

The Independent Word

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[0 : 00] Now we come to our Bible reading, which is in the first book of Kings. You'll find that on page 294. We're going to be reading chapter 13 of this, of the first book of Kings.

Quick word to put this chapter in context. We, in previous years, we've been through many of the chapters in 1 and 2 Kings. Not this particular one as it happened.

The situation is this. Solomon, the great Solomon, has died. He's hardly dead when his foolish son, Rehoboam, by his absurd and reactionary policies, has caused the kingdom to be split apart. He holds on to Jerusalem, Judah, and Benjamin. Whereas Jeroboam, King Jeroboam, takes over the northern kingdom, the northern ten tribes.

Jeroboam was a high official during Solomon's reign, particularly associated with the northern tribes. What's happened is he's taken over the kingdom. He's set up his own rival religion in Bethel.

[1 : 05] Bethel, the place once associated with Jacob meeting God. And Jeroboam has set up his set-up stall there. An able but godless man.

This is where we break into the story. 1 Kings 13, verse 1. And we'll read the whole chapter. 1 Kings 13, verse 1.

1 Kings 13, verse 1. to himself. The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the Lord. And the king said to the man of God, Entreat now the favor of the Lord your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me.

And the man of God entreated the Lord, and the king's hand was restored to him, and it came as it was before. And the king said to the man of God, Come home with me and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward. And the man of God said to the king, If you give me half your house, I will not go in with you, and I will not eat bread or drink water in this place.

For so it was commanded me by the word of the Lord, saying, You shall neither eat bread nor drink water, nor return by the way that you came. So he went another way, and did not return by the way that he came to Bethel. Now an old prophet lived in Bethel, and his sons came and told him all that the man of God had done that day in Bethel. They also told to their father the words that he had spoken to the king. And their father said, And which way did he go? And his sons showed him the way that the man of God who came from Judah had gone. And he said to his sons, Saddle the donkey for me.

[3 : 53] So they saddled the donkey for him, and he mounted it. And he went after the man of God and found him sitting under an oak. And he said to him, Are you the man of God from Judah? And he said, I am.

Then he said to him, Come home with me and eat bread. The man of God said, I may not return with you or go in with you, Neither will I eat bread nor drink water with you in this place. For it was said to me by the word of the Lord, You shall neither eat bread nor drink water there, nor return by the way that you came. And he said to him, I also am a prophet as you are. And an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord saying, Bring him back with you into your house that you may eat bread and drink water.

But he lied to him. So the man of God went back with him and ate bread in his house and drank water. As they sat at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back. And he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, Thus says the Lord, Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord and have not kept the command that the Lord your God commanded you, but have come back and have eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which he said to you, Eat no bread and drink no water.

Your body shall not come to the tomb of your fathers. And after he had eaten bread and drunk, the man of God settled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back.

[5 : 26] As he went away, a lion met him on the road and killed him. And his body was thrown in the road, and the donkey stood beside it. The lion also stood beside the body. And behold, men passed by and saw the body thrown in the road, and the lion standing by the body. They came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived. And when the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard of it, he said, It is the man of God who disobeyed the word of the Lord. Therefore the Lord has given him to the lion which has torn him and killed him, according to the word that the Lord spoke to him. And he said to his son, Saddle the donkey for me. And they settled it. He went and found his body thrown in the road, and the donkey and the lion standing by the body. The lion had not eaten the body or torn the donkey.

And the prophet took up the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey and brought it back to the city to mourn and to bury him, and to lay the body in his own grave. And he mourned over him, and he mourned, saying, Alas, my brother. And after he had buried him, he said to his sons, 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 called out by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places that are in the cities of Samaria shall surely come to pass.

After this thing, Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for high places again from all among the people. Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places. And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam so as to cut it off and destroy it from the face of the earth.

This is the word of the Lord. And may he bless this very remarkable and disturbing story to our hearts and minds. Now, could I ask you, please, to turn once again to 1 Kings 13, which you'll find on page 294.

[7 : 43] And before we look together at that, let's have a moment of prayer. Father, we believe you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear.

And sometimes your word speaks in a very strange way, perplexing us, disturbing us. But we pray, Lord, that today, as we draw near to you, that you will most graciously draw near to us.

That you will open your word to our hearts and minds. And open our hearts and minds to your word. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. You know, the Bible is a very strange book.

Sometimes reading the Bible is like living in someone else's house or going to a hotel room or a holiday cottage. You're waking up in the morning and for a few moments you're disorientated.

[8 : 50] Some of some things are familiar, but you can't quite remember where you are. And a chapter like this seems to me just like that kind of experience.

On the one hand, it's terribly familiar, telling us we have to listen to the word of God. On the other hand, the story is absolutely staggering. We're told nothing about the old prophet's motive.

Why did he behave in this way and end up destroying the man of God? And above all, why did this old charlatan, who had grown old and gray, compromising and turning his back on the true faith, why did he get away with it?

And this man of God dies because of an apparent minor mistake. And this is one of the ways, I think, in which the Bible forces us to sit up. Sometimes we can become very stale in our response to the Bible.

Oh, we've heard all that before. We know about that. We don't need to hear this again. And then we come across a story like this that hits us in the solar plexus and makes us realize we have to listen.

[9 : 59] We have to open our ears. We have to sit up. As I said, the word of the Lord dominates the chapter. Verses 1, 2, 5, 9, 17, 18, 20, 26, and 32.

If, like me, you don't like numbers very much, you won't like that list particularly. But you can go through it later on and underline the places where it occurs. And this is the theme of the chapter. And I've called it the independent word because the word of God is independent of places and people. It's independent of the person who brings it.

It's independent of the place where it's spoken. And while it is totally irrelevant to the people to whom it's spoken and the place in which it's spoken, nevertheless, it's something that transcends and goes far beyond it.

And that is the point of the phrase, man of God. A man of God came out of Judah. Now, you read this phrase many, many times throughout the books of Kings.

[11:06] A man of God, sometimes named, indeed, used over and over again of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha, who are still a generation or so in the future when this story is told.

And this means someone who is following Moses. Moses, the man of God, par excellence. Somebody who is bringing to the people the words of Moses, which are the words of God. Someone who's not leading them astray. Someone who is not simply peddling their own ideas. A man of God comes to them with the authority of Moses, which is the authority of God.

And that's why in the New Testament, in 2 Timothy, chapter 3, verse 17, Paul says, from a child, says to Timothy, My child, you've known the holy scriptures.

They make you wise to salvation because you, the man of God, are equipped to do every good work. You see, when Paul calls Timothy man of God, he's saying be faithful to the Bible.

[12:10] Be faithful to the scriptures. Moses, remember, is shorthand for the whole Old Testament. And in Timothy's time, most of the New Testament was still being written. So, you see, that's the point of this phrase, man of God.

As we see from this chapter, men of God are not perfect. Men of God are not faultless and flawless. The thing that distinguishes them is they bring the word of God.

So, let's look at this story as it develops in three acts. This story of the independent word. First of all, we have the dramatic word in verses 1 to 6.

King Jeroboam is practicing his religion, standing there at the front and offering his sacrifices and behaving in a shameless way.

Now, we know that Jeroboam invented this religion. If you just glance back at chapter 12, the previous chapter, verse 33. Jeroboam went up to the altar and made in Bethel on the 15th day and the 8th month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart.

[13:23] See what Jeroboam's done. Never mind about Jerusalem. Never mind that God has appointed worship there. I've got a better idea. You don't have to travel to fuddy-duddy old Jerusalem.

Come to Bethel. Everything is exciting there. And in fact, you can actually see your gods there because he made golden calves as much as the Israelites had done in the desert.

He set aside the great festivals. Never mind the Passover. Never mind remembering the day when God rescued you. He devised from his own heart. Now, that is the essence of religion as opposed to gospel.

Religion ignores revelation and makes up its own rituals, its own liturgy. That is why religious people like religion.

See, religion means I can set the agenda. Religion means I can do exactly what I want. I can ignore revelation. I remember many years ago being involved in a conversation and somebody said, the real problem is that we've got the Bible.

[14:27] If we could ignore the Bible, we could all agree. Now, this is at the very heart of so much modern religion. Of course, people are not setting up golden calves in Bethel.

What people are doing is setting up their own way of worshipping God. Doesn't that make us feel complacent sometimes? We don't do that, of course.

We follow the word of God. What about our evangelical religion? What about our frantic desire in evangelicalism to be busy and to be seen to do things?

To be sure that everybody knows what we're about. Our socializing, our committees, many of them good things in themselves. But all of them, remember this, any organization in the world can give people coffee.

Any organization in the world can be friendly. And, of course, it's good to be friendly. We need to be friendly. We need to welcome people. But what are we welcoming them for? Once these things become an end in themselves, then the problem is the word of God gets dethroned from its central place.

[15:43] After all, it's what people, it's what we do, not what we say we are doing, that matters. It struck me as I was reading this, this is very like the Sermon on the Mount, which Willie has been preaching on the last month.

Jeroboam was essentially a Pharisee. Jeroboam loved religion. There's a huge difference between religion and discipleship.

And into this religious tomfoolery breaks dramatically the word of God. Just imagine the man of God edging his way to the front. Everybody is standing there feeling good, feeling pious, maybe singing

hymns, but certainly not the songs of Moses.

And he rudely interrupts. And just imagine the shot-tutting reaction as Jeroboam tries to take charge. And then a power from beyond strikes him powerless.

Verse 4, Jeroboam stretches out his hand from the altar, sees him, you imagine the guards stretching for their weapons, and then a power from outside.

[16:49] The altar was also struck. You see, religion is powerless. Religion changes nothing, changes no one. But there's another thing that's very important.

This is not just judgment. This is mercy. There's a roadblock. God's pushing up a roadblock in front of Jeroboam, saying, don't go down this road. This road leads to disaster.

Now, if you read the previous chapter, another prophet called Ahijah had come to Jeroboam and said exactly the same thing. And Ahijah is going to come to him again. You see, in other words, when the gospel speaks in judgment, that is also a word of mercy.

It's saying, don't go in that direction, because that direction leads to disaster. It leads to death.

Sadly, as we'll see at the end of the chapter, Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way.

This word is accompanied by visual aids. Jeroboam's arm and the altar are both struck.

[18:01] And sometimes, of course, God does give visual aids. After all, baptism and the Lord suffer a visual aids of the gospel, a dramatic acted parable.

And sometimes people, if they won't listen to the word, will believe the evidence of their own eyes. So there's not only judgment, there is grace.

His arm struck, the altar struck, but then his arm healed. But remember this, even when the word is not accompanied by visual aids, it's still the powerful word of God to salvation.

Always remember this, the word of God is not something accompanied by the power of God, which needs other things in order to make it effective. The word of God is the power of God to salvation, but God in his goodness, God in his grace, sometimes accompanies it by signs.

And you get this particularly, I think, particularly in places where the devil has had a very strong foothold. For example, places in tribes who have been seduced by witch doctors and so on.

[19:14] You get it sometimes where spiritism has taken a hold, and when the power of God is evident. But the other thing about this dramatic word, it has a long-term effect.

First, to a son shall be born, Josiah by name. Many centuries were to happen before Josiah was to come on the scene. Do you read 2 Kings 22 and 23?

You'll discover this happened exactly. And of course, the point surely in the flow of the story is Jeroboam could not destroy the house of David.

Jeroboam set up a rival religion, a rival kingdom, rival gods, but ultimately they were going to disappear. I think this is encouraging. The word of God and the work of God could continue long after we're gone.

It's very easy to get discouraged when very little happens. Who knows what will happen in generations to come. The word sown and the word which seem to have fallen on stony ground, which may actually flourish many generations later.

[20:24] So that's the first act of the dramatic word, Jeroboam reduced to a quivering wreck. Then we have, secondly, the second act, the true word among lies, verses 7 to 30.

Jeroboam is no mindless thug. Jeroboam is a very shrewd man, and he tries flattery. Verse 7. The king said to the man of God, Come home with me and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward.

I think it would be legitimate to translate that word reward as bribe. You see, Jeroboam is not stupid. Jeroboam sees that something dramatic has happened, that people would be impressed.

And Jeroboam, like Simon Magus in the book of Acts, wants to cash in on this. The story of Simon Magus was said to the apostles, he wants something of the power of the Holy Spirit.

And Jeroboam probably thought, Oh, if I could hire this guy, this would really set up Bethel. After all, this is something spectacular. We're not told why the Lord said you're not to eat and drink.

[21:33] I suppose when you think of the notion of hospitality in those days, that much more powerful is among us when you eat with somebody that is more or less committing yourself to them.

Don't you wish the story had ended there? This would be a nice improving little story. The man of God stood up both the bullying and flattery.

But verses 11 to 22 make very sad and disturbing reading. The danger of being seduced by false friendship and by flattery.

Now, an old prophet lived in Bethel. Now, commentators speculate on why he's called a prophet and the man of God is called man of God.

And some argue that prophet means he's a false prophet and man of God is genuine. There's some truth in that. I wouldn't press it too far because Elijah and Elisha are often called prophets.

[22 : 32] Isaiah and Jeremiah are often called prophets. The thing to remember, though, is this, that the word prophet is often used in the sense of a false prophet. In the book of Jeremiah, the word prophet occurs over 200 times.

And most of these instances, it means false prophets, self-appointed, self-anointed prophets. An old prophet lived in Bethel. Verse 18, I also am a prophet as you are.

I'm in the same league as you, so you better listen to me. Now, the man of God refuses Jeroboam's lunch, but sadly, tragically, he accepts the influence of this man.

This man, we are told, verse 20, is a set of table. Table is usually a sign of a wealthy household. Most ordinary people would simply sit on the floor and eat, whereas a table is often the sign of wealth.

Is the implication here that this was a man who had become wealthy in the service of Jeroboam? We can be certain that Jeroboam paid well. We can be certain he would make it worth their while.

[23 : 48] There will be all kinds of bonuses, all kinds of attractive packages, as we would say nowadays, for someone who told the party a line. This prophet is too clever to claim direct revelation.

Verse 18, an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord. In other words, he's not saying, the Lord said to me. He's too shrewd for that.

He says, an angel said to me. And once again, that's not wrong in itself. After all, the law we are told in Galatians was given by the mediation of angels. Angels are God's messengers between God and humanity.

Notice the end of verse 20. Sorry, let me get the right verse. Yes, the end of verse 18.

But he lied to him. In Hebrew, this is very abrupt. It's just two words. The man was a charlatan. The man was a cheat.

[24 : 54] Now, what is the problem here then? Surely the man of God was simply being friendly, simply trying to, if you like, build bridges, if you like.

You see, the condemnation of the man of God was that not that he had become apostate, but he listened to the wrong voice.

Having listened to the right voice, he now listens to the wrong voice. I am a prophet, says this man. Why was the man of God so foolish, so naive, in fact?

Reminds me of that wonderful verse in Proverbs, a simple believe everything. And in this, at this moment, the man of God becomes simple. When this guy says, Oh, I'm a preacher like you.

He lets his guard slip. You see, the point is, if God gives a clear word, if God speaks unmistakably, unmistakably, that cannot be set aside by another word, even if it's spoken by someone who claims to be a prophet.

[26 : 06] We're back to a much older story, to Genesis 3. Did God really say? Did God really say you want to come and have lunch with me? You see, when we hear this voice, did God really say, we're hearing the voice of the serpent?

And that is the way the serpent works today in our culture, in our churches so often. Not by, as in some countries, by savage persecution, but by deceit, by being charming, and so on.

Did God really say? It has to be said, the Christian world is full of people saying, The Lord said to me. Have you ever been at a Bible study where someone comes and says, I believe what the Lord is saying to us in this passage is?

Apart from anything else, that kills a Bible study stone dead. Somebody comes and says, this is what the Lord is saying. Then we might as well stop the study and go away and do it and obey it. You see the problem here. People claim evangelical gurus. You see, far too often in our evangelical celebrity culture, we quote very ordinary things that some celebrity has said as if it were some, as if it were some spectacular revelation.

[27 : 23] As if the guy had said he discovered a new planet. Now the point is, God is, God is not impressed by celebrities the way we are.

When God speaks clearly, then we need to listen. And we must avoid this kind of thing. We are told in Acts 16 of the Bereans who searched the scriptures daily to find out of what Paul was saying was

true.

Now that needed to be the case with the apostle. And it needs to be the case with all of us. All of us who handle the word of God. All of us who teach the word of God. I often used to say that, that Cornhill, don't take what I'm saying, test it by the word of God.

Because that is the only, that's the only final text. And our only safety is in what John calls testing the spirits. So you see what this man of God had done.

He had set aside the clear word of God. He had set aside the word that was his safety, the word that was his message, and he had listened to a charlatan.

[28 : 30] And of course, there's this spectacular turnabout in the story in verse 20. In verse 20, as they sat at table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back.

Amazingly, the Lord speaks through this compromised prophet. And that, once again, is an important reminder that it is the message, not the messenger.

If the Lord says something that is clearly true, something that is clearly biblical, the fact that we like or don't like the person who brings it is irrelevant. And that is so, so important.

This man is actually, actually speaks the word of God because God is the term that his servant will hear it. The prophet had forgotten the words of Moses, hadn't he, in Deuteronomy, about the false prophet.

That would have been his safety, but he forgets it and he is judged. Killed by the lion. But notice, here there is judgment, there is mercy, as well as judgment.

[29 : 46] He's killed by the lion, but the lion, verse 28, had not eaten the body. The body is kept for a decent burial. And unsurprised, the old prophet wants to be in on this.

Bury me beside him. Lay my bones where his are. Verse 31. When I die, bury me in the grave. Lay my bones beside his bones.

You see, this is so typical of the old prophet, isn't it? When he sees something that he thinks will be to his advantage, then he wants to be involved in it.

And so often, we want the gospel blessings, don't we? Without the gospel obedience. We want the fruit without the seed. We want God to bless us without obedience to him.

And if you read in 2 Kings 23, you'll find the words came true. In the course of Josiah's great reformation, as the king was getting rid of and dumping literally by the cartload, the vessels of idolatry, then this man's grave was spared by Josiah.

[30 : 57] Josiah recognized the words spoken all those centuries ago was true. It was the same words which he was following. It's a sad, puzzling story, a perplexing story.

And I think it's a story of judgment. Don't set aside the word of God and listen to other voices, whoever these voices may be. This is not talking about differing interpretations of Scripture.

That's a very, very different thing. And we will always differ on some areas in our interpretation of Scripture. This is actually setting aside a definite word given by God.

Rather like what happens nowadays. We are told, for example, in some circles that Jesus set aside the Old Testament. You remember once again the Sermon on the Mount, not the smallest letter, not the smallest dot, will be set aside in the Scriptures.

And Jesus set aside the Old Testament. And of course, the Spirit is leading us always into all truth. Taking, misusing the words of Jesus, when the Spirit comes, he will lead you into all truth.

[32 : 09] A verse used over and over again by the gay lobby to champion their views. Forgetting, of course, that he will lead you into all truth and convict you of sin and righteousness and judgment.

These words are never used when that passage is taken out of context. The Word of God is our safety. As Peter says, the Word of God, the words of the apostles and the prophets is like a light shining in a dark place until the day dawns.

You see, at the moment, it's not obvious, is it? It's not obvious, for example, that what is preached in some churches is true and what is preached in others is false.

Once again, I'm not talking about shades of opinion, I'm not talking about differences of emphases, I'm talking about the preaching of the gospel and the failure to preach the gospel. When that day dawns, then the light which guided us, the light of Scripture, will be seen to be true.

And finally, Act 3, the Word and the Future, because in verse 31 to 34, the prophet brings the story back to Jeroboam and the old prophet's fear for his future.

[33 : 25] Verse 33, After this, Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way but made priests for the high places again from among all the people. Once the immediate danger is passed, Jeroboam reverts

to type.

Like what Pharaoh had done back in Exodus, when the plague was removed, then Pharaoh immediately turns his back on the Lord. You see, Jeroboam despised the judgment of God but he also despised the grace of God.

That is the point. This is something very important. We must remember however effectively the Word of God is brought, however powerfully it's preached, not everyone will believe.

I've told already the story of the skeptic David Hume hurrying to hear George Whitfield and there's no evidence at all, unfortunately, that David Hume ever listened to the message.

You see, that is the point. Sometimes we think if we simply put it clearly enough, simply illustrate it well enough, everyone will believe that is not the case.

[34 : 40] There are many, many examples. I'm sure you could think of some of your friends and families who don't, not even necessarily hostile, they just make no sense to them.

And often you hear about people who, not that they misunderstand it intellectually, but it just doesn't impact them. And that's what's happening here. Jeroboam's sin cut it off and destroy it from the face of the earth.

Now, way back at the beginning, God had said to Jeroboam, if you're, through a prophet, the prophet Ahijah, if you're faithful to me, I'm not going to turn my back on David, but I will also raise up your house.

I'll bless you as well, because God's committed to all his people. And the prophets never really accept the division of the kingdom. They accept that it happened, but they don't approve of it. And the prophets, such as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, look forward to the reuniting of the people of God. Jeroboam was given that opportunity, but he turned his back on it.

[35 : 47] So the final message of this chapter surely is that the word of God is independent of those who bring it. Because the old prophet brought a true word, but was unaffected by it.

This is not just about listening to sermons. Much more than that. It's about our minds being shaped by the Bible. Let this mind be in you, says Paul, which is also in Christ Jesus.

How do we, how does the mind of Christ grow in us? It grows in us by the word that he has given us, the written word, fully and faithfully pointing to the living word.

Not just sermons, although it may be true to say that once the central teaching of the word of God disappears in a church, then everything else goes wrong.

May not notice for a generation even, but nonetheless, this is what happens. That's why it is so important that the preaching of the word of God remains at the center of our lives.

[36 : 53] The independent word. Let's listen to that word. Let's divorce it in our minds from whether we like or don't like those who bring that word.

Oh, I know that's, I know that's difficult. The devil delights in that. The devil delights in whispering in our hearts. Oh, that may be true, but look at the person who's telling you that.

We must listen to the word of God. In the word of God is our safety. In the word of God is God's grace. And that word will shine like a light in a dark place until the day dawns and we see the full light of day.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, as we saw the word of God often in dark, stony, thorny places, we ask that you will give us the faith, the trust in the life-giving power of that word, the trust in the power of that word, not just to work in its own time, but to work well beyond.

And we pray, Lord, that we remain faithful to that word. We will read it. We will study it. We will make it become so much part of our thinking that we indeed think with the mind of Christ in whose name we pray.

[38 : 19] Amen.