

The Word and the Words

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles this morning, and we're not in Luke's Gospel, but we're going to be in 1 Kings this morning. I'm very grateful to Bob for standing in and preaching this morning for various reasons. I've had difficulty this week in doing that, and we're going to be looking at 1 Kings chapter 22, which indeed is a very relevant passage in a week when we're speaking about politics and leaders of nations. Here is a passage all about speaking truth, the truth of God to power, the power of rule in the land.

And it's a very exciting and revealing chapter indeed, 1 Kings chapter 22 on page 304, if you have one of our large church Bibles. And we're going to read most of the chapter together.

And we're way back in the time of the kings, in the time of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah, just as it is when we're reading in the book of Amos in Sunday evenings, the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom and the surrounding nations, including the war like Syria.

So 1 Kings chapter 22 in verse 1, for three years, Syria and Israel continued without war. But in the third year, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, came down to the king of Israel.

And the king of Israel said to his servants, Do you know that Ramoth Gilead belongs to us and we keep quiet and do not take it out of the hand of the king of Syria?

[1 : 46] Ramoth Gilead is to the far west of the Sea of Galilee and to the west in what's today the country of Jordan, bordering onto Syria.

And he said to Jehoshaphat, Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth Gilead? And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.

And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, Inquire first for the word of the Lord. And the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about 400 men, and said to them, Shall I go to battle against Ramoth Gilead or shall I refrain?

And they said, Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king. But Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here another prophet of the Lord of whom we may inquire?

The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah, the son of Imla. But I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil.

[2 : 54] And Jehoshaphat said, Let not the king say so. Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, Bring quickly Micaiah, the son of Imla. Now the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria.

And all the prophets were prophesying before them. And Zedekiah, the son of Chenna, made for himself horns of iron and said, Thus says the Lord, With these you shall push the Syrians until they are destroyed.

And all the prophets prophesied so and said, Go up, go up to Ramoth-Gilead and triumph. The Lord will give it into the hand of the king. And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, Behold, the words of the prophets are with one accord favorable to the king.

Let your word be like the word of one of them and speak favorably. But Micaiah said, As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that I will speak.

When he came to the king, the king said to him, Micaiah, Shall we go to Ramoth-Gilead to battle or shall we refrain? And he answered him, Go up and triumph. The Lord will give it into the hand of the king.

[4 : 13] But the king said to him, How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord? And he said, I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains as sheep that have no shepherd.

And the Lord said, These have no master. Let each return to his home in peace. And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me but evil?

And Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord. I saw the Lord sitting on his throne. And all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left.

And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said one thing and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord saying, I will entice him.

And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You are to entice him and you shall succeed.

[5 : 26] Go out and do so. Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets. The Lord has declared disaster for you.

Then Zedekiah, the son of Chanana, came near and struck Micaiah on the cheek and said, How did the spirit of the Lord go from me to speak to you? And Micaiah said, Behold, you shall see on that day when you go into an inner chamber to hide yourself.

And the king of Israel said, Seize Micaiah and take him back to Ammon, the governor of the city, and to Joash, the king's son, and say, Thus says the king, Put this fellow in prison and feed him meager rations of bread and water until I come in peace.

And Micaiah said, If you return in peace, the Lord has not spoken by me. And he said, Hear, all you peoples.

So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, went up to Ramoth Gilead. And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, I will disguise myself and go into battle.

[6 : 39] But you wear your robes. And the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. Now the king of Syria had commanded the 32 captains of his chariots, Fight with neither small nor great, but only with the king of Israel.

And when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, It is surely the king of Israel. So they turned to fight against him. And Jehoshaphat cried out. And when the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him.

But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate.

Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded. And the battle continued that day. And the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians.

Until at evening he died. And the blood of the wound flowed into the bottom of the chariot. And about sunset a cry went through the army, Every man to his city and every man to his country.

[7 : 54] So the king died and was brought to Samaria. And they buried the king in Samaria. And they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria.

And the dogs licked up his blood. And the prostitutes washed themselves in it. According to the word of the Lord that he had spoken.

Amen. May God bless to us this his word. Now could I ask you to turn once again please to page 304 and to 1 Kings 22.

And we'll have a moment of prayer as we ask the Lord's help. Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, I ask that you will take my human words in all their weakness, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. Some of you may have read the very remarkable play by Robert Bolt, A Man for All Seasons, which deals with Mr. Thomas More and his battle with Henry VIII and with Thomas Cromwell.

[9 : 34] Well, I gather that the more recent Wolf Hall, which I haven't seen but hope to see sometime, presents more in a less sympathetic light. But this play certainly is presented in a very sympathetic light as a man of integrity.

And when he's on trial for his life in really the high point of the play, some of you may have seen the film of that play in which Paul Schofield, the late Paul Schofield, played more magnificently.

At his trial, various people from his past life, people whom he has mentored and helped and encouraged, come to give testimony against him. And one of them is Richard Rich, who is wearing a very fine chain of office.

And More says to him, Richard, what is that chain that you are wearing? Thomas Cromwell replies, Sir Richard has been made Attorney General for Wales.

And More replies, it profits a man nothing to gain his soul for the whole world, but for Wales. I wish I could say Wales the way that Paul Schofield said it.

[10 : 42] And those of you who have seen the film will remember the mixture of pity and of scorn and of judgment in his words. Here in this chapter, Ahab has sold his soul, not for the world, but for the doomed throne of Israel.

And that's the first thing. This is a day of reckoning for King Ahab. He's reigned for 22 years. If you read back in chapter 16, you'll find he comes to the throne.

And all that time, he's been confronted by the word of God, especially through the dauntless figure of Elijah. But there have been others in chapter 21.

An unnamed prophet comes and speaks to him. And now here, this otherwise unknown figure, Micaiah, son of Imla, one of the most magnificent and courageous figures in the whole Bible, brings to him one last chance, so to speak, a chance which he ignores.

And the words which he has rejected persistently all those 22 years is now going to destroy him. Because this is a chapter about words, the word and the words.

[11 : 55] An old playground rhyme says, Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you. That's simply not true. Words can hurt dreadfully.

They can leave hidden scars. Years later, you can remember an unkind or insensitive remark, and you're totally thrown off guard. On the other hand, of course, encouraging words can build up and strengthen and transform.

And my goodness me, we are going to hear thousands and thousands more words this week, leading up to Thursday, and thousands more as the parties come to terms with whatever the result may be.

So this is about the word and the words. Now, this is a splendid chapter. I think it's always very interesting. When a chapter like this is read, people fall silent.

There is a sense of listening. There's a magnificence in this chapter, a power in the storytelling, in the characterization, in the details. I won't have time to go into all of the details.

[13 : 02] What I want to talk about are three voices that sound here, three kinds of voices. And first of all, we have the lying voices, the untruthful voices.

Ahab's court is absolutely awash with prophets, all ready to toe the party line. Look at verse 6. Shall I go to battle, says Ahab, against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?

And they said, go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king. See, exactly what they're expected to say. Now, Ahab is picking a fight here.

If Ramoth Gilead belongs to him, whether it's true or not, then why go now? So, he's picking a fight. Now, Ramoth Gilead straddled an important trade route on what are now called the Golan Heights, which are still a flashpoint in the Middle East conflicts.

And this coincided with a visit from Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, more of him later. But Ahab is deeply, deeply superstitious. This comes out in the story.

[14 : 08] He's a man who is afraid of the supernatural. And he calls 400 prophets. Now, as he calls these 400 prophets, we're almost certainly being reminded of an earlier episode, 1 Kings 18, when Elijah, the lone prophet of the Lord, faced the 800 prophets of Baal.

Now, these prophets are not called prophets of Baal. In fact, they are behaving as if they are the Lord's prophets. Their spokesman, Zedekiah, verse 11, Thus says the Lord, with these you shall push the Syrians until they are destroyed.

Now, first of all, notice there is no integrity in these so-called prophets. Probably, probably they were simply the ministry of religious affairs.

It was a job for them. Sometime before, Jeroboam, the first king of the divided northern kingdom, basically made the ministry of God, the ministry of the Lord, into just another job.

We are told, anyone he wanted, he ordained to be priest. Simply another job you apply for. And so it is with the prophets. They were party hacks who would spout the party line.

[15 : 27] Very interesting, in the book of Jeremiah, which we studied some time ago, in that book, the word prophet occurs over 200 times, almost always referring to a false prophet.

That is the point. Jeremiah is surrounded by false prophets who are saying what people want to hear. And what they want to hear then, as what people want to hear now, is everything is all right.

The city will be fine. The land will prosper. God is on our side. Why do we need to bother? And this is a biblical picture that runs through the whole of the scriptures.

Paul was surrounded by such people, the super apostles in Corinth, and the false teachers who roamed around like wolves in the early church.

Now, if you look at the story in Kings and Chronicles, what is one of the marks of a true king? The true king listens to the prophets, even when it's uncomfortable.

[16 : 26] A startling example surely is back in 2 Samuel, when Nathan says to David, after the terrible episode of Uriah and Bathsheba, you are the man.

Imagine how Ahab would have treated Nathan. But David immediately goes into a repentance that is as striking as the sin.

The repentance and the sin are both in technicolor, if you like. Hezekiah listening to Isaiah. That is why today we need to judge all the voices by scripture, don't we?

We listen to voices all the time, rather like in the book of Proverbs, wisdom and foolishness stalk at every street corner, everywhere where we meet, everywhere we go.

And now on the internet, the voices of wisdom and foolishness sounding all the time. How do we know who's true? So that's the first thing about the lying voices. It's just the job.

[17 : 28] There's no integrity. They know what Ahab wants them to say, and they say it. But they also, mentioned already, claim to speak for the Lord. Verse 6, the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.

And then Zedekiah uses a visual aid in verse 11, made for himself horns of iron. And thus says the Lord, you with these you shall push the Syrians. There is some biblical backing for that, because back in 1 Samuel, we are told he will give his strength to the king, exalt the horn of his anointed.

The horn in the Old Testament is a symbol of power, so these horns are the symbol of the king of Israel's power. But we know that the father of lies himself can quote the Bible for his purpose.

Always easy to gain a reputation as a popular speaker, whether in church or state, if you say what the majority of people want you to say. Now, it's very easy for us to look at the establishment and mock, isn't it, and say, kind of statement made by a leading churchman, we're not really declining, because people don't come to places of worship anymore.

They communicate through the internet. So let's create a virtual church on the internet. And that's exactly what it will be, of course. Like your so-called friends on Facebook. I wonder how many of them are real friends whom you could call on in times of trouble.

[18 : 58] What about our own evangelical subcultures? What about our worship of celebrity? Our desire to be seen with the right people?

Our fascination with having the approval of everyone? And when that begins to happen, then we really stop listening to the voice of the prophet, don't we?

Because the one thing a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change. That is the one mark of a false. Always affirming, always telling us we're all right.

Never telling us, thus says the Lord, you are the man. And it's so important that in the babble of voices, both in church and state, we listen for the voice that comes to us from Scripture.

Now that's the first thing then, the lying voices, saying what they're paid to say, saying what they think Ahab will want them to say, and that still happens today.

[20 : 01] But there's another voice here, what I would call the uncertain voice. And if you look here at verse 7, Now Jehoshaphat is a very, very different kind of man from Ahab.

Jehoshaphat is a good man who loves the Lord and believes in his word. But Jehoshaphat had an unwise habit of cozying up to Ahab and his family.

Indeed, Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram was married to Ahab's daughter Athaliah. And later on in 2 Kings 11, this is the woman who is going to try to destroy all the sons of David, to prevent, wipe out the whole Davidic line, so that the Messiah will never come.

And this is prevented by Jehoshaphat, a brave woman, Jehoiada, the high priest who saved the baby Joash. So you see how dangerous it is to... Ahab is really cozying up to a snake, because Ahab is a dreadful, wicked, and ill-disposed man.

You see, Jehoshaphat was a good man. But the one thing he did not know was how to say no. And he particularly didn't know how to say no to Ahab. That doesn't mean that he was a bad man, of course.

[21 : 35] Read the story in 2 Chronicles 20, where a vast army comes against him. He knows he's a weak and helpless man, but we are told he trusted in the Lord.

If you feel you're weak and can't say no, that's not fatal if you trust in the Lord. I think that is the important thing. In fact, read that chapter, and then read the contrasting chapter in 2 Chronicles 26, of Uzziah, who trusted in his success.

The chilling phrase, he was marvelously helped until he became strong. You could call these chapters the strength of weakness and the weakness of strength.

So Jehoshaphat's voice is uncertain, but he genuinely wants to hear the word of the Lord. Verse 7. Is there not...

Well, first of all, he said in verse 5, inquire first for the word of the Lord. And then in verse 7, Jehoshaphat said, is there not here another prophet? That's probably better put, is there not here another prophet?

[22 : 41] This time, a prophet of the Lord. Now, Jehoshaphat knows perfectly well that these 400 guys are not prophets of the Lord, whatever they may claim to be. He knows this is the ministry of religious affairs, saying what they are paid to say.

He genuinely wants to hear the word of the Lord. This is the day there are many people in places where they can't hear the word of the Lord, but would love to hear it. As Boyd Milton says, the hungry sheep look up and are not fed.

So Jehoshaphat genuinely wants to hear the word of the Lord. But the other thing is, he weakens his voice by identifying himself with the establishment. There's two significant little details here in verse 10 and in verse 30.

Verse 10. The king of Israel and Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes. And then verse 30, Ahab says, I will disguise myself and go into battle, but you wear your robes.

Now, clearly, this is simply meant to impress and intimidate. There's no reason for wearing the robes and sitting on thrones at this point.

[23 : 52] You see, this is not, this is not something genuine at all. In a few weeks' time, when Her Majesty the Queen opens the new parliament at the state opening, she will wear royal robes.

And that, of course, is the right situation. It reminds us that governments come and go. It reminds us that parties come and go, that leaders come and go, but that the parliament continues.

And that the, we pray to the Lord, the free speech, which this parliament stands for, will continue. But here, it's simply an attempt to impress and to intimidate.

Now, particularly in our culture, in our informal culture, we're not likely to be much tempted by posturing around in royal robes, are we, or any kind of robes for that matter.

But, once again, what about our desire to impress the particular establishment which we belong? The desire to be part of the in-group, the name dropping.

[25 : 00] Then you'll need for people to know what we are doing. The desire to be approved of, to be seen, is so, so endemic in our human hearts, isn't it?

And, that does genuinely weaken the desire to hear the word of the Lord. This word that cuts right through all pretense, blows up every kind of silliness.

So, Jehoshaphat is a good man who did not achieve all that he might have achieved, although he is still a faithful man. And, in the other, I mean, it's a rather dismal bunch, the kings of, the kings of Israel, and indeed most of the kings of Judah, from the nincompoop, Rehoboam, to the born loser, Zedekiah.

A fairly, fairly miserable bunch. And in that, Jehoshaphat and Asa, his father, stand out. And even more so, the two great Davidic kings at the end of the story, Hezekiah and Josiah.

So, the uncertain voice, the voice that wants, genuinely wants, to hear, the heart that genuinely loves the Lord, that is rather afraid of the establishment.

[26 : 11] And finally, the authentic voice, Micaiah. This man not otherwise known, as I say, glorious figure. Now, notice, of course, how Micaiah has the measure of Ahab right from the beginning.

Verse 15, the king says, Shall we go to Ramoth, Gilead, or shall we refrain? Micaiah answered, Go off and try, and the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.

Basically saying, why bother? You won't listen anyway, Ahab. I know you won't take on board what I'm saying. Notice the suspicion, notice the superstition here of Ahab.

Ahab doesn't want to know the truth, and he certainly doesn't want to obey it, but he's desperate to know it. He's afraid. It's rather like Herod Antipas and John the Baptist.

If you read Mark 6, you'll find that Herod saw John and listened to him, but he didn't act on it. And indeed, he ended up as the Baptist murderer because he listened, he was impressed, superstitiously impressed, perhaps.

[27 : 20] He did nothing about it. It's awfully easy, you know, to listen to the word of God week after week after week, month after month, year after year, and do nothing whatever about it.

So how do we recognize the authentic voice? It's one or two things here. The true voice speaks from the perspective of heaven.

Now just imagine the situation. There's this man standing in front of this imposing array. After all, Jehoshaphat, Micaiah, sorry, Jehoshaphat and Ahab and the royal robes, the court prophets, no doubt, also dressed in their finery, standing around.

It must have been imposing and intimidating. It must have been terrifying. Rather like in Acts when Herod and Bernice come in and Paul is brought before them in chains.

It says they came in great pomp with their royal robes. And yet, the authentic voice, then as the authentic voice, here is not the voice that's dressed up imposingly, but the voice that speaks from heaven.

[28 : 34] You see, look at verse 10. The king of Israel and Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, were sitting on their thrones arrayed in their robes. Look at verse 19.

Micaiah said, Hear the word of the Lord. I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the hosts of heaven standing beside him. Why is Micaiah not intimidated by the royal robes and the posturing of Ahab because he has seen the king, Yahweh of hosts, seated on his throne?

Now, people worry about this. Who will go, who will entice Ahab that he may go and fall at Ram of Gilead as if the Lord is deceiving and cheating Ahab? That's exactly opposite what the story says.

The story, in this story, Micaiah is telling Ahab exactly what's going to happen. He's basically saying, Ahab, you've got another chance, one very, very last chance on the brink of the abyss.

You can reject these charlatans and listen to the true prophets of the Lord. After all, he had done that at an earlier stage. The story of Naboth had been yard. Elijah had come and preached judgment and Ahab had repented.

[29 : 51] And the Lord had spared him. It could have happened again. The point is, the Lord knows that Ahab is beyond the point of heeding now.

He will not listen now. A lifetime of rejecting means he's no longer ready to listen. This is a terrifying thing. It can happen to, it can happen to groups of people.

It can happen to individuals. It can even happen to whole fellowships. Reject, reject, reject. And finally, getting to a point where the voice is no longer heard. A point far away from home where the voice is no longer listened to.

So, see everyone from heaven. Indeed, that is the picture of a prophet. A prophet comes from the counsel of God and speaks. That's what Elijah said to Ahab long before the Yahweh God of Israel before whom I stand and whose counsel I stand.

Secondly, the true prophet sticks to the truth even when it hurts. Look at verse 27. Put this fellow in prison and feed him meager rations of bread and water until I come in peace.

[30 : 59] And he's also been mocked sneeringly by Zedekiah. Verse 24, Zedekiah said, How did the Spirit of the Lord go from me to speak to you? You see, what Zedekiah is saying says, The Lord's already spoken by me.

I've got the authentic voice of God. So, where did the Spirit come from? So, mocked by Zedekiah, ill-treated by Ahab, we don't know what happened to him.

Did he die in prison? Was he released? We've no idea because Ahab's son, Ahaziah, proved to be just as bad as his father. And we don't know. Isn't he one who, like his master, was rejected, despised?

The word, the word rejected, and the prophet rejected. Silent in the face of suffering and speaking boldly, even if it were to cost him his life.

That is what the authentic voice does. So, the authentic voice is one which speaks from the perspective of heaven. The authentic voice is the one which speaks in spite of pain and suffering.

[32 : 08] And finally, the authentic voice is the one which proves to be true. Deuteronomy says, how will you know a prophet is saying the right thing?

You'll know because it happens. And the unpopular words of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the other prophets all came true as the temple went up in flames, as the stones crashed from the walls of Jerusalem, as the Babylonian armies destroyed almost everything in sight.

Their words came true. It doesn't seem as if they're going to come true. Verse 30, one of the great irises, the king of Israel, said to Jehoshaphat, I'll disguise myself and go into battle, but you wear your robes.

Surely, royal robes were never worn in a less appropriate place than this. Poor Jehoshaphat. Was he intimidated by Ahab? Did he not want to offend him?

And Ahab, of course, once again, is imagining he can hide from the Syrians and that he can hide from God. Crazy idea, the one who sees everything, he can hide from him.

[33 : 18] Look at verse 34 and 35. A certain man drew his bow at random, literally drew his bow in his simplicity and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate.

You see, this series, when it says he drew it at random, it doesn't mean he aimed haplessly. It means he was aiming at what he thought was simply another Israelite soldier.

What he didn't know, of course, was that that soldier was the man they had been sent to destroy. This is a wonderful sign of God's providence, isn't it?

The king of Syria's battle, his commanders don't know what to do, and God takes this most random of actions and guides it by his providence. The word comes true.

He thought this unknown man thought he was targeting another unknown man, but he, in fact, destroys Ahab. But it's not the arrow, ultimately, that destroys him.

[34 : 20] It is the word that destroys him. So you see, in this week, indeed in any week, when we listen to voices, when we listen to the voices of wisdom and foolishness, we need to remember there are those who will say, both in church and state, what they're expected to say, what they're paid to say.

There will be those who want to speak the truth that are intimidated. But there will always be voices, voices when we can recognize by the fact that they see things from the perspective of heaven, that they speak to their own hurt and their own danger.

what they say will one day become true. God cannot be mocked. The word, to put it another way, can never be drowned out by the words.

Lies can never destroy truth. That is the God we believe in, the God of Micaiah, the God who himself was to come as flesh, the word made flesh, and suffer for the truth in order to bring us the truth.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, as we listen to these voices of wisdom and foolishness bombarding us from everywhere, from the airwaves, the people we meet, and the voices inside our own hearts, give to us the courage to listen to your voice, to the voices of your true messengers, to the voices of the apostles and the prophets.

[36 : 00] And above all, listen to the him who himself is the word, the word who became flesh, the one who died for us and rose again, and the one whose words are still speaking into our hearts and to the world.

and we ask this in his name. Amen.