

God's Word, the King and a Prophet

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of August 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled God's Word, the King and a Prophet and is based on 1 Kings chapter 13.

In the scriptures.

I imagine it's one that you've not read lately, most of you. I imagine it's one that you've probably never heard a sermon on either. Well, I might be wrong on that. I've never preached one on this. So let's pray that God helps us to understand it. Please keep the passage open on page 278. And let's pray firstly. Our God, as we come to this intriguing chapter full of odd events, we pray that you may make clear your word to us.

Not only that we may understand it better, but so that we may obey it more. And we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, most stories have heroes.

[1 : 19] There's always somebody who's dressed in white, metaphorically or literally, who is the hero of the story. Sometimes heroes are unlikely heroes. But in many respects, this intriguing story has no hero.

The king, one of the three main characters, is defiant, evil, an apostate, worshipping other gods. The man of God, as he's called in this chapter. He starts off well, but ends up thoroughly disobedient. He dies, killed by a lion, and he's buried away from his home.

And the third key figure, the old prophet in Bethel, is a liar, a deceiver, a trickster, and a tempter. So it's a sort of trinity or triumvirate of treachery of the three main characters of this chapter. One commentator comments about this chapter that really it's an offensive chapter because trickery triumphs.

[2 : 28] The lying, tricking, false prophet deceives the true man of God. And so this chapter is, they say, offensive morally to us.

But let's look more carefully at what's really going on here. Because something does triumph despite human failures and mistakes and human ingenuity and trickery.

In the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, the order of the books in the Old Testament is slightly different from our order. It's no big deal. The same books are there. But in the Jewish tradition, Jesus' day and since and before Jesus' day, the Old Testament, as we know it, was divided into the law or Torah, the first five books as we've got it in the Old Testament.

And then at the end, the writings, things like Psalms and Proverbs and a few other bits and pieces. And the bulk in the middle is what they call the prophets. But what they call the prophets includes books like Kings.

In fact, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, as well as the books by the names of the prophets in the Old Testament. And what characterizes the prophets, both what we think are history books and the prophets themselves, is the word of the Lord.

[3 : 49] It is the word of the Lord that guides the events. It is the word of the Lord that is spoken, often critically, into events. It is the word of the Lord that is always fulfilled.

It is the word of the Lord that ends up being sovereign. And that's what we find in 1 and 2 Kings. And that's what we find in this chapter, in 1 Kings, chapter 13.

Remember how the block of material called the prophets began. We saw that last week in Joshua 1. The command to Joshua, the leader of God's people, to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night, never to let it out of his mouth, to be careful to obey it, not to veer to the right or the left of the law or the word of God.

In a sense, that sets the foundation for understanding all the events that follow in the history of Israel through what we call the history books, but what the Jews call the former prophets.

That includes 1 Kings that we're looking at here. 1 Kings 2. And so when we look more carefully in this chapter, though there are three human key characters, the king, the man of God and the false prophet of Bethel, actually the hero of the chapter is the word of God.

[5 : 03] the word of God is spoken against the king and ultimately beyond our chapter prevails it is fulfilled despite its bearers disobedience that is the man of God comes bearing the word of the Lord to the king and he speaks it and then disobeys it and yet despite his disobedience the word of the Lord still prevails and the word of the Lord is confirmed even through a false prophet who starts out lying but his subsequent two words are words of confirming the truth about the word of the Lord and if you read the chapter looking for it you'll see several references throughout the chapter to God speaking or to the word of God or the word of the Lord but the issue is not really who the hero is the issue is authority whose authority are the people of God and in particular here the leaders of God's people whose authority are they to obey and submit to or what authority is the ultimate authority is it the authority of the king is it the authority of the man of God the prophet who bears God's word is it the authority of the old prophet of Bethel or is it rather the authority of God's word himself well these events occur in a very crucial time in the history of God's people in the Old Testament the year is pretty much 922 BC a long time ago and a significant event had happened just before this chapter the great king Solomon had died

Solomon was the king of the united people of God their territory was expanded he was a world leader and a world figure but when he died there was in a sense a division a breakaway a defection or a coup and so his kingdom at his death divided into two north and south in the south his son was king not a great king fairly harsh king that's why the north broke away and they appointed one of Solomon's army officials to be their king and that's the king we're dealing with here Jeroboam but the establishment of the northern kingdom with Jeroboam as its king Jeroboam was fraught with difficulty well that's putting it mildly actually it was fundamentally defiant of God to God Jeroboam was not descended from David and God had promised earlier on in the Old Testament that the kings of God's people would be descendants of David so in breaking away and making Jeroboam their king they were defying God's own word moreover when Jeroboam became the king he did a number of things all of which were defiant of God's word he established shrines places of worship like temples for the people of his kingdom to worship in now if you imagine that country Victoria breaks away from Melbourne people in country Victoria might like to break away from Melbourne but there'd be one big difficulty with their new kingdom broken away from Melbourne they don't have the MCG and so if they ever want to go and see decent cricket or football they'd have to travel into another kingdom to the MCG now in Jeroboam's kingdom it was a similar thing if the people wanted to go and make a sacrifice and worship they had to go to the temple in Jerusalem the capital of the other part of the kingdom the southern kingdom so what Jeroboam does is set up his own shrines in the north and the south of his kingdom

Dan in the north Bethel in the south and Bethel is the place where these events occur but again he's clearly defying God's word which earlier in the Old Testament in the book of Deuteronomy in particular had said you shall only worship the Lord your God at the place God will choose not at the place a king will choose or anyone else would choose so here's a second point or third point really at where they're disobeying God and moreover to put into the shrines that Jeroboam sets up we're told in the verses just before this chapter that he made two golden calves for worship now anybody who knew their Bible well as the people of God were meant to if you remember last week Psalm 1 and Joshua 1 how the people of God were to know the Bible well and meditate on the law of the Lord the Torah the first bit of the Bible they ought to know very clearly that when Israel in an earlier time had made golden calves it was the worst possible sin that the Israelites had ever committed when in the wilderness they'd worshipped a molten calf as their God in flagrant disobedience to God's laws about no idols and graven images so here again this king has defied the authority of God's word another thing he'd done wrong he appointed priests it may not be a bad thing appointing priests but he'd appointed them from anywhere in his kingdom but God's word earlier on in the Torah the first five books of the Old Testament had said very clearly that the priests would come from the tribe of Levi not so for Jeroboam and he'd also made up his own festivals so that it was clearly a different religious system and again all the festivals were detailed in the early part of the Old Testament in the Torah in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy in this case so at every point this northern kingdom was defiant of the authority of God's word its king was wrong its shrines were wrong the objects of worship were wrong its priests were wrong and its festivals were wrong

just for starters now it seems that just this chapter begins right at the point when the new temple shrine at Bethel is being inaugurated with the first festival and Jeroboam himself is standing by the altar just as Solomon had done a few years before when the Jerusalem temple was inaugurated here is Jeroboam setting himself up as a rival leader of a kingdom and a rival leader of a religious group and so into this situation comes the man of God who in verse 2 proclaimed against the altar by the word of the Lord and said oh altar altar thus says the Lord a son shall be born to the house of David

Josiah by name and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who offer incense on you and human bones shall be burned on you I think it's the only time in the Old Testament that somebody speaks to an inanimate object the man of God actually addresses the altar not the king and he says of the altar that there is coming a king who will be of the house of David unlike Jeroboam clearly referring to the fact that he's an illegitimate king in effect Josiah by name there's only two times I think in the Bible where somebody is predicted by name before they're even born this is one there's an instance in Isaiah about Cyrus as the other Josiah doesn't become king for another 280 years a fairly long time later and when he does come at the end of two kings he does indeed do these things that this man of God prophesied he would do well you can imagine if you're the king

Jeroboam standing by the altar this big inauguration ceremony wearing all your pomp and regalia and all that sort of stuff and everybody's thinking this is pretty wacko and a man of God comes in and says oh altar you'd be a bit put out and Jeroboam it seems in defiance of this points to him and cries out and says in verse 4 seize him but as he points out his hand to point to this man of God saying seize him his hand is actually seized with paralysis and clearly you see this man of God is speaking a word of authority it is being confirmed initially by the sign of the paralysis in the king's hand in verse 5 verse 4 and 5 but in addition to that the altar is actually torn down and the ashes upon it that is of the sacrificial animals are poured out and so again the word that was spoken by this man of God is being confirmed by a sign the hand was withered paralyzed really and the altar is torn down in verse 5 and the king says in verse 6 to the man of God entreat now the favor of the Lord your God that is even though these things have happened to the king he doesn't say oh yeah look

[14 : 34] I've got it wrong entreat my God or our God entreat your God that shows the distance that he's moved away from the God of the Bible and even though these events are happening and he's asking the man of God to entreat his God there's no submission of the king to that God at all it's purely it seems a selfish thing he says pray for me so that my hand may be restored to me and out of the grace and mercy of the man of God and out of the grace and mercy of God the man of God entreats the Lord and the king's hand was restored and it became as before so the king thinks this is pretty good now I'll invite this man for a meal so he invites the man of God to stay for a meal it might be an act of thankfulness hospitality thank you for getting me out of that predicament and rescuing my hand maybe though there's a more sinister motive we really don't know the motive but if it is more sinister it could be along the lines of trying to get this prophet into his debt so that the king can exercise control over this man of God who's come up from Judah to proclaim this word and the story could end there the man of God declines he refuses to go for a meal with the king and he says to the king if you give me even half your kingdom

I'll not go in with you nor will I eat food or drink water in this place he doesn't say here in Bethel or here in your capital city in this place is a sort of derogatory I'm not going to eat here for thus I was commanded by the word of the Lord you shall not eat food or drink water or return by the way that you came so he declines the invitation because he himself this man of God who's spoken God's word to the king and challenged the king and God's word was accompanied by signs and miracles he himself the bearer of God's word is under God's word and God's word to this man of God was go up to Judah go up to Bethel proclaim this word against the king and the altar in particular but when you come back come a different route we're not sure why that was the instruction and don't eat and don't drink there while you're there and the man of God obedient to God's word returns a different way and doesn't eat and drink and again the story could easily end there and it's a nice little story a man of God who speaks God's word and is obedient to God's word and the king who keeps defying God's word even when it's accompanied by signs and so on but the story doesn't end there now it takes a bit of a twist because another character enters the story and this person is described as an old prophet of Bethel the fact that he's old certainly would suggest he wouldn't have to actually be

very old at all to have been part of originally

Solomon's kingdom but for some reason he is in Bethel it probably suggests that he himself is compromised by remaining in Bethel this now illegitimate place of worship of King Jeroboam and this character somehow hears about the man of God news would have travelled fast I'm sure around the little town of Bethel and so he goes out to the man of God to invite him for a meal verse 15 he says to this man of God come home with me and eat some food now this may be an expression of sort of collegial hospitality you know I'm a prophet and you're really a prophet a man of God come to me and have a meal let me look after you because you've come all this way but the man of God says I cannot return with you or go in with you nor will I eat food or drink water with you in this place and again a dismissive way of referring to Bethel this place where Jeroboam's shrine has been put up for it was said to me by the word of the Lord you shall not eat food or drink water there or return by the way that you came and so for the second time the man of God resists invitation to eat and drink and for the second time he quotes God's command not to do it so it's very clear that this man of God is determined to be submitting to the word of God to him so far so good but now comes the real twist because in reply the old prophet of Bethel says in verse 18

I also am a prophet as you are and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord bring him back with you into your house so that he may eat food and drink water but he was deceiving him so here is an old prophet of Bethel who is deliberately deceiving a prophet of God into bringing him back for a meal we don't know why but he lied about receiving a word from the Lord and what perhaps is surprising is that though he twice refused to accept invitations to meals and to drink now without argument the man of God follows the deception and goes back in verse 19 and ate food and drank water in his house we're not told why the old prophet lied we're not told why the man of God succumbed but what we do know is that the old prophet shouldn't have lied and the man of God should not have succumbed now what we're getting here you see is a bit of a twist because the bearer of God's word who started out obeying God's word has now disobeyed

God's word to him just as the king who'd never obeyed God's word kept on disobeying God's word now that's often a trap it seems in Christian leadership that the bearer of God's word the teacher the preacher the evangelist the pastor often can start out under God's word but for whatever motive sometimes good sometimes bad end up personally standing above God's word sometimes that's in manipulation and the abuse of power over those in the flock that this shepherd preacher teacher whoever is responsible for maybe it's deliberate disobedience sometimes it may be almost subconscious maybe this old this man of God couldn't really understand why God should prevent him from eating and drinking so maybe he rationalized it and said well okay maybe

[21 : 19] I do want to say maybe he is really hungry and tired and that's a point where many people are very vulnerable to disobedience but whatever the case here is a man who fails to heed God's word he fails to do what Joshua was charged to do as we saw last week to know God's word so well to meditate on it day and night don't let it out of your mouth here he's let it out of his mouth because it said yes I'll come he's failed to be the person of Psalm 1 who is blessed because he doesn't go the way of the scoffer doesn't go the way of the sinner or stand in their path and here he is going their way instead of going a different way route road home he goes the way the route the road of this old prophet of Bethel back to his house disobeying God's word he's veered from the right or from the left of the word of God to him and so he faces God's judgment but what is surprising here is that God's judgment gets spoken to him from the false prophet the false prophet who's already lied about God's word now actually speaks a true word from

God so while they're sitting at the word of the Lord comes to the deceiving old prophet as we'll see and told him he proclaimed then to the man of God who'd come from Judah thus says the Lord because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord and have not kept the commandment that the Lord your God commanded you but have come back and have eaten food and drunk water in the place of which he said to you eat no food and drink water your body shall not come to your ancestral tomb there is God's word of judgment but imagine this man of God right me clearly that was wrong but is this word also wrong you can imagine that he could well be rather confused what word is right here although he would know that he's done wrong well he gets up and goes having eaten his food and drunk his drink and he settled for him a donkey and off he goes and as he went away verse 24 a lion met him on the road and there used to be lions in Israel and Palestine until about 1200 AD and it killed him his body was thrown in the road and the donkey that he was on stood beside it the lion didn't eat the donkey and the lion also stood beside

the body he didn't eat the man now that's unusual if a lion is killing something it's because he wants to eat it so here is an odd event clearly again something strange is happening clearly the man has died as has been predicted by the old prophet that he's just eaten a meal with but the lion doesn't even gobble him up or the donkey they just stand by as though they're silent guards over the corpse of this man of God maybe it's even a little bit ironic the man of God's failure was the man of God was killed and was buried outside his ancestral tomb what this odd story is at least in part showing is that God's word is not limited by its bearer you see even a false lying prophet may actually speak words of truth and even a true prophet can fall and disobey what it's saying is by the compromised man of God and the compromised old prophet is that the hero or what is sovereign what has the authority is in the end God's word God's word is sovereign here and as we'll see despite the man of God's death God's word spoken by the man of God is still fulfilled what it's also showing us is that no person or leader of

God's people can stand over or even next to God's word the right place for any person leader or not is under God's word and that's what this chapter is making very clear at the point of the break away of the northern nation and its establishment as its own kingdom with its own religious system it is saying that nobody without any except with no exceptions at all nobody stands over God's word whatever reason they think to decree their laws of breaking away a kingdom establishing a king or setting up a religious system whatever it is going in for a meal nobody stands over God's word at all and yet of course in every age that's what we see people who sidestep the authority of God's word come out from underneath it stand next to it or stand over it of course it happened way back in the third chapter of the Bible first book of the

[27 : 15] Bible Adam and Eve in the garden told by God if you eat of it you surely die told by the serpent if you eat of it you won't die the challenge of God's word is on which authority do they submit to and tragically for us they submitted to the authority of the serpent and not the authority of God's word and through the history of Israel we see continually their resistance and defiance of God's word and the leaders of God's people time and again resisting and defying the authority of God's word and subtracting from it and standing over it time and again and yet in contrast Jesus perfectly submitting to God's word and obeying it and we see the issue time and again in the letters of Paul as well as in the Acts of the apostles how the leaders of God's people are to submit to God's word and hold fast under it and not be like the false teachers in Galatia in

Ephesus in other places that are standing over God's word reinterpreting it adding to it compromising it subtracting from it etc with new and progressive gospels we see it in church history with medieval Rome the papacy setting up its authority over the Bible so much so they wouldn't even let people read it we see it in our own day and age with bishops like Bishop Spong the authority because we've got the minds the reason we've got scientific information whatever it is that actually sets up an alternative authority to God's word such people as those must beware of the lions that they encounter as they go home it's quite easy in the end for a human leader a leader of God's people to actually move out from under God's word and stand over it because human pride is insidious and pernicious and human pride leads all of us whether or not we're leaders of God's people to want to exercise our own authority over God's word and over God's people wrongly sometimes leaders do it motivated by the best of intentions but often not for those in the pew as you all are at the moment your responsibility is to test the word your responsibility is to be a psalm one person that you've meditated on God's word day and night not deviating from it knowing it so well that you can test the word that is given to you in various forums like a sermon or in a Bible study group and your responsibility is to be a psalm one person so that I and preachers and Bible study leaders are Joshua one people that you hold us to account that we submit to God's word and teach it faithfully as well but if you are not psalm one people then often the leaders of God's people can get away with murder now it's not quite the end of the story the old lying prophet of Bethel now when he sees the man of God dead and buried in his tomb reconfirms the original word from that prophet who'd come up from Judah from the man of God so he says in verse 31 when I die bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried lay my bones beside his bones for the saying that he proclaimed by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places shall surely come to pass now that again is striking what he's saying there is this man of God preached the true word he's dead but the true word of God does not die with him and so the word that he spoke against

Bethel and the altar and Jeroboam the king in effect still stands you see what is sovereign here what has the authority what lasts here is the word of God its bearers may die but the word of God remains word of God remains valid now to all intents and purposes you would have to say if you were the old prophet of Bethel you seen a man of God come and outrageously defy the king and the altar and then get killed by a lion on the way home you could well say well here is Bethel secure God preserved it he's kept it intact the king is king this man of God who's he he's would happen came true Josiah became king he was only eight years old and even when he became king who would have thought that he would actually fulfill what was spoken here but within 20 years of him becoming king these words had come true he'd reformed the nation because he'd rediscovered the law of the

[32 : 39] Lord in the temple he knew it and he responded to it by amongst other things destroying the shrines that were still even left in Bethel as Isaiah the prophet later says all flesh is like grass but the word of the Lord endures forever and that's what this chapter is telling us the man of God his life was like grass he died but the word of the Lord endures forever and it is always fulfilled now in this I think for Christians and for Christian leaders there is both challenge and encouragement there is encouragement that God's word is sovereign and so that even if we as leaders fail from time to time God's word remains sovereign it is not limited by us it is not thwarted by our failure God's word will not return to God void or empty God's word will be fulfilled in

God's time but there is also challenge to us because very often we are tempted to somehow dismiss the authority of God's word when you look around the world you think gosh I'm not sure that God's word really is actually accomplishing what he says it will accomplish when we preach the gospel there is little obvious response sometimes just downright hostility our world authorities our society around us seems to continue to defy God's word there are false preachers who seem to get bigger crowds than we ever do and itching ears run after false words now maybe if we want to get a bigger crowd maybe we need to just adjust the message a little bit even even when it's costly lonely and demanding the challenge is not only for Christians but in particular for Christian leaders to keep on with the word of God submitting to it and proclaiming it despite all these events

Jeroboam the king kept on in his evil ways he'd heard the word of God come from the man of God he'd seen it confirmed by the sign of his hand paralyzed and by the sign of the altar split and the ashes poured out he then had the original word confirmed by the old prophet of Bethel the lying prophet twice and yet he continued in his sinful ways because sinners don't like their sin exposed and they're stubborn and resistant to even God's word when it's manifestly true unless God works in their hearts let's pray happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers love but their delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law they meditate day and night they're like trees planted by streams of water which yield fruit in their season and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so. They're like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

[36 : 11] For the Lord watches over the ways of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. O God, we pray that we may delight in your law, that we may meditate on it day and night, so that we do not deviate from it, but are nourished by it like trees beside streams of water, so that we may be watched over by you and accounted by you as righteous.

And we pray this for the sake of the righteous one, the word, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.