source of security and comfort for us. The foundation of our faith is based on the facts that God does not change and that God knows everything. The reason you can trust Him is because He knows everything. According to Hebrews 4:13, nothing is hidden from God: “Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.”

While for some this would be a reason to tremble in fear, to those who are born again and are faithfully serving Him, it is a comfort. Just to know God sees everything, no matter how hidden it is to the eyes of man, means God is aware at all times of what is happening to each of us. His knowledge of what we do not know means He has answers and solutions that we will never find on our own.

II. NABOTH HAD A VINEYARD

I Kings 21:1–13 tells of a man named Naboth who owned a vineyard. Owning land meant a certain amount of security for the person and the person’s family. A vineyard in that day would have been of great value due to the demand for wine for both common people as well as the military. Great value would be placed on such a piece of land, not only for what it produced presently, but also for what it would provide in the future.

» *Is there something you own that gives you a certain sense of security because you own it?*

A. An Inheritance from His Fathers

In ancient times many people did not own land but would farm land and sell whatever was produced on the land. Considering that the majority of people were not wealthy and had limited means, if a man owned property, he would be considered much better off than the man who merely farmed the land of someone else.

In this case, Naboth had inherited the vineyard. This means he understood the worth and the price that had been paid for it by his forefathers. Not only was there value in the land itself, but it would also have had significant emotional value to him and his family. The vineyard was not something to treat casually or sell off just to make life easier.

» *What things have you inherited that have great value to you?*

B. Ahab Wanted Naboth’s Vineyard

God is a merciful God. Ahab should have known this better than most. In I Kings 20 God extended mercy to Ahab during a time when it seemed Ahab would be defeated by Ben-hadad, king of Syria. The Lord told Ahab that victory would be his in spite of how much it looked like things would not go his way.

After God brought His word to pass, evidently something changed inside of Ahab. Instead of being thankful for what God had preserved, Ahab began to selfishly desire

the vineyard of Naboth, which was located next to the palace. Ahab wanted to turn it into a vegetable garden instead of a vineyard.

He offered Naboth a certain price, which Naboth refused. Instead of simply accepting no as an answer, Ahab became despondent and depressed. He should have been content with what he already had, but his greed caused him to be consumed with what he did not have.

C. God Knows the Enemy Wants to Take What We Have Been Given

We need to remember that God sees all. He knows we have an adversary who is roaming about, seeking whom he may devour. Our enemy not only wants to devour us, but he wants to devour any good thing God brings into our lives.

The blessings of life that we have, our walk with God, and our families are all precious and valuable. Many of these blessings are a part of our spiritual inheritance. The devil would like nothing better than to bargain them away from us. And if we are not willing to make a bargain, he will do everything he can to destroy us. God sees everything and knows this about our enemy. Nothing is hidden from God, even the plans of our enemy.

III. JEZEBEL DEvised A PLAN

When Ahab returned home, he was distraught, refused to eat, and spent most of his time in bed with his face turned toward the wall. Jezebel noticed this and asked him, “Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread?” (I Kings 21:5).

A. Naboth Was Falsely Accused and Stoned

Ahab was quick to tell her of Naboth’s refusal to sell the vineyard. Being the evil person she was, Jezebel took it upon herself to devise a plan to kill Naboth and give the vineyard to Ahab. She instructed Ahab to get up and cheer up. She told him she would take care of everything.

Her plan involved writing devious letters and signing Ahab’s name to them. The plot was carefully laid out to call an assembly and have Naboth accused of blasphemy. The tragic result was he was carried outside of the city and stoned to death.

» *Have you ever been unjustly accused of something? How did you feel?*

B. Ahab Let the Injustice Happen

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the story is that Ahab silently sat back and let a good man be put to death in order to fulfill his own selfish desires. No doubt Ahab knew that what was being done was wrong. He also knew God had blessed him by giving him victory over his enemies. Yet he overrode all of that and allowed an injustice to occur.

C. God Knows the Enemy Will Try to Steal, Kill, and Destroy

Jesus said in John 10:10, “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.” God is ever aware that the enemy of our souls will do anything he can to keep us from succeeding at living for God.

The enemy may approach us with kindness, offering to bargain with us for what is valuable. He may even offer a high premium for us to sell out. The Lord knows the struggle the flesh has with temptation. His response to the temptation of the devil in the wilderness is still the best approach we can take. Our response should be to appeal to the Word of God and say, “It is written.”

II Corinthians 2:11 tells us we are not ignorant of the devices of the enemy. Through the leading of the Spirit, God makes us aware of the approach of the enemy in our lives. Naboth was a great example of standing his ground and not yielding to the devices of the enemy when tempted.

IV. GOD REVEALED THE TRUTH TO ELIJAH

Unknown to Naboth, God would reveal all of this to the prophet Elijah. Just because Naboth had lost his life did not mean God would turn a blind eye to what Ahab and Jezebel had done.

The Lord revealed to Elijah what Ahab had done and where Elijah could find Ahab—in Naboth’s vineyard enjoying the spoils of his evil actions. A swift and terrible judgment was pronounced by the man of God to Ahab. Elijah told Ahab that because of the great evil he had done, he would lose his prosperity and dogs would lick up his blood in the same place where they licked the blood of Naboth after his stoning.

A. Nothing Is Hidden from the Lord

Ahab and Jezebel failed to realize that nothing is hidden from the Lord. I Corinthians 4:5 declares, “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.” In other words, God sees all; nothing is hidden from Him. He will bring out in the light those things that were formed against us in the darkness. Once they are exposed, He will execute judgment on them.

Regardless of what we have gone through, God has not turned a blind eye toward us. He sees everything. The pain and suffering we endure has not slipped by Him unnoticed. God is ever aware and will not let such things go unpunished.

» *Can you think of a situation where you observed someone doing evil while acting as if God was not watching?*

B. We Must Seek to Please the Lord

Our desire must be to please the Lord. Naboth took no thought for the wealth that could have been gained by selling the vineyard. Rather, he was more concerned with what was pleasing to the Lord. God not only sees the evil acts of our enemy, He also

sees the righteous acts of our own hearts. While the enemy will be judged for his evil, we will be blessed for our righteousness.

Proverbs 16:8 tells us, “Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right.” Naboth was more content with a vineyard that produced what it did and having a righteous heart than he ever would have been by selling out just for money.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

In Psalm 139:7 the psalmist asked the questions, “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?” In many ways such questions are rhetorical. The psalmist knew there was nowhere he could go where God would not see him.

The same is true for us today. God sees all. Nothing is hidden from Him. To the sinner this could be a frightening proposition. But to the faithful it is one of the greatest comforts we can know in this life. The knowledge that God watches over everything that happens to us should bring us great confidence in Him.

There will be times when others will treat us unjustly. It will hurt and could cause us to turn aside from trusting God. However, the story of Naboth should be an encouragement to us that God will not allow evil to go unnoticed or unpunished. He is faithful to those who are faithful to Him.

Focus on Following

FOCUS THOUGHT

No matter the distractions, we must choose to focus on following the Lord.

»» FOCUS VERSE

II Kings 2:2

And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Beth-el. And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Beth-el.

»» LESSON TEXT

II Kings 2:1–4; 11–15

1 And it came to pass, when the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal.

2 And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Beth-el. And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Beth-el.

3 And the sons of the prophets that were at Beth-el came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace.

4 And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho.

.....

11 And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

12 And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces.

13 He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan;

14 And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over.

15 And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him.

BE THE AFTERSHOCK

The first rattling of an earthquake is referred to as the mainshock. However, once the initial shaking subsides, there are usually aftershocks. Aftershocks are caused by the readjusting of the plates that were shifted during the mainshock. The bigger the earthquake, the more aftershocks and the longer they can last. The earthquake of 1906 in San Francisco is reported to have had aftershocks that affected Southern California, Nevada, Oregon, and Arizona.

When an earthquake happens, there is no question of whether there will be aftershocks; they always follow. There are safety protocols and guidelines on how to prepare for earthquakes and their aftershocks, but scientists have not discovered any method to stop them. Once an earthquake begins, there is no stopping what will follow.

The earthquake makes its mark, and the aftershock follows in its path. Aftershocks are so consistent that scientists can determine a range in which they will occur. There is not a question of if, but when.

As disciples of Christ, what would happen if we were to become the true aftershock of Jesus? If we follow Him consistently, others will have no doubt of who Jesus is, and what He does will naturally flow through us. We can be His aftershock, following His lead and helping those He has touched to adjust to a new life in Him.

OUTLINE

I. THE LORD SENT ELIJAH SEVERAL PLACES

- A. Elijah Told Elisha to Stop Following
- B. The Lord Wants to Know If We Will Continue to Follow Him

II. SONS OF THE PROPHETS BROUGHT DISTRACTION

- A. Elisha Told the Distractions to Be Quiet and He Kept Following
- B. We Must Choose to Focus, Despite the Distractions

III. ELIJAH PERMITTED ELISHA TO MAKE A LAST REQUEST

- A. A Double Portion
- B. God Honors the Prayers of Those Who Follow Him

IV. ELIJAH WAS TAKEN AWAY IN A FIERY CHARIOT

- A. Elisha Kept His Eyes on the Mantle
- B. Where Is the Lord God of Elijah?
- C. God's Power Follows Those Who Follow Him

V. NO MATTER THE DISTRACTIONS, WE MUST FOCUS ON FOLLOWING THE LORD

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In 2015, reports show that 3,477 people were killed and an estimated additional 391,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers; 10 percent of fatal crashes, 15 percent of injury crashes, and 14 percent of all police-reported traffic crashes were reported as being affected by distractions; 9 percent of all drivers fifteen to nineteen years old involved in fatal crashes were distracted at the time of the crashes (this age group has the largest proportion of distracted drivers at the time of fatal crashes); 551 non-occupants (pedestrians, bicyclists, and others) were killed in distraction-affected crashes (<https://www.enddd.org>). In each year following, these statistics have increased.

Distracted driving comes in three different forms: (1) Cognitive distraction or mental distraction is when a driver's mind is not focused on driving. Talking to another passenger or being preoccupied with personal, family, or work-related issues are some examples. Even listening to a favorite podcast or radio station can put a driver at risk; the audio can take the

focus away from driving and the overall surroundings. (2) Visual distraction occurs when a driver looks at anything other than the road ahead. Even checking a child's seat belt while driving is visually distracting. Electronic devices for the car, such as GPS devices and portable DVDs or digital entertainment systems, also distract drivers. (3) Manual distraction happens when a driver takes one or both hands off the wheel for any reason. Some common examples include eating and drinking in the car, adjusting the GPS, or trying to get something from a purse, wallet, or briefcase.

The highway of life is also filled with distractions that take our focus off following the Lord. It is easy to be turned aside by the little things of life and to lose focus on what really matters. We need to always remember that those momentary glances at things that detract from following God could prove to be spiritually fatal.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE LORD SENT ELIJAH SEVERAL PLACES

The story of Elisha following Elijah provides us insight into what it means to remain focused on the journey. After choosing to follow Elijah, Elisha returned home and said some final goodbyes to life as he had known it. He would be leaving behind his mother and father and the security of a future already laid out for him.

Elisha had no way of knowing that the journey with Elijah would take many twists and turns. Perhaps Elisha thought the anointing would simply be his because he had accepted the mantle. He may not have realized there would be a long season of simply following, in order to receive all God had for him.

The two left Gilgal together. Soon after, Elijah turned to Elisha and told him the Lord was sending Elijah to Bethel. From Bethel he would be instructed to go on to Jericho. The stay in Jericho would be brief as the Lord further instructed Elijah to travel to Jordan. Elisha was finding out that following was much more involved and strenuous than he perhaps had first thought.

A. Elijah Told Elisha to Stop Following

At each point along the journey, Elijah turned to Elisha and told him to remain in the place he found himself presently. Elijah told Elisha to stay in Gilgal, then in Bethel, and then in Jericho. Each destination brought a straightforward instruction to “stay.”

No doubt it would have been somewhat discouraging and disheartening to Elisha to be told to quit following, time and time again. After all, he had accepted the mantle and wanted to follow the prophet of God. He had left all he had ever known, and following after Elijah had become everything to him. And yet Elisha continued to follow.

» ***Why do you think Elijah kept offering to let Elisha stay behind?***

B. The Lord Wants to Know If We Will Continue to Follow Him

In living for God, the journey is not always as easy as we expect. Many times we feel a major hurdle or stop sign has been thrown into our pathway. Other times life seems

to be going along fine, and we anticipate great things happening. Then, suddenly, distractions appear that could easily take our focus off the Lord.

The Lord wants to know if we will continue to follow Him. He knows how easily we can be distracted from what really matters. Several times in Scripture the Lord tested people's commitment to see whether they would remain faithful followers. Moses had to lead Israel through the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. Abraham had to follow God to the top of Mount Moriah when it would have been easier not to go. Simon Peter had to follow Jesus by walking on a stormy sea. When many others had ceased following Jesus, He asked the disciples, "Will you also go away?"

God knows it is easy to follow Him when He is answering our prayers and saying "yes" to our requests. But there will be times when it seems as if everything in life has turned upside down, and the journey could come to a standstill. In those times God finds out just how committed we are to following Him.

» *Can you recall a time when it seemed as if it would be easier to just stop instead of continuing to follow the Lord? Explain.*

II. SONS OF THE PROPHETS BROUGHT DISTRACTION

Every day we are surrounded by noise—the noise of traffic and workplaces, the noise of family and homelife, and even the noise that comes with being at church. Among the noise are voices. Voices are constantly vying for our attention and seeking influence in our lives.

The challenge is to know which voices to listen to and which ones are merely distractions. Elisha was surrounded by the noises of his day as well as the voices of the sons of the prophets. It would seem they were well-intentioned voices. Each stop on the journey brought an audience of these men before Elisha.

Quite honestly, they were telling him the truth. But to Elisha they were just stating the obvious, telling him things he already knew would happen. In so doing they became a distraction that could have caused him to lose focus.

A. Elisha Told the Distractions to Be Quiet and He Kept Following

How would Elisha respond? What would he do with the distractions that kept showing up at every place he went following Elijah? Perhaps Elisha would give in to the voices and become discouraged after realizing the elder prophet would indeed be taken from him.

Better yet, maybe Elisha should stop and reason with the sons of the prophets and try to explain why he was doing what he was doing. Maybe he should just agree with them and convince himself that all this following was foolishness. After all, he had followed the prophet all over the world and back again.

Elisha chose the wisest response of all. He refused to allow the distractions to change his direction. Although the voices were speaking truth, Elisha knew if he gave

in to them, he would quickly lose his way. By speaking to the voices and silencing them, Elisha allowed his focus to remain steadfastly on Elijah.

B. We Must Choose to Focus, Despite the Distractions

Every distraction requires a decision. It is totally up to us what we will do when distractions come. We can yield to them and lose sight of where God is taking us, or we can refuse to allow them to turn us aside from the journey. These are decisions only we can make.

However, without a made-up mind willing to stay focused on God, it is nearly impossible to faithfully follow Him. At times we will have to take authority over the distractions in order to be successful. II Corinthians 10:5 gives some great advice concerning this: “Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” In other words, we must control our thoughts to avoid being distracted. The best solution for avoiding distractions is bringing every thought captive to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and His purpose in our lives.

» ***What are some practical things you can do to help avoid distractions?***

III. ELIJAH PERMITTED ELISHA TO MAKE A LAST REQUEST

Elijah knew the time for his departure was near. He had also seen Elisha’s faithfulness in following him. It was then Elijah made an incredible offer to Elisha, an offer that almost seemed too good to be true. Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee” (II Kings 2:9).

Can you imagine? It was as if Elisha had received a blank check from the great prophet Elijah. Elisha could ask for anything his heart desired. The only limitation would be what his imagination could dream up.

A. A Double Portion

Interestingly, Elisha did not ask for anything to make his life easier. He did not request financial blessings or material things. Neither did he look for anything to assure his future would be one of comfort. Instead he replied, “I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me” (II Kings 2:9).

Talk about reaching for the stars! Of all the things Elisha could have asked for, he asked for what most people would have never even considered. But his heart was on the things of God. Elisha knew just how much the miraculous ministry of Elijah had impacted God’s people. More than anything he wanted a life that would be even more impacting.

His concern was not for the things of this world. He was not worried right then about food, shelter, or clothing. His heart was on the kingdom of God.

B. God Honors the Prayers of Those Who Follow Him

Jesus told His followers in Matthew 6:33, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” He was not ignoring the needs of daily life. He was impressing upon them that it was more important to stay focused on the things of the Kingdom than to become distracted by the things of this world. And just as He did with Elisha, the Lord will honor those who do not become distracted, but keep Him first in their lives.

Elijah told Elisha that he had asked a hard thing. But it was not an impossible request. Elijah then went on to say Elisha’s request would be honored if he did not get distracted, but he kept his eyes on Elijah until he was taken up to the Lord. Elijah wanted Elisha to realize following never really ends. Elisha would have to keep looking diligently to receive the blessing God wanted to give him.

IV. ELIJAH WAS TAKEN AWAY IN A FIERY CHARIOT

Elisha had no promise of just how long he would need to keep following. For all he knew, it would be years before Elijah was taken away from him. Elisha made up in his mind that regardless of how long it would be, he would be right on Elijah’s heels every day.

While continuing the journey and the conversation, out of the heavens appeared a chariot of fire being pulled by horses of fire. The moment had finally arrived in a rather dramatic way.

A. Elisha Kept His Eyes on the Mantle

The chariot separated Elijah from Elisha, but Elisha kept his eyes on his mentor. The mantle Elijah cast upon Elisha on that monumental day of his calling (I Kings 19:19) never left his sight. Though many things came his way and could have distracted him, Elisha never wavered. He ignored the temptation to simply give up, and he ignored the voices of the sons of the prophets. And he did not allow the flaming chariot and horses to cause him to lose focus.

» ***What are some of the distractions you have seen turn people away from God?***

B. Where Is the Lord God of Elijah?

Elisha watched as the mantle fell to the ground. Immediately he grabbed it up in his arms and held it to his chest. He did not question where Elijah had gone. He was not left to wonder what had just happened. He knew of a certainty that this was the moment for which he had been faithfully following.

He ran to the bank of the Jordan River and cried out to the heavens, “Where is the LORD God of Elijah?” (II Kings 2:14). His appeal was no longer to Elijah; it was now to God. The mantle was resting squarely on his shoulders, and he was about to prove that the same God who had been with Elijah would also be with him.

C. God's Power Follows Those Who Follow Him

Taking an action born of great faith, Elisha struck the waters of the Jordan with the mantle that was now his. He fully expected God to respond because he knew God's power will always follow them that believe. For many long days and nights, Elisha had been faithful. He had every right to believe God would part the waters.

God honors those who faithfully follow Him. In Mark 16:17–18 Jesus told the people who had gathered around Him, “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” Immediately after, Jesus was received up into Heaven in much the same way Elijah had been taken.

» *In what ways does God honor those who are faithful?*

V. NO MATTER THE DISTRACTIONS, WE MUST FOCUS ON FOLLOWING THE LORD

Starting the journey to live for the Lord is often the easiest part. The hardest part is staying faithful during the long, weary days of life. Distractions that come our way can make it difficult to continue to follow. But never forget what James declared, “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him” (James 1:12). Those who endure the temptation to be distracted will be blessed. God will reward them. For Elisha the blessing was the mantle of the prophet who went on before him. For us, if we are faithful and avoid distractions, it will be an eternal crown of life.

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

It is easy to follow the Lord when the road is paved and the answers are all “yes.” But faithful following is not proven by being there when things are going our way. Faithful following is proven by being there when everything and everyone around is telling us to stop.

Just as Elisha had to determine that nothing would stop him from following Elijah, we must determine that nothing will stop us from following the Lord. Just like Elisha, we must silence the distractions in our lives in order to keep our eyes and ears on the Lord. We cannot afford to allow the distractions to become our primary focus.

Distracted drivers cause accidents and fatalities. Distracted spiritual drivers cause spiritual accidents and even spiritual fatalities. It is time to remove things that catch our eyes and divert our attention and our actions from focusing on God. Our focus needs to be on seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness. He will take care of everything else.

Miraculous Multiplication

FOCUS THOUGHT

God can take what we have and miraculously multiply it to bless us.

➤➤ FOCUS VERSE

II Kings 4:7

Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest.

➤➤ LESSON TEXT

II Kings 4:1-7

1 Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets unto Elisha, saying, Thy servant my husband is dead, and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the LORD: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.

2 And Elisha said unto her, What shall I do for thee? tell me, what hast thou in the house? And she said, Thine handmaid hath not any thing in the house, save a pot of oil.

3 Then he said, Go, borrow thee vessels abroad of all thy neighbours, even empty vessels; borrow not a few.

4 And when thou art come in, thou shalt shut the door upon thee and upon thy sons, and shalt pour out into all those vessels, and thou shalt set aside that which is full.

5 So she went from him, and shut the door upon her and upon her sons, who brought the vessels to her; and she poured out.

6 And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed.

7 Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest.

CULTURE CONNECTION

MIRACULOUS HARVEST

It was time for harvest, but the rain came in torrents for an entire month. Kendall and LaVonne looked out at their fields of soybeans. Two hundred acres were completely under water and would be a total loss. Other fields were partially under water, and as the water drained, lines appeared high on the plants where the water had stayed for two weeks. This could bankrupt the entire farm.

Farms for miles around were suffering the same damage. Plants were 50 percent to 100 percent mold in the pods, which meant no one would buy them. Kendall and LaVonne had prayed and begged God to stop the rain, but it seemed there was no response. Now they had to harvest beans they knew would be worthless. Why had God not stopped the storm?

They soberly harvested the beans and sent them to the grain elevator to be evaluated. The phone rang, and Kendall braced for the news. The voice on the other end said, “Where did you get these beans? They only have 3 percent to 5 percent damage. Send us all you’ve got.”

Other than the two hundred acres that were a total loss, all their other fields brought in a bumper crop and sold for more money than most other years.

While some of the farms did go bankrupt and others struggled terribly, God multiplied Kendall and LaVonne’s crop miraculously. He did not stop the storm, but He used what they had and multiplied it in spite of the storm.

OUTLINE

I. THE WIDOW WAS LEFT WITH INSURMOUNTABLE DEBT

- A. Creditors Were Coming
- B. The Threat of Losing Her Sons
- C. At Times We Will Face Difficult Challenges

II. THE WIDOW CRIED OUT TO ELISHA

- A. What Do You Have in Your House?
- B. God Will Always Start with What We Have in the House

III. BORROWED VESSELS

- A. They Filled All the Vessels
- B. The Widow Paid Her Debts
- C. God Will Multiply What We Have in the House

IV. GOD CAN USE WHATEVER WE HAVE

- A. What You Have Is Enough
- B. Trust God to Multiply and Bless

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The woman in II Kings 4:1 is identified as one of the “wives of the sons of the prophets.” She came to Elisha, apparently in great distress: “Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the LORD: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.”

The prophet Elisha responded, “Tell me, what hast thou in the house?” (II Kings 4:2). In effect the prophet was telling the widow that she already possessed the resources to meet the emergency.

All crises are not equal. Every problem needs evaluating, and the answer to everything starts from where we are. When Elisha asked what she had in her house, the woman immediately answered, “Not any thing.” Then she added, “Save a pot of oil” (literally, “except for an anointing of oil”). Elisha took this one small hint of a solution—one anointing of oil—and proceeded from there.

I. THE WIDOW WAS LEFT WITH INSURMOUNTABLE DEBT

Who was this widow, and who was her deceased husband? Scripture explains that the husband was a member of the “sons of the prophets.” The narrative contains several references to these groups located at various places, including Bethel (II Kings 2:3); Jericho (2:5); and Gilgal (4:38). Each group was led by the same prophet, and when he died (or was taken, as with Elijah), another guild member took his place (as did Elisha). These groups had their roots as far back as the time of Samuel, who wrote about a “company of prophets” (I Samuel 10:5, 10; 19:20), and were apparently equivalent to modern-day Bible colleges where young adults aspiring to ministry are taught and mentored by more experienced ministers.

The narrative in II Kings seems to indicate some of these men had homes, spouses, and children. Although the deceased husband is not named in the biblical text, at least two historical sources identify him as the Obadiah of I Kings 18:3–16. Josephus, a Jewish historian, stated that this Obadiah was one of King Ahab’s stewards who borrowed money to buy food for the prophets, which may explain why his widow went to Elisha with the problem. She approached Elisha with language that seems to imply he had some accountability for the debt: “Thy servant is dead, and you know he did fear the Lord” (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*).

The Targum, an Aramaic interpretive rendering of Hebrew Scriptures, also identifies the deceased husband as the Obadiah mentioned in I Kings 18:3–16. There is scholarly debate about these identifiers, as Scripture mentions at least twelve men named Obadiah (Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of the Bible*).

A. Creditors Were Coming

While we are not certain whose wife the widow had been, we are certain that she was the wife of a prophet who had died, leaving her strapped with debt. She sold everything of value and still lacked enough to pay the creditors. When she came to Elisha with the problem, he did not offer immediate help. Instead, he wanted to determine if the widow had any available resources.

B. The Threat of Losing Her Sons

All debt is a wager that all conditions will remain constant; therefore, all debt carries a hidden risk, because situations are subject to change at any moment. The devil is a merciless creditor; he will not settle for one son if he can get two.

The love of money smothers mercy and propagates cruelty. The creditors in our story were demanding the remaining balance of the debt be paid by the involuntary servitude of the widow’s sons. What a dilemma! Money borrowed during better financial times, however righteous the reason, became an impossible responsibility to meet. The parents had no idea it would come to this.

This was all legal under Jewish law, but legality is often different than morality. Men could borrow on their personal credit, and primary security for debt was first considered to be their own persons—the value of their labor and that of their dependents.

Hebrew law stipulated two things: (1) the service rendered could not be severe (Leviticus 25:43, 46) and (2) the time of service was limited until the next year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:40). There is nothing in our narrative to indicate the distance to the year of Jubilee, but the creditor apparently had been unable to enforce the law against the boys' father before he died, and now the law was on the creditor's side.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible indicates the Hebrew word *ārubbâh* ("surety," Proverbs 17:18) means "to take in pledge, in the sense of bargain or exchange; something given as security—a bondsman." *Nâshak* ("usury," Deuteronomy 23:19) was also used in financial situations. It means "to strike with a sting (as a serpent); to oppress with interest on a loan; to take a bite," which is a fitting description because debt sometimes comes back to "bite" us.

» ***What are some of the consequences of debt? How can this affect us spiritually?***

C. At Times We Will Face Difficult Challenges

To calm the widow's desperation, Elisha simply asked a question that prefaced a course of action: "What do you have in the house?" In other words, he was suggesting a resource evaluation.

Panic in the face of a dilemma can skew the results of resource evaluation. *Always* and *never* (as in "it will never work out" or "everything always goes wrong") are not conducive to positive solutions. Most often we want and expect instantaneous help from the Lord from resources other than our own, and we will suggest several different solutions. How much better it is to survey our resources: What do we have to work with? Perhaps we already have in our possession the elements of our own deliverance.

The man in our story may have left his wife and sons deep in debt, but he left them something far more valuable than gold: a testimony and a legacy that he feared God and was faithful. Poverty of things can be endured if one has an anointing of oil.

The narrative of the desperate widow reveals to us that the Lord helps unnamed, ordinary, everyday people. The Bible documents numerous stories of God's deliverance of ordinary people. It shows them in their homes, in their businesses, in their joy, in their grief, at their marriage feasts, and at their funerals.

We learn lessons, both positive and negative, from kings and prophets. We also learn lessons, both positive and negative, from unidentified people like the widow in today's story. To us, she may look like a nobody, but to God, she was somebody. And her only resource was a teaspoonful of oil.

There was no mineral oil or petroleum oil in Bible times, but there was olive oil. The olives were picked before they were ripe and then pressed by foot (Micah 6:15), pestle and mortar (Exodus 27:20; 29:40), or by a stone press (Joel 2:24). One tree could

yield up to a half ton of oil, which was then used for commerce, light, anointing rituals and consecrations, tithing, and, of course, cooking. Oil was not to be used for a sin offering (Leviticus 5:11), nor was it to be used as a jealousy offering (Numbers 5:15).

In the Scriptures, oil was a universal spiritual type or symbol of the Holy Spirit and was inextricably ingrained in the culture of biblical times.

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- » *Discuss the significance of oil in a variety of biblical events (e.g., the Tabernacle, the anointing of kings and prophets, and New Testament anointings [James 5:14–15]).*
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II. THE WIDOW CRIED OUT TO ELISHA

A. What Do You Have in Your House?

A pot of oil was not much. It may have been a very small pot, and it may not have been full—it was only an “anointing” of oil. Her resources were severely limited, surely not enough to settle an insurmountable debt to save her sons from slavery. But we already know what God can do with a small amount of oil: Elijah and his benefactor were sustained throughout a famine with a small cruse of oil and a handful of meal (I Kings 17), and Elisha in today’s story saved the widow’s sons from slavery with even less oil. In the New Testament, Jesus miraculously multiplied five common barley loaves and two fishes. In none of these and other miraculous instances did the Lord change the substance He was multiplying; He merely replicated the original common substance into miraculous amounts. (See Matthew 14:13–21; 15:32–39.)

“Sister Obadiah” was willing to give all she had. She also was willing to obey, despite the doubts she may have had about the seemingly foolish command to gather empty pots, pans, jars, and jugs from the neighbors. Not only was she quick to seek godly counsel, but also she was quick to obey godly advice.

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- » *Have you had an experience in your own life when limited resources lasted far beyond what would have been expected?*
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B. God Will Always Start with What We Have in the House

The Lord can multiply our ordinary commonalities into extraordinary results if we willingly put our resources into His miraculous, multiplying hands. Consider the staff in the hands of Moses, the small amount of blood on the doorposts in Egypt, a small boy with five loaves and two fish, and Paul the apostle who considered himself the least of all his peers.

III. BORROWED VESSELS

A. They Filled All the Vessels

After determining the widow had something to work with, Elisha next charged her with a curious task: “Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors—empty vessels; do not gather just a few” (II Kings 4:3, NKJV). Elisha did not explain

how the miracle was going to be performed, so the exercise was an act of faith. The widow vigorously collected her neighbors' empty vessels—from “all” her neighbors, and not “just a few” vessels. Faith's endeavors should be pursued to utmost levels.

To some, it would make more sense for the widow to borrow full vessels, but the command was to borrow *empty* vessels and not *just a few*. The Lord will not get us out of debt by obligating us to more debt.

When the widow's house was full of empty, borrowed vessels, she “shut the door upon her and upon her sons” (II Kings 4:5). What she was about to do was not for public display. (Every widow in the neighborhood would have formed a double line in front of Elisha's door if they had witnessed the miracle.) The widow did not yet know it, but the amount of oil she received would be determined by two things: how many neighbors she had visited and how many empty vessels she had compelled them to loan her. The more neighbors she visited, the more vessels she accumulated. The more vessels she accumulated, the more oil she could pour out. The more oil she could pour out, the more money she could gain to pay off the debt, thus saving her sons from the creditors.

We can imagine the scene: empty pots, pans, jars, and jugs sitting on every surface—tables, benches, chairs, counters, and in the sink. Even the water pot was emptied out and waiting. The widow looked at the empty vessels and then at her teaspoonful of oil in the cruse; she set her doubt aside, took a deep breath, and started to pour.

The first kettle was the hardest. She tipped the little cruse of oil on its side above the kettle, and the oil began to flow—and kept on flowing. Once the first vessel was full, her faith began to build. She was afraid to tip up the little cruse lest the oil stop flowing, so her sons kept changing the containers while she held the miraculous cruse of oil on its side.

“Hurry,” she admonished her son, “bring another empty vessel.”

He replied, “There are no more empty vessels,” and before she could react, the oil stopped—not because the oil ran out, but because the empty vessels ran out. The oil was good to the last drop. No doubt the widow at some point wished she had gone to a few more houses and begged for just a few more empty vessels. God's miraculous multiplication could have filled many more.

B. The Widow Paid Her Debts

This story ends on a positive note: the widow sold the oil, paid the debt, saved her sons from bondage, and lived day to day on the rest. It is interesting that she did not consider the abundance of oil was hers to do with as she liked; instead, she went to Elisha, told him what had happened, and obeyed his advice. We should not feel possessive of God's blessings. The men and women of God in our lives can advise us of what the Scriptures teach about good stewardship of our blessings.

C. God Will Multiply What We Have in the House

The widow's story teaches us what to do in a crisis: seek godly counsel and obey godly advice; use what resources we already have, no matter how small they may seem, and keep the faith. The Lord has unlimited resources; our task is to provide a place for His miraculous multiplication to work. Our Savior's miraculous infilling has kept the creditor from our door, delivered our children from bondage, and supplied enough left over to live day to day until Jesus comes.

» *Jesus paid a debt He did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay. Discuss how this well-known adage pertains to today's lesson.*

IV. GOD CAN USE WHATEVER WE HAVE

A. What You Have Is Enough

God's miraculous multiplication is equal to any need. The problem might be our lack of providing a place for Him to work. What if the widow had collected only five empty vessels? Or what if she had collected twice as many? The more empty the situation, the more space the Lord has to work.

B. Trust God to Multiply and Bless

Look at Creation: all was "without form, and void" (Genesis 1:2). But when ultimate creativity met ultimate potential, ultimate change took place. The Creator came in contact with the ultimate empty place in which to create. The more empty space we give God to work His miraculous multiplication, the more creative He can be with His solutions. Yet we tend to give God ideas and supply Him with multiple solutions as to how He could cleverly (we think) solve our dilemmas. This story of a weeping widow suggests that we should apply what oil we have to faith and let the Lord handle the "how to" part. If God's power is unlimited, why would we want to limit Him to our ideas of how He should answer the dilemma?

» *How can we limit God?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Is the widow's dilemma just another positive Old Testament narrative, or are there some lessons we can apply to our contemporary dilemmas? Situations sometimes develop that bring overwhelming pressure to our hearts and minds. Life sometimes seems more than we can bear, and we do not know what to do. Consider discussing the predicament with a godly counselor for possible solutions. Consider what resources you might already possess and pray about it. God may use what you already have to solve your problem, no matter how insignificant your resources may seem to you. Listen to godly wisdom and obey with faith and purpose. Trust that God will supply until all the potential for blessing is filled up . . . and do not forget to return what you borrowed.

A Humbled Leper

FOCUS THOUGHT

God delivers those who humble themselves.

FOCUS VERSES

II Kings 5:13–14

And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean? Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

LESSON TEXT

II Kings 5:9–14

9 So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha.

10 And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.

11 But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.

12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.

13 And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?

14 Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

A HUMBLE PRISON PRAYER

In December of 1999, while in the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, Ron repented of his sins and was filled with the Holy Ghost.

Over time he took correspondence Bible school courses to become a minister, and he studied some law to try and get his conviction overturned. He had a stellar reputation inside the prison and earned the trust of the warden and guards. He was known for his ministry and the quality work he did all over the prison campus. Ron had family, friends, pastors, and business owners write letters to the governor. He did everything in his power to gain his release. In all of that, every door closed. Ron exhausted himself trying to find a way to be released, but nothing worked.

After eighteen years Ron finally realized that even though he was doing his best to live a life of integrity and obey the Word of God, pride still had a foothold. It took time and was one of the hardest things he had ever done, but he was finally able to pray, “God, I am guilty of my crimes, and I deserve to be here. Lord, I want You to decide what is best for me. If You decide it is best for me to stay in prison for the rest of my life, then I am OK with that.”

After that humble prayer, everything began to change. Over the next two years, doors began to open, and events happened that were unheard of in Parchman. All of this led to his miraculous release, at his first parole hearing.

Genuine humility touches the heart of God, allows our hearts to connect to His, and provides the opportunity for the miraculous.

»» OUTLINE

I. NAAMAN

- A. A Commander of the Army Who Had Leprosy
- B. Diseases of the Body and Soul Touch All Types of People

II. A SERVANT GIRL FROM ISRAEL

- A. A Prophet Who Could Heal Him
- B. We Must Testify to Others about God’s Power

III. WASH IN THE JORDAN

- A. Naaman Was Offended and Went Away Angry
- B. His Servants Convinced Him to Obey the Prophet
- C. We Must Listen to Those Who Encourage Us to Do the Right Thing

IV. NAAMAN HUMBLING HIMSELF

- A. He Was Made Clean
- B. He Testified That the Lord Is God
- C. God Delivers Those Who Humble Themselves

»» CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The entire narrative of Naaman highlights the role of servants. The story begins with Naaman, a servant of the king of Syria, being saved from his horrific diagnosis by a servant girl. His anger almost talked him out of a miracle, but his servants talked him into listening to the prophet. After his healing Naaman returned to Elisha and in humility identified himself as Elisha’s servant. The narrative comes to an end as one of Elisha’s servants was cursed with the disease of Naaman because of his greediness. Humbling ourselves is one of the hardest things to do. Becoming a servant of God will call us to interact with a diverse faith community. Being a servant of God will also call us to be vulnerable in this community. Admitting we have areas in our lives where we need help can be hard, but that admission allows the rest of the faith community to step up and provide care.

I. NAAMAN

A. A Commander of the Army Who Had Leprosy

Naaman was a Syrian military hero, and during this period of Israel's history, the Syrians were the greatest military threat to Israel. (See I Kings 20; 22; II Kings 6–7.) Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Syria. It was through his many battles, probably including those against Israel, that he received praise. In this narrative the fame and valor of Naaman was referred to four times to emphasize his distinction: he was the captain of the host, he was a great man before his master, he was of high renown because of the victories he had won, and he was a mighty man of valor (August H. Konkel, *NIV Application Commentary*). However, with all this praise, the author closed out with an anticlimactic “but he was a leper.” Most people would think Naaman had the ideal life. However, he found himself excluded from the “ideal life” because of his leprosy. While it is easy to look at someone else and wish for that life—because it seems that person has no problems—we do not know the struggles that person faces. Eventually we all come to understand that life is not perfect.

» *Have you ever struggled with envy? If so, how have you worked on overcoming this struggle?*

B. Diseases of the Body and Soul Touch All Types of People

Dr. Chris Thurman found that one of the lies Christians believe is “because I am a Christian, God will protect me from pain and suffering” (*The Lies We Believe*). Somewhere in our theology, the church has mistaken Christianity to mean a life free from pain, loss, hurt, and suffering. However, the church must understand that being a Christian does not mean life will be free from issues that face non-believers. If the church is not careful, unrealistic faith in God can turn into a source of bitterness and resentment when life begins to turn bad. A Christian's ultimate hope is not that everything will go fine here on Earth, but we have an eternal hope awaiting us in Heaven. Even Jesus Christ, who should have been free from all pain and hurt, was not sheltered from struggles while He walked here on Earth. The church must accept that exemption from hurt and pain does not come with the Christian walk.

The story of Naaman brings into focus hardships for both Jew and non-Jew. The disease-stricken Naaman caused hurt and pain for the Jewish servant girl when he dragged her from her homeland. And even though Naaman received his physical healing, there is no mention of the servant girl ever receiving her freedom.

II. A SERVANT GIRL FROM ISRAEL

A. A Prophet Who Could Heal Him

A young Jewish girl, having heard the horrific stories of Syria invading her own nation of Israel, was forced to become a servant of the leader of those invading

armies. While Scripture does not give us many details about her, we do see that she waited upon Naaman's wife. According to this young girl's upbringing, she was enslaved by a ritually unclean or defiled man (Leviticus 13–14), and he was under the judgment of God (II Kings 15:5; Numbers 12:1–15; II Samuel 3:28–29).

While this young girl was living a life she had never dreamed of living—inside she must have hoped that one day she would be restored to her family and people—she heard about a need within the house. Immediately she thought about the great prophet in Israel, Elisha. The prophet's reputation was widespread because of all God had done through him. He had parted the waters of Jordan (II Kings 2:14), healed the bitter waters (II Kings 2:21), called down the she bears on those who mocked him (II Kings 2:24), filled the valley with water (II Kings 3:17), deceived the Moabites into believing the water was blood (II Kings 3:22), performed the miracle of the vessels of oil (II Kings 4:4), prophesied that the Shunammite woman would have a son (II Kings 4:16), resurrected that Shunammite's son (II Kings 4:34), healed the gourds (II Kings 4:40–41), and performed the miracle of bread (II Kings 4:43). All these miracles were evidence of God's power, and this servant girl believed this same miracle power could work on Naaman. So she shared with Naaman's concerned wife about the prophet in Israel who could heal Naaman.

» *Why is it important to witness to others even while we are going through hard times?*

B. We Must Testify to Others about God's Power

The young servant girl was used to living in harsh environments. Her homeland was no longer a nation under God; the king of Israel had turned to Baal worship. Thus, coming under a household that did not worship the true God, was not necessarily something new. Still she did not let that become a hinderance to her lifestyle and witness.

God has always been a loving God. Naaman eventually learned this himself. The narrative of Naaman displays God's purpose originally spoken to Abraham: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). No matter what situation we find ourselves in, Christians are supposed to be a blessing to all who inhabit the Earth. No gender, ethnic, or social prohibition was placed on this promise. The author emphasized that all would be blessed. We cannot be part of the church if we think we can pick and choose to whom we will be a blessing. God's Word does not place limitations on whom He can touch.

The servant was willing to put her life on the line by telling her master that their gods were not the answer and the prophet in Israel was better and could bring the answer to Naaman's situation. She was not a well-known person of influence, yet she witnessed to Naaman. No matter who we are, our testimony to one individual could change the dynamics of revival around the world.

One amazing part of this narrative is that this girl witnessed to Naaman's wife. She did not witness to the one who was sick, but she knew if she testified, God would do

the rest. The testimony was then shared with Naaman through his wife. The people we testify to may not be the ones who end up coming to our church. God is faithful to use the testimony we share.

III. WASH IN THE JORDAN

A. Naaman Was Offended and Went Away Angry

Naaman arrived at Elisha's house with horses and a beautiful chariot. He was wearing some of the finest clothing in the whole world. Elisha's house must have looked insignificant as Naaman pulled up with his large caravan and riches. Naaman was a proud man and was used to receiving whatever he wanted. He was not familiar with defeat on the battlefield or being denied what he wanted. Even the king granted his wishes. But pride can become a snare if we are not careful. Proverbs warns us about pride (Proverbs 6:17; 11:2; 16:18; 29:23).

Naaman was quickly humbled out of his dignified state. Instead of meeting Naaman at the door, Elisha sent his messenger—most likely Gehazi—to speak with Naaman. Perhaps Elisha was worried Naaman was wanting a magical specialist to conduct a proper ritual that would bring healing to him. The church should not be filled with rituals or individuals seeking praise because of their works. The church should give all glory to Jesus Christ as the healer. We do not need a specific person to pray for us to see God move in our lives. I John 5:14–15 tells us those who believe and pray the will of God will have their prayers answered.

Disgusted at the thought of having to be baptized in the Jordan River, Naaman grumbled to himself about the rivers of Damascus being better than all the waters of Israel. He wondered, *Does it really matter where I get wet, as long as I get wet? Does not all water lead to the cleansing purpose? And does it really have to be that seven-step process? Really?* However, Naaman quickly learned that all waters do not lead to the same conclusion.

» *Why do you think Naaman became angry at Elisha's instructions?*

B. His Servants Convinced Him to Obey the Prophet

Naaman's frustration with the prophet came to a boil. Through his furious rage, he could have decided to gather his army and march on the man of God. As a great man, he was expecting something great to happen. However, he did not receive an audience from the prophet, and he was asked to go down into waters that were inferior to his standing.

Although the men with Naaman were his servants, they still cared about him. Their words were never disrespectful. They never said, "Finally, he gets what he deserves." Instead, they showed respect for him by using reason to convince him to obey the man of God. They knew Naaman would have been willing to do anything grand, most likely because he could turn it into a grand show. But they also recognized

the simplicity of the faith that was needed. All he had to do was follow the simple instructions of the prophet. Sometimes salvation can seem like a major process; however, the hardest part is humbling ourselves before the Lord.

» *Why is it important to be surrounded by people who encourage us?*

C. We Must Listen to Those Who Encourage Us to Do the Right Thing

For some people today, Elisha would not make a good pastor. His actions could be viewed as rude, unloving, and arrogant. Church shopping has become a trend—seeking out a pastor who will please me the most and will fulfill my needs. And when Naaman got upset at the prophet, Elisha did not run after him. Elisha did not plead with him; he left Naaman in the hands of God. For us to truly succeed, we need a pastor who will speak to us as God has commanded. While the words of the preacher may seem harsh, it is important to reflect upon these words to see the change we need to facilitate. Through the way Elisha treated Naaman, Naaman found a pride issue in his life.

Naaman had to humble himself and hear the wisdom of his servants. He had to hear wisdom from those who were under him. Wisdom does not dwell only upon those who are well educated or those who seem to have it all together. God can use anyone. Naaman, the man who was used to humbling people, found wisdom from servants. Here the humbled showed they had more wisdom than the exalted.

IV. NAAMAN HUMBLLED HIMSELF

A. He Was Made Clean

Once Naaman understood the only price for his miracle was humility, he found himself coming out of the water clean. His healing was not a seven-month plan. His healing was instantaneous. Naaman was not only cleansed on the outside, but something happened internally. Internal change must happen before God is able to work. The biggest obstacle to God's will being accomplished is getting ourselves out of the way.

The cleansing of Naaman did not produce a partial healing. All the skin on his body was completely restored like that of a child. No spots or marks remained. He was given a brand-new start. When we are born again, we receive a new start. Yes, people can remind us of who we once were, but that is no longer who we are. People can remind us of our past, but we are now walking as new individuals.

B. He Testified That the Lord Is God

When he returned to see the prophet, Naaman's disposition had been transformed. His pride and arrogance had been overcome with humility, and an audience with Elisha was finally granted. This man who had conquered lands turned to the prophet and said, "Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel" (II Kings 5:15). No other God can compare to the one who had granted his heart's

desire. Because of God's kindness to him, Naaman was ready to make Him his Lord. Naaman was humbled, and he changed his attitude toward the land of Israel. Earlier he had not wanted to bathe in the waters of Israel, now he was willing to take that part of the land back home with him. He planned to take two mule-loads of earth back home to create an altar to his new God (Exodus 20:24–25; II Kings 5:17). He recognized God as the only true God. And his testimony would be seen by anyone who would come into his household.

C. God Delivers Those Who Humble Themselves

As we referenced at the beginning of this lesson, Naaman's story highlights the role of servants and humility. While Naaman struggled with humility, Elisha remained humble. Even though Naaman pushed for the prophet to take a reward for the part he played, Elisha refused. Instead, Elisha wanted all glory to go to the one he served.

If you are seeking for a divine solution from God, start with humility. There needs to be a check of heart, spirit, soul, and mind. Is there any place in your life where pride dwells, thus prohibiting God from moving?

» ***Are there areas in your life where you struggle with humility? Explain.***

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

While we talk about God humbling those who are not saved, the church also needs humility. We must be honest about our true motives. Naaman's narrative is filled with prideful and humbled individuals. God is able to work through people who humble themselves.

Two true servants were mentioned in this story, Elisha's servant (Gehazi) and the captured Jewish girl. Although she was experiencing hurt and pain, the unnamed Jewish girl wanted to help those she saw in need. There was no pride in sight. However, Gehazi, the man who was learning from one of the greatest prophets, allowed pride and greed to consume him.

Gold, silver, and fine clothing will not bring complete joy. Having a famous name people would revere will not bring joy. Material things may bring fleeting happiness, but true happiness can only be found in pursuing the will of God. And that takes humility.

Unexpected Ways

FOCUS THOUGHT

God works in unexpected ways to bring His purpose to pass.

➤➤ FOCUS VERSE

II Kings 7:9

Then they said one to another, We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace: if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us: now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household.

➤➤ LESSON TEXT

II Kings 7:3-9

3 And there were four leprous men at the entering in of the gate: and they said one to another, Why sit we here until we die?

4 If we say, We will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there: and if we sit still here, we die also. Now therefore come, and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians: if they save us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die.

5 And they rose up in the twilight, to go unto the camp of the Syrians: and when they were come to the uttermost part of the camp of Syria, behold, there was no man there.

6 For the Lord had made the host of the Syrians to hear a noise of chariots, and a noise of horses, even the noise of a great host: and they said one to another, Lo, the king of Israel hath hired against us the kings of the Hittites, and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us.

7 Wherefore they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents, and their horses, and their asses, even the camp as it was, and fled for their life.

8 And when these lepers came to the uttermost part of the camp, they went into one tent, and did eat and drink, and carried thence silver, and gold, and raiment, and went and hid it; and came again, and entered into another tent, and carried thence also, and went and hid it.

9 Then they said one to another, We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace: if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us: now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household.

CULTURE CONNECTION

THE PARIS AUTO PART MIRACLE

While Lugo and Valeria were stationed in Germany, they were introduced to the gospel and found a Pentecostal church. Although new Christians, the Lord directed them to go to Spain and minister to three specific people. They packed their belongings and decided to stop in Paris along the way. About two blocks from the Eiffel tower, the clutch cable on their Fiat broke and fell into the road.

Picking up the pieces off the street, they prayed for help and provision. After asking for directions and struggling with the language difference, Lugo thought he understood there was an auto parts store about six blocks away. He left Valeria and their daughter with the car and asked them to pray he could find a part.

Lugo walked a few blocks and saw a man pacing in a circle on the sidewalk in front of him. This seemed strange, but he still needed more directions. When he questioned the man, he responded in perfect English that the auto parts store was about two blocks away. The man then asked what happened, and Lugo told him about the broken clutch cable. “The same thing happened to me!” the man exclaimed. “When I went to the auto parts store, they gave me the wrong part, and I have it in my car.” The man reached into his car and pulled out the exact clutch cable Lugo needed. Lugo paid the man 50 francs (about \$10 U.S. at the time), and the man then offered to help install the cable.

OUTLINE

I. SYRIA SURROUNDED SAMARIA

- A. Severe Famine
- B. Elisha Prophesied
- C. God’s Word Will Come to Pass

II. FOUR LEPERS AT THE GATE OF THE CITY

- A. Why Stay Here Until We Die?
- B. Decided to Walk to the Syrians
- C. God Drove the Syrians Away
- D. God Responds to Hunger

III. LEPERS FOUND THE SYRIAN CAMP EMPTY

- A. Fed Themselves
- B. Did Not Keep the Good News to Themselves
- C. We Must Tell Others of the Good News We Have Heard and Believed

IV. SAMARIA PLUNDERED THE SYRIAN CAMP

- A. The Word of the Lord Came True
- B. God Works in Unexpected Ways to Bring His Purpose to Pass

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Growing up in the Midwestern United States, I can remember the weather being crazy. The running joke was the speed with which the weather would change. In a word, it was unpredictable. Typically this is not a word we use to describe God. However, there is much of God that remains a mystery to us. In the words of the apostle Paul, “We know in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9). This missing knowledge of God can cause us to question our faith at times.

In our journey to understand who God is and grasp His nature, we can become overwhelmed by the fact He is far beyond us. To this end, His actions are not only divinely dynamic but truly unpredictable. In our lesson text we see that God is not subject to demonstrate His power in a way we think is best. He is sovereign. Therefore, He works in the way He wants, regardless of our opinions, and in some cases, regardless of our desires.

I. SYRIA SURROUNDED SAMARIA

Sin and rebellion had once again led the people of God into a place of total loss. Surrounded, and in the midst of famine, King Jehoram (son of Ahab) was desperate. The power of God is most effective when people get desperate enough to lay down their pride and submit to His plan. It is always amazing how often people will allow pride to stop the move of God in their lives. Pride will bring division into any relationship. The first few years of marriage will teach this principle well. All newlyweds will encounter a time in their marriage when they will need to humble themselves to reduce any conflict. Most fighting in any relationship is a result of either party not being willing to let go of pride and bring the discussion to a peaceful resolution. Pride has destroyed many relationships. Any relationship that allows pride to go unchecked will end in failure. If you find yourself in a dispute or argument, make sure to check your spirit and make sure your pride is not the reason for the ongoing conflict.

» ***How has pride affected relationships in your life, including your relationship with God?***

A. Severe Famine

The Scripture speaks of the economic conditions in Samaria reaching rock-bottom. The people had turned to cannibalism to satisfy their hunger. Although King Jehoram was angry with the prophet, this situation had been brought about by the king's own leadership and rebellion against the Word of God. What is beautiful to consider is the tremendous miracle God performed in the great depression of Samaria. This story should remind its readers that God's omnipotence is not limited to spiritual troubles but includes economic and financial matters as well.

B. Elisha Prophesied

In this setting, the king of Israel turned to the prophet Elisha for direction. Some believed the word of the Lord that came from the prophet; others did not. It is a picture of the gospel message that was to come. Those who believe the gospel will be partakers, but those who refuse to believe may see but not be able to partake. Here we also have the same imagery as Moses and his final days. Because of Moses' unbelief, he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. (See Numbers 20:12.) A mistrust in God will always cause a person to miss out on the glorious things He has planned.

C. God's Word Will Come to Pass

"God can't" are not words we like to use. Nonetheless, there are some things God cannot do. The Scripture tells us God cannot lie. He is bound to His Word. The story of the lepers illustrates once again that the word of the Lord will always come to pass. The prophet wrote, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper

in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). We can rest assured that God’s word will always come to pass.

» *How should we respond when God has not answered a specific prayer?*

II. FOUR LEPERS AT THE GATE OF THE CITY

Banished to the outskirts of the city, the four lepers are the ones God chose to bring salvation to the Samaritans. These unlikely and unqualified outsiders changed the course of a nation and gave another chance to a king to get it right. It seems as if it is often the people no one would expect whom God chooses to use in His plan. From Abraham to Jacob, from Gideon to David, God has consistently empowered those who did not match the standard of what some would call great. This is even seen in the twelve men Jesus chose to be in His inner circle. Jesus called the disciples to have significant insight and receive unrestricted access to His ministry, yet the religious leaders were astounded. “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). It was not merely the disciples’ education level the leaders were referring to, but rather the fact these were common people—fishermen and tax collectors—and yet they were well-versed in the Hebrew text and the plan of the Messiah.

A. Why Stay Here Until We Die?

The driving force of these lepers was summed up in the question they considered: “Why stay here until we die?” In other words, how can this get any worse? Their situation had gotten to the point where they no longer feared the consequence of death. The fear of death would no longer hold them back. Often people allow fear to hold them hostage. Whether it is something simple like a job or career move, fear tends to keep people in the state they are in rather than trying to reach for something greater.

Fear is something all humans share. In many ways, fear is a major factor in every life-choice a person makes. Fear can be a good thing. A healthy fear will let us know when something is wrong. It will ensure that our children and loved ones are cared for and safe. However, fear can also become unhealthy and irrational. The spirit of fear can gain strength when unchecked in our lives. (See II Timothy 1:7.) As believers, we must make up our minds that fear will not hinder the progress of the gospel, nor will it keep us from everything God has in store for our lives.

» *Have you ever had a deep, unsettling fear that seemed to paralyze you? Explain.*

B. Decided to Walk to the Syrians

Each day we will make hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions. The recipe for success is making good decisions. One study showed that the cascade of choices a person evaluates each day actually leads to what psychologists refer to as “decision

fatigue.” One thing rings true and is important to understand: not all decisions are created equal. For instance, choosing your spouse and choosing your toothpaste are obviously not equivalent propositions. The four lepers were faced with a decision that would determine the fate of their lives and the destiny of a nation. Understanding the gravity of our decisions is paramount in our walk with God. There may be some choices we will make today that will set us on a path of growth or lead us down a path of destruction.

C. God Drove the Syrians Away

God will always fight for His people. This story shows that God is more than just “in our corner.” In fact, there are moments in life when we are too weak, too overwhelmed, and exceedingly overmatched. But it is in those situations when God steps in and fights the battle for us. Over and over stories in Scripture describe the way God defends His people.

Standing on the edge of the land promised to their fathers, the children of Israel saw an enemy of great power occupying their destiny. In the midst of their fear, two people reported the victory was within reach. The word of the Lord came to the people affirming the faith of Joshua and Caleb. This word was a consistent message to the people of Israel. The Lord said, “The LORD your God he shall fight for you” (Deuteronomy 3:22). This message of assurance was repeated multiple times throughout the journey of Israel to the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1:30; 2:24–25, 31, 33, 36; 3:2–3; 20:4). We should never forget the battle always belongs to God.

D. God Responds to Hunger

The hungry always seem to get God’s attention. Jesus, standing in the midst of more than five thousand people, said, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). Both spiritually and physically, it would seem God cannot resist those who hunger and thirst. This fact is deeply rooted in His character. We see His compassion for humanity scattered throughout the Bible. God Himself told Moses that His compassion is given by Himself alone. God said, “I will . . . be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy” (Exodus 33:19). This grace and compassion have been realized by the redemptive work of Calvary. The whole Bible, it would seem, is the story of how God has demonstrated His love and compassion for humanity. The redemption of humanity is the strongest evidence we have that God has shown mercy, grace, and compassion to all people.

In this story, we see a small example of what happens when people are in need. God responds to the hungry. Of course, hunger is not the only requirement to get a response from God. God is faithful to His people. David said, “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread” (Psalms 37:25). God’s people can trust Him to care for physical needs and to know that He responds to our faith for greater needs as well.

III. LEPERS FOUND THE SYRIAN CAMP EMPTY

A. Fed Themselves

When traveling in an airplane, the flight attendant will announce, “In the case of an emergency, be sure to secure your oxygen mask before assisting other passengers.” Basically they are saying to help yourself first because you are no good to anyone if you are not taking care of yourself. Often those who neglect their own well-being and health (both spiritually and physically) will end up losing out on the things they have worked so hard to accomplish.

This principle is evident in the greatest commandment we find in Scripture. Jesus was asked what He considered to be the greatest commandment in the Law. His response is recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels of the New Testament. He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Then He gave the second greatest commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It is imperative to note that we must be focused on our own salvation before focusing on the salvation of the world. These four lepers fed themselves first before turning to share their blessings with friends and family in Samaria.

B. Did Not Keep the Good News to Themselves

Think about how many problems would go away in our lives if people would just consider others more. The lepers in our story experienced the benefit of not hoarding the blessings and good news. They elected to share the news with the rest of the army. The very essence of the gospel is tied to considering others. When we consider others, we not only obey the gospel but grow even more in the image of God.

C. We Must Tell Others of the Good News We Have Heard and Believed

If the lepers had kept silent, the people would have stayed in their misery. The Samaritans were starving and the lepers had the solution. This lesson is twofold. First, the people of God have what the world needs. Hungry people are roaming the earth looking for anything to satisfy their appetite and quench their thirst. They have tried everything the world has to offer and are still empty. Like the prodigal son, they keep waking up in the pig pen wondering what went wrong. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the meat that will satisfy their hunger. The second lesson is the blessing the believer receives from sharing the good news. The lives of the people were saved, and the lepers were able to share in the victory and provision of God alongside the rest of the nation. It would seem the lepers' lives were also changed during this miracle. Without a doubt, the blessings of God will always be on those who take the Great Commission seriously.

» *Have you ever been blessed by sharing the gospel with someone? Explain.*

IV. SAMARIA PLUNDERED THE SYRIAN CAMP

Only a few changed the lives of many. The Samaritan army was able to benefit from the bravery and decision of just a few lepers. It is amazing the influence a few can have on the masses. With God, these numbers and influence is even greater. Deuteronomy 32:30 says, “How should one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, except their Rock had sold them, and the LORD had shut them up?” With God, nothing is impossible. When God is fighting for us, one person can defeat an army.

A. The Word of the Lord Came True

Words have power. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof” (Proverbs 18:21). We get this human attribute from our heavenly Father. The words God speaks are the most powerful force on earth. Everything He says is true, and any predictions He makes are going to be fulfilled. Our faith is in the fact God does not make mistakes, and our trust is in the fact God is not like flawed humans. When God says something will happen, it will happen.

B. God Works in Unexpected Ways to Bring His Purpose to Pass

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9). It should be no surprise that God works in unexpected ways. God knows everything. We must trust that He also knows what is best for us. Often we think we know how God should act or respond. Trusting God is the ultimate test of our faith. Trust is the feet to our faith. We can say we have faith, but it is tested when we are forced to trust in God’s plan.

» *Has God ever surprised you? In what ways did God work in an unexpected way in your life?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

In December each year we gather together to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. This one event has captured the attention of every believer, and it still stands as a sign to those who have yet to believe. It is often curious to consider the thoughts of those who were there to witness the birth of Christ. What did they think? Did they have a clue about what it meant to be the Messiah? Even with a little knowledge it seems clear that no one can know for sure what plans God has for His people. The apostle Paul said, “Now we see through a glass, darkly” (I Corinthians 13:12), meaning there are many things about which we simply do not have a clear picture. The imagery here is looking at a foggy window and trying to determine what is being reflected. In our lives, we must find the room to trust God with every decision. Like the lepers, we cannot know for certain where or when God will choose to bless, deliver, heal, or save. Our job is not to figure out the method but rather trust that God knows and will be faithful.

The Priority of God's House

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must make the house of God a priority in our lives.

FOCUS VERSES

II Chronicles 24:10–11

And all the princes and all the people rejoiced, and brought in, and cast into the chest, until they had made an end. Now it came to pass, that at what time the chest was brought unto the king's office by the hand of the Levites, and when they saw that there was much money, the king's scribe and the high priest's officer came and emptied the chest, and took it, and carried it to his place again. Thus they did day by day, and gathered money in abundance.

LESSON TEXT

II Chronicles 24:1–11

1 Joash was seven years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Zibiah of Beer-sheba.

2 And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the LORD all the days of Jehoiada the priest.

3 And Jehoiada took for him two wives; and he begat sons and daughters.

4 And it came to pass after this, that Joash was minded to repair the house of the LORD.

5 And he gathered together the priests and the Levites, and said to them, Go out unto the cities of Judah, and gather of all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year, and see that ye hasten the matter. Howbeit the Levites hastened it not.

6 And the king called for Jehoiada the chief, and said unto him, Why hast thou not required of the Levites to bring in out of Judah and out of Jerusalem the collection, according to the commandment of Moses the servant of the LORD, and of the congregation of Israel, for the tabernacle of witness?

7 For the sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken up the house of God; and also all the dedicated things of the house of the LORD did they bestow upon Baalim.

8 And at the king's commandment they made a chest, and set it without at the gate of the house of the LORD.

9 And they made a proclamation through Judah and Jerusalem, to bring in to the LORD the collection that Moses the servant of God laid upon Israel in the wilderness.

10 And all the princes and all the people rejoiced, and brought in, and cast into the chest, until they had made an end.

11 Now it came to pass, that at what time the chest was brought unto the king's office by the hand of the Levites, and when they saw that there was much money, the king's scribe and the high priest's officer came and emptied the chest, and took it, and carried it to his place again. Thus they did day by day, and gathered money in abundance.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY

On his twentieth birthday, Tom Marshall was drafted into the U. S. army. He trained for eight weeks and was sent to England to train for eight more months. He saw his first combat during the invasion of Northern France, better known as D-Day. He and his battalion landed on the beaches and worked their way through France. Later, following General Patton, they crossed through Belgium, Holland, and Germany. At the end of World War II, Tom watched as displaced families struggled to find food and shelter. He recalled Paul's words describing the Macedonian call: "Come over . . . and help us." From that moment on, Tom was never the same.

Tom returned home, met and married Leila, who had lost her first husband in the war. They started a family, and after a few years the weight of God's call was heavy upon him. He and Leila, in response to a call for help, left a good job and sold all they had to go pastor.

After his experiences in the war, Tom understood the importance of having a place to gather and worship—a place of safety and unity. People needed a church. Tom and Leila pastored "over forty years in five states: Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. He built five churches, two parsonages, one large educational building and completed one church building that another minister started" (*To God Be the Glory*, Tom and Leila Marshall, 2002). They discovered people were willing to work and sacrifice alongside them to have a place that was dedicated to God and ministry.

OUTLINE

I. JOASH BECAME KING AT SEVEN YEARS OF AGE

- A. He Did What Was Right in God's Eyes
- B. We Must Choose to Do What Is Right No Matter Our Heritage

II. JOASH SOUGHT TO RESTORE THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD

- A. Tasked the Priests and Levites to Collect Money
- B. The Levites Slacked in Their Work

III. THE HOUSE OF GOD AND SEXUAL PURITY

- A. Jehoram and the Moral Decay of Judah
- B. Our Worship Shows Our Priorities
- C. The Ransom Collected by Moses and Joash
- D. Our Ransom Has Been Paid by Christ

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Near the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Zhu Di of China was revered as a living god. Though he only lived from AD 1360 to 1424, he was responsible for consolidating rule over China, pushing out Mongol invaders, extending the Great Wall, and commissioning the largest naval armada in world history until World War II. However, his greatest achievement was arguably the building of the Forbidden City in Beijing.

When the Forbidden City was commissioned in A.D. 1407, it took over one million convicted criminals and conscripted slave laborers ten years to gather the proper materials for the project. It took another one hundred thousand skilled craftsmen to finish the fine details of the city. No expense was spared for the residence of the palace and the Forbidden City, and the rule of the Emperor was absolute.

Unlike the Forbidden City and its palace, the restoration of the Temple of God in Jerusalem was not a project built by forced labor or authoritarian rule. The Temple was restored by the free and

cheerful giving of the faithful. The collection taken to restore the Temple was a “ransom” that had been originally required by Moses. Anyone who chose to not partake in the “ransom” of Judah would not be counted among them in the census; therefore, it was a choice to serve the Lord and contribute to the restoration of His house.

A life of faithfulness cannot be achieved without a lifestyle of sacrifice. During the reign of Joash, the kingdom of Judah would have been aware of growing foreign threats; yet they decided to put their faith in the Lord and His ability to save. Though under the direction of the king, the Temple was restored because of the collective desire of the people to honor the Lord.

The people of Judah were not giving to a fruitless cause, but they were paying a ransom required by the Law of Moses. They were giving for the restoration of the Temple of God. The Temple had been left in disorder and decay by the three rulers prior to Joash. However, Joash’s mentor was Jehoiada the priest, a man of God. It was the people’s willingness to be obedient to the tax of Moses and the righteousness pursued by Joash and Jehoiada that led to the restoration of the Temple, the house of God.

Since the New Testament was established, the house of God is no longer a building of brick and stone, but we as believers are His temple. When Paul admonished the church in Corinth that their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit, it was not just a simple metaphor. Paul’s warning came in the context of sexual purity. To be sexually pure is to honor the house of God. This principle was true even during the time of Joash.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. JOASH BECAME KING AT SEVEN YEARS OF AGE

Joash was the youngest king of Judah to ascend to the throne. In many ways, having a child on the throne was the reset the monarchy of Judah needed. Before the reign of Joash, the succession of kings from the line of Judah had been David, Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, then Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah. Among these, Rehoboam, Jehoram, Ahaziah, and Athaliah had been unrighteous rulers because of their idol worship and self-reliance. Rulers such as Abijah (meaning “my father is Yahweh”), Asa, and Jehoshaphat were righteous.

Though Jehoshaphat was counted to be righteous, his decisions to ally with Ahab—who was wicked—set up a series of tragic circumstances that ultimately led to a seven-year-old king (I Chronicles 17:3). Jehoshaphat allied himself to the house of Ahab through marriage (I Kings 22:43–44; II Chronicles 18:1). Though Jehoshaphat trusted in God as his father and grandfather had done, his son Jehoram was raised under influences of the house of Ahab and the kingdom of Israel. Little information is given to us in Scripture about Jehoram’s mother, but his wife, Athaliah, was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel.

A. He Did What Was Right in God’s Eyes

Joash did what was right in God’s eyes. When Joash was made king over Israel, he knew nothing of governance; he was only a child. However, his mentor was

Jehoiada the priest. Joash was adopted by Jehoiada and Jehoshabeath. Jehoiada was instrumental to restoring the monarchy of Judah to a path of righteousness. He taught Joash to prioritize the Law of Moses. Joash's mother was also not from the house of Ahab of Israel; she was from Beersheba of Judah.

When Joash was a child, he was surrounded by godly influences who directed him to seek after and prioritize the Lord. Joash was brought up in an environment of righteousness. While Jehoiada was alive, Joash was a righteous king. It is important to surround ourselves with mentors who will encourage us to pursue righteousness. We can follow their example. No matter our age or background, we are always able to draw near to God in repentance to pursue righteousness.

» *How does repentance help us draw near to God?*

B. We Must Choose to Do What Is Right No Matter Our Heritage

Athaliah went on to raise her son, Ahaziah, to value the unrighteousness of the northern kingdom of Israel over the righteous principles of his great-grandfather (five-times), David. When Ahaziah was killed by Jehu the son of Nimshi, Athaliah ruled over Israel as Judah's first and only matriarch queen. During her reign she killed all the royal heirs of Judah (II Chronicles 22:10), with the exception of Joash. The royal coup that had begun with the marriage ended in murder and sin. Joash, a baby, was saved by Jehoshabeath, daughter of King Jehoram and wife of Jehoiada the priest. She hid Joash and his nurse in a bedchamber. He was hidden in the Temple until he reached seven years of age.

Jehoiada was a strong influence on Joash, but he was not controlling the monarchy as a priest. In II Chronicles 24:4–6, after Joash ordered the Levites to go about repairing the house of God, the Levites did not listen. Jehoiada was the chief priest and Joash held him responsible for the inaction of the Levites. In II Chronicles 24:7, Joash referenced how Athaliah had repurposed the Temple for the idols associated with the pantheon of Baal. It is difficult to imagine the chief priest being content with the Temple in a state of disarray when he had the ability to make a change with the support of the monarchy. Joash made sure the Temple was repaired by reinstituting the collection Moses required of Israel for the building of the original tabernacle during the time of the Exodus.

» *How could the drama and tragedy have been avoided in the royal household of Judah?*

II. JOASH SOUGHT TO RESTORE THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD

II Chronicles 24:4 says Joash was “minded” to repair the house of the Lord. The NKJV reads, “Joash set his heart on repairing the house of the LORD.” The focus of this verse shows that prioritizing God is an issue of the heart. It would have been easy for Joash to maintain the status quo the previous three rulers before him had set. However, Joash did not let his heart go away from serving God while Jehoiada was alive.

A. Tasked the Priests and Levites to Collect Money

II Chronicles 24:5 says, “And he gathered together the priests and the Levites, and said to them, Go out unto the cities of Judah, and gather of all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year, and see that ye hasten the matter. Howbeit the Levites hastened it not.” When the house of God was in disrepair, Joash made its repair a priority.

B. The Levites Slacked in Their Work

When the priests and Levites did not follow the command of Joash, it could have been an excuse to give up. If the priests—the ones responsible for ministering in the house of God—are not even willing to take up a collection for its repair, is there any use in repairing it at all? To Joash, the answer was yes. He had set his heart to make the house of God a priority. Joash held Jehoiada responsible for not taking up the collection (II Chronicles 24:6). Joash cited Moses’ collection from Israel to create the tabernacle as a precedent for the priests to follow.

III. THE HOUSE OF GOD AND SEXUAL PURITY

To understand that the house of God is a priority is to understand the need for sexual purity. The Temple was in a state of decay long before Joash began to rule on the throne. If it had not been for the poor decisions of Jehoshaphat when he allied with the house of Ahab in marriage, the priority of the house of God would have likely remained high. However, when the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel married into the line of the kings of Judah, the gods of Israel replaced the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in priority.

A. Jehoram and the Moral Decay of Judah

The theme of unrighteous and moral decay is pervasive throughout Scripture. The righteous men who were descendants of Seth were corrupted by women who were descendants of Cain (Genesis 4:26; 6:2). Samson—whose name means “day”—was deceived by Delilah—whose name means “night”—and his last moments were spent humiliated with his eyes gouged out. Solomon, who built the Temple and was given wisdom above any other man, also fell into the trap of marrying unrighteous women (I Kings 11:1–8).

Paul made a direct reference to the pervasive theme of unequally yoked marriages in his second letter to the Corinthians:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? (II Corinthians 6:14)

Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, the monarchs of Israel. Through this marriage Judah’s once righteous royal family was corrupted and destroyed. When Judah began to follow after idol worship that was closely tied to adultery, the house of God went into

disrepair. These events are absolutely tied together. If the kings of Judah had made God their priority, then the Temple never would have needed to be restored. Instead, because of the influences from the house of Ahab, the rulers of Judah (Jehoram, Ahaziah, and Athaliah) turned after idols and the people followed after sexual sin.

» *How is being equally yoked connected to prioritizing the house of the Lord?*

B. Our Worship Shows Our Priorities

Prostitution and adultery were a part of worship in the idolatry of ancient Israel and pagan temple cults. The narrative of II Chronicles 13–23 describes a dark descent in the monarchy of Judah from a kingdom of righteousness to a kingdom of prostitution and idol worship. The gods of the Canaanites were “worshiped” through adultery. When the prostitution of idolatry began to rise in priority in Judah, the priority of the house of God decreased. Joash was the righteous king Judah needed to both restore true worship within the kingdom and to restore the house of God.

In the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:16–17, Moses addressed the root of idolatry by identifying the power behind it. He wrote, “They provoked Him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations provoked they Him to anger. They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared not.”

In ancient times, idols and false gods always carried sexual overtones. Sometimes we can be very harsh when we speak of ancient people because it is foolish to bow down to a block of chiseled stone or a statue of precious metal. On the surface, idol worship does not seem very tempting, so it is easy to criticize. However, idol worship gave ancient people an excuse to justify sinful sexual acts. Sinful sexual temptations are still present in today’s world, but they manifest themselves differently. Instead of using an image or precious metal to justify sin, people choose to boldly deny God without shame. Just as devils were behind the worship of idols, there are spiritual forces behind our culture’s obsession with sexual sin.

» *How is adultery and sexual sin connected to idol worship?*

C. The Ransom Collected by Moses and Joash

The reference Joash made in II Chronicles 24:6, 9 to the collection Moses placed on the people for the building of the Tabernacle is found in Exodus 30:11–16. In Exodus, the money that was used for the Tabernacle was not simply a “collection” or a “tax,” but it was called a “ransom.” Moses began by taking a census of the people. Then all the males twenty years of age and older, despite economic status, were commanded to “ransom” themselves to God for the price of a half shekel. By calling this collection of funds a “ransom,” Moses was telling Israel that without fulfilling the contribution

of half a shekel, they would not be represented as being among the people of Israel. The ransom Moses instituted was to be given every time a census was taken in Israel.

D. Our Ransom Has Been Paid by Christ

Paul mirrored the theme of “Ransom” when he spoke against fornication and idols in I Corinthians 6. Verse 20 clearly connects the idea of being “ransomed” to Christ’s work on the cross. By taking the punishment for our sins, Jesus Christ has paid the ransom of death that sin held against us. Paul’s answer to sexual immorality associated with idol worship is rooted in the concept of ransom. Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). If Jesus Christ has paid the ransom for the sins of every believer and the temple is no longer a building of stone, or a tent, but the human body, then all worship from the body belongs to God. If we identify with Christ, then we are more than His people; we are also His temple. Paul’s teaching is not directed to the individual, but to the corporate church. Sexual impurity by one member of the body has far-reaching impact throughout the corporate worship of the entire church.

» *How do we apply to our lives the ransom paid by Christ?*

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Just as sexual temptation was a part of the culture surrounding Judah, it surrounds our culture today. Joash made an intentional and conscious decision to repair the house of the Lord. Likewise, we need to be intentional about living in purity. To live in purity is to show God His sacrifice is a priority to us and that we will not allow His house to fall into disrepair.

Purity in relationships includes setting boundaries before marriage and staying committed to only your spouse in marriage. If you are unmarried and looking to become married, then you should also be sure to find someone with whom you can be equally yoked. Because we are the temple of the Lord, we should abstain from sexual sin because it disgraces Jesus Christ’s sacrifice.

It is also important to remember that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (I Corinthians 6:11). Our past is in the past when we repent of our sins, are baptized in the name of Jesus, and receive His Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ paid our ransom on the Cross and that good news is still true. Our past mistakes do not define the relationship Jesus wants to have with us now; He has made us free to be sanctified temples and living sacrifices.

The Puzzle of King Uzziah

FOCUS THOUGHT

God calls us to live a faithful life that ends as it began.

➤➤ FOCUS VERSE

II Chronicles 26:5

And he sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him to prosper.

➤➤ LESSON TEXT

II Kings 15:1–7

1 In the twenty and seventh year of Jeroboam king of Israel began Azariah son of Amaziah king of Judah to reign.

2 Sixteen years old was he when he began to reign, and he reigned two and fifty years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Jecholiah of Jerusalem.

3 And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done;

4 Save that the high places were not removed: the people sacrificed and burnt incense still on the high places.

5 And the LORD smote the king, so that he was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house. And Jotham the king's son was over the house, judging the people of the land.

6 And the rest of the acts of Azariah, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?

7 So Azariah slept with his fathers; and they buried him with his fathers in the city of David: and Jotham his son reigned in his stead.

II Chronicles 26:3–5

3 Sixteen years old was Uzziah when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Jecoliah of Jerusalem.

4 And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah did.

5 And he sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him to prosper.

CULTURE CONNECTION

REFILLED WHILE IN A COMA

Dr. Joey Peyton received a call to visit an elderly couple in the hospital. According to the doctors, something rather strange was happening while the man lay in a coma. With his wife in visible distress, the hospital thought Dr. Peyton, being a Pentecostal chaplain, might be the best to handle the situation.

Upon entering the room, Dr. Peyton instantly realized the man, though in a coma, was speaking in tongues. He told the wife that her husband was fine, he was just praying. “He doesn’t pray and hasn’t even attended church in years!” she responded. She became quite angry and said she was no longer interested in any more discussion.

The next day when Dr. Peyton arrived in the room, the man was sitting up in a chair. When asked if he remembered anything from the previous day, he talked of a dream he remembered having. In his dream, he was back at an old brush arbor with his parents and had been refilled with the Holy Ghost.

This man had left his Pentecostal faith when he and his wife decided to get married. He had been raised Pentecostal and she was Catholic. They both walked away from their faiths and decided to attend a different church. She was faithful with the kids, but he could not bring himself to attend.

While on his deathbed and in a coma, he had returned to God and had been refilled with the Holy Ghost. He spent the last few days of his life testifying of what God had done and declaring there was only one way to God.

OUTLINE

I. THE RISE AND FALL OF AZARIAH

- A. Early Success
- B. Final Demise
- C. Almost Succeeding Is the Worst Tragedy

II. PUZZLING PERSPECTIVES

- A. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Kings
- B. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Chronicles
- C. Self-Reflection Is Vitaly Important

III. FALLEN HEROES—A CALL TO REFLECTION

- A. Humans Not Heroes
- B. Re-Envisioned History
- C. We Must Begin and End Well

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

One sobering reality of our social-media saturated world is that one moment of weakness or one indiscretion can literally ruin a person’s life forever. In its own brutal way, our society is learning that being a good person “most of the time” really does not count for all that much in the end. It is absolutely vital, in this social era where we are daily rocked by scandals from the most unimaginable places, that we as the people of God learn again the importance of faithfulness.

That is the real topic of today’s lesson. How do we ensure that our lives are truly consistent and faithful to God? By looking at the telling and the retelling of the life of King Uzziah in the books of II Kings and II Chronicles, we will explore the scriptural call to faithfulness and the path to developing it.

I. THE RISE AND FALL OF AZARIAH

A. Early Success

Just before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria, the divided nation enjoyed an extended period of surprising prosperity with Jeroboam II reigning in the north and Uzziah/Azariah (essentially variant spellings of the same name) reigning in the south. During this period, Assyria was occupied with internal issues. The more proximate Syrian power, centered in Damascus, had been broken to the point that it never fully recovered. This relative peace and quiet, it seems, reignited both Judah's and Israel's expansionist tendencies. For example, of Jeroboam II's reign, II Kings 14:25 (see also v. 28) declared: "He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain."

The Chronicler, who presents an expanded account of Uzziah's reign, points out that he largely followed Jeroboam II's example: "And God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians that dwelt in Gurbaal, and the Mehunims. And the Ammonites gave gifts to Uzziah: and his name spread abroad even to the entering in of Egypt" (II Chronicles 26:7–8). With these newly expanded borders, the divided kingdoms' extent nearly matched the extent of the united kingdom under Solomon, which is the acknowledged apex of biblical history, Israel's own "Golden Age." The Chronicler added another clue to the greatness of the era by noting that Uzziah's fame had spread southward to the border of Egypt. This is language similar to that used to describe King David's successes in I Chronicles 14:16–17. For all intents and purposes, it appeared that the "glory days" had returned despite the division of the kingdom.

The Chronicler's expanded recounting divides the description of Uzziah's successes into two sections, dealing with foreign and domestic affairs respectively. Uzziah's foreign expansions represented success in that they served to subjugate long-standing enemies of Judah (e.g., Philistia, Ammon, Arabia). Uzziah's domestic successes include rebuilding and fortifying the city of Jerusalem; abundance of flocks, herds, and crops; and equipping a mighty standing army.

The note in the text about the creation of "engines" (II Chronicles 2:15) that stood upon the towers has intrigued generations of scholars. Many have suggested these may have been a type of catapult; however, catapults appear to have been a later invention and, furthermore, there is no known type of catapult designed for use with both stones and arrows. J. Barton Payne suggests they are better understood as defensive mechanism, a kind of shield "used to cover defending troops as they repelled enemies seeking to scale the walls" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*).

These two sections are united by the use of the catchword *strong* (Hebrew *hazaq*) in verses 8 and 15. Furthermore, the term appears in close proximity to the word *help* (Hebrew *azar*), referring explicitly here to divine aid and support. Thus, the story of

Uzziah's stunning success, as told by the Chronicler, is a story of divine blessing rather than simply personal achievement.

» *Why is it important for us to recognize our blessings as being from God instead of the result of our intellect and ability alone?*

B. Final Demise

In the Chronicler's record, II Chronicles 26:16 essentially reverses the entire story of Uzziah: "But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction." This is the third appearance of the catchword, but this time Uzziah's strength is not the strength of divine favor and blessing; it is the strength of human hubris and pride! Uzziah had perverted the very blessings of God. Instead of acknowledging God as his help—as the One who made Uzziah's success possible—he claimed these blessings as markers of his own personal prowess and ability.

What makes Uzziah's usurpation of divine blessing as personal accomplishment even more brazen is that the Book of Psalms, with its undeniable linkage to the great King David, frequently uses "Help" as a divine title, similar to "Rock" or "Shield" or "Refuge." In fact, the celebratory psalm that inspired Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," is built around this metaphor of God as our help. (See Psalm 46:1–3, 5, 10–11.)

Because of Uzziah's pride, he assumed responsibilities forbidden to the king since the establishment of the Israelite monarchy and was struck down as a leper in the Temple of God. Because of his leprosy, he was driven not only out of the Temple precincts but also out of Judean society altogether. He lived the rest of his days in an isolated house ("several house"—KJV). Steven McKenzie points out that this phrase, literally translated "house of separation," has been found in Ugaritic texts, where it is used as a description of the underworld, the abode of the dead (*I–II Chronicles*). In other words, because of his pride, Uzziah became a "walking dead man"!

» *Why do you think it is easy for people to abuse or misuse God's blessings?*

C. Almost Succeeding Is the Worst Tragedy

Uzziah's auspicious beginnings only serve to heighten the sense of tragedy at his dishonorable end. Uzziah had an opportunity to be the "next David," to restore the former glory of the kingdom of Israel. He had everything he needed to be successful: an extended period of international peace, agricultural abundance, renewed access to international trade, and—most important—the blessing and favor of God. Yet, the tagline of Uzziah's life would have to be: "He *almost* succeeded." Even with all those secular benefits and spiritual advantages, Uzziah's life ended in dramatic failure.

II. PUZZLING PERSPECTIVES

A. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Kings

We may tend to overlook the differences in how the story of King Uzziah's reign is related in the books of II Kings and II Chronicles. As can be seen from this lesson's Scripture text, the Kings account of Uzziah's life is only a brief outline, following the familiar pattern of the so-called "regnal formula." The use of this formula has several important effects on the narrative of Kings. First of all, the regnal formula is introduced after the kingdom is divided into northern and southern realms; by constantly synchronizing the royal history of both kingdoms, the book was subtly emphasizing that, even though Judah and Israel were divided politically, they were still considered together as God's one chosen people. This approach held out hope that one day the divided Kingdom would be reunited.

The most crucial element of the formula is the evaluation of the king's reign, usually given in comparison to King David (for Judean kings) or in comparison to King Jeroboam (for Israelite kings). There is only one criterion for success: faithfulness to God's covenant. Furthermore, there is only one test for such faithfulness: worship of God alone. The writer of Kings positively evaluated Uzziah, saying, "He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord" (II Kings 15:3). But he added a qualification: "Save that the high places were not removed: the people sacrificed and burnt incense still on the high places" (II Kings 15:4). Therefore, the reader is led to understand that though Uzziah was a good king overall, he did not measure up to the faithfulness of the ideal King David.

The only other information provided about the reign of Uzziah is found in verse 5: "And the LORD smote the king, so that he was a leper unto the day of his death." Coming as it does on the heels of what appears to be a positive evaluation of Uzziah's reign, this statement has a shocking effect, especially since there is no explanation offered. Clearly, Uzziah did something that brought about divine displeasure and a judgment of leprosy, but the writer said nothing more.

» *Why is it such a tragic thing to see leaders make such dire mistakes?*

B. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Chronicles

The writer of Chronicles took a much greater interest in the reign of King Uzziah. In fact, the Chronicler added key pieces of additional information. First, the Chronicler included the fact that Uzziah recovered the port city of Elath, which would have reopened Judah's access to international trade. According to Steven McKenzie, this would have invited the readers to think of Uzziah as a new Solomon (*I-II Chronicles*). Second, the Chronicler acknowledged that Uzziah "sought God," but then immediately qualified that statement to a specific time period "in the days of Zechariah." The statement concludes ominously: "As long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper." This recalls the story of King Joash, who, like

Uzziah, also followed God as long as the priest Jehoiada was present to guide him. However, as soon as Jehoiada died, Joash ceased to follow the Lord with all of his heart. (See II Chronicles 24:2, 15–18.)

The final addition is the significant expansion that detailed the sin that caused King Uzziah's leprosy. In fact, the Chronicler's preference for the name "Uzziah" (rather than the variant "Azariah") probably arose from the inclusion of this story, in order to avoid confusion of the king with the high priest, who was also named Azariah (II Chronicles 26:17). Uzziah's specific infraction was his entering the sacred precincts of the Temple intending to offer incense as a priest. First of all, the list of royal duties given in the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 17:14–20) granted the king no such priestly right or privilege. Furthermore, Uzziah's actions here recall both the sins of Saul (II Samuel 13:2–5) and Jeroboam I (I Kings 12:33; 13:1)! However, Uzziah was not judged for offering incense (which he never actually did); he was judged instead because of his prideful spirit.

C. Self-Reflection Is Vitally Important

What is most noticeable in the Chronicler's story of Uzziah are all the allusions and connections to the stories of other kings who began well but ended badly—Solomon, Saul, Jeroboam I, Joash. In every case, the root problem was a false sense of accomplishment that gave birth to pride and arrogance.

There is a reason Scripture often calls us to seasons of remembrance and reflection, and it certainly is not to bolster our flagging sense of self-worth with a rehearsal of our greatest accomplishments. No, any honest review of our lives would reveal how much we have been undeservedly blessed; our accomplishments are rarely our own. We have often had others help us in crucial ways at key moments and, most certainly, we have been strengthened by the hand of God. The real tragedy of Uzziah's life is that he simply became another king who "forgot where he came from," as the old saying has it.

» *What do you do personally to maintain a thankful heart?*

III. FALLEN HEROES—A CALL TO REFLECTION

A. Humans Not Heroes

As this lesson draws to a close, we can draw some key truths from the sobering example of King Uzziah. First, we can be thankful that the story of Uzziah is in the Bible. Perhaps one of the most wonderful things about Scripture is its realism about human nature. The kings of Israel and Judah are no comic-book superheroes or Hollywood movie stars with near-magical superpowers or unbelievable good looks and charm. No, the kings of Israel were real flesh and blood. There is no attempt in either Kings or Chronicles to cover for Uzziah's sin, but neither do the books ignore the good he accomplished. Both his successes and his failures are there for all to see.

Such honesty lets this story serve as both encouragement and warning. Like Uzziah, if we are faithful to God, we know God will bless us and prosper us in our work for the kingdom of God. If, however, we let our hearts be lifted up with pride—if we ever confuse our blessings as our accomplishments—then we run the risk of a ruinous fall.

B. Re-Envisioned History

The story of Uzziah also demonstrates the importance of revisiting our past, over and over again. Though we cannot date the composition of the books with absolute precision, it is clear that Kings presents to us an “exilic” perspective on Israel’s monarchical history, focused largely on explaining the national tragedy of the Exile. Chronicles comes from a later generation and utilizes a “post-exilic” perspective, focused more on finding patterns of hope and warning in Israel’s national story to inspire and exhort those who are trying to rebuild a fallen nation.

Chronicles, however, is not “revisionist” history; rather it is “re-envisioned” history. As was noted above, the Chronicler did not simply focus on Uzziah’s successes; in fact, he offered a more detailed record of Uzziah’s sin! Clearly, the Chronicler wanted to emphasize the importance of treating the newly-rebuilt Temple with reverence, but it seems he wanted to do something greater. If Israel was to succeed in rebuilding herself as a nation, she must address this nationalized pattern of early success followed by pride and apostasy.

» *What is one thing you wish you could tell your younger self about what it means to live for God successfully?*

C. We Must Begin and End Well

The lessons of faithfulness from the life of Uzziah still apply to us. First of all, the biblical metric for the “good life” is not success but faithfulness. By most external measures that we utilize today, Uzziah’s reign was successful. It was a period of peace and prosperity, there was a strong military, and international trade and commerce revived. It is not enough to simply begin well; we must also end well, maintaining our faithfulness to God.

» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Beryl Markham, the first person to fly the Atlantic solo from east to west, said in her memoir, *West with the Night*: “If a man has any greatness in him, it comes to light, not in one flamboyant hour, but in the ledger of his daily work.” If there is anything to be learned from the life of Uzziah, it is that a lifetime of faithfulness to God always comes down to today’s decisions. The question that faces us is not “Will you be faithful to God *for the rest of your life?*” but “Will be you faithful to God *today?*”

Josiah and the Power of Obedience

FOCUS THOUGHT

God expects us to obey His Word.

»» FOCUS VERSE

II Kings 22:13

Go ye, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.

»» LESSON TEXT

II Kings 22:8–13, 18–20

8 And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it.

9 And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the LORD.

10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.

.....

18 But to the king of Judah which sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard;

19 Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the LORD, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the LORD.

20 Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.

CULTURE CONNECTION

ADVICE FROM AN ELDER

Wayne and Gayle Ellard had been pastoring in Greenville, Mississippi, for around twenty years when the district superintendent, G. R. Travis, came to discuss retirement. He was traveling and encouraging the Mississippi ministers and their churches to invest in a retirement plan with the UPCI. Pastor Ellard had believed in pouring as much as possible back into the church and did not in any way want to be a burden or take advantage of the people he served. Due to the insistence of a trusted church official and the desire of the church to start retirement for their pastor, Wayne Ellard agreed to obey the advice of his elder.

Around age fifty-five it became apparent that Pastor Ellard was suffering from an illness the doctors in Mississippi could not diagnose. After suffering for close to ten years, and at the recommendation of his doctors, the Ellards moved to Colorado to be with two of their daughters and receive better medical attention.

He was diagnosed with Primary Progressive Aphasia, and God opened the door for him to be able to live in a new, beautiful care center with medical personnel who understood this illness. The time he was there was completely paid for by his retirement fund. He and his family were treated with respect and honor as he finished his life on this earth. The month the retirement fund ran out was the month God took Pastor Ellard home. God knew what would be needed years in advance and worked through His people's obedience to bring it to pass.

OUTLINE

I. AN ERA OF REVIVAL

- A. The Disastrous Reign of Manasseh
- B. The Dawning of Hope
- C. God Can Intervene in My Worst Circumstances

II. A NATIONAL TRAGEDY

- A. The Death of Josiah
- B. The Dissipation of the Revival
- C. Sometimes Good People Face Tragedy

III. THE MANY FACES OF FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE

- A. To Obey Is Better Than to Succeed
- B. The Aftereffects of Josiah's Revival
- C. We Must Remain Faithful in the Face of Failure

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs, and Henry Ford. These names are all quickly recognized as three of the world's greatest twentieth-century inventors. However, not many would recognize the names Spencer Silver and Art Fry. Yet it is no stretch to say their invention is even more ubiquitous than the iPhone.

Spencer Silver was an engineer working at 3M in 1968, trying to create super-strong adhesives for the aerospace industry. He discovered a type of adhesive called acrylate copolymer microspheres (ACMs). Unfortunately, instead of being incredibly strong, ACMs were incredibly weak. However, they did have two unique features. First, when removed from a surface, they left no residue. Second, even after being adhered to a surface, they retained their stickiness and were effectively reusable multiple times.

Five years later, in 1973, Silver approached Geoff Nicholson, 3M's products laboratory manager, with an idea for a product—an ACM-

coated bulletin board. Papers could be stuck to it without using thumbtacks or staples and could be removed without getting any “sticky stuff” on the displayed items.

Enter Art Fry, a 3M product development engineer. He was already familiar with Silver’s ACM adhesives and his proposed bulletin board. However, Fry sang in a church choir and constantly dealt with the problem of his paper song-page markers falling out of the hymnal. Then he had an idea: Why not use some of Silver’s ACM adhesive on the page markers to keep them in place? Fry then suggested to Silver and Nicholson that they put the adhesive “on a piece of paper and then we can stick it to anything.” And, just like that, the Post-It Note was born.

From one perspective, Spencer Silver’s work could be considered a total failure; from another point of view, though, it could be considered a stunning success. In today’s lesson, we will explore the life of a Judean king whose own story can be read in two very different ways. And it reminds us, just like the lowly Post-It Note, that not every so-called “failure” is quite as disastrous as it first may seem.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. AN ERA OF REVIVAL

A. The Disastrous Reign of Manasseh

His fifty-five-year reign in Jerusalem was the longest of all the kings of Israel or Judah (II Kings 21:1). Usually, in Scripture, long reigns (like long lives) are symbolic of divine blessing on righteous living. However, in the case of Manasseh, quite the opposite is true. He not only was Judah’s longest-reigning king but also its most wicked ruler. The author of Kings catalogued many of Manasseh’s offenses, comparing them to the prior occupants of the land (II Kings 21:2, 9).

In other words, under the reign of Manasseh, Judah became more wicked than the Canaanites whom the Lord had destroyed when Israel conquered the Promised Land! This is a key part of the reason that during the reign of Manasseh God first proclaimed His intention to destroy the city of Jerusalem and send the people into exile (II Kings 21:11–15). Manasseh set in motion the disaster that brought the destruction of Judah’s capital and Yahweh’s holy Temple.

» ***Why do you think God’s judgment so often takes years to come fully to pass?***

B. The Dawning of Hope

Against that extremely foreboding background, the reign of Manasseh’s grandson Josiah burst onto the scene with the light of hope. Josiah was the last and greatest of the reformist kings of Judah, in the tradition of Asa (I Kings 15:11–15) and Hezekiah (II Kings 18:1–8), both of whom walked in faithfulness to God. In fact, in offering an evaluation of the quality of Josiah’s reign, the author of Kings reported: “And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (II Kings 22:2). Josiah’s

faithfulness was unmatched, even by the “man after God’s own heart,” David! As great a king as David was, even his life was marred by his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her lawful husband, Uriah. (See II Samuel 11.) There was no such blot on Josiah’s recorded reign.

Josiah’s religious reforms were more extensive than any other. First, the catalog of King Josiah’s reforms exceeded the description of Manasseh’s sins (II Kings 23:2–25). Second, Josiah’s reforms included the destruction of the high places, especially the false altar of the Northern Kingdom erected at Bethel, an altar that had stood since the time of Jeroboam I and had become the iconic symbol of Israel’s apostasy. (See I Kings 12:28–33; II Kings 17:9–12.)

This second action was vitally important because King Josiah was used by God to fulfill a prophecy given by an unnamed prophet from Judah at the time of the altar’s construction (I Kings 13:2).

Josiah fulfilled this centuries-old word of judgment to the letter, even disinterring bones from nearby sepulchers to burn upon the altar (II Kings 23:16). In so doing, Josiah’s reform reversed the apostasy of both Jeroboam and Solomon.

Josiah’s final reforming action was to observe a national Passover at Jerusalem (II Kings 23:21). The only other recorded Passover celebration of this scope is found in Joshua 5:10–12, just before the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

C. God Can Intervene in My Worst Circumstances

It is important to pause here and contemplate the spiritual distance between the reigns of Manasseh and Josiah. No one who lived during Manasseh’s reign, with its rampant idolatry and immorality, could ever have imagined a revival quite like Josiah’s. It would have seemed to the average onlooker as if all hope for national restoration and a return to God was dead. Yet Josiah’s revival was greater than any the nation had previously seen. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God commanded His people:

Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:18–19)

One of the most fascinating and pivotal figures of modern history is British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. When he came to power in May 1940, the nation teetered on the brink of total collapse. Churchill, however, with that bulldog glower and growling voice, was able to inspire the nation to continue resisting. In his book about Churchill, *Darkest Hour: How Churchill Brought England Back from the Brink*, author Andrew McCarten points out a key reason why Churchill’s words were so inspiring: “In stark contrast to Hitler’s egomaniacal speeches—which emphasized the word ‘I’—Churchill . . . knew the power of ‘We’ when exhorting the British public to take up such a fearful struggle.” Churchill’s words, like the words of the rediscovered Book

of the Law in Josiah's day, were able to inspire hope and courage. And yet today, the Word of God should continue to inspire us to never give up hope, even when all appears to be hopeless.

» *What passage of Scripture do you often turn to when you need inspiration?*

II. A NATIONAL TRAGEDY

A. The Death of Josiah

It is fun to speculate about the national feeling in the weeks following Josiah's celebration of the first national Passover since Joshua's day. The atmosphere could only be described as euphoric. True change had come at last; the sins of past generations had finally been dealt with. In the midst of this revival, the conclusion of the story of Josiah's reign comes like a thunderclap. In one brief verse, the author of Kings tells us Josiah went to war and was killed (II Kings 23:29). Scholars today are still puzzled by Josiah's actions in this matter. It does not appear Pharaoh Necho was threatening Judah, so why did Josiah go out to meet him in battle? Josiah's actions are not presented as foolishly provocative nor as rebellious against God's Word. It appears Josiah was simply doing what he felt was right to protect his kingdom, and he died for his efforts.

B. The Dissipation of the Revival

Unfortunately, Josiah's untimely and unexplained death quickly killed the revival's momentum. Jehoahaz, his son, was quickly deposed as the Judean king, and his brother Jehoiakim was set up as a pro-Egyptian "puppet-king" of Judah. As the memoirs of the prophet Jeremiah testify, Jehoiakim was nothing like his righteous father. He plundered the newly restored Temple to pay tribute to Egypt and imposed a heavy and oppressive tax on the people of God (II Kings 23:35). The concluding evaluation of Jehoiakim's reign by the author of Kings is made more tragic in its brevity: "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done" (II Kings 23:37). All the good Josiah had accomplished was undone by Jehoiakim.

C. Sometimes Good People Face Tragedy

The difficult reality is that bad things do happen to good people for no apparent reason. Even though we know such suffering is ultimately the result of sin's corruption of God's perfect world, such an understanding does not assuage our grief when we see those we love caught in the throes of pain and heartache. These are the moments that can push our faith to its breaking point. If we are honest, we all, at one point or another, have wrestled with what C. S. Lewis called "the problem of pain."

Yet if we are to persist in our honesty, we would also be forced to admit the truth of Lewis's further observation about the reality of pain: "I have seen great beauty of spirit in some who were great sufferers. I have seen men . . . grow better not worse with advancing years, and I have seen the last illness produce treasures of fortitude

and meekness from most unpromising subjects” (*The Problem of Pain*). The deepest mystery of pain’s reality lies not in the suffering, but in the wondrous beauty only pain’s endurance can produce.

- » *Consider for a moment one of the most difficult or painful times in your life. Would you say it made you a better person? If so, in what ways has suffering and pain actually benefited you? How can you use the lessons you have learned to help others cope with their pain?*
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III. THE MANY FACES OF FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE

A. To Obey Is Better Than to Succeed

Josiah’s death, even today, calls into question the value of his reform. Certainly, he was the greatest reformer the nation had ever known, restoring the rule of God among the people of God to an extent unmatched by any before or after him. So what? When he died, his sons went right back to following the evil ways of their great-grandfather Manasseh. In fact, Josiah’s reforms lasted so short a time, it is difficult to even describe them as a “success.” Honestly, Josiah’s reign would appear to be better categorized as a failure.

This becomes even more certain when we consider the prophecy of Huldah to Josiah, given before Josiah ever launched his reform program:

Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. (II Kings 22:16–17)

Josiah’s reforms were not enough to reverse God’s decision to destroy Jerusalem and send Judah into exile! Then why would Josiah exert so much energy on a reform that was useless? Quite simply, because doing the right thing is more important than being successful. Once Josiah learned from God’s Word what obedience to the covenant required, the outcome no longer mattered.

- » *Why is it so easy for us to fall into the trap of serving God in order to get something from Him?*
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B. The Aftereffects of Josiah’s Revival

Before we assign Josiah’s reform to the category of “Abject Failure,” we should consider briefly a story from the Book of Jeremiah, taken from the time after the city had fallen to the Babylonians. As would be expected, it was a time of tremendous upheaval. Within just a few weeks or months of his appointment, the Babylonian governor Gedaliah was assassinated by Ishmael ben Nethaniah (Jeremiah 41:1–3).

The day after, a group of eighty pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem to mourn the loss of the Temple. Ishmael, fearing discovery of his crime, murdered all of them in cold blood and buried them in a mass grave (Jeremiah 41:4–7). However, what gets lost in the horror of all this senseless bloodshed is the brief aside that these pilgrims came “from Shechem, from Shiloh, and from Samaria” (verse 5), cities located in the region of the long-overthrown Northern Kingdom.

Ever since the days of Jeroboam, Israel had been rife with idolatry and false worship. There were no righteous northern kings; every one of them was wicked and evil. Yet Josiah’s brief foray decades before into the territory of the Northern Kingdom to destroy the shrine at Bethel seems to have brought something of a revival to the remnant of the people left there. Though Josiah’s reforms did not last in Jerusalem, they had a lasting effect in these northern cities!

C. We Must Remain Faithful in the Face of Failure

Was Josiah’s reform a failure? The answer, it seems, is not clear-cut. Certainly, Josiah’s reforms did not rescue the city of Jerusalem from destruction, but they did revive the worship of God in northern territories long overrun by idolatrous worship. Josiah’s reforms may not have had the lasting effect he hoped for, but they did have a lasting effect!

This points us again to the importance of faithfulness, even in the face of apparent failure. Just because we do not achieve our purposes or goals does not mean our obedience and faithfulness do not achieve any purpose or goal. In fact, obedience to God is never about achieving our purposes, but should always be focused on achieving His purpose.

» *Have you ever faced a situation where you had to obey God without understanding why? Was it difficult? Why? What thoughts and feelings did you battle? In the end, what was the result of your obedience?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

It is important that we understand Josiah did not simply obey God because He hoped to get God to bring him success and prosperity. Josiah obeyed God because God is to be obeyed. Too often, we treat obedience and faithfulness as a means to an end—success, happiness, fulfillment, contentment—when, in reality, obedience and faithfulness must be seen as ends in and of themselves. Otherwise, obedience simply becomes another tool in the sinful human quest to control God and make Him do what we want. The fundamental principle of Scripture is that God is God . . . and we are not: “We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture” (Psalm 100:3, NKJV).

The Righteous Judge

FOCUS THOUGHT

God loves us enough to judge our rebellion.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSES

II Chronicles 36:15–16

And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy.

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

II Chronicles 36:11–21

11 Zedekiah was one and twenty years old when he began to reign, and reigned eleven years in Jerusalem.

12 And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD his God, and humbled not himself before Jeremiah the prophet speaking from the mouth of the LORD.

13 And he also rebelled against king Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God: but he stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning unto the LORD God of Israel.

14 Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem.

15 And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place:

16 But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy.

17 Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand.

18 And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king, and of his princes; all these he brought to Babylon.

19 And they burnt the house of God, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt all the palaces thereof with fire, and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof.

20 And them that had escaped from the sword carried he away to Babylon; where they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia:

21 To fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years.

CULTURE CONNECTION

THE DANGER OF NO DISCIPLINE

Doctors and nurses scurried around the emergency cubical as a young mother attempted to calm her toddler. The child sobbed uncontrollably as nurses carefully removed the first-aid bandage from her charred and blistered hand. The damage was so severe, amputation would have to be considered. At best there would be permanent nerve damage that would be a reminder of the incident for as long as she lived.

As the staff wheeled the frightened child off to the operating room, the responding officer began asking the mother for additional information. The mother said her daughter had been electrocuted when she inserted a metal rod into the electrical junction box on the side of the warehouse where her husband worked. The mother and daughter were waiting for the father to get off work when the toddler found the piece of metal and began trying to pry the electrical cover open.

“Do you mean you just watched your daughter playing around the high-voltage box?” asked the officer.

“Yes,” answered the mother defensively, “I had warned her twice, but she was being stubborn. I don’t believe in nagging or spanking, so all I did was watch.”

OUTLINE

I. Zedekiah Became King of Judah

- A. He Did Evil in the Eyes of the Lord and His Heart Was Hardened
- B. He Defiled the Temple of the Lord
- C. Hardened Hearts Lead to Rebellion

II. THE LORD SENT MESSENGERS

- A. The People Mocked God’s Messengers
- B. The People Despised God’s Word
- C. God Will Compassionately Reach for Those Who Have Rebelled against Him

III. GOD JUDGED JUDAH’S REBELLION

- A. The Lord Sent the Babylonians
- B. The Babylonians Destroyed the Temple and Broke Down Jerusalem’s Wall
- C. God Will Judge Those Who Rebel against Him

IV. THOUGH GOD WILL JUDGE, HE ALSO WANTS TO PARDON

- A. He Loves Us Enough to Judge Us
- B. He Desires for Us to Turn from Our Rebellion and Receive His Pardon

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We tend to criticize the rebellious attitude or actions of others while brushing off our own sin as a mistake or a moment of weakness. Our sinful nature leads us along the path of sin, justification of certain behaviors, and the internal delineating of our value of the sin versus its consequences. The desire to do things our own way and the belief that we know best is a result of sin. Realizing this tendency is an important step in identifying the rebellious nature that resides in each of us. God “calls out” our sin not to shame us or punish us, but to bring us to repentance so we can be restored to Him.

I. ZEDEKIAH BECAME KING OF JUDAH

Second Chronicles 36 contains the account of the heartbreaking demise of a nation. It is an iconic warning to humanity, the story of a nation and a king who disregarded God and blundered into oblivion. The king was twenty-year-old Zedekiah. While his tender age and inexperience may have contributed to his ultimate destruction, the Bible clearly delineates the core reasons for this king's failure. The account also explains why God felt the need to respond with righteous judgment. He would not stand by as His people disobeyed.

A. He Did Evil in the Eyes of the Lord and His Heart Was Hardened

Second Chronicles 36:12 tells us that Zedekiah “did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD his God, and humbled not himself.” One translation says “he was a stubborn man.” The hardening of a heart is a frightening thing. It is like the deadening of nerve endings. People who begin down that path actually convince themselves to believe their own lies. This does almost irreparable damage. According to Proverbs 29:1, “He, that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.”

Zedekiah's “stiffened neck” and hard heart (II Chronicles 36:13) caused him to resist the prophet Jeremiah and even King Nebuchadnezzar. The result was complete chaos among all of the nation's leaders.

» ***How do God's rules serve as a protection against evil?***

B. He Defiled the Temple of the Lord

As can often be observed not only in Bible stories, but also in contemporary life, evil always takes people beyond innocent mistakes to an in-your-face kind of bad behavior. It was not enough to do what he wanted; Zedekiah had to do it in a way that showed disrespect toward God and His Word. Once the evil was set in motion, it eventually polluted the most important things in their lives. “All the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem” (II Chronicles 36:14).

C. Hardened Hearts Lead to Rebellion

Satan, flesh, and sin are never content to simply do wrong; they are intent on being in charge. Thus, rebellion always follows unrepentance. Rebellion has often been glamorized, but when one rebels against benevolent leaders, the result is never good for the rebel. Like the toddler in our opening story, those who rebel will experience dire outcomes. But unlike the parent in our opening story, God will do something to salvage His people.

The above is a predictable pattern: (1) people do evil, (2) harden their heart, (3) disrespect spiritual authority, and (4) eventually rebel against God. Since the end of this pattern is self-deception and destruction, every believer would be wise to notice the early signs of unrepentant sin and then pay special attention when they begin to feel a rift between them and their local church or someone in leadership. These are red flags that, if ignored, mark the point at which the enemy begins to gain the upper hand and soon separates the sheep from the flock.

» *What are some safety nets to help us avoid developing a hard heart?*

II. THE LORD SENT MESSENGERS

A. The People Mocked God's Messengers

Since God is loving and merciful, He continually reaches for people who are caught in this downward spiral. His primary means of saving them is through words of warning sent through willing vessels. Second Chronicles 36:15–16 points out that “the LORD God of their fathers sent to them . . . messengers . . . but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy.” God sends messages until people stop listening. When people stop listening, there is no remedy. The only remedy is to heed God's warnings. This point underscores the importance of preaching and of having a teachable spirit.

Scripture is replete with stories that expose the arrogance and stubbornness of human nature. Noah's contemporaries laughed at the idea of judgment. David was ridiculed when he offered to kill Goliath. Children made fun of Elijah. Paul evidently had full-time detractors who followed him all over the world opposing him. And Jesus' ministry was plagued with accusers, questioners, and mockers. Ultimately, God in flesh was mocked while He was in the process of saving the world.

B. The People Despised God's Word

Mocking messengers quickly leads to a disrespect for higher authority, and Judah was no exception; they “despised His words.” Just as a parent must help a child who despises their words to learn the value of respect, God had to do something to teach His people respect for His Word.

The United States has been “Exhibit A” in this arena. America was founded on biblical principles and has enjoyed incredible prosperity as a result. Many of those principles are etched into the stone on federal and state buildings. However, as culture began to reject biblical morals and values, educators, politicians, and courts began to systematically attack the Word of God. It has been challenged in the Pledge of Allegiance, on US currency, and on federal buildings. Many have even demanded that the Ten Commandments be removed from all public buildings. The Bible has been banned from being taught in public schools and even barred from some public venues.

And it is plain to those with any discernment that the results have been devastating. America is experiencing the rise of rebellion. The rule of law is diminishing. Flesh is running wild. Truth has been defined as relative, and our culture has been weakened on every level, all because a nation despised the Word of God.

The good news is that our churches and our personal lives need not follow the same deadly path. We can preserve our personal integrity and the integrity of our families and churches by maintaining high respect for the Word of God. Disregard for His Word will bring righteous judgment in a very organic way even if God does not choose to send specific judgment.

» ***Can you think of a contemporary example of someone who demonstrated a high regard for God's Word both in word and in deed?***

C. God Will Compassionately Reach for Those Who Have Rebelled against Him

Hebrews 12:6 (NLT) declares, “For the LORD disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child.” In the case of Zedekiah and Judah, we see how God used prophets, kings, and circumstances to reach for them. But as their stubbornness escalated, so did God’s response. God is often trashed for taking action, but according to stories like this one, He is merciful and patient. In this case, He loved them and reached for them for over a decade.

A single mother was struggling to make ends meet and live a holy life. She had been baptized, filled with the Holy Ghost, and delivered from a number of destructive habits. From time to time this woman allowed her church attendance to lag, and before long she found herself re-captured by one or more of the things from which she had been delivered. In one of those vulnerable times, she became involved with an unsaved man and allowed him to move into her apartment. She knew this was wrong and soon began to reap the fruit of her choices. The man began mistreating her, became very demanding, and refused to move out.

One day she encountered her pastor in a grocery store parking lot. She confessed her situation and expressed her regrets, and they prayed together that God would forgive her and provide a solution. Upon her return to her apartment, she found the man for whom she had prayed very angry. He proceeded to chide her and then informed her that he was leaving and would not be persuaded otherwise. God had provided a way of escape even though it was her poor choices that put her in that situation. God is longsuffering and forgiving, always ready to forgive and restore those who approach Him with repentant hearts.

III. GOD JUDGED JUDAH'S REBELLION

Because of Zedekiah’s stubbornness, God used a heathen nation to discipline the nation of Judah. Their rebellion had to be dealt with. They had to be saved from themselves. It was a merciful God who reluctantly used Babylon to bring His own people back to their senses.

A. The Lord Sent the Babylonians

It is always sad to watch the disciplinary action of God. When the Babylonian soldiers descended on Jerusalem, Zedekiah and his family tried to escape, but they were captured near Jericho. That is when the king witnessed the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy: he was brought before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah and sentenced to exile in Babylon. But before having his own eyes gouged out, he was forced to watch as his sons were executed. Their execution was the last thing he would ever see.

It would have been better if King Zedekiah would have listened when God tried to correct him through the prophets. We would do well to pay close attention to this cautionary tale. How much easier our lives will be if we are the first to respond to conviction and visit an altar of repentance when the Word of God goes forth. Paul asked, "Do you not know that the goodness of God leads to repentance?" (See Romans 2:4.)

» *Can you remember a story or sermon God used to redirect your life? Explain.*

B. The Babylonians Destroyed the Temple and Broke Down Jerusalem's Wall

Not only was the king's family judged, but the Babylonians removed all the valuables from the Temple in Jerusalem. They broke down the walls and set fire to it all. The holy city lay in ruins. The sacred Temple was desecrated, and the nation ceased to be a nation because God's people insisted on doing things their way. Such is the nature of unrestrained flesh.

C. God Will Judge Those Who Rebel against Him

This story stands as a testament to the righteousness of God. He will not cheat, even for His own people. Many other Bible stories attest to this character trait, such as the judgment that came to Samson, the people of Noah's day, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God will judge those who rebel against Him because His righteousness demands it. Sometimes His judgment is delayed. Sometimes it is not recognized. Sometimes it is reserved for eternity. But judgment is inevitable. Although this may be a sobering thought to some, it is also a reassurance to those who believe in a just God.

If God did not judge, how could we be confident that He will eventually be fair in His treatment of Satan and those who stand before Him in judgment?

IV. THOUGH GOD WILL JUDGE, HE ALSO WANTS TO PARDON

A. He Loves Us Enough to Judge Us

Although God will judge us, His ultimate goal is to lead us to repentance and restoration. His discipline is meant to teach us a lesson. A pre-teen boy experienced this same kind of loving correction from a favorite uncle. The uncle was welding in the shop on his small farm. Although the boy had been instructed to wear welding glasses, his uncle caught him peeking, so he put down his welding rod

and proceeded to scold the boy for his indiscretion. The correction was not all that painful, but the boy cried, devastated that he had disappointed his uncle. The uncle was protecting his nephew from potential blisters on his eyes. He loved his nephew enough to discipline him. And the boy never looked at a welding arc again without eye protection.

B. He Desires for Us to Turn from Our Rebellion and Receive His Pardon

God's judgment is discipline, not retribution. He is not getting even or settling a score when He judges. His goal is always pardon and restoration. He is a loving, forgiving, and righteous heavenly Father.

» *Can you think of some biblical characters who were pardoned and restored because they responded properly to God's judgment?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

He lived a Huck Finn existence, coming and going as he pleased. The rest of us kids in the neighborhood considered him lucky. His parents did not nag him or set boundaries. Every time our mothers called us in for dinner, we secretly wished we had his life. He was roaming the streets late at night, going home to eat whenever he felt like it, and experimenting with whatever he wished. How lucky could a young man be?

From where I stood, my friend lived an exotic life. Once he showed up at our house with an owl on his arm. I mean, how many kids get to have a pet owl? Admittedly, he did a few excessively adventurous things, such as putting a water snake in his mouth, so when he opened his mouth it would stick its head out and flash its tongue. Of course, his unsupervised escapades led to more devious deeds, such as tying cats' tails together and hanging them over a clothesline to watch them fight.

As we grew up and entered high school our paths diverged, and I was aware that he was experimenting with drugs and alcohol. He was still doing whatever he wanted without anyone standing in his way. It was a few years later, while away at college, that someone gave me the tragic update. My lucky friend had been shot and killed in a drug deal gone bad. He did not even make it into his mid-twenties. He never knew the joys of marriage or parenthood. He never even got to grow up.

Suppose someone had cared enough to discipline my friend. Suppose they had loved him enough to teach him to discipline himself. Observing the end of a life that had been lived without anyone caring enough to hold him accountable gave me a fresh appreciation for our heavenly Father who loves us enough to judge us and hold us accountable.

To embrace God is to embrace His discipline. If we trust His character, we will eagerly count on His discipline and be grateful that He loves us enough to save us from ourselves.

God Is Faithful

FOCUS THOUGHT

God is faithful to those who turn to Him in humility and prayer.

»» FOCUS VERSE

II Chronicles 7:14

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

»» LESSON TEXT

II Chronicles 12:5–7

5 Then came Shemaiah the prophet to Rehoboam, and to the princes of Judah, that were gathered together to Jerusalem because of Shishak, and said unto them, Thus saith the LORD, Ye have forsaken me, and therefore have I also left you in the hand of Shishak.

6 Whereupon the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves; and they said, The LORD is righteous.

7 And when the LORD saw that they humbled themselves, the word of the LORD came to Shemaiah, saying, They have humbled themselves; therefore I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some deliverance; and my wrath shall not be poured out upon Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak.

II Chronicles 13:10–16

10 But as for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken him; and the priests, which minister unto the LORD, are the sons of Aaron, and the Levites wait upon their business:

11 And they burn unto the LORD every morning and every evening burnt sacrifices and sweet incense: the shewbread also set they in order upon the pure table; and the candlestick of gold with the lamps thereof, to burn every evening: for we keep the charge of the LORD our God; but ye have forsaken him.

12 And, behold, God himself is with us for our captain, and his priests with sounding trumpets to cry alarm against you. O children of Israel, fight ye not against the LORD God of your fathers; for ye shall not prosper.

13 But Jeroboam caused an ambushment to come about behind them: so they were before Judah, and the ambushment was behind them.

14 And when Judah looked back, behold, the battle was before and behind: and they cried unto the LORD, and the priests sounded with the trumpets.

15 Then the men of Judah gave a shout: and as the men of Judah shouted, it came to pass, that God smote Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.

16 And the children of Israel fled before Judah: and God delivered them into their hand.

SISTER PARKER

Minnie Weems Parker was in her forties when she heard about the Holy Ghost. She desperately wanted to receive this gift from God. It was during the Great Depression, and she was working long hours on the family dairy farm as well as battling a serious snuff habit. God delivered her from snuff and many other bad habits even before filling her with the Holy Ghost two years later.

The railroad track ran in front of her house, and she fed many “hoboes” with a warm meal and the gospel message. Her front porch was known as a preaching spot for traveling ministers, and many people received the Holy Ghost on or near her porch. As a result, she became known for miles around as Sister Parker. One particular night, men from other churches came to burn down her house. As they stood there with flaming torches, Minnie came out and began to pray. A white dove landed on the roof of the porch, and one by one the men left.

One night a man knocked on her door needing prayer for his dying baby. Minnie was sick in bed with a gallbladder attack, and her husband told the man there was no way she would be able to travel in her condition. Yet she got up and rode the man’s mule out to his house and prayed. The baby was healed, and so was she! From that moment forward, she never had another gallbladder attack.

Minnie faithfully shared the gospel and was a light to her community until she died in her early nineties.

OUTLINE

I. THE KING OF EGYPT ATTACKED JERUSALEM

- A. Shemaiah Prophesied to Rehoboam
- B. The King and Leaders of Israel Humbled Themselves
- C. The Lord Responded to Their Humility
- D. God Will Deliver Those Who Humble Themselves

II. ISRAEL WENT TO BATTLE AGAINST JUDAH

- A. Abijah Confirmed Judah’s Reliance upon the Lord
- B. Judah Cried Out to the Lord and God Gave Them Victory
- C. God Will Give Victory to Those Who Rely on Him

III. GOD’S PROMISE TO SOLOMON

- A. If My People
- B. Humble Themselves and Pray
- C. God Is Faithful to Those Who Turn to Him in Humility and Prayer

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

One of the greatest struggles a person has in his own flesh is the struggle with pride. Ego is inherent in each of us. It is always lurking beneath the surface, eager to be recognized, flattered, and lifted up. Pride drives us to succeed at any cost, living life on our own terms. We want to be self-made and we want everyone to recognize just how great we really are.

Deep in the heart of a Spirit-filled believer is the quest to live a life of true humility, but it cannot be achieved until the struggle against pride is won. It is astonishing how much effort it takes for humility to overcome pride to the extent it can flow outward in our conversations and actions. In the struggle between pride and humility we find truth in the saying “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

I. THE KING OF EGYPT ATTACKED JERUSALEM

Throughout Old Testament history, God's people found themselves at war with heathen nations. Most often, the cause of each conflict was rooted in the pride that had worked its way into their hearts and lives. The cycle repeated itself over and over: God would bless, the people would become proud of their blessing, their pride would lead to worldliness, God would bring an enemy army to do battle with them, and finally His people would humble themselves and pray, returning to a right relationship with God.

This is where we find Israel in II Chronicles 12. After Rehoboam had become king of Judah, he forsook the law of the Lord and led the people into sin. In the fifth year of his leadership, Shishak, king of Egypt, attacked Israel. The Bible tells us Israel was attacked because they had transgressed against the Lord (II Chronicles 12:2). Rehoboam had strengthened himself as king and was convinced he no longer needed to follow after the Lord.

» *Can you think of a time when you allowed the blessings of God to cause you to become arrogant, thinking that you had arrived? Explain.*

A. Shemaiah Prophesied to Rehoboam

God is a God of great mercy. He does not simply wait for people to rebel against Him so He can judge them. Instead, He will send a warning before He ever sends judgment. It was not the Lord's intent for His people to be destroyed by Shishak without first giving them an opportunity to humble themselves.

Before God turned them over to Shishak for retribution, He sent the prophet Shemaiah to speak with Rehoboam. The best way to deal with the actions and attitudes resulting from foolish pride is to address the problem head-on, and that is exactly what Shemaiah did. He told the king, "Thus saith the LORD, Ye have forsaken me, and therefore have I also left you in the hand of Shishak."

» *In reflecting on your life, can you recall a time when God sent you a warning and extended mercy to you before bringing judgment to the situation? Explain.*

B. The King and Leaders of Israel Humbled Themselves

This warning struck terror into the heart of the king as well as the princes of Israel. They knew Shishak was a vicious warrior-king. They knew he was capable of destroying them and decimating their land. So their swift and humble response before the Lord was no surprise.

When our pride is confronted, a response is demanded. We can humble ourselves before God and fall on His mercy, or we can continue in stubborn pride and ultimately be destroyed. Like Rehoboam, we need to be quick to respond in humility and bow our faces before Him.

C. The Lord Responded to Their Humility

In their humble response, they declared, “The Lord is righteous.” There is more depth in that simple statement than we may realize. It was both an admission that their proud actions had been unrighteous, and an acknowledgment that God was righteous in punishing them for their pride. They found the right response when confronted with brutal honesty in the presence of God. It drove them back to a place of humility where they could realign their perspective and put God back in His proper place in their lives.

The Lord told Shemaiah that because the people had humbled themselves, He would show mercy to them. He would not allow Shishak to completely destroy them. Instead, the Egyptian king would only be allowed to take the treasures of the house of the Lord and of the king’s house.

D. God Will Deliver Those Who Humble Themselves

Shishak could easily have taken the life of Rehoboam and held all of Israel captive. But because of Judah’s act of humility before the Lord, the king’s hand was stayed from doing so. God proved to His people once again that He will deliver those who humble themselves.

They not only found out that “pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18), but if people will humble themselves, God will deliver them from pending destruction.

It is wise to remember that even though God delivered them, they still suffered the loss of their treasures. There may be times when God will spare you while still allowing you to feel the pain of what your pride can cause you to lose. He does this so that your loss can serve as a future reminder of the danger of allowing pride to overtake you.

» *Can you recall someone else in Scripture whom God delivered after they humbled themselves and prayed? Give a brief account of the circumstances.*

II. ISRAEL WENT TO BATTLE AGAINST JUDAH

Soon after this, Abijah, the son of Rehoboam and the grandson of Solomon, ascended to the throne of the southern kingdom of Judah. At the same time, Jeroboam, an evil king, was ruling over the northern kingdom of Israel. Second Chronicles 13:2 lets us know there was war between the two nations.

Abijah had assembled an army of four hundred thousand proven men, but Jeroboam had amassed an elite fighting force of eight hundred thousand men. The numbers alone seemed to indicate an easy victory for Israel.

Before a sword was ever drawn or an arrow ever flew, Abijah stood on the edge of the battlefield and called out to Jeroboam. He reminded him that God had made a covenant giving the kingdom to David forever.

A. Abijah Confirmed Judah's Reliance upon the Lord

Abijah continued his speech by telling Jeroboam that he had rebelled against the Lord. Jeroboam had gathered children of Belial unto himself to give him ungodly counsel. He and his people were worshiping false idols of golden calves, and the Levitical priesthood had been dismissed and replaced with worldly priests.

After letting Jeroboam know just how far his pride had taken him away from God, Abijah declared, "But as for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken him" (II Chronicles 13:10). He went on to say the priesthood was still doing service in the house of the Lord and that God Himself was with them as their captain.

B. Judah Cried Out to the Lord and God Gave Them Victory

Judah did not allow pride to make them think they could win the battle. Neither did they allow arrogance to drive them into a war they could not win. The words of Abijah were not offered from the vantage point of pride, but rather from a strong confidence that God was with them and would fight for them. He boldly warned Jeroboam not to fight against the Lord God of his fathers because he surely would be defeated (II Chronicles 13:12).

Jeroboam disregarded Abijah's words, and the battle began in earnest. He sent troops along Judah's flanks in an attempt to surround them and attack from all sides. No doubt Jeroboam was confident this strategy would win the victory.

When Judah discovered they were surrounded, they responded quickly. Interestingly, they did not reposition their troops. They did not fight back-to-back. They did not attempt to breach the battle lines. Instead, they cried out to the Lord, and the priests blew the trumpets. Then, as one voice, the men of Judah shouted a blood-curdling battle cry. God violently smote Jeroboam and all Israel (II Chronicles 13:15). They turned to flee, but were caught by the armies of Judah. Jeroboam lost five hundred thousand warriors that day—more than half of his fighting force.

» *How have you learned to depend on the Lord during difficult situations?*

C. God Will Give Victory to Those Who Rely on Him

Being humble before the Lord will pave the way for Him to bring you victory in the battles you face. Second Chronicles 13:18 gives the following insight: "Thus the children of Israel were brought under at that time, and the children of Judah prevailed, because they relied upon the LORD God of their fathers."

Relying on God tells Him you do not trust yourself to fight your battles. It is letting Him know you are humbling yourself in His presence and need Him to be at work in your life. You are leaning on Him and not on yourself.

III. GOD'S PROMISE TO SOLOMON

Several years before the biblical account of this lesson, God spoke to Solomon while he was the king of Israel. His instructions to Solomon contain a timeless formula for us concerning living our lives in such a way that God will fight for us and deliver us.

In II Chronicles 7:14, the Lord told Solomon, “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

A. If My People

We need to realize identity matters to God. He created us to be in relationship with Him. His desire is for us to be His people and for Him to be our God. In a world where the term *Christian* has become so broadly defined, we need to be sure we are truly His by being born again and having His name applied to our lives.

B. Humble Themselves and Pray

We cannot expect identity alone to be some magical formula for victory in our lives. The battle with ego and pride will constantly be with us. These two enemies will give us ideas for how to wage war; they will speak words of false bravado into our ears that can cause us to be destroyed.

The Lord told Solomon that His people needed to “humble themselves and pray.” In other words, He was calling them to go beyond the flesh and walk in the Spirit. We must not wait for life to humble us. We must not wait for circumstances to humble us. We must not wait for God to humble us. It is far better to learn to humble ourselves and pray, choosing to rely completely upon the Lord.

» *How can we humble ourselves?*

C. God Is Faithful to Those Who Turn to Him in Humility and Prayer

When you turn to the Lord in humility and prayer, you can have full confidence that God will respond. As He informed Solomon, humbling yourself and praying will get the attention of Heaven: “Then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (II Chronicles 7:14).

God could choose to move at any moment on your behalf. In fact, He could keep the battle from ever coming your way. However, He often chooses not to do so. Instead, He waits to see what your response will be when the struggle comes. He waits to see what role pride will play when you are confronted with the blessings He sends your way.

He will resist you if you allow pride and arrogance to lead you. But if you willingly choose to humble yourself and pray, He will be faithful to you and deliver you.

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The outcome of our life is determined by how we live moment by moment. The Word instructs us on every aspect of our lives. Yet some instructions serve as foundational principles on which to build our lives.

First Peter 5:5 says, “Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth

the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.” Take a moment and pay particular attention to the words “and be clothed with humility.”

Every morning, we look in our closet to decide what we are going to wear for the day. Often, our mood can determine which garment we choose. Sometimes the activities of the day will dictate the decision for us. Regardless, we choose our outfit for the day and then display it for everyone to see.

We also have a spiritual closet we enter into at the beginning of each day. The choices are laid out before us, and we decide how we will adorn our spirits for that day. James tells us we should be clothed with humility. Let it be the humility of mind, heart, and spirit that is put on display for all the world to see. By doing so, we are ensuring that God is on our side and will faithfully fight our battles for us.