

1. God's Word Challenges the Establishment

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[0 : 0 0] now let's have a moment's prayer Lord God we pray that as we draw near to you that you will most graciously draw near to us that you will open our hearts to your word that you will open your word to our hearts we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ the living word your son our Lord Amen so to 1 Kings 16 and 17 I'm calling this series Elijah God's messenger for difficult times that's what we're going to be looking at over the next week's Elijah God's messenger for difficult times and today particularly God's word challenges the establishment it's rather difficult for us in an age of soundbites to realize the sheer power the sheer authority of the spoken word it was 70 years ago that Winston Churchill for a number of months virtually fought the second world war with words there were no other weapons left everything was collapsing around him those great speeches which perhaps some of you heard at the time and others like myself will have heard on recordings and so on this great voice challenging the nation to rise from its knees to fight on the beaches and the landing grounds and so on the sheer power of the spoken word which rallied the nation at a critical time and something like that is happening here in the ministry of Elijah and in the ministry of the prophets in general so let me say just a couple of words about the significance of Elijah now Elijah dominates the story of 1 Kings for the rest of the book and into 2 Kings 2 when he's taken to heaven he ministers for some 20 odd years in the reign of Ahab and Ahab's son Ahaziah and when you add the ministry of Elisha

Elijah's disciple the story continues right on into 2 Kings 13 so there is a major concern in the middle of this long historical work 1 and 2 Kings with the word of God this is what it's about the word of God and the power of the word of God the power of the word of God to rebuke the power of the word of God to build up the power of the word of God to change and to change profoundly now Elijah's a mysterious figure he's a titanic figure he appears abruptly and he leaves abruptly now Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbite of the settlers in Gilead said to Ahab we're not told any of the kind of things we'd like to know about him we'll come back to that and at the end of the Old Testament in the book of Malachi we are told that the prophet Elijah will herald the coming of the great day of the Lord mysterious figure a figure who seems well beyond us and yet the letter of James chapter 5 verse 17 says this

Elijah was a man just like us a human being in other words not some kind of superman not some kind of figure who felt no emotions we'll see that in a few weeks time when we come to chapter 19 in particular his name is significant Elijah the Lord Yahweh the name of Israel's God Yahweh is my God that's the concern of the story that's the first thing this titanic figure burst on the stage at a time when everything seems to be going going downhill the second thing I'd want to say is this you might wonder what all the fuss is about it's very easy to become weary in reading the Old Testament endless announcements of judgment endless condemnation of idolatry and of course if you think it's going to get better in the New Testament it doesn't there are equally endless condemnations of false teachers and calls to repent on the whole people people are uncomfortable with this although I've often noticed in the past that some people like the preaching of judgment because they always apply it to someone else I wish so and so had been here to hear that you ever said that or ever thought it because that's so common judgment encouragement for me judgments for someone else but the penetrating word of God doesn't allow us to do that you see you could read this it's easy to read this story another way and Ahab's spin doctors I'm sure did tell the story in another way after all he reigned 22 years if you read the previous if you read the previous chapters you'll find a depressing chronicle of guys who reigned for a few months and a few years a time of total chaos for example you'll read about a prized nincompoop called Zimri who reigned for seven days and made a most elementary mistake tried to organize a coup without making sure the army was on his side that's the kind of people who had been reigning up till Ahab so you say look this man's given us

stability he's reigned for 22 years also he's very shrewd politically makes an alliance with Tyre and Sidon proverbial for their wealth proverbial for their economic power look Ahab's brought us stability including economic stability and we know because Ahab is mentioned outside the Bible in the Assyrian records that he and his father

Omri were regarded as formidable players on the international stage indeed ironically the Assyrians always refer to the kingdom of Israel as the house of Omri and that shows the kind of impression they made but you see you see the point our author is making they may have made big they may have made a big noise in the kingdoms of this world they may have strutted the international stage filling with sound and fury as far as the kingdom of God is concerned Omri and Ahab were nowhere because Omri and Ahab missed the main point of life the main point of why they had been created and the six chapters given to Ahab which is much longer than any king's been given since Solomon are there for one reason only as a backdrop to Elijah's ministry yet a similar thing in the New Testament at the beginning of Luke chapter 3 we have a roll call of the good and the great the Roman emperor the religious rulers the provincial governors a whole as if a herald were reading the names and then

[7 : 32] Luke says the word of God came to John the Baptist in the desert so that's what's happening here the word of God is challenging and threatening the establishment I want us to look at this reading in two parts first of all in chapter 16 verses 29 to 34 I'm going to call that the mess that humans create the mess that humans create and secondly in 17 1 to 6 well it's really the whole of the story but we're going to concentrate on 1 to 6 the remedy that God provides and this is really what this story is about and these two are not really two separate things they are two sides of the same coin two ways of looking at the same reality so first of all then the mess that humans create the author of Kings sees the reign of Ahab as uniquely evil verse 30 Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him and that's repeated in verse as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam and then again in verse 33 he did more to provoke

Yahweh the God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him now up to now his father had gained that dismal accolade the worst of all the kings but now Ahab is given that title so what was this mess what made Ahab so bad a king and what can we learn from it this is not ancient history this is the living word of God I want you to notice three things about Ahab which made him uniquely evil the first is the worship of Baal verse 31 he took the daughter of Ephbaal king of the Sidonians and went and served Baal and worshipped him and then in verse 32 he erected an altar for Baal and the house of Baal she made in Samaria who or what was Baal and why was it so bad to worship him now the word

Baal is a general word in Hebrew and other languages for lord or master and a general title for a number of gods and that's why in chapter 18 Elijah says to Ahab you have forsaken the lord and followed the Baals because it's a name that could be given to many gods almost certainly this was a particular version of Baal the storm god whom we know was worshipped in Sidon where Jezebel came from and that's important in the story Baal here who is being worshipped is the god of wind the god of rain the god of fertility we'll see how important that is in the story and that's why he is worse than Jeroboam if you look back at the story of Jeroboam back in 1 Kings 12 and 13 and 14 and so on you'll find that Jeroboam set up golden calves in Bethel and he basically probably what Jeroboam was doing was breaking the second commandment making images and saying this is what Yahweh looks like because the bull god was common in that culture but here he's deliberately turning his back on Yahweh on the lord as Ralph Davis says in his commentary if Jeroboam was polluted water Ahab is raw sewage and that's what's happening here but what did it mean to worship Baal and I think if you were a Baal worshipper there were two things which it offered you first of all the sense of the supernatural a kind of nature worship a kind of vague mysticism a kind of a kind of a sense of the otherness and the sense of mystery in the world that's the first thing it offered and that's always going to be popular that that that that does appear to that does appeal to contemporary people I've already mentioned if you go to mind, body and spirit and borders and waterstone you'll find many many books on that subject the other thing it offered was unbridled enjoyment do what you like when you like it's your life it's your body you can do with it what you want you see in the Canaanite text from which we know about Baal