

THE DOWNWARD COURSE OF SIN – R3399

1. Trace the genealogy of the kings of the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel from Jeroboam to Omri. Who was king of the two-tribe kingdom of Judah at the same time? How would you describe Omri's reign? What will it be like for Omri (and others like him) in the kingdom? (Par 1-4)
2. Who succeeded Omri as king? How would you characterize his reign? What lessons does Br Russell draw from the examples of these two kings? (Par 5-9)

HE CARETH FOR YOU – R3400

1. Why did God have Elijah announce the coming drought? What is Br Russell's point about the four Hebrew words translated "rain"?
(Par 1-2)
2. Why did God tell Elijah to hide? What is the lesson for us in the ravens feeding Elijah?
(Par 3-7)
3. Tell the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath? What are the lessons for us?
(Par 7-11)

THE DOWNWARD COURSE OF SIN – R3399

1 KINGS 16:23-33 JULY 31, 1904

Golden Text: Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. Prov. 14:34

1. A PREVIOUS lesson showed us the start of the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam as a split-off from the king of Judah. We noted Jeroboam's changes of the religious customs, so as the more effectually to separate the two peoples and thus to establish himself in power. We notice that although at first the holy places he established and the images he set up were to represent the true God, nevertheless these symbols led the people more and more to the general idolatry of the surrounding heathen nations. Jeroboam reigned twenty-two years, and was succeeded by his son Nadab, who reigned only two years and was assassinated. The assassin, a general named Baasha, became king and reigned twenty-four years, continuing in the course of Jeroboam and warring with the king of Judah. He was succeeded by his son Elah, who in turn was assassinated, after two years' reign, by Zimri, one of his generals. The latter ruled for only a week and suicided, chagrined that he did not have the support of his army. A civil war ensued, as the result of which Omri came to the throne, as stated in the first verse of our lesson.

2. Omri was evidently a shrewd king, and unscrupulous respecting the divine will and the covenant obligations of the nation to Jehovah. He followed the course of

Jeroboam in seeking to alienate the people from the true religion, and went still further in the matter of introducing idolatry and licentious practices connected therewith. He was, nevertheless, what would be termed a successful king from the worldly standpoint: he strengthened his hold upon the people by the building of a new capital city, Samaria, and was generally reputed amongst the outside nations as a powerful king. Had his executive abilities been combined with reverence for the Lord and a consecration to do his will, Omri would have been a great ruler in the true sense of the word. But, instead, he led Israel into what our lesson terms displeasing "vanities"--vain religious ceremonies, that not only amounted to nothing good, but on the contrary were provocative of greater evils.

HE SLEPT WITH HIS FATHERS

3. Omri died after eight years' reign, the record being that "he slept with his fathers." This was the common form of expression in noting the death of all prominent people, whether good or bad. The Grecian theory, that when people die they become more alive than ever before, had not yet been introduced. The Israelites held the matter in its true and simple form--that death is a cessation of being, but that God had intimated a future re-living by a resurrection. In view of this hope those who died were figuratively

spoken of as falling asleep--to await the resurrection morning. Abraham slept with his fathers as did Omri; and so the Scriptures teach that, when the awakening time shall come at the Second Advent of the Redeemer, all that are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and shall come forth--those approved of God and those disapproved of him, the just and the unjust. Omri will evidently be amongst the latter class, of whom the Prophet declares that they shall come forth to "shame and lasting contempt." (Dan. 12:2`) Abraham as evidently belongs to the former class, and will be amongst those who will come forth unto the resurrection of life.

4. Abraham's trial is past, and we have the testimony that he pleased God. Omri, on the contrary, has the record that God was not pleased with him; but since Christ has redeemed all, Omri is to have a full and impartial knowledge of God's grace that he may thereby be tested and proven--whether, with a clear knowledge of the divine character and will, he will accept the opportunity and come into harmony with the Lord, and during the Millennial age will by obedience gain life everlasting or whether he will, with full light, still choose an evil way. If so, "the end of that way is death"--the Second Death--extinction. The measure of Omri's knowledge of right and his perversion of that knowledge will proportionately measure disadvantage to him when he comes to trial during the Millennial age; and so it is with every human being. In proportion as right and conscience are obeyed, character for good is formed that some day will be helpful; and in proportion as sin and wilfulness in wrong

doing have control, in that same proportion will character be undermined and the course of repentance and reformation in the future be difficult.

JEZEBEL AND HER HUSBAND

5. Omri was succeeded in his kingdom by his son Ahab, the notorious. He also was an able man, skilled in state-craft and unscrupulous. He was helped along in the downward way of his father and predecessors by marrying the daughter of the king of Tyre, Jezebel, who in the Scriptures is noted as a desperate character, and in the book of Revelation is used to symbolize the great mystery of iniquity which persecuted spiritual Israel during the dark ages. Jezebel's father was a priest of Baal, who murdered his father, the king of Tyre, and then succeeded him. Thus Jezebel inherited in a natural way her perverse and idolatrous disposition, and in marrying her Ahab secured an able accomplice in evil. Indeed, the woman may be said to have been the prime mover and instigator of much of the evil later developed in that kingdom.

6. Ahab built a temple to Baal at Samaria, and established in it an altar where sacrificing was done. Four hundred and fifty priests of Baal attended the altar and services, clothed in special priestly vestments. Thus was the true Temple at Jerusalem, the true altar of God, and the true priesthood appointed of God in connection with the same, counterfeited by Ahab at the instigation of Jezebel. Similarly we have in nominal Spiritual Israel a great counterfeit system misrepresenting the true on a gorgeous scale. We shall say more along this line in succeeding lessons.

7. The Golden Text is the pith of this lesson, illustrated on all the pages of history. The kingdoms of this world are not the kingdoms of our Lord--he is not their ruler; nevertheless the general principle expressed in the Golden Text prevails. In proportion as any nation conforms to principles of righteousness, justice, in that same proportion the nation is exalted; while in proportion to the prevalence of sin in any nation will be its tendency to downwardness in every respect.

8. When we look about us in the world and perceive that national policies are shaped by absolute selfishness, and that the rulers amongst men are very generally consecrated to doing their own wills so far as possible, we may well be astonished to see to what extent the influence of the righteous, the salt of the earth, exercises a preservative effect upon them. So far from wondering why the kings of earth are not better than they are, we are inclined to wonder that the laws and regulations of Christendom are anything like as good as they are. Undoubtedly there is in the great majority of the human family, at the bottom of their hearts, a respect for righteousness and truth and goodness; and were it not that this is overbalanced at the present time by prevalent selfishness and evil influence from every quarter, we might have hope for such reforms as many seem to expect, but which the Scriptures do not warrant us in expecting. Our hope, on the contrary, is that the Lord, according to promise, will establish his own Kingdom in power, superhuman power; that the great King Immanuel will subdue all

things unto himself; that thus released from present bonds of selfishness, evil surroundings and Satanic deceptions, the great majority of mankind will choose righteousness--choose obedience to the Lord--that their experiences under the blessings of the Kingdom shall, in the majority of cases, fix character in accord with the principles of righteousness.

9. All of the Lord's people, in proportion as they see the downward and degrading influence of sin, become more and more strong in their determination to uphold righteousness in their every thought, word and act, and to throw their influence upon that side of every question in every appropriate manner. In so doing they will be seeking first, primarily, the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and be in process of training for the great privileges of the Kingdom time, that they may be associated with the Lord in the bestowment of the blessings of that Millennial Kingdom upon all the families of the earth.

HE CARETH FOR YOU - R3400

I KINGS 17:1-16. AUG 7, 1904

1. DURING the period of Ahab's prosperity in his wicked course, leading the people of Israel further than ever into idolatry, the Lord sent him and the whole nation a rebuke and chastisement through Elijah the prophet. In order to thoroughly appreciate the Lord's interposition in the affairs of Israel--the sending of famines, etc.--we must remember that he entered into a special covenant with that nation at Mount Sinai when the Law was given them. According to that covenant, the obedience of the nation to the Lord guaranteed it earthly blessing and prosperity, while disobedience, idolatry, etc., insured it tribulation, chastisement, famine, etc. It is necessary to remember this special relationship of Israel to God, that we be not confused in supposing that every famine in the world's history, every pestilence, every war, etc., has been similarly of special divine imposition in chastisement, etc. God's relationship to that one nation was peculiar, as expressed by the Prophet, "You only have I known [recognized] of all the families of the earth."--`Amos 3:2`.

THE DROUTH PROPHESED

2. Elijah went to the capital city, Samaria, and presented himself in the presence of the king as the Lord's mouthpiece, as expressed in the first verse of our lesson by the words, "before whom I stand"--or whose representative I am. The announcement was respecting the dearth of rain, which, to people in that part of the

world, meant famine and death; and this dearth of rain and dew was to last for years. The Lord might have withheld rain without using Elijah as his mouthpiece in the matter, but in that event the lesson would have been measurably lost upon the people. By sending the message in advance of the drouth it would be evident to Ahab and to all who should ever come to know of the circumstances that the drouth was a judgment from the Lord, a punishment for sin. The drouth and the consequent famine lasted three and a half years, and it is difficult to imagine how the people could have subsisted for that length of time had no rain whatever fallen, as would seem to be implied by the language of the Prophet. However, it is remarked that of the four Hebrew words used to represent rain, the one here used is the one which is generally understood and translated to mean the early rain, the principal rain, which usually came in the fall of the year.

3. After the delivery of his message the Lord directed his Prophet to go eastward beyond the river Jordan to a brook which cannot now be accurately located. The Prophet was to hide himself--to keep his identity secret, his whereabouts unknown to the king. This was probably for two reasons: (1) To preserve him from special persecution as the one who had brought the trouble, and the one who, if he would, could remove it. (2) The inability of the king to find the Prophet, whose word alone could, under the Lord's arrangement,

revoke the drouth and famine, should cause the king and the people to appreciate the matter as a judgment of the Lord and lead them to look to the Lord for relief from their chastisements.

RAVENS GOD'S MESSENGERS

4. It is estimated that the Prophet spent about a year in the vicinity of the brook Cherith--miraculously supplied with food by ravens and with water from the brook until it dried up. There have been various speculations respecting these "ravens"--whether or not the word raven is here used in a figurative sense to represent various assistances, or whether ravens literally fed the Prophet. It is a matter of fact that the highland country to the east of the Jordan is just such a place as the ravens usually inhabit, and that bird is noted as "the most highly developed of all birds, quick-sighted, sagacious and bold." In defence of the thought that the Prophet was supplied by ravens, just as the account reads, the following stories are told as illustrating not only the sagacity of this bird and its natural disposition, but also as illustrating the Lord's providences in respect to other persons than Elijah.

5. A missionary writes to the S.S. Times respecting ravens that they had frequently snatched food from his children while they were eating. He tells the following story: "Our nurse one day prepared a fowl to be grilled, and, standing in the doorway, plate in hand, called the cook to come for the fowl. When the man came the nurse discovered that her plate was empty. A kite or crow had carried away the fowl without her knowledge." The same journal relates a story of an English nobleman, imprisoned and nearly starved, fed by a cat which

"appeared at the window grating every day with a pigeon from a neighboring dovecote, and dropped it there for his benefit; this act was repeated day by day during his imprisonment." Stanley's History of Birds tells of an injured Newfoundland dog which was visited at his kennel constantly by a pet raven that brought him bones.

6. The child of God will have no difficulty whatever in accepting the fact that our heavenly Father was quite able to use the ravens in supplying the needs of his servant. The lesson to the Lord's people in this connection is expressed in the inspired words, "He careth for you" (1 Pet. 5:7), "My God shall supply all your needs." (Phil. 4:19.) The Lord did not supply Elijah with luxuries, but with the absolute necessities. And so it may be at times with us. We may not have the superfluity and delicacies of the king upon our tables nor in our wardrobes, yet it may be well with us because of our relationship with the Lord, our realization that we are his servants and that he careth for us, and is making trials and disciplines of present experiences to work out for us much advantage every way for the future, as well as rest and peace of heart for the present. Let us remember in this connection the words of the Apostle, "Be content with such things as ye have." (Heb. 13:5.) We would not be understood as meaning that we should not note and avail ourselves of any providential doors that the Lord might open before us for a betterment of our condition, but we would impress the thought that contentment with godliness is great gain, and should always be the portion of the Lord's faithful people, as expressed by the poet, "Content whatever lot I see, since 'tis my God that leadeth me."

HEATHEN FAITH HONORED

7. Those who neglect thus to look for the Lord's leading and guidance in their affairs are not only missing a blessing to their hearts in the present time, but are failing to be prepared for the glorious things which the Lord has in reservation for his people in the future. The Lord could have continued the miracle wrought in Elijah's case--supplying the water and the food indefinitely had he so chosen --but in due time he permitted the drying up of the brook and sent his servant elsewhere, and the facts show and the words of our Lord Jesus prove that he was specially sent to the other location in the interest of a poor widow. This widow lived at Zarephath near the sea coast, in about the same locality as the Syrophenician woman whose daughter our Lord healed. Zarephath was outside the kingdom of Israel, and the widow was evidently not an Israelite, but a godly Gentile--like the Syrophenician woman, of greater faith than many in Israel. Our Lord's miracle, giving some of the crumbs of divine favor to the "dogs," Gentiles, indicates to us the Lord's appreciation of well-intentioned people outside of Israel, although under his covenant with that nation they were considered strangers, aliens, foreigners from God and not heirs of the promise made to the children of Abraham.

8. The widow to whom Elijah was sent had a little son, and the famine, which was heavy upon the land of Israel, naturally extended also to the land of Sidon, which lay along the Mediterranean seacoast. Doubtless the wealthy, both in the land of Israel and in the land of Sidon, could procure the necessities of life, and the

burden doubtless fell specially upon the very poor. The widow in question was gathering some firewood when the Prophet met her and requested a little water. The streams of that vicinity from the mountains of Lebanon had evidently not completely dried up, as had the brook from which the Prophet had just come, and the widow was able to supply him refreshment; but when he asked her for bread she was compelled to tell him the truth, that she was nearly as poor as himself--that the earthen pot in which she kept her store of meal (called in our text a barrel) was nearly empty, and that she was just preparing to cook the last of it, expecting thereafter that herself and her child would die of famine. The Prophet suggested that she first of all make a little cake for him, and that afterward he would guarantee as a Prophet of the Lord that her meal should not decrease nor her bottle of oil diminish until the Lord would send rain upon the earth, which would break the famine. It required great faith on the woman's part to accept this statement and give to the Prophet of her little store of food. No wonder the Lord was pleased to bless such an one-- pleased to send his servant to her, though in going to her he passed by many widows in Israel, as our Lord indicates. No wonder her faith is mentioned as a memorial of her.

THE LORD LOVETH THE CHEERFUL GIVER

9. There are several lessons in this connection for the Lord's people: First, the spirit of generosity--readiness to give to those who are worthy and are in need. We are not attempting to hold up the case as one having a parallel every day. We are to remember, on the contrary, the famine

stress of the times, for, had it been otherwise, quite probably the woman would have been justified in asking the Prophet why he did not labor for his own food instead of asking to share her bite. It was, however, a time of distress, of general lack of employment, etc., and the woman showed forth a noble sentiment of heart. Neither would we advise that the word of every stranger be taken so implicitly as this widow accepted the Prophet's word. Nevertheless, faith in humanity and faith in God and generosity of heart--willingness to divide our little all with those whom we believe to be the Lord's people and in need--will surely today as then bring a divine blessing, and we hold that it is better to err on the generous side than the reverse. Our heavenly Father is generous, giving continually of his substance to us all, and we are exhorted to be like unto our Father in heaven--kind even to the unthankful--generous to those who are not generous to us. Whoever cultivates this spirit cultivates the God-like quality, and thus is drawn nearer to the Lord and closely into fellowship with him, and is prepared for greater blessings to come.

10. It is estimated that Elijah's stay at the home of the widow, and their mutual participation in her little store of meal and oil, lasted about two to two and a half years. The Lord continually worked a miracle for their sustenance, and he is equally able to work such a miracle today in our interest if in his judgment it were necessary. But such miracles are unnecessary today and under present conditions, and should not be expected. Rather the hearts of the Lord's people should look for divine interposition in their interests as New Creatures in Christ Jesus.

How often has the Lord used figurative ravens and wolves to bring to his children needed spiritual nourishment! How often have the trials and difficulties and persecutions of the evil one and his blinded followers been overruled of the Lord for good to those who trust in his name. This thought is expressed by the Psalmist in that beautiful `twenty-third psalm`, in which he represents the Lord's consecrated ones as his sheep, led by green pastures and still waters: then changing the figure he says: "Thou preparest for me a table in the presence of mine enemies -- my cup [of joy, spiritual refreshment] runneth over."

11. The Prophet's experience at Zarephath also represents spiritual experiences of the Lord's people today. How often has the Lord provided his people with spiritual refreshments, encouragements, etc., through those who are not his children! As such experiences bring blessings to the Lord's people, they also bring blessings to those who are used to minister them, and thus the same lessons of experience today are continually ours as they were those of the Prophet twenty-five centuries ago. The lesson for us is the Lord's care and the propriety of confidence in him, and the realization that he is able to use any means he may desire in sending us his favors.