



Unlocking the Bible (17)



Hidden Dangers: Lessons from 1 Kings

We come now to the first of two Books of Kings. Along with the two Books of Chronicles these record the progress of Israel, now established as a nation in their own land under formal government. It should have been a golden era: alas it did not turn out that way.

In the previous book, 2 Samuel, David had emerged as “the man after God’s own heart,” redeeming the situation after they had requested a “king to be like all nations.” He had great aspirations to see God at the centre and being given a suitable dwelling place - the Temple. He was not allowed to do so but to pass that task on to his son.

It was Solomon’s privilege and responsibility to bring that dream to reality. The early part of 1 Kings records his endeavours to this end: gathering the materials, commissioning the craftsmen, and completing the task of building the Temple – a magnificent building worthy of God. It was appropriately dedicated with great ceremony and grandeur. It was the pursuit of another’s vision: he had fulfilled his father’s wishes.

This exercise of his gifts and abilities, and the goodwill associated with the venture, however, became a snare to Solomon. Using the same processes (tax and voluntary labour) he went on to build his own palace, extend his own kingdom and to amass even more of his own wealth. He, rather than God, became the focal point.

At the ostentatious dedication of the Temple earlier God had warned about such neglect. That warning was not heeded. Little wonder, then, that on Solomon’s death there was a revolt. The Kingdom was divided into Israel and Judah, idol worship became common and, by default, Ahab and his infamous wife, Jezebel, championed of Baal worship. God was ruled out.

It is against such a background that the second major character of this book emerges. Elijah, the prophet of God, challenges Ahab on Mt Carmel and wins. Through that victory God is vindicated and the faithful are again given their place. A corrective has been applied. God restores the testimony.

What can we learn from this collection of stories and record of events? Three principles suggest themselves. Firstly, any servant of God – however gifted with natural attributes – is only ‘safe’ when fulfilling the declared purposes of God, following in the revealed tradition and aspirations of those who have faithfully given themselves to seeing “Thy will be done on earth.” Without that, self becomes the central motive; leading inevitably to decline and disaster. Secondly, in such a situation the default position is idol worship. Tangible achievements are in danger of becoming self-sufficient objects of worship. Even in Jesus’ time the Temple was preferred to the Incarnate Christ. We may well ponder whether the institutional church is focused on our likes or does it reflect the purposes of God? But, thirdly, God is not dormant for in such times He raises His ‘agent provocateur’ to speak His Word and to challenge His people as to where they stand and whom do they really serve. We do well to heed such a call.