

## 7. The ineffective words of humans and the powerful words of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you could have our Bibles open, please, at pages 312 and following, we'll have a moment of prayer. Father, as we turn now from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we pray indeed that you, the living God, who has spoken to our ancestors by the prophets and by the apostles, and who speaks to us now in the living word, Christ Jesus, and by your gracious Holy Spirit, you will take my words and all their imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so indeed lead us to that living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Ben-Hadad, king of Syria, and Jehoram, king of Israel, whose name isn't even given here, are probably not household names.

Probably most of you haven't thought very much this week about either of them. It would have astonished and appalled both of them had they realized that if they would be remembered, if they were remembered at all, only because they are part of the story of the prophet Elisha.

They made a big noise in their own day. They filled the world with sound and fury. They had many things to say, but their words have simply gone. But the words of Elisha, because they are the words of God, still speak to us today.

And that's really my first point. It's about human and divine words. I've called this, a somewhat long title, the ineffective words of humans and the powerful words of God.

[ 1 : 51 ] Not all human words, of course, are ineffective. Need only mention Shakespeare, Churchill, many other writers. Many human words are powerful. The point about this chapter is the words of the main human actors, the words of the good and the great, have no power whatever.

If you were here last week, you'll remember how we saw that the essence of the difference between Elisha and the kings of Israel and Syria was their view of reality.

These guys, these kings of Israel and Syria, thought reality was what was all around us. The material reality which they manipulated. Elisha, however, without denying any of that, realized there was a bigger and deeper reality, the power of God behind everything.

God's words express reality. They are words that come with authority. They are words that change lives. Now from now until the end of Elisha's story, he's increasingly going to be involved in national affairs.

He's going to become increasingly prominent in the affairs of the nation. And if you read through the Old Testament, you'll find that one of the big themes running through the history books is the interplay of king and prophet.

[ 3 : 12 ] What the kings do and what the prophets have to say to them. The gospel is public truth, after all. I mean, after all, that's why we preach the gospel. We don't preach the gospel in private.

This is not a private faith for one or two people who happen to believe these sorts of things. The gospel is public truth. The gospel is the words of the living God who made heaven and earth, and therefore it's relevant and important to us all.

So with that in mind then, let's look at the story as it develops in really three acts or three scenes.

First of all, we have what I would call the helpless words of humans in verses 24 to 33 of chapter 6.

The helpless words of humans. Now the situation here is a desperate one. Some have seen a contradiction between the end of 23 and the beginning of 24.

The Syrians did not come again on raids. But as I said, that's short-lived. And in any case, this is not a raid. This is a full-blown, full-scale invasion.

[ 4 : 18 ] He mustered his entire army and went up and besieged Samaria. And all the horror that war brings. And it is a horrific story.

Cannibalism. Murder. People behaving, as Romans says, without natural affection. But one thing we know from the earlier parts of Scripture is that famine, war, in the background to the Elijah-Elisha stories, is a divine judgment.

After all, Moses had said that long before. If you disobey the words of the Lord, this is the kind of thing that will happen. Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 speak about cannibalism and war and famine as one of the signs of divine judgment.

The situation is awful. It's desperate. And we have several ineffective words spoken into that situation. First of all, there is the cry for help.

Verse 26, As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried out to him, saying, Help, my lord, O king. The first thing to notice about that is she's crying to the wrong place.

[ 5 : 32 ] If Jehoram had been a righteous king, Sam 72 says, The righteous king delivers the needy when they call. He guards the poor. He stands up for the oppressed.

Jehoram did nothing of the sort. We can be pretty certain, by the way, that Jehoram himself was probably quite untouched by this famine. It so often happens in situations of war, particularly in countries ruled by tyrants.

They always seem to manage to escape from the worst effects of it. They shield themselves, whereas the ordinary people, the poor, the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, simply go to the wall. Don't we often do this kind of thing, though, ourselves? Help, my lord, O king. I mean, in a kind of contradictory way, sometimes we do it.

The government, any government of any party, we, first of all, on the one hand, we criticize them for interfering. We say they're always interfering in our lives. And then the next thing is, why doesn't the government do something about it?

[ 6 : 37 ] In other words, we so often look to governments to get us out of crises. Well, this is what this woman was doing. Samaria is going to be saved. But it's not going to be saved by kings and armies.

It's going to be saved by the Lord. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. This woman would have been better to have cried, not to my lord, the king, but to the Lord God who made heaven and earth.

So this cry for help is a helpless cry. And then we have evasive words from the king of Israel. Now we've met this king of Israel before.

He is Jehoram, the second son of Ahab. He's not mentioned here. In chapter 8, by the way, just to confuse things, he's called Jehoram. That's not at all surprising.

After all, then as now, we had longer and shorter forms of the name, Catherine and Kate, and that sort of thing. It's the same guy. But just, of course, to make it totally confusing, there's another Jehoram who reigns in Judah.

[ 7 : 38 ] Don't get too worried. Don't get too upset about it. If you're really concerned, you can read the commentaries. The point is, this man is a compromiser.

He is not a notorious idolater like his father Ahab. But over and over again, he bandies around the name of the Lord. He's good at religious language.

The king asks, what is your trouble? And so on. And then, he says, if the Lord will not help you, how shall I help you? From the threshing floor or from the wine press?

He's not a man who takes his responsibilities to the poor at all seriously. Of course, it's true enough. If the Lord can't help you, how can I help you? That's not what he means.

He's not meaning, cry to the Lord. He's meaning, essentially, and the Lord hasn't been much help in this situation, has he? He's let us down. So what's the point? You see, sackcloth is usually a sign of repentance.

[ 8 : 40 ] Verse 30, he had sackcloth beneath on his body. There's very little sign that Jehoram had repented. Like so much about him, it is show.

Jehoram is the kind of guy today who would have loved religion. He would have loved churchianity. He would have loved the courts of the church. He would have loved being, he'd been an ecclesiastical person.

But there's no genuine repentance. There's no genuine turning to the Lord. That's another type of ineffective word. Words that evade responsibility.

Words that refuse to cope with reality. But then, see what he does in verse 31. We've got threatening words now. And he said, may God do so to me and more also.

The head of Elisha, the son of Shaphat, remains on his shoulders today. Those with long memories who remember the story of Elijah will remember that Jehoram's mother Jezebel had said almost exactly the same thing.

[ 9 : 43 ] May God, or may the gods, do so to me and more also. Unless Elijah is killed. Now you see, this is what's happening again. You would have thought Jehoram would have learned by now.

After all, presumably he knew all about the miracles in the days of Elijah, about the confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Carmel. He knew about the healing of Naaman the Syrian.

He knew about the Syrian army just a short time ago being led into Samaria by Elisha. Notice verse 33.

While he was still speaking with them, that's Elisha, the messenger came down to him and said, and the messenger is quoting Jehoram, this trouble is from the Lord. Why should I wait for the Lord any longer?

This shows what he really thinks of the Lord, of Yahweh, the God of Israel. He's no use. He's let us down and we're not going to bother anymore. You see why I call it the ineffective words of humans.

[ 10 : 45 ] Because none of these words are grappling with reality. None of these words are facing up to the situation. And it's so easy for us to be the same, isn't it?

We look at the outward, external reality. We profess belief in the Lord, but we don't actually. And it's one of the great struggles of faith, isn't it, to make what we sing and what we say actually part of what we do.

So that's the first scene then. The ineffective words of the human actors. Secondly, in chapter 7, verses 1 and 2, we have the hopeful words of the prophet.

The helpless words of humans, the hopeful words of the prophet. Now notice the difference between verses 33 and 7.1.

And remember, the chapter divisions aren't part of the original, so the story simply runs on.

Jehoram's words are words of somebody who does not know the Lord, who does not have a word from the Lord.

[ 11 : 50 ] Elisha's words, by contrast, are the words of someone who speaks for the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord. And there are two elements in this, in this prophetic word, this hopeful word.

First of all, there is the promise of help. Now notice what Elisha is promising. Elisha is not being extravagant. He's not saying, today there is fasting and tomorrow there will be feasting.

What he's saying is, tomorrow things will begin to return to normal. This is the word of the Lord. Two sears of barley for a shekel and so on. Now that's still pretty, that's still pretty tough.

It's going to return to normal. But when you compare that to verse 25, a donkey's head for 80 shekels, shekels, the fourth part of calf of dove's dung, that's probably not quite as awful as it sounds.

I imagine the dung would be for cooking rather than for eating. But commentators get a wee bit worried about that and try and tell us it's some kind of seed. But anyway, Elisha is saying, trust in God, things will return to normal.

[ 13 : 01 ] Buying, selling, the ordinary business of life will continue. The genuine prophet always brings a message of deliverance, doesn't he? A message of grace. A message that the Lord who reigns in heaven and earth will help.

We turn to him. He will help. There's also a word of judgment. Because this prophetic promise is greeted with mockery. The captain, we are told, on whose hand the king leaned.

This probably, probably the reference here is to the royal chariot which would have a driver in it and then the king would be seated in it and another, his attendant there, the woman whose hand he leaned.

Now you'll notice that the typical worldly reaction to the prophetic message, oh this is nonsense, this can't happen. The kind of word that rings in the books of Richard Dawkins and others, this is nonsense, this is impossible, this is not something that can possibly.

If the Lord himself would make windows in heaven, you can imagine the dripping scorn of his word and you could probably imagine him going back to the barracks and laughing, you know that guy Elisha, he's lost it this time.

[ 14 : 15 ] He's really lost it. If this captain actually had read his scriptures, he would have known that God does open the windows of heaven.

Back in Genesis 7, verse 11, in the flood story, the windows of heaven were opened. In other words, he is trifling with the God of judgment. Once before, God opened the windows of heaven in judgment.

And that of course is exactly what Peter says in his second letter which we looked at recently.

Where is this coming that he promised, scoffing, mocking, saying nothing will ever change.

And what term does Peter say? Peter says God did intervene. He intervened in the flood. He opened the windows of heaven. He doesn't use that phrase. It's the same idea. And then again, later on, a later prophet, the end of the Old Testament, Malachi, slightly different word, Malachi 3, verse 16, bring the tithes into the storehouse and see if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing.

Now you see what's being said here. God does open the windows of heaven. Sometimes in judgment, sometimes in blessing. If we're going to be like this, Captain, we're going to experience judgment.

[ 15 : 35 ] Just as the people at the time of the flood mocked and sneered at Noah for building the ark. But the flood came. This man didn't have so long to wait that the message was fulfilled.

The word of judgment is ominous. And the key here is whether do we believe the words of God or not. The hopeful words of the prophet. And then the rest of the story, which is a very exciting story in itself, a good example of biblical narrative with its tension, with its build-up of suspense, are what I would call the proof of the prophetic word, verses 3 to 20.

And now, where does this deliverance come from? Where does this rescue come from? It comes from the one who opens the windows of heaven, doesn't it?

It doesn't come from diplomacy. It doesn't come from armies. It comes from heaven itself. And the Syrian army flees, illustrating Proverbs 28, verse 1.

The wicked flee when no one is pursuing. That's exactly what happens here. And again, in Proverbs, Proverbs 21, no wisdom can avail against the Lord.

[ 16 : 54 ] The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord. That's what's happening here in this exciting story. But this story is dominated by words once again.

As I said, not all human words are futile and helpless. And you'll notice, first of all, that nameless people announce the good news.

verse 9 of chapter 7. This is a day of good news. Therefore, come, let us go and tell the king's household.

There's also a nameless servant in chapters 12 to 15. As we looked at these stories, we've seen how God so often bypasses the big and the important, takes up nameless people and uses them to announce his purpose and to carry out his will.

And who disbelieves this? Jehoram, once again. Verse 12. I will tell you what the Syrians have done to us. They know we are hungry. It's a trap.

[ 17 : 59 ] It's an ambush. You see, Jehoram works purely on the level of diplomacy, purely on the level of common sense. And this is what unbelief means.

Unbelief doesn't mean the occasional doubt or wobble. We all have these. I'm sure there is no one in this building whose faith hasn't and doesn't sometimes wobble.

Sometimes find it hard to believe in the face of external evidence. This is not what's happening here. What is happening here is not an occasional doubt or wobble.

It's deliberate, persistent, and sullen refusal. Nothing will convince Jehoram. No amount of evidence will convince his invincible prejudice that this God works.

And you see it so often. You see, it's in churchmen today. They tell us that liberalism is liberating. Why is it emptied the churches then?

[ 19 : 08 ] Why is it any time when they see the gospel preached and see lives being changed and so on? They pour scorn on it. That is truly invincible prejudice and unbelief.

And if people persist in that, then there comes a time when they can no longer believe. They become hardened. There comes a time when they no longer can be forgiven.

Not because God is unwilling to forgive them, but because they are unwilling to accept forgiveness. And that seems to me the point of that expression in the Lord's Prayer.

Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Not that God is saying, if you don't forgive others, I'm jolly well not going to forgive you. Rather, I think what's being said is, if you don't forgive others, you will become so hard, so twisted, that you will be unable to receive forgiveness.

Someone said to John Wesley once, Wesley, I never forgive. And Wesley replied, well I hope you never sin. And that really is the point. Forgiveness is receiving the grace of God.

[ 20 : 17 ] This king would accept nothing but the evidence of his senses. Now, I'm not going to allegorize verse 9 and say that these men went and preached the gospel.

Nevertheless, this, while the saving of the city was not salvation from sin, being the saviour is one of the great truths about God, isn't it?

Great truth about God that runs through the scripture. Who is a pardoning God like you? And in this we see a picture of something greater, don't we?

This is good news. And as someone said, what is evangelism? Evangelism is a beggar who has found bread, telling other beggars where to find bread.

That's what's happening here. I'm not saying for one moment that these men preached the full gospel. What I'm saying is they went back with a message of grace and of salvation.

[ 21 : 20 ] And who were these people? Nameless, ordinary outcasts, lepers, people who had no standing at all in society. And this nameless servant who tries without success to persuade his master to believe the good news.

You see, you don't have to be big and important to spread the good news. You don't have to be somebody whose name is in the headlines to be used by God.

All you need to do is to be a beggar who has found bread and tell others where that bread is to be found. So you see, in this story, we have nameless people announcing the good news.

Oh, that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace, as Charles Wesley said. And notice how in verses 16 to verse 20, several times, verse 16, according to the word of the Lord, verse 17, as the man of God had said, and not only that, the words are repeated, the captain's own words are repeated.

Skepticism is shown up for what it is, as skepticism always will be. What the Lord says is going to come true. Whatever skeptics may say, however they may mock, however they may cause faith to wobble, what the Lord says is going to be true.

[ 22 : 52 ] Verse 19, if the Lord himself should make windows in heaven, Elisha said, you shall see it with your own eyes, you'll not eat of it. And so it happened for the people trampled him in the gate and he died.

Now there is no sense of satisfaction here. There is no sense of gloating. There is no sense that the prophet enjoys this. What we're having here though is someone who sets himself up against the word of the Lord.

And those who set themselves up against the word of the Lord and treat it with skepticism are going to be found out. That really is the story of scripture, isn't it? One day the truth is going to take a body.

One day the word is going to become flesh. God's good faith in human form. And one day that word is going to wake the dead.

Those who are in the grave, says John, will hear the voice of the Son of God and shall come out. And just one final point. I've often said this in the Elijah-Elisha stories, that these miracles, these miracles of healing, these miracles of provision, miracles of raising the dead, these are token miracles.

[ 24 : 11 ] I don't mean by that, that they are simply a gesture. What I mean by that, they are signs of something bigger. They are signs of the age to come, the world to come, when the dead will be raised, the world to come and there will be no hunger, no war, no famine, and no plague.

And just as the living word brought in the first creation, God said, God said, God said, so at the very end of the story, what are the words at the end of our Bible?

See, I am making everything new. And that living word which speaks here, in this old story of Elisha, is the word which speaks to us now.

The word which tells us that this God who made heaven and earth is a God we can trust, a God we can believe in. Amen.

Let's pray. Thank you.