

Experiencing God's Powerful Words

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[0 : 01] As we begin, I am sure we are all aware in different ways of the power of words. Words positively! Words positively can move us to tears. The beauty of a story or a poem perhaps. But words can also move us to tears as we experience someone's anger or abuse.

Words can affect the course of our lives. Perhaps the wise guidance from a trusted friend leads us to a path of study or work that has gone well for us.

Or negatively, the cutting comments that a child experiences might strip them of worth and affect the course of their life negatively.

The power of words, in part at least, is related to the one who is speaking. If we imagine ourselves as children for a moment, if you had a brother or a sister who said to you, stop that thing you're doing, stop it.

Depending on your mood, that may have some effect. I suspect if parents say stop it, it has, should have a greater effect. But if a policeman invites us to stop something, then absolutely we're going to stop.

[1 : 22] The power of words are also connected to how much weight we allow them to have in our lives. And again, we will know this. There are some times we receive comments, perhaps criticism, perhaps praise, and we pay close attention.

There's this huge positive sort of impact on us. Other times, words might come and they're like water off a duck's back to us.

That's true with human words. And we all have that kind of experience. But if that's true with human words, how much more powerful are God's words?

And therefore, how much more weight God's word should have in our lives? And one of the things that the Bible does is to speak for itself about its power.

God's word is powerful. Think about some of the familiar descriptions the Bible gives. So we have in Ephesians 6, that description of the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

[2 : 30] Hebrews chapter 4, God's word is living and active, piercing to the division of soul and spirit. Those famous prophetic words from Isaiah, where God declares his word never returns empty, but always accomplishes its purpose, whether that purpose is judgment or salvation.

Or Jeremiah 23, God says, my word is like fire. God's word is powerful. Just by way of our own reflection, when was the last time you really felt the weight of God's word?

When you felt compelled by what you read towards a new obedience to God's command?

Well, this section that we're reading, it can feel like a kind of an in-between, those great miracles of Elijah being provided for, the widow's son being raised, and then we've got this great confrontation. But in this section, the spotlight really shines on the power of God's living word in contrast to that powerless silence of the idols.

[3 : 46] The power of God's living word will direct the prophet. It clearly gives courage to an administrator. It challenges a wicked king. It calls for obedience.

It calls for belief. It calls for repentance. And so we're going to hear it speak. And we're going to hear Jesus speak as we get into his word.

And as we begin to hear Jesus, the living word speak to us, as he would bring by the Spirit his word to bear on each one of us, will we let it cut deep to have its impact?

Will we let it burn within us so that God's desired purposes would come to pass in our lives also? So what we're going to do is we're going to think about each of the different human figures in the story and think about different aspects of how God's word comes to them.

So first of all, thinking about Elijah, recognizing that God's powerful word calls for obedience. So there is in Elijah's story this pattern of call and response.

[4 : 56] We first meet him in chapter 17, verse 1, and he is called by God to go into Ahab's presence to announce that there's going to be no dew, no rain falling.

And then he again is called in verse 3 of chapter 17 to go to a ravine, because God's going to look after him there. And then in verse 9 of chapter 17, again, he has to go to the widow's house to be provided for.

And in each time, he responds with obedience. And now we come to chapter 18, verse 1, He hears the call, he responds with obedience.

He's going to go back into the king's presence. He's no longer living in a different country in the background. Now he's going to deliver God's word to the king.

And with these words, two different famines are going to be over. So he announces, God says, I'm going to send rain. So the physical famine is going to be over.

[6 : 10] But now as God's spokesman speaks in the public sphere, the famine of hearing God's word is also over. However, the other great need for the king, for the nation, is to hear God speak.

This came, this book came to a group of people who also were outside of Israel. They were living in exile. And this message, as it would come to them, would speak hope for them, having lived in rebellion, having now been sent into exile, that they were invited to hear and to respond with obedience to the word of God.

So as we continue in Elijah's story, though, here, we recognize in verses 7 and 8 that Elijah is moving back into the country and he encounters Obadiah.

So obedience leads him to have this discussion with Obadiah. We discover that Obadiah has been on this task for the king. He's been searching for grass, for the animals.

And he's also been part of this search team looking to find the prophet in order, I think, to get rid of him. And we'll come back to Obadiah.

[7 : 29] But Obadiah is a striking character because he works for an evil king. But clearly he serves God as his true king. You can even hear it in the way that he speaks to Elijah. Is it really you, my lord, Elijah?

There's respect there versus Ahab. Oh, is that you, troubler of Israel? But as Obadiah and Elijah begin to have this discussion and Elijah says, listen, I've been told to present myself to the king, we get that sense that Obadiah is desperately worried.

Well, what if the spirit, Elijah, takes you away? Clearly he understands that God's spirit has been protecting Elijah from Ahab. And so he's always evaded his capture.

And Obadiah is saying, well, listen, if you disappear again from the public view, then it's my neck on the line. But notice what Elijah says towards the end of their conversation.

Verse 15, 16. As the Lord Almighty lives whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today. Why is he going to do this?

[8 : 34] Why is he going to take the risk of going into the presence of the angry king? Because he serves the Lord Almighty. God said, appear before the king, so he is surely going to present himself.

And so you get this picture of Elijah as the prophet of God, the man of God, who absolutely takes his marching orders for his life from God's word.

Even if it involves risk, because now he's back in public, and he knows that Ahab wants nothing to do with him, he is going to obey.

There is one voice that holds sway in Elijah's life, and it's the voice of God. And wonderfully, because he responds to God's word in obedience, and we'll see this next week, God is going to be glorified within the nation.

He's going to be shown to be the one and only God, the one true king, the only one who deserves obedience and worship, the one whose authority should never be ignored.

[9 : 40] There's this wonderful demonstration, in part because of Elijah's obedience. A couple of very basic points of application for ourselves.

The first, God's people are always called to obey God's word. It's a pattern you can trace all the way through scripture. Think about someone like Abraham.

Abraham is told, leave everything behind and go to the land I will show you. And in faith, he obeys. Or we can think of Moses.

Moses, who gets the message, Moses, I've chosen you to be the man to go and speak to King Pharaoh and to set my people free. And again, somewhat reluctantly, but with faith, Moses goes.

At a very different level, we've met a widow who is told by God through the prophet Elijah, go and make a meal for my servant in faith that you'll be provided for.

[10:47] And again, she goes. You know, trace it to the New Testament. Think about the command that Jesus gives to his disciples. Go and make disciples of all nations.

And the book of Acts records them doing exactly that. That God will always call his people to obey his word.

And one of the striking things, when you think about those stories and so many more, in none of those stories, is obedience, a comfortable thing. That there is always that sense where faith has us living on the edge.

Where we really need, instead of trusting ourselves and living in our comfort zones, we need to trust God's presence, God's power, God's promises. Faith says, come what may, God's word has the most weight in my life.

That regardless of how I will be received, I will submit to Jesus, the living word, and to the authority of the Bible.

[12:01] Because we've come to discover its truth and its power. To quote from Abraham Lincoln, who famously said this of the Bible, I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man.

All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this book. When we get that, then we understand the call to obey.

So just think at where we are right now, where you are in your own circumstances. How is God's word calling you to go? Maybe it's go and deal with that sin in your life.

Or maybe it's go, put things right with that family member, or that friend. Maybe it's the call to go to your job, or to your school, as an active witness for Jesus.

Maybe there's someone that God's put on your heart, and the message is, go and bring them words of hope, and comfort, and encouragement. But whoever God's word comes to us, and compels us, calling us to obey, will you and I say, to do your will I take delight.

[13:20] So God's people are always called to obey God's word. But I want to say secondly, that God's people obey for a particular reason. We obey because of love.

And I think that's really important to say. You know, Jesus makes the connection with his disciples. In a couple of years, he says, you are my friends, if you obey my commands.

And then, he puts it even more starkly, if you love me, keep my commands. So there's this connection between love for Jesus, and obedience to his word.

So, in other words, our obedience is not some kind of dull duty. What we're talking about here is not moralism. It's not, I'm trying to find God by doing enough good works.

I'm not trying to get into favor with God by some form of obedience. Rather, Christian motivation is different. Because God has already found us.

[14:20] Because God has loved us first, we respond with obedience. We let God's grace and kindness to us mobilize and motivate us to glad obedience.

We listen to the word of the gospel. The gospel that introduces us to the reality of Jesus, the Son of God, who fully, perfectly obeyed God's word and God's will.

An obedience that led him to the cross at Calvary. Where he would suffer and die. Facing the judgment for all the sin, all the wrongs that we have done, so that by his act of saving mercy and goodness and love, you and I can hear words of pardon, words of welcome.

And Jesus rose from the dead, and has sent his spirit to live in the hearts of his people, so that now in the gospel, we also have a motivation to obey, and a new ability to obey.

God has, in effect, performed a spiritual heart transplant, so that now instead of being hard towards him, we can respond in love and truly obey.

[15:51] To change the imagery, he has performed a prison break. He has broken the chains of sin that held us captive. Now that we are no longer slaves, again, we are enabled to obey.

We have freedom to obey. We have freedom in the gospel, and our gospel freedom is expressed in joyful obedience. Jesus doesn't set us free so we can live however we want to live, regardless of God's word.

Rather, Jesus sets us free, the Spirit sets us free, so that we might gladly obey. To give us that desire we never had before, now I want to live a life that pleases God, because of all that he has done for me.

Now I want to love God by loving my neighbor, because God has loved me and saved me. And so perhaps for us, the daily prayer of faith becomes, speak, Lord.

Your servant is listening. And perhaps before we open our Bibles, we pray those words from Psalm 119, open my eyes to see wonderful things in your word, and give me that desire to obey.

[17 : 14] So God's powerful word calls for obedience. But now we're going to turn to Obadiah, and we're going to think about the fact that God's powerful word also calls for belief.

And a belief in a context that can be very challenging. Just to help us to get into the setting a little bit, you maybe saw in the news this week that one of the fringe events that was happening at Summer Hall, so just down the road, it made the news.

There was a Herald newspaper event, and Kate Forbes, the deputy first minister, was invited for a long-ranging interview. And the day after that event, Summer Hall announced that Kate Forbes would never be invited back.

For the safety and the well-being of every other fringe performer, she was not welcome. Maybe you're asking, well, what did she talk about?

And actually, there was no problem with the content of the interview. The problem lies in the fact that she has views on gender and gay marriage that come from the Bible that are beyond the pale to some people.

[18 : 36] And so, Summer Hall felt compelled to say that Kate Forbes was no longer welcome. I mention this in part to remind us to pray for followers of Jesus who are in positions of power.

And for people working in politics and local government who find themselves working sometimes in hostile religious atmospheres. Because that's exactly where Obadiah finds himself.

So here is Obadiah. He's the administrator for Ahab. Ahab is an awful king. And Obadiah is a man of God who's having to figure out, how do I work faithfully for God working for this guy.

And in so doing, he stands in line with Joseph in the book of Genesis. He stands in line with Daniel as believers in the one true God who find themselves serving pagan kings in a hostile environment.

And they are called to believe God's word even when that is profoundly challenging. One of the things that this section does for us, we don't meet Obadiah really much in the Bible, but it shows us in this little scene that he's very different to his boss, Ahab.

[19 : 58] So we already notice that he calls him my lord, Elijah. Ahab calls him the troubler of Israel. Look at how he is introduced in verse 3, Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord.

Whereas we've already been introduced to Ahab and we discover that he's been one of the worst kings leading them away from true worship. We discover too that Obadiah has been practicing a very costly faith.

Look at verse 4, while Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets, hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water. And he tells Elijah the very same thing in verse 13. It's costly in the sense that, remember, this is a time of famine. So resources are scarce.

Water is hard to come by. Food is hard to come by. But he is, out of his own pocket, looking after a hundred prophets in two different caves. And he's doing that at a time when the queen, Jezebel, is looking to hunt down and kill prophets.

[21 : 04] This is costly faith. And that's really brought out as well in that conversation between Elijah and Obadiah where we discover he has an all-or-nothing faith.

Because he obviously has a legitimate fear for his life. Ahab, his boss, is obsessed with finding Elijah. He's going not just within his own country, he's going to different countries, asking the leaders there, asking the officials, have you seen this man?

If you have, hand him over. He absolutely hates Elijah and what Elijah represents. And so he is on this mission to destroy him.

I couldn't help thinking of Star Wars. It's like the dark side in the Star Wars, always hunting down the Jedis, the rebels across the galaxies. That's the kind of picture you get of Ahab.

Ahab. And Obadiah understands that if God does in the present what he's done in the past, rescuing Elijah, keeping him safe, Obadiah will die.

[22 : 16] But, look at verse 16. Knowing all that to be true, Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah.

He believes, he trusts, he goes. A couple of things from Obadiah's story. One is this, that where you work or where you study may well become a battleground for your belief.

Think about your own experience as a Christian in school or uni or the workplace. And I imagine for some of us the situation will be we are isolated, the only Christian in our office or in our work group. And that can be hard. Sometimes it's because of the challenging conversations that are all around us and we get swept up and perhaps it's the language that's used, perhaps it's the gossips that's shared, perhaps it's just the out and out hostility to faith that is expressed.

But maybe the battleground for belief in our workplace will be to do with our moral integrity and maybe the pressure to cut corners.

[23 : 39] Maybe it'll be to use AI to cheat the system. Maybe we just live with high levels of stress in our workplaces and that can affect our ability to treat others well and with patience.

Sometimes the hardest place to be a Christian is where we work and sometimes if we're honest we may wish we were like those prophets hidden in a cave.

Here's 50 of them and they're clustered together and it's dangerous but at least they've got one another. But most often our experience is going to be engaging with a world of work as the place where we're going to bear witness for Jesus and the difference that he made.

Or that's what our calling is going to be. And probably related to that and certainly we see it in the story of Obadiah as we seek to be faithful disciples of Jesus we will understand that discipleship often comes at a cost.

It's here in our story there are prophets who are wanting to serve God and they are being opposed and some of them are being killed. There is an authority figure who is determined to silence God's voice.

[24 : 57] There are people who do not want God's authority coming near and you and I will work and live around people with that same kind of attitude and therefore part of our call to obedience is about carrying our cross about sharing in the sufferings of Christ in being willing to accept rejection and opposition and to help us in that we need to consider Jesus Jesus the great prophet the true holy son of God the savior for the world but what was his experience?

He was despised he was rejected and in the end people cried out crucify and so Jesus as he came seeking to be the light of the world he came to experience the hatred of the world towards the holy God and as his body as the body of Christ some of the slings and arrows that were aimed at him will come our way also and it's one of the things that Jesus did for his disciples the night before he went to the cross if you have a bible you can turn to John 16 and John 17 but as Jesus concludes his words of encouragement and teaching for his disciples there at the end of John 16 verse 33 he says I've told you these things so that in me you may have peace in this world you will have trouble but take heart

I have overcome the world and he prays in chapter 17 for his disciples for his followers in this way my prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one so as we go to our workplace to our places of study to places where we perhaps find ourselves opposed we claim these words that in Jesus we overcome because he has overcome that in Jesus we are protected by our father as we have that call to believe God's word and we go to work so so far we've seen that God's powerful word it calls for obedience it calls for belief but the last thing and this takes us to the story as it relates to Ahab

God's powerful word confronts us now I imagine that nobody sitting here today enjoys being confronted nobody likes to be shown to be in the wrong whether we're children whether we're adults if a parent confronts us with wrong or a teacher or a boss we don't like it it challenges our pride it challenges our sense that we are in control it might even challenge our sense of identity for wrongdoing to be exposed by someone else and naturally speaking that's how the human heart chooses to respond to God's word as it comes near and King Ahab shows us that it shows us that without the gift of faith without

God's spirit working in us and changing us as people we naturally resist when God's word comes and rubs up against us and it takes a work of God to bring humility and repentance and faith so just to remind ourselves about this guy Ahab he's a truly terrible king we met him in chapter 16 there's this list of really bad kings and he is the bottom of the barrel and he has turned his own heart to idols and he turns the nation away from the worship of the true God to worship false gods chapter 17 verse 1 that turning away from God has led him and by extension the nation under God's judgment the rain is withheld his response is not repentant it's not to be humble rather it's to look to get rid of

[29 : 56] Elijah remember Obadiah's words chapter 18 verse 10 as surely as the Lord your God lives there's not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you he literally wants to shoot the messenger while he accuses Elijah of being the troubler of Israel ultimately it's Ahab who has brought trouble on Israel the spiritual trouble of turning their backs on God one of the pictures that you get of the word pictures of the shepherds of the kings of Israel is that they were called to be the shepherds of God's people to lead the people in true worship but you get this picture of Ahab in verse five what's he looking for he was a kind of shepherd of a sort but what he's giving his attention to is finding some grass to keep his horses and mules alive there seems to be more concern with his animals than with the subjects that he rules over he is more bothered about finding some good grass than he is about taking seriously the reality of

God's wrath God's settled hatred towards what is sinful and evil and so we discover clearly he is not repenting clearly his heart is hard towards the judgment of God and that climax is with Elijah's words in verse 18 and 19 I'm not the troubler of Israel you and your father's family have caused trouble why well firstly you've abandoned the Lord's commands secondly you've followed the Baals so they've abandoned God and he set up alternative gods and so now the scene is set for this great showdown summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel bring the 450 prophets of Baal the 400 prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table and what we're going to see next week is that the one true God is going to be revealed the one true God is going to get glory for himself but what we see in

Ahab in many ways like Pharaoh before him is a king who is hard hearted he hears God's word very clearly and he wants nothing to do with it and because of that he comes under God's judgment and God is going to use that judgment as part of his purpose to display his greater power and authority ultimately to show to Israel to show to Ahab and to show to us that it's God's word it's God's actions that demonstrate that he and he alone deserves our worship as we close a couple of implications from Ahab and this part of the story first to recognize that the church needs a prophetic voice part of our calling as the church of

God is to speak clearly against what is evil and against what is unjust that we take what we understand about God's character about the horrors of sin that we discover in the Bible and we apply them to our current context and so the church needs to be able to speak clearly to acknowledge where injustice and evil is happening whether that's human trafficking whether that's the evil of the porn industry whether it's the evil of the euthanasia bill each of these when you think about it is a devaluing of people made in the image of God and so the church must always have that prophetic voice and the wisdom to know how to speak God's timeless truth into our ever changing world but at the same time our voice must also speak the gospel we speak judgment and salvation like the gospel does recognizing that our culture has a lot confusion or this morning a lot of anxiety we recognize people have deep longings in their hearts they're looking to find meaning and hope and purpose we are invited as the people of

God to speak of Jesus the way the truth the life to bring good news in a world marked by hurt and confusion but also each one of us needs to hear and to respond in obedience and belief to Jesus the great prophet to let his words speak unlike Ahab Jesus is the good king he's the good shepherd so concerned for his people in our spiritual lostness that he both lays down his life and he calls us powerfully to himself he is the true prophet the greater than Elijah who would confront and who would conquer the forces of evil at the cross the same

[35 : 56] Jesus who began his ministry saying the kingdom of God is near repent and believe the good news the one whose word has the power to take us from our natural hostility or indifference to God's word to cause us to hear its beauty and truth and life giving power and to respond with God