

2. God's Disturbing Word

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have your Bibles there, if you could have them open at page 308, that would be a help. Let's have a moment of prayer together as we ask the Lord's help.

Father, we praise you that in days long ago you spoke to our ancestors by the prophets. But we thank you that you did not only speak to them, but that these words that they spoke are words for today.

Words that will lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus. I pray that you will take my human words, in all their imperfection you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. And we come to the second of our studies in the prophet Elisha.

I'm calling this series God Carries On His Work. Sometime earlier this year we looked at the prophet Elijah. And we're looking now at Elisha. And I'm calling this particular study The Disturbing Word.

[1 : 12] Because that's what this passage is about. It's about the word of God. Winston Churchill had a very faithful servant called Frank Sawyer, whom he relied on for almost everything.

And one day Churchill was one of his moods of black depression, to which he was prone. And Sawyer, trying to cheer him up, said, Never mind, sir, history will treat you kindly.

And Churchill replied, It most certainly will, because I intend to write it. And of course, that's what he did. And a reminder that when we hear words from the past, they are always loaded in a particular way.

There's always a particular angle. And when we come to these history books in the Old Testament, better called the former prophets, we don't just have an angle on history from a particular individual or a particular group.

This is God's commentary on history. When we look at the history of God's people, this is what God is saying. And it's what he's saying to his people now.

[2 : 21] And here we have the power of Elisha's word among the nations. Or rather, the word of God through Elisha as it speaks to the nations of the time, and through them as it speaks to us.

Now, back in 1 Kings 19, when Elisha was called, the commission that was given was that he would anoint kings, raise kings, set down kings.

This is what's happening here. And so we have this passage, which I'm sure as you were reading it, you wonder what on earth Mesha the sheep breeder and the hundred thousand lambs had to say to us today.

Remember, the Bible is always a realistic book. These are the little details that show us we are dealing with history. We're not dealing with once upon a time in a never-never land.

We're not dealing with a fantasy world. We're dealing with a real world where real people lived and real events happened. But we're particularly concerned with Elisha and what he has to say.

[3 : 22] I think the structure of the chapter illustrates this. Verses 1 to 12, that's down to where the king of Israel, Jehoshaphat, the king of Edom, went down to him.

That's went down to Elijah. Verses 1 to 12, and then the last two verses, 26 to 27, tell us wrong ways of responding to the word of God.

Ways in which the word of God is not valued as it ought to be. And then in the middle, verses 13 to 25, the true word of God coming through Elisha.

You may think Elisha has a fairly small role, but it's an absolutely critical role, because he's in the middle of these sections that tell us about the word of God and its neglect.

So let's look at the chapter then in these three sections. First of all, verses 1 to 12, which I will call not treating the word of God seriously. Now, where on earth do we get that?

[4 : 26] The immediate situation is the situation of this guy, Mesha, king of Moab, who had obviously been subordinate to Ahab, king of Israel, Jehoram's father.

And Jehoram now, along with Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Edom, who is probably a vassal of Jehoshaphat, had gone down by the Dead Sea to attack the king of Moab.

That's the historical situation, as I say. Not household names to us, but immediately to the first readers and the first hearers, who had actually set the scene very clearly.

But the point of this is not to inform us about ancient history. There are two comments, one on Jehoram and one on Jehoshaphat, which tell us what actually lies behind this story in verses 1 to 12.

Look at verses 1 to 3. This is what I'm going to call the pick-and-mix approach to the word of God. Verse 2 tells us, Jehoram did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, though not like his father and mother, as the notorious Ahab and Jezebel, for he put away the pillar of Baal that his father had made.

[5 : 43] Nevertheless, he clung to the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, which made Israel to sin. He did not depart from it. We are told he was not as bad as his father and mother had been.

Because they, if you like, pumped raw paganism into the lifeblood of Israel, rather as if they had dumped raw sewage into a water system, which of course is absolutely deadly.

But you see, our author realises that it's no less deadly, actually, to mix the pure water with some polluted elements, which is what Jehoram had done. He doesn't say, oh, we should be thankful for small mercies.

Jehoram actually wasn't as bad. In fact, you can sense the impatience of the author here. He wasn't as bad, but he clung to the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat.

Now, what does that mean? If you look back in 1 Kings 13 and 14, when the kingdom is split apart, Jeroboam, who had been a high official under Solomon, snatches the northern ten tribes, and Solomon's son, an income of the first order called Rehoboam, takes the southern kingdom, and Jeroboam is described thereafter as the one who made Israel to sin.

[7 : 03] Now, what exactly was that sin? Now, Jeroboam, at the ancient place of Bethel, set up two golden calves, just as, rather like what Aaron had done in the desert long ago, made a golden calf.

Now, the point about this sin was this. Jeroboam, neither Jeroboam nor Aaron, were saying that the Lord, Yahweh God of Israel, is not real.

What they were saying is, he is a God like other gods, and he may be represented by a golden calf. Technical term for this is syncretism, or in English, pick and mix, where you take bits of various religions, cobble them together, and describe the result as enlightened, describe the result as tolerant, describe the result as the way for contemporary people to worship the Lord.

Now, you see, he doesn't say, there is no Lord, the God of Israel. What he says is, there is a Lord, but we can put him in a box. That's why I call it a pick and mix approach.

But look what verse 3 says, he clung. That's the word used in Genesis 2 of a man and a woman. A man will leave his father and mother and cling, be joined to his wife.

[8 : 26] It's the word that ominously is used of King Solomon back in 1 Kings 11. He clung to the foreign gods. You see what? You see what Jehoram is doing and what Jeroboam did before him.

They are sitting in judgment on the words of the prophets. Hear, O Israel, said Moses, the Lord your God is one Lord. He is the only Lord.

You will have no other gods before him. He's ultimately sitting in judgment on the word of God.

That's what happens and you have pick and mix religion.

How do you recognize it? You recognize it when people say the Bible is a useful resource. When you hear anyone saying that, then alarm bells ought to be ringing. The Bible is not a resource which implies that it's something we can use and which we can manipulate.

The Bible is the authority which judges us. Or when they say the Bible is full of insights, usually they add the phrase it's also full of a great deal of savagery and vindictiveness.

[9 : 31] Particularly in the Old Testament. What there is not in that attitude is the trembling before the word of God. To this man will I look. The one who is of a lowly and contrite spirit, says Isaiah, and who trembles at my word.

So you see what Jehoram is doing. Jehoram is saying, well have your Bible if you like. It's a useful resource. Listen to it. But please remember, we've moved on. There are other insights.

There are other ideas. We can sit in judgment on it. This is so relevant to today. Many months ago, when I was thinking about this series, I had no idea just how relevant this would be to the situation that we face in the church today.

So that's Jehoram. Jehoram. That's one way of not taking the word of God seriously enough. But then we have Jehoshaphat. Now Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, is a very, very different kind of man from Jehoram.

You can read about Jehoshaphat in 1 Kings 22, fairly briefly, and in much greater detail in 2 Chronicles 18 to 20.

[10:44] Jehoshaphat was a man who genuinely believed in the word of God. He genuinely tried to do what was right. So what was the problem?

You get the problem back in 1 Kings 22. He made peace with the king of Israel. Jehoram, in other words, loved the word of God, but he also loved cozying up to those who did not love the word of God.

He made peace with the king of Israel. And that making peace with the king of Israel almost led to his death. Read the chapter later in 1 Kings 20, I think it is, or 1 Kings 20, where Jehoshaphat foolishly goes with Ahab up to the Golan Heights to fight against Syria.

And there's a fascinating little detail there. They dressed themselves up in their royal robes and went into battle. Now that's crazy, isn't it?

You do not dress yourself up in royal robes and finery and flummery when you're going into battle. And you see, Jehoshaphat loved pomp and circumstance.

[11:59] He loved being a friend of the establishment. You see, Jehoshaphat Jehoshaphat was the kind of guy who did not know how to say no. He didn't know where to draw the line.

And this meant that his, this meant that he had lack of clarity when it came to seeing who his enemies were. And that's always a problem, isn't it?

Like the story of the young politician, which may make a lot of sense in the days we're passing through, who at last made his way to the front bench of his party. And sitting on the front bench for the first time, he looked across the floor of the chamber and he said to a veteran politician sitting beside him, it's great to be here at last.

I can see my enemies now. The veteran says, son, these are your opponents. Your enemies are on the benches around you and behind you.

This is something that Jehoshaphat never truly realized, who his true friends were and who his enemies were. And thus, in the end, he achieved less than he might have achieved.

[13:09] Truly a warning to us, the kind of alliances we form, the kind of people we associate with in the word of the Lord. The old hymn says, perish policy and cunning.

Perish all that hates the light. Cease from man and look above you. Trust in God and do the right. So, two inadequate ways of treating the word of God.

The pick and mix approach of Jehoram, which almost leads to disaster. And the subordinating the word of God to the claims of friendship and worldly alliances, which is Jehoshaphat.

So, that seems to be the significance of these first twelve verses. The ancient history, it is ancient history, but it is powerfully relevant history because when the prophets and the historians of the Old Testament are writing down their message, they are writing it down for all of God's people who will live in this world.

But secondly, we have what I would call unleashing the word of God in verses 13 to 25, when Elisha comes onto the scene. And once again, Elisha's word, as we saw at the end of chapter 2 a few weeks ago, is the genuine word of the true prophet.

[14:34] Because the true prophet's word is marred by two things. It is a message of salvation, a message of grace, a message of blessing. But it is also a message of rebuke, a message of judgment.

In other words, Elisha takes the word seriously. And two things here. First of all, the word of Elisha cuts through all the pretense.

There are no pleasantries from Elisha. Look at verse 13. Elisha said to the king, what have I to do with you? Go to the prophets of your father and to the prophets of your mother. Back surely to 1 Kings 18 where Elijah had faced the serried ranks of the prophets of Baal and there were also the prophets of Jezebel's favourite goddess, the Asherah, the prophets of Asherah.

Notice he doesn't say, oh well Jehoram, we can do business. You're at least an improvement on your dad and your brother. Some time ago we looked at Ahab's other son Ahaziah who was at least as bad as his father and mother.

No, he says, why don't you go back to the prophets you say you believe in? Why are you turning to the Lord now? Why this sudden interest in the Torah? And notice what Jehoram says.

[15:51] The king of Israel said to him, no, it is the Lord who called these three things kings to give them into the hands of Moab. You see, Jehoram uses pious language.

The Lord has called us. Now, you see, for Jehoram, the providence of God is not a truth to be believed in, not to lead him to wonder, love and praise and a life of faith and trusting.

Rather, it's a phrase to be trotted out, to excuse his own behaviour. It's also the danger of using the language of piety, the language of godliness, without having any meaning in it.

It's having a form of godliness, as Paul says, but denying its power. That's what's happening here. So, Elisha cuts through the pretense.

What have I to do with you? But this is verse 14. Elisha says, as the Lord of hosts lives before whom I stand, were it not that I have regard for Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, I would neither look at you nor see you.

[16:54] Now, you see, that remark, first of all, is a remark of judgment. Jehoshaphat, you're in bad company. Jehoshaphat, you've forgotten who your true friends are, bringing the Judean king back to realities.

But it's also a word of wonderful grace, isn't it? You see, Jehoshaphat is the Davidic king. Jehoshaphat is one of that line through whom the promises of God are going to be fulfilled, through whom the son of David, greater than David, is to come.

And Jehoram is only safe because he is standing beside the Davidic king. And surely, in this old story, we have a picture of the gospel itself.

What makes us safe from the judgment of God? What gives us the right to approach the presence of God only because the Davidic king is beside us.

Before the throne of God above, I have a strong, a perfect plea, a great high priest whose name is love, whoever lives and pleads for me. And in this old story, there is a picture of that.

[18:01] Jehoshaphat, as an individual, had his faults, had his weaknesses, but he is one of the line of promise. Through him is eventually going to come the son of David who is also the son of God who is going to save the world.

So that's the first thing, the prophet's word, that it cuts through pretense. And notice verse 14, he uses exactly the same words with which Elijah had introduced his public ministry many years before.

As the Lord, God of hosts, lives before whom I stand. The main truth filling Elijah's horizon, filling his world view, is that the Lord is the living God.

But secondly, the word of God through Elisha does more than we can imagine. First of all, there's the promise of water. Verse 16, he said, Thus says the Lord, I will make this dry stream bed full of pools.

Incidentally, these guys, strategically, showed themselves to be enormously incompetent. We will go, said Jehoram, back in verse 8, by the way of the wilderness of Edom.

[19:10] Now the wilderness of Edom is one of the most barren places on the face of the planet as the land sinks down to the Dead Sea. What did they expect to find there except barrenness and drought?

Another reminder that strategy and policy without the guidance of God so often simply leads to disaster. But Elisha says, of course God can do that.

After all, Elisha is implying, remember your history, God can supply water in the desert. That's the kind of God you are supposed to believe in. But more than that, he says, this is a light thing, verse 18, in the sight of the Lord.

He will also give the Moabites into your hand. Poet Cooper says, of praying, you are coming to a king. Large petitions with you bring, since his grace and power is such.

None can ever ask too much. I often feel, certainly I often feel this, when I ask the Lord for something, sometimes I make my requests terribly modest.

[20:19] Almost as if, well, if he doesn't answer it then I won't be too disappointed. But the point is, the Lord is a God who delights to give, who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or

receive.

thou, now bring me musician, verse 15. We're not told why Elisha calls for a musician, but surely it's a reminder, I think, of David's playing in front of Saul, which God used to drive out the evil spirits. Power of music to inspire, the power of music to make people, to give people heart, I suppose, in the time of battle.

it's said that when Cromwell's iron sights raised their sands, the cavaliers trembled. And we sing the praises of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember what we're doing, we're not just singing words, we're making a declaration of faith and loyalty. When we sing that Jesus is Lord, this is actually a song, a defiant song against the principalities and powers of that dark empire.

[21 : 32] And that's what's the kind of thing that's happening here. So Elisha unleashes the word of God, the word that cuts through the sham, the word that cuts through the pretense, the word that cuts through Jehoshaphat's compromising and reminds him of where his loyalties truly lie.

But then we come to this final part, which is a puzzling little section, verses 26 to 27, which I'm going to call the results of ignoring the word of God.

Now the king of Moab is in, really is in difficulty, in fact, difficulty is too weak a word. The king of Moab sees disaster staring him in the face.

Verse 26, when the king of Moab saw the battle that was going against him, he uses two tactics. First of all, he uses military tactics, 700 swordsmen, to break through opposite the king of Edom, probably seeing the king of Edom as the weak link in the alliance and therefore trying to break through there.

But, this fails, then what does he do then? He offers a human sacrifice. 27, he took his oldest son, offered him for a burnt offering on the wall.

[22 : 47] The puzzle is that this should have caused Israel to withdraw. And I think there's two things I want to say. First of all, when we don't listen to the word of God, when we listen to pagan voices, we are going to get ourselves trapped in a world of cynical cruelty, of violence.

The Chemosh was the name of the god of Moab. We read about him in 1 Kings 11, one of the gods that Solomon worshipped and set up a shrine to in Jerusalem.

This is what pagan gods tell their followers to do. There is no grace in paganism. Oh, I know people will talk about freedom from ridiculous rules and regulations.

They'll talk about being liberated. The truth of the matter is that paganism is a cruel, relentless, unforgiving and uncompromising creed which will demand everything and give back nothing. and that's what, that's the result of living in a world where the law of the Lord, which we sang about at the beginning, the law of the Lord shining in brightness like the sun and giving life to everything it touches and giving hope and giving joy.

[24 : 10] Here we have the darkness of paganism. Paganism is full of hatred. Paganism is full of death. Paganism brings nothing but disaster to those who listen.

That's the first thing. Well, the second thing is how could, as I say, how there came great wrath against Israel. The king of Moab failed to listen to the word of God.

Does it mean there came great wrath? Now, the commentators disagree about this but, and it could mean the anger of God himself who having allowed them to win the victory then causes them to withdraw.

If it means the anger of the Lord it's a bit odd it doesn't actually say the Lord. It certainly doesn't mean the anger of the pagan God whom I've mentioned because he had no power at all.

He simply didn't exist. Possibly the phrase would be better translated there came great wrath upon Israel. In other words, Israel was so furious that they withdrew.

[25 : 16] Now, you see what's happening here. Israel and Jehoram its king had chosen to pick and mix what they believed.

They were furious at this child's sacrifice just as people are rightly angry and rightly concerned about pedophiles and the abuse of children.

But, it's almost as if the author is saying God's law is holistic. Why are you angry at this and you are not angry at Jehoram for disobeying other parts of the word of God?

Why is it that you get so angry about child sacrifice but you care nothing about the other parts of the commandment of God?

