

# Notes on I Kings 11–22

*By Grant Thorpe*

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## Chapter 11–12

The story has moved quickly to when Solomon was old. From the beginning of his reign, he had gathered foreign wives. Perhaps he thought that his own needs for political stability excused him from heeding the warnings of Moses (Exod. 34:12–16). He may have thought his own heart was secure from turning aside to idols, but it was not so. The warnings in two appearances by God did not prevent him from turning away. Now, he held to these idols in love and provided shrines for them. Solomon had broken the covenant.

However, God would keep his covenant. He would keep it in bringing judgement on Solomon's dynasty. He would keep it also by delaying the judgement and by keeping one tribe 'for the sake of your father David'. Here, as with Abraham and Moses, we see the purpose of God to have a faithful covenant partner to whom he could respond in love. David had been this faithful one, in anticipation of the Christ who would, in every respect be the beloved Son in whom God was well pleased. For his sake, God would have mercy on us all. God would also keep his covenant 'for the sake of Jerusalem', for no other reason than that God had chosen Jerusalem, but, related to the faithfulness of David. Who could find the reason for God's covenant faithfulness to us? It is because of his own mercy. His choice of us is 'in Christ', our faithful Covenant Head.

The Lord saw fit to send adversaries to Solomon. These had been in preparation since David's day. Hadad the Edomite, rescued as a boy from Joab's genocide, desired his own destiny rather than one under Egypt's protection. Ethnic identity drove him because he had no home in the living God. Rezon had belonged to the Arameans (whom David defeated), but rejected his king, gathered other rebels and returned to make his base in Damascus. He took control of the city and joined with Hadad to satisfy his abhorrence of Israel.

Israel was not permitted to abhor Edomites because of their descent from Esau (Deut. 23:7–8), even though Edomites had made Israel's passage into the promised land difficult (Num. 20:14–21).

The downfall of Solomon's united kingdom would come through the industrious young warrior whom Solomon appointed to look after the Northern labour force, perhaps those required to provide for repairs to Jerusalem's citadel. God sent a prophet to Jeroboam to announce his charter and his limitations. (Israel's kings, even Jeroboam who would lead a revolt, could not hope to succeed without a prophetic word.) He could do what God had told Solomon would happen, but he could not foil the purpose of God to keep a 'lamp' alight in Jerusalem for David and to have his

own name remembered at Jerusalem. He and his sons could continue to reign until God's purpose in the separation was finished, that is, if he kept the commands of God.

A 'lamp' is a figure of speech for a life or a dynasty. It could also signify divine guidance (Ps. 119:105; Prov. 6:23). God had been David's lamp (II Sam. 22:29) and David was a lamp for Israel (II Sam. 21:17). Now, the purpose of God in David would be continued in his sons (I Kin. 5:4).

Solomon did not accept that his kingdom would divide and continued in his political mind set. Jeroboam had to flee the country. In this state, Solomon's life and reign came to an end.

Perhaps we should see this in contrast to David who had accepted the chastenings of God.

Solomon's lavish expenditure, of which Samuel had warned (I Sam. 8:10–18), had bred resentment, particularly in the powerful Northern tribes centred in Shechem. (It is doubtful, however, if it was as harsh as they claimed. Solomon's reign had brought abundant prosperity to the whole country.) Rehoboam chose this city to be made king, perhaps aware that the North would have to be won over. However, Jeroboam was back and represented Israel's cause to the new king.

Solomon's older counsellors advised Rehoboam to moderate his Father's demands. The people would serve him if he served them. But the young king preferred the advice of his peers and rejected the loss of glory involved in downsizing his court. In this manner, God's judgement against Solomon was at work.

This episode demonstrates the folly of ignoring the advice of elders. It also suggests that service is the true spirit of leadership (Luke 22:25–27). Solomon could hold his large kingdom together, but his heir had little or none of his father's wisdom. Even at 40 years of age, he could not recognise the power of the forces set against him and moderate his demands with a view to the greater good.

It would be wrong to generalise from the particular elements of this story however. More broadly speaking, kingship involves discretion at all times, and severity and kindness at different times (see Proverbs 20:8, 26, 28). In Israel, kingship could be nothing less than representing the covenant faithfulness of God to the nation. We may compare God's own goodness and severity to his people (Rom. 11:22).

Rehoboam's claim to all his father's kingdom was thwarted. His ambassador lost his life and the young king had to content himself fleeing to David's city and with Judah as his kingdom. He could raise a considerable army, but another prophet succeeded in showing him that his had happened by God's will and that he should not war against his brothers.

Even if the king was far from God, he had to give evidence of divine assistance to retain his kingship. Rehoboam, wisely, did not contest the word of God. Jeroboam acknowledged the need for people to worship, but perversely, established rival worship centres at his Southern and Northern borders so that his people could continue to worship God without having to go to Jerusalem. He established a 'civil religion', religion used for state purposes. The Lord was one Lord with one centre where he made his name to be remembered. Jeroboam returned to the sin Israel committed while Moses received the ten commandments, making golden calves and saying these represented the God who had led them out of Egypt (Exod. 32:4, 8). He

ordained his own priests and feasts and sacrifices for which there was no command. This was the continuing sin of the Northern tribes because none of their kings ever abolished this political expedient.

### Prayer

Father, teach us to live by your covenant faithfulness and to keep our hearts from idols. We can never explain your mercy to us, but we have been assured of it through the faithful kingship of your Son. He has taught us to worship you in spirit and in truth. We have been made clean by his blood, and you call us your children.

We confess that we, your church, have often abused the worship you ordained by using it to serve our own ends. You have judged our untrue worship and so we suffer shame. Teach us how to live to your glory in these times, for Christ is still above all powers. When our faith is dim, the light of your Son still shines and we are again made bold. Thanks be to you Lord Christ! Amen.

### Chapter 13–14

Jereboam, perhaps wanting to place himself as an equal of Solomon (cf. I Kings 8:62–64) by offering public worship at his altar, was confronted by a prophet from Judah, or rather, by the word of the Lord. Already, the Lord had decreed the ruin of this altar, an event that took place under Josiah (II Kings 23:15). Jereboam opposed his word to God's, but God's word prevailed. Even now, his altar could not hold the offerings offered on it. There was even mercy for Jereboam in the word of the Lord: he lived all his life, not with a withered arm but a healed one. He had no reason to doubt the word of God or God's purpose to do him good.

The man of God rejected the king's hospitality, recognising that it went against the word of God to him. However, he was led astray by the old prophet's lie and found the truth of the word of the Lord in a lion's teeth. It is better to be a prophet killed by the truth than a king living by a lie. Graciously, God has killed us all in the killing of his Son, and raised us up in him too, so that we may live truly to him.

See the Martin Bleby song *The Lion on the Road*, in *New Creation Hymn Book Vol. 2/53* at the [New Creation web site: www.newcreation.org.au](http://www.newcreation.org.au)

Did the old prophet want the company of the messenger from the South? Did he want to test him to see if he would play with the word of the Lord as he did himself? Whatever the case he discovered, by the word of God in his own mouth, that what God had said would happen, not only to this fellow prophet but to false worship established by Jeroboam. Whatever compromises he had made in his life, he wanted to be with this prophet in his death and honoured the man who had brought a true word by burying him in his own grave. In contrast, Jereboam did not honour the servant of God or the word he brought. His dynasty was doomed from the beginning.

Further warning followed quickly. His son was sick. A word of God that his dynasty could not last could only be countermanded by another word from God. But he could not seek this openly when he had publicly flouted the word of God. His wife visited the prophet who had announced his kingship and called him to faithfully follow the Lord. Old Ahijah, living by the word of the Lord, recognised things his eyes could not see. Jereboam's wife heard how her son would die, and how her husband's dynasty

would end (after only a two year reign by another son). Their family would be treated as refuse by dogs and carrion because they were not like David. (We note that David is still the measure of all God's leadership of his people.) The son that would die would, of all Jereboam's family, be honoured, because in some way unknown to us, he had upheld the covenant of God with his people.

Israel would be struck and tremble like a reed in the water, perhaps an image of the unstable leadership which Israel would now have (cf. Luke 7:24). Then, she would be rooted up and be taken captive, a prophecy fulfilled some 200 years later when Assyria carried captives from the North across the Euphrates River. Their whole history would hang under this sword because of their love for idols.

God's name would be known at Jerusalem, capital of the South (now known as Judah), but King Rehoboam was far from godly. He led the people in adulterous liaisons with idols (provoking the Lord to jealousy in a term appropriate to an unfaithful spouse) more than at any time in their previous history and was just like those who did not know God. Even when Rehoboam was stripped of the wealth he inherited, he still behaved in a grand manner, unaware of the loss of his glory.

### Prayer

Gracious Lord, it is a solemn thing to worship you truly through Christ and your Spirit. It is a solemn thing also to live by every word from your mouth, and to speak your word so that false worship may be exposed by what is true. Then keep us mindful of your mercy and refreshed by your grace, for you will surely judge what is false, whether it be in ourselves or in another. Save us from trusting in the securities of our own making, for surely, there is no other King than Christ and no rest from judgement outside of his cross. Save us from the lusts of the flesh so cherished in this present world, or from living on the riches of a glory we used to have. Hear our prayer through Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

### Chapter 15–16

Abijam did nothing notable other than continue the sins of his father, and the war his father began. The remarkable thing about his three years is that God remembered his ancestor David: he remembered the pleasure he had in David, and, of course, the promises he had made to him. David would always have a 'lamp' or successor on his throne.

Asa's 'mother' was, in fact, his grandmother, suggesting that, with the early death of his father, his grandmother exercised leadership while he was still young. She was a descendant of Absalom and encouraged idolatry. But Asa later deposed her and instituted bold reforms. He was unable to break Israel's love for her 'high places' but remained true to God, like David. He had to resort to costly tribute to break the constant attacks made on him by the Northern tribes, an action which, a later history tells us, was rebuked sternly (II Chron. 16:7–10). Asa seems to have gathered the whole country behind him in re-establishing their northern defences, but not in settling their trust in God.

'High places' had been forbidden by Moses (Deut. 12), and were sometimes used by earlier leaders without condemnation, but, now, as idolatry increased, became centres of idolatry because of their previous associations with Canaanite practices.

Asa's alliance with Aram set events in place that later led to the fall of both North and South.

Meanwhile, in the North, Ahijah's prophecy (14:6–16) was fulfilled. Nadab, as careless of the word of the Lord (11:38; 13:4–6) as his father had been, reigned only two years and then all Jereboam's family were massacred. So ended the first of a series of dynasties. Baasha started a new dynasty but not a new policy. False worship continued and fighting with the South was perpetual (cf. 14:30). He tried to establish his own leadership, but it did not arise from God's faithful promise to David of a Christ to be Lord over the nations, and became one more vain attempt to replace the reign of God with the reign of man. A prophet came to Baasha with a message identical to the one given to Jereboam: his family would all die unnatural deaths. He had established his reign with violence and made no improvement in the country.

True to the prophecy, Elah and his whole household died through a conspiracy of one of his commanders. God used the wrath of Zimri to his own ends because his people loved their idols. But the conspirator had only 7 days of glory and was called to account by his country. He had not had time to shape or change the policy of the country but had walked in the ways of Jereboam. Omri had challenged Zimri, but part of the country favoured Tibni and so, for three years (cf. vv. 15, 29), the country was caught up in civil war. When Omri prevailed, it was only to perpetuate and further the idolatry with which the secession had begun. However, he bought and established Samaria as capital of the North and brought some stability to the region after fifty years of upheaval.

The scene was now set for the arrogance of Ahab who reigned in his father's capital and took Jereboam's sin to still greater lengths. He strengthened his position politically through a marriage alliance with Phoenicia, but weakened himself by embracing and promoting the false worship of his wife. (Perhaps he also felt he had to humour the local Canaanite population by promoting Baal along with Yahweh.) As a further suggestion of the arrogance of the times, Hiel ignored the prophecy against the rebuilding of Jericho, and the death of the builder's sons did not register with the North as to the danger they were in. But the scene is also set for one of the greatest of Israel's prophets.

### **Prayer**

Lord, grant that we may live by your promise and grow strong in faith. Set our eyes on your Son who has performed all that Israel and her leaders failed to do. Thankyou for his faithful shepherding of us all. We do not yet see all things subdued under his hand but we do see him crowned with glory and honour for his death. We do see him now waiting until all his enemies be made his footstool. Grant that we may not be dragged down by our weaknesses but encouraged by his gracious strength. We ask this in his name. Amen.

Father, when sin increases, and false worship is flaunted, when your people divide and wage war, when ambition rules and disorder covers the land, and when your warnings are ignored, Lord have mercy! Send out your word! Give strength and comfort to your people through your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Chapter 17–18**

The God of Israel still lived. Elijah stood before him and knew the purpose and heart of God for his people. From seemingly nowhere, God had sent another man like Moses who not only knew the heart of God but also was called and empowered to

participate in God's jealous care that his name be honoured. Elijah asked for one of the curses predicted by Moses (Deut. 28:23–24) to come, and to remain until his further word. James tells us that such effective and fervent prayer can accomplish much (Jam. 5:16–18). What James had in mind there was the healing of the sick and restoration of sinners, so, we may suppose that that is what Elijah also had in mind. How could God's people be so ignorant of their Lord? Would they turn from their idols and be healed?

Revelation tells us that two witnesses prophesied for three and a half years (42 months or 1260 days) with power to stop rain during that time (Rev. 11:1–13). They are a picture of the church that participates in the prophetic ministry of Christ to the world. John the Baptist had come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but every person who holds the testimony of Jesus is greater than John. It is the high calling of all who believe in Christ to share in the jealous love of God for the world which was revealed in him. Our prayers for the world are to be shaped by God wanting his Son to be known.

As famine spread, Elijah himself was fed by birds. God's word then led him to Phoenicia where he asked a widow to feed him. This territory was controlled by Jezebel's father, it was given over to Baal worship and Baal was the Canaanite god of rain, but God taught a bereft woman in this land that Israel's God was alive and that Elijah was his servant. She obeyed the word of the Lord in mouth. Jesus noted that it was a Gentile who had seen this gracious provision of God (Luke 4:25–26).

Israel's story is left for a moment while we are told about the crisis of death and resurrection through which this family passed. Elijah prayed another fervent prayer and a son was raised from the dead. Was 'calamity' the final word of God? Would she have to have all her sins brought to mind? Elijah believed this was a place where God was revealing his mercy and asked God to demonstrate that it was so. Here, God was doing for this family what he would love to have done for all his people.

Back in Israel, Obadiah's service to God in caring for 100 prophets and his concern at getting caught between Elijah and Ahab are in marked contrast to the bombast of Ahab and his feeding of 950 false prophets. Years of drought had not made him doubt that his policies were right for Israel and that Elijah was only a problem to be eliminated. He had not reckoned on the God who lives and before whom Elijah stood. Obadiah was wonderfully sensitive to God and his servants.

But not even Ahab could argue with the man who, as he well knew, had stopped it raining for 3 years. Only by him could the rain be restored. So Israel and their false religious leaders were summoned. The nation was not yet totally apostate but, as Elijah said, had been limping between two opinions. Even now, with Ahab watching, the people would not choose between the Lord and Baal, but they were happy to let the Lord prove himself.

Baal's prophets could draw blood but light no fires. Their antics, scorned by Elijah, emphasise the futility of all religion that does not arise from the word of the living God of grace. Elijah repaired an ancient altar to the Lord and made it for all Israel, ('Israel' meaning that they were a nation defined by prevailing with God, Gen. 32:28). Then he drenched the offering to demonstrate that no human intervention was necessary

in what was about to happen. Elijah waited until the evening sacrifice was being offered (as ordained by God, in Jerusalem), and prayed that the Lord would show himself to be Israel's God. He wanted Israel to know that he was acting for the Lord, that the Lord had turned their hearts back to himself. It is one thing to challenge false powers, but it is another to turn the hearts of the children to the godliness of their forefathers (cf. Mal. 4:6; Luke 1:17). This was the spirit and power of Elijah, and of his successor, John the Baptist—to bear witness that it is the Lord who can turn our hearts back to himself, and so, to assure the continuity of a true worship.

Fire fell, Israel worshipped the Lord and the prophets of Baal were bundled to the base of the mountain and slaughtered. Ahab was sent off to celebrate the coming rain, but Elijah climbed the mountain again to pray. He waited long enough to see one tiny cloud, then warned the waiting Ahab to get out before he got bogged. We are not told why the Lord helped Elijah outrun Ahab's chariot back to the latter's summer palace (or to the turn off to the same). Perhaps he wished to be first to tell the story so no false account could blur its impact.

### Prayer

Father, the nations are largely ignorant of your presence and grace, and many in the land are deliberately hostile to the knowledge of your Son. Even so, may we spread the savour of the knowledge of your Son everywhere. You have called us not to curse but to bless, but we pray also that you will bring to nought the vile idolatries that demand devotion and divert many from the knowledge of yourself. May our Saviour's grace be known!

When arrogance all but crushes the faith and hope of your people, and when false worship offers seductive ways to express devotion, grant that your servants may stand in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of your people back again while you confirm your word with signs and wonders. This we ask in the strong name of Christ your Son. Amen.

### Chapter 19–20

Jezebel could not be persuaded to celebrate the break of the drought as Ahab had. She spoke of what the gods would do to her if she did not kill Elijah. She feared no gods in fact. She feared only not getting her own way. However, her actions reveal the demonic powers behind all idolatry (I Cor. 10:19–20); she was not free at all.

Elijah's courage failed him and he fled for a safe haven in the South—the southernmost settled area of Judea. His witness on Carmel had not been his human strength pitted against Jezebel's but a divinely orchestrated confrontation. God would deal with Jezebel. In the mean time, God would help his servant and re-equip him for his next witness.

Elijah had not only run for safety. He tasted what he felt was the bitter failure of his mission and his failure as a person. His emotions and confidence were in tatters. He wanted to die. God sent an angel with food and encouragement to eat, and on a second occasion, told him he would need the food for his coming journey. Then we find him travelling 40 days and nights, like Moses (Exod. 24:18; 34:28; cf. Matt. 4:2), to the Mount of God (Exod. 3:1), again, like Moses. Clearly, Elijah was still being directed in his powerful, Moses like ministry. His journey would have been 400 kilometres long.

At the Mount of God, he was still bitter about his failure. 'Why are you here?' God asked him. All his humanity had been poured out for nothing. Other prophets had been killed. His life was being sought. He could not see any people of God remaining. However, he was summoned to stand where Moses had stood. In a manner reminiscent of Israel at Horeb before, Elijah saw demonstrations of the Lord's 'passing by' in a wind, an earthquake and a fire, but it was in a 'still' and 'thin' voice that God came to Elijah.

God asked his question again. Elijah gave his same answer. His depression was profound and persistent. But God had come to him. He announced the next part of the plan: he was to anoint three men. The first, a pagan king, would begin the judgement on Ahab and Israel's false worship. The second would continue the judgement and replace Ahab. The third would continue God's prophetic witness to his people and complete what remained to be done. There would be 7000 untouched by any of these judgements, people who had feared and been faithful to the Lord.

Perhaps Elijah then saw that he had assumed a responsibility for Israel which was not his to bear. The Lord himself would be responsible for his people. Things were not as they had seemed; the Lord knew what he was about, and Elijah was still his servant.

Elijah returned to Israel and anointed Elisha. Elisha signalled his change from prosperous farming to prophetic ministry by feasting with his workers, using the beasts he would no longer need.

We do not hear of contact with Hazael until II Kings 8:7–15 when Elisha foretells his kingship, or of contact with Jehu until II Kings 9:1–3 when Elisha sends a fellow prophet to anoint him as king. It appears that Elisha did these things in place of Elijah as the Lord had indicated.

How would Israel respond to Mount Carmel, and how would the judgements of God work out? Firstly, the drunken Aramean king, Ben-hadad, not only humiliated Ahab but provoked him into battle with outrageous demands. God's judgements began with mercy, however a prophet was sent with a promise of victory. God said: 'I want you to know I am the Lord'. This was the same point that Elijah had prayed for on Mount Carmel. Ahab decisively won the battle, apparently begun with a number of single combats.

But he would have to contend with the Arameans again. 'Perhaps Israel's God was only God of the mountains' they reasoned. Though Israel's army was pitifully outnumbered, a prophetic word settled the outcome. The Arameans had questioned God's sovereignty in his world. Again, Israel would know their Lord was God and that he had set Israel among the nations to bear witness to him.

Israel surely won the battle but Ahab lost the point of it. He preferred his own mercy and the generosity he thought it expressed to the purpose of God. Clearly, Ahab was still not prepared to be the servant of God, and his days were numbered. The severity expected of the prophetic movement tells us how deeply the Spirit had impressed upon them that Israel was to be about the Lord's business and not about protecting their own interests.

## Prayer

Father, the church is yours, all the earth is yours, and you yourself are taking out a people who will call on your name. The power of idols seems to make this impossible and we are often dismayed. Lord, have mercy on us, give us good hope, and fix our eyes on your Son. You have ordained, that by his death and rising, and by the power of the Spirit, he and his Church shall not fail.

Father, as you have called us to be your prophetic people, grant that we may understand your purpose, live in your mercy and not be ensnared in the ways of those who serve only themselves. For the sake of your Son, may we be ready to endure hardness as good soldiers of Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

## Chapter 21–22

Ahab had the immaturity of a child, having never disciplined his desires or thought through what it was right to expect of other people. He certainly did not understand the nature of the land as an inheritance given by the Lord to Israel. His 'whole world' for the moment revolved around having a pleasant grove next to his summer palace. Naboth was stirred to invoke the name of God to resist Ahab. We may wonder what hope he thought he had of holding out against Jezebel when she could so readily accomplish her ends. Did he think there was some religious reformation in the vacillating Ahab?

It was now clear that a man could gain no mercy in Israel by invoking the name of the Lord. (The failure of a nation to fear the Lord is never good news for the weak.) Jezebel's iron will reigned. But Ahab was still held accountable and could not blame his wife for what had happened (cf. Gen. 3:17). It was he who had given himself up to idols and their destructive reign had made the land like it was under the Amorites whom God had already judged. His reign was worse than any since Jereboam. Elijah was despatched to announce his sentence. Ahab's 'troubler of Israel' (18:17) was now 'my enemy'. His dynasty would come to an end, as had the dynasties of Jereboam and Baasha.

Weakly, Ahab cowered under his inability to choose and he put on sackcloth. God postponed his judgement to the next generation, a witness to us all of the amazing mercy of God. Elijah was not despatched with any further message but was told of God's compassion for this man. God had given Elijah no reason to call Ahab an enemy as Ahab had called him.

Ahab's respite lasted three years but his repentance did not translate into heeding God's true prophets. The nature of false worship in the North appeared through the visit of Jehoshaphat from the South. Jehoshaphat may have been the weaker party in the alliance (Ahab could make the conditions,—v. 30) but was the stronger for his fear of the Lord and eagerness for prophetic guidance. Ahab had 400 prophets (not the prophets of Baal but compliant so-called prophets of the Lord) who would prophesy pleasing things for him, but one prophet remained faithful. Micaiah pretended to be compliant as the others were and provoked Ahab to demand a true word. But Ahab had no intention of listening to a true word from God. Micaiah could explain the contrary prophecies of his colleagues. God could use them as well as true prophets if his purpose was to bring Ahab down. Naturally, the false prophets were not happy to be exposed, but Chenaanah, who struck Micaiah, would soon

retreat in embarrassment. As for Micaiah, he would languish in gaol waiting for a king who could never return, but his word would burn in the memories of all who heard him.

Israel and Judah's enemy, Aram, only had Ahab in their sights, and he could not escape the word of God spoken against him. Jehoshaphat's cry when he was mistaken for Ahab, may have been for help, or to identify himself, but a later history says it was the Lord who heard and helped him (II Chron. 18:31).

What then of Jehoshaphat? He was a good man and, with some exceptions, kept the covenant of the Lord with his people. His peace with Israel had come at a price however. The alliance was sealed with the marriage of his son to Ahab's daughter Athaliah who brought with her the contempt and arrogance of the North. More of this later. In the North, Ahab's son led Israel on in the ways of his father and mother.

### **Prayer**

Father, in days where policies are made because of greed, weakness lets the idols reign, and the poor in the land suffer for lack of your covenant provisions, grant that we may love your word, fear only you, proclaim the reign and grace of your Son and wait humbly for your salvation. Grant that many may recognise the cruelty of the idols and see the grace of your covenant in both its word and deed, and choose to suffer with those who love your name. This we ask in the strong name of Christ your Son. Amen.