

The Word of the Lord Rules

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[0 : 00] So that's a theme that is running all the way through. Words and particularly the word of the Lord. There is another theme which is hidden by most of our translations.

Hebrew can mean to turn, to turn back, to turn away and indeed the word for repent is the word turn. So let's have a look here. Verse 4 it says, His hand shriveled up so that he could not return it. Translated pull it back. Verse 6, Pray for me that my hand may be restored, my hand may be returned.

Verse 9, I was told not to drink bread or water or to return by the way you came. And then verse 10, He did not return by the way he came.

And then verse 16, the man of God said I cannot turn back. And then verse 17, you must not eat bread or drink water but must return by the way you came.

And then in verse 18, bring him back with you is return him with you to your house. And then in verse 19, so the man of God returned with him.

[1 : 35] Verse 22, you came back and ate bread, you returned and ate bread. Verse 23, the prophet who had brought him back, in other words the prophet who had caused him to turn, the prophet who had returned him.

Verse 26, the prophet who had brought him back, the prophet who had returned him. Verse 29, the prophet who had brought him back to his own city.

And in verse 33, even after this, Jeroboam did not turn his evil ways but once more turned people into priests from all sorts of people.

So it's a bit of a surprise underneath the translation because you would never have guessed from English. But if you use your computer and look for word 07725, that's the way to get it.

I think I'm telling you the right number. You don't have to know Hebrew, you just have a computer and can count up to 7725. So here is the word meaning to turn back, to turn away, to restore, to repent.

[2 : 51] And we're going to watch then as people turn in different ways through the story. So let's begin the story. It begins at the house of God, verse 1. By the word of the Lord, a man of God came from Judah to Bethel, as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make an offering.

So there's Jeroboam standing by the altar. There's one of the priests that he's made from any old sort of person. And then the prophet comes along.

There he is. And by the word of the Lord, he cries out. And he says, Oh, altar, altar, this is what the Lord says. He cries out that there will be a son named Josiah born to the house of David.

So the son of David will come along at some point. And he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who now make offerings here.

And human bones will be burned on you. So here's this altar making sacrifices of animals. And he says, One day, these rotten priests, they'll be sacrificed on there.

[4 : 03] They'll be burnt up on there. Which is a very striking, confrontational thing to say, isn't it? I don't think you would go to one of your friends and say, I've got a word for your encouragement.

Anyway. Anyway. He also says, That same day the man of God gave a sign. This is the sign the Lord has declared.

The altar will be torn apart. Tearing is one of the things that goes on. Robes get torn. Kingdoms get torn. The altar's going to get torn. And the ashes on it will be poured out.

So there's King Jeroboam. All the court knew. Well, I don't know what. Everything all posh. And sophisticated.

And this scruffy. I don't know whether he was scruffy. But let's assume he was scruffy. This prophet comes in and starts shouting out. This is all rubbish. It's all. God's going to judge all this.

[5 : 04] And King Jeroboam, as you might imagine, is not too pleased. He doesn't say, that's very interesting. Let's talk about this over a glass of sherry. He says, arrest that man.

Seize him. And he stretches out. Arrest that man. And as he stretches out his hand, his hand sort of dries up. So that it's no longer able to move back.

It dries up and sort of freezes in that position. He sent out his hand. It was dried up.

And it says he could not pull it back. He could not return it. So it's stuck out there. It doesn't, can't return. And also the altar was split apart and his ashes poured out.

According to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the Lord. So the word of the Lord is presiding over all this. It's happening as God says. His hand has gone dry.

[6 : 12] And then the king says to the man of God, verse 6, intercede with the Lord your God. Pray for me that my hand may be returned. So the man of God interceded with the Lord.

And the king's hand returned. Pray that my hand may return. There's a prayer. And his hand is able to return back. So it's not sort of paralyzed.

Which is very nice. It happens instantly. And it goes, it comes as it was at the beginning.

Now, let's miss out the middle bit. And let's go right, cut right to the end to verse 33. Because in a sense you could miss out the middle bit about the journey.

And pick up on Jeroboam right at the end. So verse 33 says, Even after this, Jeroboam, even after this, even after this, Jeroboam did not turn.

[7 : 14] Did not change his evil ways. But he carried on turning people into priests. From all sorts of people. This is the sin of the house of Jeroboam that led to its downfall.

And its destruction from the face of the earth. So, let's just forget the middle bit. But as concerns Jeroboam, even after this, it had no effect on him at all.

So that's quite shocking. So he's got his man-made religion, which he's invented. And which God says is totally out of order.

And God sends this prophet to say it to him in as many words. This is rubbish. It's all going to come to a terrible end. And, as Jeroboam says, arrest him.

His arm gets paralyzed. Dries up. And he says, pray for me. And the guy prays for him. And his arm is made better. Immediately.

[8 : 30] So you see, not only has he had a clear warning. A very, very clear warning. But he's also experienced God at work in his kindness, hasn't he?

That God's healed him. So he's had it from both angles. He's had the severity of a warning. And he's had the blessing of a healing. And it says, even after all this, he didn't change.

God turned his hand back. But Jeroboam wasn't willing to turn his heart back. Very obstinate, isn't it?

He's a very tough man spiritually. Despite the clarity of the word of God. And the urgency of it. And the kindness that was there as well.

Pray for me. I will. Pray. And return. He said, if you think I'm going to do what God says. You know. Dream on.

[9 : 33] That's a shocking thing to say. You can't say he didn't know. You can't say that he didn't think God has power.

You can't say that he didn't think God was a nice person. Because he had all that he needed. In absolute clarity. And he says, I'm not doing a single thing of this.

I'm not taking any notice at all. This is Jeroboam's description. He had received an unmistakable warning and judgment by the word of the Lord.

God had turned things round for him in answer to prayer. But he was not prepared to turn himself. And this is a severe warning.

Which I think might well get inside our heads. It's a severe warning to anybody and everybody. Who has heard from God. And even has tasted, as the book of Hebrews says.

[10 : 38] Tasted the power of the world to come. Don't harden your hearts. Don't get all that and then turn away.

It can be done. Jeroboam did it. Don't you do it. People can do it slowly.

And the writer of the Hebrews says. We should pay careful attention so that we do not drift away. So drifting, I take it, happens quite slowly. Bit at a time.

No, so for somebody who is living the Christian life. A bit at a time would be. They don't come to church so often. They don't read their Bible so often.

They don't pray so often. They gradually, gradually drift. And perhaps Satan will introduce some circumstances into life. To push that process along.

[11 : 42] Don't drift away. Maybe you have experienced God's word and heard it.

Maybe you know it well. Maybe you have experienced God's answers to prayer. Don't say in your heart, but I'm not going to do what God says.

Don't say in your heart, I reserve the right to decide what I will do and what I will not do. I know, whatever God says, I'll choose. I'll pick and choose what I want to do.

Don't do that. That's Jeroboam-ish. People can fall away slowly and people can fall away quickly. Paul writes to the Galatians, I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you.

Because if you think of the experience of Israel, they had the Ten Commandments and within a matter of hours, they had made golden calves and turned away.

[12 : 51] They just turned away quickly. Don't turn away slowly. And don't turn away quickly. So let's move on from Jeroboam.

Let's do the middle bit. The journey of the man of God. So now we've got to verse 7. The king said to the man of God, Come to my house.

Houses crop up in quite a few verses. Come to my house. Have something to eat. And I'll give you a gift. This is a change of tune, isn't he? A moment ago he was arresting and he says, Yeah, this is great.

I like having my hand back. We ought to be buddies. So I've got a nice party lined up. So why don't you come back and we can sit down together. And the man of God says, Even if you were to give me half your house, Even if you were to give me half your house, I would not go with you and I would not eat bread or drink water here.

For I was commanded by the word of the Lord, You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came. So he took another way and did not return by the way he came to Bethel.

[14 : 01] Now I don't know why he was told not to go back the same way, but he was told not to go back the same way. So I've got the man of God there. I've got the word of the Lord. I've got Jeroboam inviting him.

And he's supposed to turn that way. That's the way he's supposed to turn. And I wonder whether the point of saying don't eat or drink means, if it's breakfast time, I want you to be back in your country by lunchtime.

I wonder if that idea of not eating or drink is to do with speed. If it's just been lunchtime, I want you back in your country before you start getting peckish for your supper.

I mean, maybe. I don't know. There's lots of unanswered questions in this passage. But maybe it's really saying get back quick. Right, so what does happen?

Now, verse 11. There was a certain old prophet living in Bethel whose sons came and told him all that the man of God had done there that day. So one of the commentators says, this is like one of those things, hey, mum and dad, you'll never guess what happened in church this morning.

[15 : 18] It's sort of that sort of thing, isn't it? One of my friends went to a church where the curate for a Sunday school talk ate a daffodil. He lived to tell the tale.

I think daffodil's a poisonous. But anyway, for the children's talk, he ate a daffodil. So you just imagine that. Guess what happened, mum and dad, in church today? The vicar ate a daffodil. So this is the same sort of thing.

The sons come back to the old prophet and they say, you never guess what happened. We were all lined up and Jeroboam was there by the altar. The king was there. His majesty, the king was there. And this prophet burst in and he nearly got arrested, etc., etc. And they also told their father what he had said to the king. And verse 12. Their father said, Which way did he go?

And his son showed him which road the man of God from Judah had taken. So he said to his sons, Saddle the donkey for me. And when they'd saddled the donkey for him, he mounted it and he rode after the man of God.

[16 : 17] So the prophet says, I'll go after him. Get me a donkey. So there's the donkey. And he finds the man of God. Now get this bit. He finds him sitting under an oak tree.

There's the oak tree. There he is. I put him asleep. It says actually he's sitting. It doesn't say he's sleeping. But I think he's chilling out. So, you know, one asks, What happened to the speedy return?

I'm nearly there. I'm nearly there. And it's a lovely day. It'd be just nice to sit under this tree for a bit. So there's the man of God sitting under a tree.

And I think he shouldn't be there. I think he should be on his donkey. Assuming he's got a donkey. I think he's got a donkey. And he should be speedily making his way out of the country.

His passport ready and everything like that. Boarding pass. Ticket. And the old prophet comes to him and says, what Jeroboam said.

[17 : 23] Come home with me and eat. To which the man of God rightly replies, I can't turn away. I can't turn back with you. I've got my path already mapped out for me.

And I can't eat bread or drink water with you in this place. I've been told by the word of the Lord. Let's see. I've got a bubble for the word of the Lord. You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came.

Okay. That's what the word of God says. And he trots it out correctly. And the old prophet, that's the way I'm supposed to go. And the old prophet says, ah.

I wonder if I can do an old prophet's voice. I too. I too. I too am a prophet as you are. Yes. And an angel said to me, an angel said to me by the word of the Lord, bring him back, turn him round with you to your house that he may eat bread and drink water there.

But he was lying. No. How dare he? But he was. He was lying. And at this point, you expect the man of God to say, hang on a minute, that sounds a bit odd.

[18 : 34] Because the word of the Lord to me was, I had to go quickly back. I know I'm sitting under this tree, but I should be going quickly back. And I'm not supposed to. But this old prophet comes. No, no, no, no, old chap.

An angel spoke to me. And without anything in between, apart from a full stop, it says, so the man of God did return with him and ate and drank in his house.

So he's turned off course. And I think how easily this man of God was turned away from a sure word, because that's what he had from the Lord, a sure word, definite and clear.

Don't go back the way you came. Don't stay here. Don't eat or drink. Get back home. To a different than it, different, dodgy word.

He doesn't even say, that's odd. Are you sure? Could we go into this? Where did this word come from? That's funny. God didn't tell that to me.

[19 : 44] But he just takes it naively. He just takes it at face value. Oh, right, okay. So there they are now in the old prophet's house.

And verse 20, while they're sitting at the table, the word of the Lord came to the old prophet who had brought him back. So embarrassing, isn't it, when that happens.

He cried out, so they're sitting at the table, and he cries out to the man of God who had come from Judah. So this is the old prophet now, the dodgy one.

And suddenly, God sends him something which is true. He cried out, so the word of the Lord came to the old prophet who had brought him back, turned him round.

He cried out to the man of God who had come from Judah, this is what the Lord says, you have defied the word. Notice, you see, it doesn't say you've made a mistake, you've been a bit naive.

[20 : 50] It puts it much stronger than I was prepared to do. It says you've defied the word of the Lord. You've defied the word of the Lord and not kept the command the Lord your God gave you.

You returned and ate bread and drank water in the place where he worded you not to eat or drink. So that's a bit tough, isn't it?

But it's the sort of tough that God is, and I think human beings are a bit unhappy with being, but that's the sort of tough that God is. And he says, you know, I told you, you didn't do it.

I gave you that word, that's your job, you know, you had one job and you didn't do it. Therefore, your body will not be buried in the tomb of your fathers. So, pretty tough.

Verse 23, when the man of God had finished eating and drinking, the prophet who had brought him back saddled his donkey for him. That's a little bit strange. I'm afraid I didn't go into the translation of that just to be double sure, but it does seem strange to me because having been denounced like this, you'd think he'd be saying, oh, goodness me, you know, what an idiot I am.

[22 : 07] What can I do? Lord, you know, I've been so stupid. And he'd be off quickly, but no, it says, he finished eating and drinking. So, at the meal, he's told, you know, you're not going to be buried with your fathers because you've defied the word of the Lord.

Oh, that's interesting. Actually, could it, those chips are rather nice. Can I have some more chips? Have we had dessert yet? What have we got? Eaten mess. I didn't even know that had been invented.

That sounds really good. And they finish eating and drinking before he does anything about it. I mean, what would your word for that be? Sloppy. Something like, it's, it's, it's, he's not taking God seriously, is he?

You rebelled against the mouth of the Lord. It's not so much gullibility, but rebellion. And he finishes eating and drinking. Now, okay, he is now on his way. Verse 23, the prophet saddles his donkey for him.

I think it saddles his, the man of God's, donkey, donkey, but I'm not quite sure about the donkeys here. As he went on his way, a lion met him on the road and killed him.

[23 : 24] His body was thrown down on the road with both the donkey and lion standing beside it. Some people who passed by saw the, saw the body thrown down there with the lion standing beside the body and they went and reported it in the city where the old prophet lived.

So he goes on his way. So that's the way he's supposed to go, but he didn't go that way, did he? Because he turned back with the old prophet and now he's trying to turn back on course.

Well, that's the right sort of thing to do. He's a bit slow in doing it and I have to say that if you've gone off course, I would strongly recommend that you try to get back on course quickly.

That's what this, the prophet's doing. But I'm afraid he's had his chance because a lion kills him and there he is lying in a pool of blood and the donkey and the lion very strangely just stand there and watch.

So it's bizarre, isn't it? And the by, the passers-by are conscious of this being bizarre and they report it in the city where the old prophet lived. They don't do anything about it, do they?

[24 : 34] They don't say shoe to the lion or try and pick up the body or they just go back and report it. That's a very strange thing. There's a dead body out there with a lion standing next to it.

Now, the prophet who brought him back from his journey heard of it and said, verse 26, it is the man of God who defied the word of the Lord.

I should have pointed out there still seems to be some protection for the man of God, doesn't there? He's not sort of totally gobbled up by the lion.

So the old prophet, there's the old prophet, he says, let's get over there. He went out and found the body thrown down on the road with the donkey and the lion standing beside it.

The lion had not eaten the body nor mauled the donkey. So the prophet picked up the body of the man of God, laid it on the donkey, brought it back to his own city to mourn for him and bury him.

[25 : 40] He laid the body in his own tomb and they mourned over him and said, my brother. So they're mourning. Oh, my brother. Dear fellow.

You got him into that trouble. Say, dear chap. And is he, are they brothers really? It's an interesting question because the old prophet represents the north with its really, what shall we say, apathetic interest in God's word.

And the southern, the prophet from the south, the man of God represents the south. He's full of zeal but he doesn't do God's word either, does he? He doesn't obey it. So, and in fact, the northern kingdom came to a sticky end and the southern kingdom also did but more slowly.

So you wonder, were they actually brothers really or was it just the older one thinking that they're brothers? Good question. And he says, I want to be buried where the man of God is buried.

Lay my bones beside his bones. For the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel and against all the shrines and the high places in the towns of Samaria will certainly come true.

[27 : 06] And the original says, happening, it will happen. Which is, it's a doubling of the word which means it's certain. So if you eat, the day you eat this fruit, dying you will die.

You will surely die. And the word of the God, happening it will happen. It will surely happen. It's the one factor in the whole chapter that you can depend on.

The word of God. And we're nearly at the end. So I've got a little bit out of order with the comments. What do we make then?

That's the, you know, that's the, we've been through the story. What do we make of these human characters? And I think it's, it's rather sobering really. So here's King Jeroboam.

You remember him? Who heard the word of God with clarity. Who was turned and healed. But who would not turn from his own ways despite being given a chance.

[28 : 03] Don't be like him. Please do not say in your heart, I hear what God's saying. I know what I should do.

I've experienced answers to prayer. But I'm not going to do what God wants me to do. Don't think that people can't do that because Jeroboam did.

Don't you do it. Think about the old prophet. He's a frightening character really, isn't he? You sort of wonder in today's world whether he wouldn't be one of the priests or vicars or pastors or bishops.

You find many years later he's been involved in child abuse or something like that. Somebody who was professionally looked up to, who's that? That's the old prophet.

Afternoon to you. Afternoon. You know, he's the prophet. But he seems to have no problem at all about lying about the word of God.

[29 : 12] That's spine chilling, isn't it? He falsely claimed to have the word of God and it doesn't seem to matter to him.

There's no point in the story where he says, you know, what an idiot I've been. He just says, oh, he was my brother, you know. We knew each other. Yes. He came round to my house. No sensitivity, no sense of regret, shame, repentance.

You know, perhaps he was taught at theological college. You don't, you don't, perhaps he was taught, you know, you don't take too much notice of the word of God. I mean, some theological colleges have taught that.

We don't bother with the word of God and he's just totally at ease with that. Just awful. How dare he? What a terrible thing to tell somebody you have the word of God and not have the word of God and lie.

He thought he was on the same side as the man of God. God. And what a responsibility for religious teachers, for ministers and vicars and priests and prophets and all the rest of it, people who do my line of work.

[30 : 34] What a terrible responsibility to find out that you are not telling people what God actually says. Chilling. And what about the man of God?

Well, he's quite something, isn't he? He had the word of God and he spoke it boldly. So, he's a bit of a firebrand preacher.

Denouncing the altar! See, he could have done all that, couldn't he? He resisted the king and the king said to him, you know, you're going to come back and have tea with me and he says, I'm not going to have tea with you because the word of God says it.

And this guy who knew that he should be hurrying back home but he says, oh well, I've done the important bit. You know, I've done the religious bit, the bit where everybody's watching and now it's my leisure time.

And I'm just going to chill out here under this tree. And he sort of spiritually went to sleep when he sort of been obeying. And you know, sometimes when it comes to obeying the word of God we say, you know, this is just too difficult.

[31 : 52] I can't do this. Spiritually, I'm not up to it. I don't have the capacity. And there are some things in which, because we're weak sinners, that would be, you know, the Lord would have a lot of sympathy for that.

Remember when the guys weren't praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. But I ask, how difficult would it have been given that Bethel is close to the border? How difficult would it have been to just kept on his donkey and kept going until tea time? I don't think that would have been difficult at all. Do you think that's too difficult? Is that too much to ask? But instead, he says, oh no, I'm going to have a little bit of rest and refreshment here. And in that moment, in that dangerous moment of relaxation, where you say, I've done the spiritually important bit.

I think lots of preachers and pastors experience this. I've done the spiritually important bit. I'm exhausted now. Off guard. So, Chris can.

[32 : 54] Credit to you, because you put that thought into my head here. Off guard. That's a dangerous moment, isn't it? When we say, oh, it's time to relax.

You know, being on the mountaintop and then relaxing. Holidays are sometimes spiritually dangerous times, aren't they? Because we say, you know, I've got to make the effort to come along to church and so on.

So I've got all the time in the world. yeah, dangerous. Beware. And he, this man of God who is deceived by a deceptive, dodgy, different word when he had the sure word. What is he thinking of? And the word of God, which we started this morning with, is, according to Jesus, like a wise man and a foolish man.

The foolish man builds a house, but he builds it on sand. And the wise man builds a house, and he builds it on rock. And everybody knows this story. What's the difference? What are these two?

[34 : 04] And Jesus says, one of them is having my word. Actually, both of them have my word. Both of them have my word. One of them doesn't do it. And the other one does do it.

Very simple. It's the key to a spiritual life. Doing what God says. There's a place in John's Gospel where it talks about washing the feet of the disciples.

And the last phrase is, blessed are you if you do it. I remember going to the University of Sussex and asking the students there, with their combined brain power, what is the final point of this?

And somebody said, you're blessed if you think about it. And I said, it actually doesn't say that. It says, you're blessed if you do it. And there are things, I know there are difficult things in the Christian life that we find very difficult to do, but there are an awful lot of things that it's just a question of you going to do it or not.

And Jesus said, this is the mark of a real prophet. This is the key to true spirituality. You have the word of God and you do what it says.

[35 : 22] Well, that's the exposition of the chapter. And I'm, I think it's, does get inside your head and it's very challenging.

And I just wanted to add a footnote to say that we might be thinking, well, I failed in this department. I have known what God has wanted me to do and I haven't done it.

I have failed. And I want to say that the chapter does have some hope in it for sinners like us. But I'm going to draw on some fairly distant echoes for this.

I'm going to say our hope lies in a prophet, in the echoes of a prophet who rode on a donkey and did not go off course.

Do you know who I'm talking about? Somebody who, he rode on a donkey and he was headed for a really tough, but he didn't go off course. He wasn't intimidated or deceived.

[36 : 26] He went straight on. of a son who completely obeyed his father's word, that whatever God told him to do, he says, I delight to do your will.

of a man who was killed as if he had rebelled against the word of God, as if he deserved to be forsaken, but this man, his body was not buried in his own tomb, like the man in the story, and nor were his bones broken, but he did die.

And this person was returned from the dryness of death. So that returning word is actually quite powerful. He returned from the dead.

And this person who says, I will accept you as brothers and sisters, even though you're a miserable lot, but you are, I am not ashamed to call you my family. And he did it all for sinners, and he did it for us.

He did it for our salvation. And in case you didn't know who I was talking about, I was talking about Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. He alone can forgive our wanderings and return us home on the right path.

[37 : 52] of the night.