



“Lessons Learned Too Late”

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The Bible tells the story of a courageous prophet who made a deadly mistake. He learned some important lessons too late. This is a sobering story from the Old Testament, recorded in **I Kings 13**. It's about a young prophet who is nameless to us, but who would be celebrated for his courage, his valor, his resolve and his faithfulness to God. But, as we will learn, he had some fatal flaws.

I Kings 13:1-10 “And, behold, there came a man of God out of Judah by the word of the Lord unto Bethel: and Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense. And he cried against the altar in the word of the LORD, and said, O altar, altar, thus saith the LORD; Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; and upon thee shall he offer the priests of the high places that burn incense upon thee, and men's bones shall be burnt upon thee. And he gave a sign the same day, saying, This is the sign which the LORD hath spoken; Behold, the altar shall be rent, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out. And it came to pass, when king Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God, which had cried against the altar in Bethel, that he put forth his hand from the altar, saying, Lay hold on him. And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not pull it in again to him. The altar also was rent, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the LORD. And the king answered and said unto the man of God, Intreat now the face of the LORD thy God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored me again. And the man of God besought the LORD, and the king's hand was restored him again, and became as it was before. And the king said unto the man of God, Come home with me, and refresh thyself, and I will give thee a reward. And the man of God said unto the king, If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place: For so was it charged me by the word of the LORD, saying, Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest. So he went another way, and returned not by the way that he came to Bethel.”

Were the story to end there, it would be a profile in great courage. Perhaps the prophet would've gone down in that great roll call of the faithful that Paul wrote about in **Hebrews 11**. Instead, he went down in infamy and died a horrible death because after verse 10, our story takes a twist. This once brave and valiant prophet made a deadly mistake and in the process, he learned some very valuable lessons that many of us should learn today before it is too late for us as well.

This nameless man of God was sent by God on an important mission to Bethel. He was to prophesy against the false altar of King Jeroboam. That altar had been built by Jeroboam after the division of the kingdom to keep the people from going to Jerusalem to worship. He worried that if they continued going to the house of David to observe their holy feasts and ceremonies, some of them would be tempted to defect and remain there. So, he built an altar up in Bethel and over the course of time, he polluted the worship of God in every way imaginable. He instituted a wicked religion. When this nameless prophet came into the city to cry out against that altar, he said that in the future that very altar that the people were using for their false worship would be used to burn the bones of those sinful, digressive priests. As a sign that he was telling the truth, he said that God was going to break the altar in two and pour out its ashes.

As he said all of this, Jeroboam was standing at the altar burning incense, and when he heard the prophets' words, he was angry. He pointed at the prophet, commanding his officers to seize him. The Bible says that suddenly, Jeroboam's hand was withered and frozen in place and he could not draw it back. That frightened the king, and he had a brief change of heart and pleaded with the prophet to ask God to restore his hand. God granted his request, and when his hand was healed, he asked the prophet to go home and eat with him, and he would give him a great reward for what he had just done. You won't find a statement that took more conviction and courage in all of the Bible than the prophet's response.

I Kings 13:8 "And the man of God said unto the king, If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place:"

You see, God had told him when he began his mission that he wasn't to eat or drink anything while in Bethel, and he was to go home a different way than he had come. So, he was obeying the voice of God; he was resolved to do exactly what God said in the way that God had said to do it. I don't know for sure why God wanted it that way, but it certainly put the prophet in an awkward position. Nonetheless, that's what God had said and the prophet was determined to do as God had commanded him.

The Bible says that he turned around and walked away from Jeroboam, leaving the city a different way than he had come. As I said, if that was all there was to it, it would be a wonderful story of bravery, valor and fidelity to God. It took a great deal of courage for him to stand toe to toe with the king, look him in the eye and make such a refusal. I doubt if many of us would credit ourselves with that kind of fearlessness. Satan could not win this prophet on that front. But even this great man of God fell into sin. Deception, and the devil with his deception, is very sly. He defeated him on another front, and it was quite a sly tactic.

After the prophet left the presence of Jeroboam, some young men who saw what had happened went and found their father, who was also a prophet, albeit not a very faithful one. They told the old man what the prophet from Judah had said and done, and he wanted to talk to him about it. He found out which way he went and saddled a donkey and took off after him.

The old man found the prophet a while later sitting under a tree and he asked him to come home and eat with him. This wayfaring prophet repeated what he had told Jeroboam, that God would not allow him to go home with him. Here is that old man's response:

I Kings 13:18 "He said unto him, I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the LORD, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him."

You're going to find some lying preachers from time to time. The Bible tells us about prophets and so-called preachers who lie. Well, sadly, this prophet believed the old man and he got up and returned to Bethel to his house and ate and drank. It wasn't that he was setting out to intentionally disobey God; he was now deceived into thinking that God had revealed this to this other prophet.

Suddenly, the old prophet really DID get a revelation from the Lord. God told him that because that Judean prophet had listened to him and returned to Bethel, he would not make it home alive. Terrified, the old man told the prophet what God had said, and I can only imagine the fear that gripped him as he got up and started back for home, knowing he had disobeyed the Lord and that he was going to have to settle with God.

Sure enough, as he went on his way, a ferocious lion met him and killed him, leaving his mangled body on the side of the road. Some people saw his body, went to town and told the old lying prophet what had happened and he retrieved and buried the body himself, mourning the sad fate of the man of God who had done so well to perform his mission until he fell under the sway of this lying prophet. I'm sure that if the prophet from Judah had it to do all over again, he would do it a lot differently. Of course, none of us get to go around in life more than once, and sometimes, we make mistakes that we recognize after it's too late. Let's notice some of this young prophet's fatal flaws.

First of all, this disobedient prophet learned the hard lesson that God does not contradict Himself. If what the old man said to him was true, it was in direct contradiction to what God had already said. It's a really strange thing that he would be so determined to do what God had plainly told him to do, but then be so easily led to believe something totally opposite. Perhaps by the time the old prophet had found him, he was getting tired, hungry and thirsty. That's how the devil works: he preys on our weaknesses. He knows when to tempt us with what.

Whatever the case, the prophet from Bethel told him something far different than what God had said and he somehow believed that God must have spoken to him. He learned the hard way that God meant what He said the first time, and He doesn't tell one man to do one thing and contradict His own will by revealing something else to another person. That's so very plain to see in this case, isn't it? But it's not so easy for many of us to see in our own lives.

Without realizing it, a lot of people have God contradicting Himself if their ideas about religion are true. Did you ever notice how some people pit the scriptures against the scriptures? I'm not even talking about people who come along with some supposed latter day revelation that contradicts the Bible. There are people who have a very mixed up theology, where they pit scripture against scripture, accepting one verse to the exclusion or rejection of another. For example, some people—in fact, *most* people—reject baptism as a step involved in our salvation because the Bible tells us that we are saved *by grace*. The Bible DOES tell us that we are saved by grace. But the Bible doesn't exclude or negate the obedience of faith because of the grace of God.

Ephesians 2:8 “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:”

Yes, that’s the truth. The Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to write those words. But the Holy Spirit also inspired Peter to write this:

I Peter 3:21 “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us...”

Now, God doesn’t contradict Himself; the Holy Spirit doesn’t speak with a forked tongue. The Holy Spirit revealed the truth in both cases, and I can and do believe both. For me to properly understand one verse, I have to take into account the other. I can understand that salvation comes by grace and that I have never merited or earned my salvation, nor can I merit or earn it. But I can also understand that King Jesus, who came and authored salvation, expects me to obey Him. I can also understand that to receive the grace of God, it is received by faith, and if it is a true faith, that faith will obey and submit to the command of Jesus to be baptized. Why wouldn’t it?

You see, I have to interpret the Bible using the Bible itself, and if you study what God’s word teaches about grace, it shows us that by grace Christ came, died, and made a way for our salvation, and when we come to Him in faith, that faith leads us to submit to His command of baptism. There’s no contradiction there.

Some say that all churches are of God. But that’s not what Paul said.

Ephesians 4:4 “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;”

There’s a contradiction. Who are you listening to: what most people are saying in religion, what’s easy and popular OR are you listening to what the inspired apostle said? You see, the prophet of our text failed to realize that God doesn’t contradict His own law, His own teaching. Are you making the same mistake with fast and loose explanations of the word of God?

Second, this prophet learned that religious leaders don’t always tell the truth. He may have been courageous, but this prophet was also very gullible. He failed to account for the fact that the devil uses guile and deception to accomplish his purpose.

II Corinthians 11:13-15 “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.”

There ARE people like that in religion yet today. Notice what the lying prophet did in relation to the word of God. First of all, he took the word of God and he turned it around, making it say the exact opposite of what God said. Anytime someone takes the Bible and tries to give you some fancy explanation of why it doesn’t really mean what it says, they are likely wresting the scriptures. I know of supposed Bible teachers and theologians who spend more of their time trying to prove to people that the Bible doesn’t mean what it says than they do actually affirming what the Bible does say.

II Corinthians 4:2 “But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully...”

Some people do handle the word of God thus. Be very leery of anyone who does not take the word of God for what it says, but is always trying to explain it away. God plainly told the man from Judah to do one thing, but he was willing to believe that God had other plans for him that went against what He had said the first time.

Another reason he so easily believed the old lying prophet was because he claimed to have been given some more up-to-date revelation from God. That’s a popular ploy in religion in our day and time, too. The lying prophet told him that he had seen an angel who gave him the instructions to go and get the man from Judah and bring him back to Bethel. The Bible says that *he lied*.

Millions of people are so easily led into error by the incredulous claims of men in religion today. A man can stand before an audience or on television and claim that God gave him a message or special revelation and people will believe that. In fact, there are a lot of people who would rather believe *that* than something they can actually read in the Bible. They would rather have an experiential religion as opposed to a revealed religion—and when I say a revealed religion, I mean one that has been revealed in the word of God. Have you noticed how many of these supposed ‘modern messages’ that come to preachers involve sending them some money? And people believe them. A lot of people believe them. I know that to be true because someone’s keeping them in business, giving them the money to buy luxury cars and live in their fine mansions.

Just because someone says that God spoke to him doesn’t mean it’s true. As this man from Judah learned, it’s a tragic mistake to believe those claims when the word of God says something else. Some religions thrive on the claim of ‘modern revelation’ from God. Many are the preachers who will stand in their pulpits on Sundays and claim that God put something on their hearts, or revealed something new to them. We commonly hear that in pulpits across the land today. But, think it through: that revelation must be something different than what’s written in the Bible. If not, why would God need to reveal it to them when He already did in His word? If I don’t have vital information concerning the faith, it’s not because God hasn’t revealed it; it’s because I’ve not looked at it and listened to it, because it has already been revealed.

Jude 3 “...exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

Friend, you need to be very skeptical of the claims of men, no matter how impressive or spectacular they may be.

Third, the slain prophet learned that sincerity is not a substitute for obedience. Surely no one can doubt the genuine heart of this brave prophet. He had to be an earnest and determined man to look into the eyes of the wicked King Jeroboam and say what he said. When the old man from Bethel found him, he was doing just what God told him to do, and it certainly wasn’t his fault that this ornery old prophet lied to him and led him astray.

There are a lot of folks who are counting on someone else to answer for them in the judgment. They place a lot of faith in what men tell them. They are well-intentioned people, and I suppose they think that if their preacher is misleading them, he’ll answer for that and somehow, that relieves them of any

responsibility. They're not burning the midnight oil opening up the scriptures to scrutinize what they're hearing in light of the word of God. They might test it by their feelings or emotions, their biases or their prejudices, but they're not testing it by the word of God, and that's very, very dangerous.

You can have all of the good intentions of the world, but I'm going to tell you, there are a lot of people in the world today who will lead your soul astray. There are a lot of men who will walk up to a pulpit wearing a black suit and a red tie with a King James version of the Bible tucked under their arms, and they will want you to think they are very learned and pious. But they will mislead you; in fact, they will lead you to eternal damnation because they don't preach the truth. It's up to you and it's up to me to see if they're preaching the truth, and determine whether or not they are leading us in paths of right. How do we do that? by opening up the Bible and seeing what God's word tells us in all matters of faith and practice.

Let me give you an example of real, genuine sincerity. Many claim to be sincere today; you may even be saying, *I know I'm sincere*, but how can you be sure? Here is an example of genuine sincerity. The Bible tells us about a group of people whom Paul and Silas met in Berea. They had come from Thessalonica and when they got to Berea, they found a different attitude in their audience. Here's what the record says:

Acts 17:10-11 "And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

Here were some sincere people. They wanted to do what was right and they weren't willing to take a man's word for it. They searched the scriptures. I mean, we're talking about the apostle Paul here! But so far as they were concerned, he could've been teaching false doctrine. They didn't know. They knew that the Old Testament scriptures were indeed revealed by God; they knew that the Old Testament scriptures pointed forward to that which was to come; that there were guidelines in the Old Testament scriptures as to what to look for in the Messiah, the Savior and the Kingdom that was to come. So, Paul and Silas were not going to say anything that these people were not going to take home and lay alongside what they knew the word of God taught to see whether or not those things were the truth. Do *you* do that after you hear a gospel sermon? Or are you simply struck by the man's charisma or his ability to speak? Does he just *seem* credible, like he knows what he's talking about? Maybe he's charming, maybe he just says things that you like to hear, things that lift you up and encourage you and make you feel good about yourself and your present state in life. There are a lot of preachers that that's about all they do. They want to talk about how you can *live your best life now*, and fill you with all kinds of pop psychology to make you feel good about yourself and where you're headed in life. But you may not be following the Lord Jesus Christ. You may *feel* like you are, but have you ever actually opened the Bible to see what God says about salvation, the church, worship, Christian living and holiness? Are you comparing the teachings you have heard to the word of God? These people compared what they heard to the teachings of the Bible.

Jesus said there will be a lot of sincere people, as we think of sincere people, lost on the last day, who thought they were doing God's will but they weren't.

Matthew 7:21-23 "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out

devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

You see, you and I need to be very circumspect with our souls because it takes more than good intentions to be saved. Would that more folks in our day would learn this lesson that the prophet of long ago really died to teach us: take God at His word, do what He says to do, as He says to do it. Sometimes His commandments may not make a lot of sense to us and our human thinking; sometimes they might seem minute and insignificant, but they're not so to God. We may be tempted to question what God said and accept what someone else tells us instead, but when we do that, we're making a lethal error, a deadly mistake. The prophet met God's judgment in the form of a lion that slayed him on his way home, but those who reject the commandments of God today have a worse fate in store for them, when they meet the Lord Jesus in judgment and the books are opened.

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