

Lesson 9: I Kings 22:1-28

Objective: This is not an easy lesson. There are three main struggles in this lesson:

1. The issue of true prophecy vs. false prophecy - How can we tell which one is true?
2. How do we live our lives in a way in which we seek truth and not simply to have our own will confirmed?
3. God sometimes behaves in ways different than we expect - Can we be okay with having an unpredictable God, a God who does not fit in the box that we have built for Him?

*This lesson was supposed to include Ahab's death; however, it will be part of next week's lesson.

Introduction: Last week, we saw up close and personal the destruction caused by Ahab and Jezebel's turn towards sin and away from God. Even though Ahab had witnessed God's amazing power on Mount Carmel and two great victories over the Arameans, even though he had heard the word of the Lord spoken numerous times and experienced it coming true, he still gave himself over to sin. Amazingly, after God pronounces judgement on him and his family, Ahab humbles himself and repents, and God relents and postpones his judgment. Unfortunately, we will see this week that Ahab's character did not change, that he remained captive to sin.

Even though this lesson does not include Elijah, it happens during the time of Elijah. As we read these stories, we continue to learn more about God, more about who He is.

God's story is the main story - it is His stage that these "actors" are acting on, His world they are living in.

Read I Kings 22:1-4

Let's set up this scene:

Peace Treaty - the peace treaty that Ahab was not supposed to set up in Chapter 20 with the Arameans has lasted three years

Jehoshaphat: King of Judah; while Ahab was expanding the worship of Baal, Jehoshaphat was getting rid of the male shrine prostitutes in Judah (I Kings 22:46); according to 2 Kings 8:18, 26 Ahab's daughter married Jehoshaphat's son which may have helped seal a peace deal between the two countries

Ramoth-Gilead: an area east of the Jordan River in the modern state of Jordan; some of the Israelite clans had settled there but it is frontier territory - (It is close to an area that has still been disputed by Syria and Israel in modern times. (Moberly, 2008)); it is possible that this was one of the cities that the Arameans were supposed to return with the peace treaty that Ahab had with Ben-Hadad

King of Israel: unnamed through most of the story - almost as if his name is not important enough to remember, but we know by the end of the story that this is definitely Ahab. If this story were being reported by a secular source, the name of the King of Israel would be more important than the name of the King of Judah because Israel was

much bigger, much wealthier and Ahab was much more important politically than Jehoshaphat. However, the narrator of Kings is less concerned with who is important politically and more concerned with who follows God.

Just as Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard, now Ahab wants Ramoth-Gilead for his country, his rule. He asks Jehoshaphat to go to war with him. Jehoshaphat may feel as if he must do whatever Ahab wants him to do since he is the one who is in the subservient role in this unequal alliance between a large country and a smaller country (Keck, et al, 1999).

Read I Kings 22:5-9

Although Jehoshaphat has answered that he will willingly go to war with Ahab, he knows that they should ask God first if this is a war that should be undertaken. Ahab gathers 400 prophets together and asks them if he should go into battle or refrain. These prophets seem to know what the king wants to hear, so they answer with a strong, "Go, for the Lord will give it into the king's hand."

What is Jehoshaphat's response?

There is no way to know exactly why he has what he says but why do you think he may have recognized that these were not prophets of the Lord?

What does Ahab answer? What strikes you in his answer?

It is interesting that he names only one other prophet - and that prophet is not Elijah.

We know that there are more prophets - there is Elijah and there are the 100 prophets that Obadiah hid, but he only names Micaiah.

It is interesting also that he says he hates Micaiah because Micaiah only prophesies disaster about him.

What did Ahab call Elijah in chapter 21 (Naboth's vineyard)?

He called Elijah "my enemy" in chapter 21 and now says he hates Micaiah. He hates the messengers of the word of God.

Why do you think that Ahab hates those who speak the word of God, the truth?

Ahab has given himself over to sin his whole life, and that sin has gained an increasing hold on him. He has allied himself with someone who is also drawn to evil, and his soul has become numb to the word of God (Foster, et al, 2005). He has left no room in his heart for the truth.

How does sin make it harder for us to accept the word of God? Are we also, like Ahab, tempted to just put people around us who will tell us what we want to hear?

How do we do this? How can we do differently?

Read I Kings 22:10-12

What an impressive scene! The kings are wearing their royal robes, sitting on thrones at the city gate. The city gate is the formal gathering place where justice is administered and decisions are made (Ruth 4, Job 29). The prophets are prophesying in front of the kings; Zedekiah (who must have been the prophetic leader of this group) performs a symbolic action, and all the other prophets agree with him, supporting him. The government leaders and religious leaders are all gathered in the place where justice is administered - surely God is present and His will will be done (Moberly, 2008).

How do we know the narrator is setting us up? (How do we know that even though everything looks “right”, all is not “right”?)

We know that “a prophet of the Lord” is not there. Ahab has called for him, but he has not gotten there yet. Even though everything looks just right, it is a sham.

Read I Kings 22:13-18

From the scene we just read about at the city gate and the message the messenger delivers, what kind of pressure is Micaiah facing? What is he expected to do?

The messenger urges Micaiah to go along with the other prophets. Ahab is not really interested in a genuine word of the Lord. He only wants a prophesy that goes along

with what he already plans to do in order placate Jehoshaphat.

Micaiah is walking into a formal, public symbolically charged context instead of a private meeting with the king. He will need a lot of courage to not go along with the other prophets. (Moberly, 2008)

How does Micaiah answer the king's question?

We are surprised because we are not expecting Micaiah to go along with the other prophets! No one is more surprised than the king who immediately recognizes that Micaiah is not speaking the truth. We can only speculate on how the king realized Micaiah was not telling the truth - was he speaking sarcastically? He repeats the words verbatim that the other prophets are saying.

Ahab indignantly insists that Micaiah tell him the truth. Ironically, the king who does not want the truth, once provoked, demands the truth! Micaiah must be a skilled communicator to get Ahab to express how important it is that the prophets tell the truth.

What does Micaiah answer? What does his answer imply?

Micaiah's answer of Israel being scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd and having no master lets Ahab know that he will not make it through this battle.

What seems to be Ahab's primary concern? Who does he show no concern for?

Ahab immediately turns to Jehoshaphat - it almost seems like Ahab's main concern with Micaiah telling the truth was to prove his point to Jehoshaphat that Micaiah only prophesies bad things about him.

Ahab is not at all concerned that his people will be left without a shepherd, without a leader. Yahweh's concern is for them and their safe return home, but the king is only worried about himself (Moberly, 2008).

What do you think Micaiah's prophesy is meant to do for Ahab? Is it simply to foretell the future? Is there room for Ahab to change?

In last week's lesson, we saw that when Ahab repented, God relented on his punishment. Could this have been an opportunity for Ahab to change his mind, to not go to war? This is supposed to be the reason that he is asking for prophecies, to make his decision about whether or not he should go to war. Micaiah's prophecy is typical - it is a warning of a disaster which seeks to change hearts and minds so that the disaster can be averted (Moberly, 2008). The king can still turn, can still repent as he did in chapter 21.

Read I Kings 22:19-23

Micaiah tries again, and this part may seem strange to us. Micaiah paints us a scene of a heavenly court, and this heavenly court reveals the true nature of the earthly court. It is the spiritual counterpart to Ahab's court. (Moberly, 2008)

Describe who is sitting on his throne in this court? Who is standing around him?

Just as the kings of Judah and Israel are sitting on their thrones, surrounded by prophets, Yahweh is sitting on his throne with the multitudes of heaven standing around him. He asks “Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth-Gilead and going to his death there?” Those in the multitude suggest different ideas. One spirit comes and says he can entice him by putting a deceiving spirit in the mouths of his prophets.

What is this meant to tell Ahab?

This is a clear warning for Ahab that his prophets are not telling the truth! The basic verbal root of the word “deceive” in Hebrew means ‘simple-minded/foolish’. In some ways, Micaiah is saying to Ahab ‘You are letting your prophets make a fool of you.’ (Moberly, 2008). No one wants to be made a fool of! Ahab can still change his mind and not allow himself to be made a fool of!

In this situation, God is using people who are not committed to speaking God’s word as a way of bringing judgment on someone who does not want to hear God’s word (Goldingay, 2011). This idea of God putting a lying spirit in the mouths of his prophets is uncomfortable to us, and we do not understand it. However, it is not inconsistent with some other scriptures:

Ezekiel 14:1-11 speaks of men setting up idols in their hearts and going to a prophet. God says he will answer them “in keeping with their great idolatry. I will do this to

recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.” (Ezekiel 14:4,5) God says that when they go to a prophet to inquire of Him, He will answer them himself. Ezekiel 14:9 “And if the prophet is enticed to utter a prophecy, I the Lord have enticed that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel.”

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”

Does this vision, do these verses bother you?

This vision may seem scandalizing to us even though it matches the way Scripture speaks elsewhere. Just like God can bring judgment on people who have rejected the truth by making it even more impossible to understand the truth, so God can bring judgment by sending a message that isn't true (Goldingay, 2011). (See Isaiah 6:9,10; Mark 4:12) God does not always “behave” in the ways we think he should.

Can we be okay with a God who does not always act the way we expect Him to?

God is not limited by our ideas about Him, our preconceived notions of how He should act. A God who always does what we think He should do would be an idol, a god of our own creation. This passage forces us to deal with a God who is sovereign and free to use any means in order to bring divine purpose to fulfillment (Keck, et al, 1999). In Isaiah 55:8, the Lord declares, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways, my ways.”

Ahab now has all the information - he can again repent and fast and go about quietly as he did after Elijah pronounced judgment on him.

Read I Kings 22:24-28

What does Zedekiah do and say? Why do you think he behaves this way?

Zedekiah goes up to Micaiah and slaps him in the face and asks a clever rhetorical, sarcastic question that points out that it is difficult to tell who should be believed.

Here are some things to know about Zedekiah:

1. He must have been the leader of the court prophets, and he stands to lose the most if the king listens to Micaiah (Moberly, 2008).
2. His name indicates that he is a worshiper of Yahweh just as Micaiah's name does (In both names, the last syllable is a form of the name “Yahweh”) (Goldingay, 2011)

And, yet, just because Zedekiah is the leader of the court prophets, one whose name

shows him to be a worshiper of Yahweh, he is not a true prophet of God. His activities show us that it is possible to think that you are serving God and even manifest spiritual gifts but be deluded and no better than the prophets who serve Baal (Goldingay, 2011).

The spirit in Micaiah's prophecy/vision says that "*sheger*" (which means "lie, deception, falsehood") will be in the mouth of Ahab's prophets. In Jeremiah *sheger* is what the prophets speak when they are not sent by Yahweh and when they tell people the things they want to hear. It is a self-serving use of religious language - there is no engagement with God, no integrity in the word. Zedekiah embodies this spirit. He intervenes to make sure that a king who might change his mind remembers who his "real" friends and advisers are - he hits Micaiah in order to hurt and humiliate him. He asks clever rhetorical questions to change the dynamics, trying to put Micaiah in a defensive position. (Moberly, 2008)

From our past lessons, how do we know when a prophet is a prophet of God?

We know a prophet is speaking a word from God when the word comes true. (See lessons 2-4)

Micaiah is not put off by Zedekiah. He knows that it is when the word comes true that people will know who a true prophet of God is. Micaiah replies that it will become clear who is telling the truth when Zedekiah has to hide in an inner room - which would be the most obscure place possible in a building, the best place to hide when you are trying to hide from people trying to kill you. Just like Ben-Hadad had to hide because his life was

at stake, Zedekiah will have to hide because his life will be at stake once the Israelites lose the battle.

How does the king respond? Why do you think he responded this way?

Ahab orders Micaiah's arrest and imprisonment. He may have wanted to keep Micaiah from further undermining his war efforts. He could have wanted to keep the prophet alive as insurance. He still seems to expect to return safely. (Keck, et al, 1999)

Ahab is unable to give up what he wants to do. He cannot see the truth in what Micaiah says and admit that he could be wrong.

How could he have responded?

Ahab is now in the same position that he was at the end of chapter 20. He can repent and give up his war plans if he listens to God. Or, he can keep going with his own agenda.

From the stories we have studied so far, how has Ahab experienced God? What are some of his experiences with God, with His prophets?

How has Ahab experienced God's grace?

Do you think Ahab understands the nature of God? Do you think he understands what God wants from him?

What is Ahab most interested in?

Ahab is most interested in himself and what he wants. We see this with the Arameans, we see this with Naboth and his vineyard, we see it in this story. He has a personal agenda that he wants to carry out, and he is willing to manipulate the religious establishment to support him. He ignores what he knows to be the truth and suppresses voices of dissent. He even tries to deceive God. Ahab is a model of what we can become when we are not attentive to the will of God. (Keck, et al, 1999)

Can we be the same way? Can we get so caught up in our own desires that we ignore what we know about God, what we know He has done what we know He wants from us? We may not be able to call on all the prophets, but do we use scripture and friends or religious rhetoric to justify ourselves?

Part of what is so difficult in this is that we want to do our own will so badly that it feels right! How can we find the truth - How can we stay attentive to the will of God?

From the life of Ahab we see that a life of living outside the will of God, following idols, makes it impossible for him to believe and obey the word of the Lord when spoken

through the prophets. If we want to hear from God -whether that be through His Word, His people, the Holy Spirit - we must make our lives about following Him - to obey Him in small ways so we can obey Him in big ways. We must tune ourselves to hear His voice - we cannot make it our lifestyle to follow our own desires then expect to be able to know what He wants us to do when life is more difficult and expect to have the courage to do it.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 9:24-26a: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly."

Following God is a decision to must be made every day with purpose.

How does Micaiah respond?

Again, Micaiah shows us that he knows that when a prophet speaks a word from the Lord, it will come true. He is not afraid. However, Micaiah recognizes that it will only be once disaster has occurred that it will be obvious who is telling the truth. It is not always an easy thing to discern the will of God. The issue here is false prophecy vs. true prophecy. How do we know the difference?

How do you usually try to discern God's will?

How does this passage shape what you believe about discerning God's will?

Is it possible that even when a word is uncomfortable or inconvenient, it can still be true? Have you ever experienced a time when something made you uncomfortable yet as you studied or thought about it, you realized it was true or that there was a word in it for you?

Conclusion:

This passage acknowledges how difficult it can be to discern God's will. Sometimes we are confronted with two (or more!) different truth claims and it is difficult to tell which is true until one has been proved - at which point it's often too late. Majority does not matter in this story - being a "prophet" in some ways doesn't even matter in this story. In this story, we see the majority of prophets pander to the powerful. God says in Jeremiah 6:13, 14 "From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."

When we are looking for the will of God, we can't simply find messengers who will confirm our outlook, our opinions and support our agenda. We have to be ready to listen to messages that don't say what we expect or want to hear.