

THE UNNAMED PROPHET FROM JUDAH BELIEVING A LIE

Text: 1 Kings 13

Have you ever had someone say to you, “It really doesn’t matter what you believe. The only thing that is important is whether or not you are sincere in it. Doctrine does not count; what matters is your heart”? You probably have. We all have. Since the Bible is our guide, an important question must be raised: Is this approach to religion true? Let us see.

Before we leave Jeroboam, let us consider in greater detail the unnamed prophet of Judah who rebuked Jeroboam before his newly-built altar. This prophet is of special interest to us because he reminds us of the continual battle that rages in this world between truth and error, between obedience and disobedience.

You have heard the expression “little, innocent lies,” but we must remember that no lie is ever little or innocent. Some lies may *seem* little or innocent, but they never are. One person in the Bible who bears record to this truth is the prophet from Judah. In order to see this truth, we will need to take up his story after his rebuke of Jeroboam.

Following the historic denouncement and public humiliation of Jeroboam, God chose to give Jeroboam an opportunity for repentance. His hand and arm were healed, and final judgment was withheld a little longer. In relief and in a moment of good-will, Jeroboam invited the prophet to go with him to his home for refreshment and a reward. What an invitation! What

prophet would not want to be able to say, “I rebuked the king, and he thanked me for it by taking me to his palace for a meal”?

The prophet showed what kind of loyalty he had to his true Captain when he said to the king, “If you were to give me half your house I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water in this place. For so it was commanded me by the word of the Lord, saying, ‘You shall eat no bread, nor drink water, nor return by the way which you came’” (13:8, 9). If this prophet’s life had ended at this point in the story, we would have regarded him as one of the greatest prophets of the Bible. We would say of him, “This man is one of the great men of all time. He had his heart set on one thing—the truth of God. He could not be persuaded by anyone—potentate or peasant—to turn aside from God’s will. He was a true prophet who was dedicated to proclaiming only God’s truth, and he did so without fear or favor.” However, the rest of the story of this man gives us another picture of him.

The prophet from Judah got on his donkey and started home, making sure he was going down a road other than the one on which he had come. All of Bethel must have been buzzing with what had happened to Jeroboam at that altar. Some young men who had seen those events went home and told their father, an old prophet, all that had occurred. We do not know much about the old prophet other than that he was stirred by what he heard from his sons. He asked

them, "Which way did he go?" (13:12). The sons knew. Everyone who had been present at the altar knew which road the prophet had taken back to Judah. After the prophet had answered the king, he no doubt turned, walked out of the king's presence, got on his donkey, and rode out of town like a statesman who had won the day for truth at a crucial time of decision. All the people who had witnessed the scene followed his leaving carefully with their eyes, watching his every move until he and his donkey were out of sight. After he disappeared, they perhaps stood motionless for a few minutes in a hush of silence, with their ears tingling from the judgment sentence—then, one by one, they began solemnly strolling away to their homes, speechless and meditating deeply on what they had seen. Yes, the sons knew the road he had taken, for they had watched him leave as an angel of light returning to his divine Sender.

After learning which way the young prophet had taken out of the city, the old prophet quickly mounted his donkey and went after him. He found the man of God sitting under a tree, relaxing before he continued the rest of his journey. We do not know why the old prophet spoke or acted as he did.¹ We do not know why the young prophet did what he did. The old prophet said to him, "Come home with me and eat bread" (13:15). At first the young prophet was adamant and resisted the invitation as valiantly as he had Jeroboam's. He said,

¹Several possibilities have been suggested as to why the old prophet made this proposal to the prophet from Judah. First, it is thought that the old prophet was just overwhelmed by the courage and faithfulness of the younger prophet and wanted to have fellowship with him so much that, in his excessive zeal, he urged him to come home with him even though it was in violation of God's will. The old prophet, to begin with, did not respect the truth as he should have, or else he would not have been passively watching all of this go on with Jeroboam. Thus, as he fabricated a story of how God had spoken to him, he was going to an extreme to be with the younger prophet.

Another possibility is that the old prophet was deliberately seeking to bring the prophet from Judah down to his level. The denouncement at the altar had condemned all who had gone with Jeroboam into apostasy, including the old prophet because of his failure to speak out against it. Therefore, if the old prophet could get the young prophet to give in to a lie, he would be destroying, to an extent, the effect of his rebuke of Jeroboam and Bethel. The old prophet should have been rebuking the sins of Jeroboam and was convicted by the younger prophet who did. Hence, getting the younger prophet to give in would, in a distorted way,

I cannot return with you, nor go with you, nor will I eat bread or drink water with you in this place. For a command came to me by the word of the Lord, "You shall eat no bread, nor drink water there; do not return by going the way which you came" (13:16, 17).

The old prophet, for some reason, inspired of the devil, said to him:

I also am a prophet like you, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord, saying, "Bring him back with you to your house, that he may eat bread and drink water" (13:18).

These pivotal words follow: "But he lied to him" (13:18). Read those words slowly and thoughtfully. Here is where we see the true soul of the young prophet. Was he really committed to obeying God, or did he have a soft spot in his thinking about it? He had rebuked a king, but would he be fooled by an old prophet with a lie? The answer to these questions is given in verse 19: "So he went back with him, and ate bread in his house and drank water." As we watch the story unfold, our hearts cry out to him, saying, "No! No! Don't be misled by a fib. Stay faithful to the Lord's Word." Our hearts sink as we witness his leaving the tree for the prophet's home, a journey from faithfulness to unfaithfulness, from being a great prophet to being a "has been" prophet, from being a living prophet to being a dead one.

While sitting down to eat at the prophet's house, the Holy Spirit constrained the old

ease the conscience of the older prophet.

Third, some have thought that the old prophet was really putting the young prophet to the test, checking to see if he was genuine. The young prophet came from Jerusalem. Was he just a messenger from the Southern Kingdom who had come to cause trouble, or was he truly a prophet sent from God to rebuke their sin? If the young prophet gave in to this sinister invitation, he would be proving that he was not a "real" prophet of God.

Fourth, it may be that the old prophet was just acting on behalf of the king. He was a self-appointed defender of the king. Jeroboam could not get the prophet from Judah to come to his home, so the old prophet would try to accomplish what the king had failed to get done. If the old prophet could get him to come to his home, he would lessen the effect of the prophecy and perhaps acquire notoriety for himself in the Northern Kingdom. This could be his opportunity to become a success.

Even though many suggestions have been made, it would only be a guess as to what the motivations of the old prophet were. We do know that he "lied" to him. That truth, it must be agreed, is the main thought the Holy Spirit wanted us to see.

prophet to utter a prophecy concerning the young prophet's future:

Thus says the Lord, "Because you have disobeyed the command of the Lord, and have not observed the commandment which the Lord your God commanded you, but have returned and 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 grave of your fathers" (13:21, 22).

Later that day, as the younger prophet was returning home, he was attacked by a lion, mauled, and killed. When the old prophet heard of his death, he went out, took up his body, brought it back to the city, laid it in his own grave, and sighed, "Alas, my brother!" The only epitaph that we can think of for the tombstone of this prophet of Judah is "Alas, my brother! Why did you do it?" He fell away in the midst of his own revival. He was a preacher who did not listen to his own preaching. He was a man of truth who was deceived by a lie.

This sad episode should help us to get straight in our minds the tragedy of believing error. Falsehood is impartial; it condemns kings and preachers alike. The prophet lying dead on the road teaches us that God is the God of truth. Lies and falsehoods are the antithesis of God. Only truth is given from heaven and only truth is honored by heaven. Against the background of this event, we can easily see why a lie is so tragic.

A LIE IS DECEPTIVE

First, a lie is a tragedy because it misleads and deceives. In this respect, it is the opposite of God, for God is never deceitful. His word is always good. Nothing about Him is untrue. He leads us in the paths of righteousness (Psalm 23:3).

Error does not guide us into what is right, but into what is untrue and unreal. The old prophet wanted to convince the younger prophet with his lie that eating and drinking at his home was right, even though it would be in complete disobedience to God's will. The younger prophet believed him and was fatally deceived.

Notice how believable a lie can sometimes be. The old prophet made his lie very attractive, asserting that he was also *a prophet* and that *an angel* had appeared to him and replaced the

command given to the young prophet with a new command. He argued that his source was credible and that he, the messenger, was credible. We do not know why the prophet of Judah gave in to his appeal, but it could be that he said to himself, "He is a prophet too, and he says an angel appeared to him. I did not have an angel appear to me. It must be that he is right. I will go home with him." Thus he ignored God's plain command to him in favor of accepting an old prophet's lie that was dressed up, wrapped in believability.

Someone has said, "Be careful about believing the man who says that the Lord has appeared to him more recently than He appeared to you!" The truth is that the Lord has given all of us His Word, the Bible, and anyone who says he has received an update to the Bible is to be watched as if he were a mad dog. If he pleads for us to obey a command that is not clearly found in the Scriptures, follow the Scriptures, not him! Remember the words of Paul:

But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8, 9).

A LIE IS DESTRUCTIVE

Another reason that a lie is a tragedy is that a lie is always destructive. As the old prophet invited the young prophet to his home, he was inviting him to darkness, deterioration, and death. If you want to murder someone's soul, just lead him to believe and live a lie. Anyone who leads another to disobey God is not a friend but a foe—regardless of how he looks or how pleasing his personality or voice may be.

One good question to ask about any teaching is this: "Where will it lead?" The end result of error is death. Would you like to know what falsehood does? Look at the young prophet lying on the road and say to yourself, "This has resulted from believing a lie."

Every lie is destructive. There is no such thing as a harmless lie. The liar is affected by the lie that he tells. The old prophet fell into the pit of disrespect and locked himself outside of the approval of God when he sent forth from his mind and through his lips a lie. His life would be

forever marked in the Word of God for his misdeed. Anyone who believes a lie is affected by the lie. Life was intended to be lived in harmony with the truth. Anyone who tries to live life by error operates in darkness, misunderstandings, and evil consequences. There is no escape. Error always hurts the one who utters it and the one who accepts it.

A LIE IS DEVILISH

Still another reason for saying that a lie is a tragedy is that lies are always from the devil. Anytime you hear a lie, you know the devil is present. Jesus said that the devil is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). Thus we can say with complete confidence that the devil is somewhere in this story. When the Scriptures declare that the old prophet lied, they are telling us that the old prophet was under the influence of the devil. Anyone who lies is under the influence of the devil. The liar is a child of the devil.

We do not know when the old prophet made the decision to lie to the young prophet; we do not know why he chose to lie to him. We do know that he lied to him, and we do know the outcome of that lie. We can deduce from this scene that regardless of the reason, regardless of when or where the decision is made, a lie is the work of the devil and inches forward the devil's influence in the world.

Jesus said that the truth makes us free (John 8:32). Just think of all the ways the truth makes us free: It frees us from bondage to sin (Romans

6:17, 18, 21, 22), from darkness and ignorance (John 17:17; Romans 1:25; 1 Thessalonians 5:3, 4), from death (Romans 8:2; Hebrews 2:14), from dishonesty (Ephesians 4:23–25), from fear of judgment (John 3:18, 19, 21), and from the displeasure of God (2 Thessalonians 1:10, 11; 2:9, 10).

The lesson we have learned from the prophet of Judah should never be forgotten. It deals with the basic choice of life. When all is said and done, life comes down to a basic decision: Will I follow God or the devil? If my decision is to follow God, I commit myself at the same time to following the truth; for God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). If my decision is to follow the devil, then truth does not matter—but the consequences are bitter, fatal, and eternal (Matthew 25:41–46).

CONCLUSION

The story of this prophet from Judah is placed here as a rebuke to Jeroboam and to all who may be tempted to believe a lie and turn away from the truth. Swift and stern consequences came to a prophet because he relaxed his grip on the truth. He was God's representative, and the truth of God was not to be compromised. He was to preach it and live by it. God took a drastic measure, ending the life of a prophet, to teach us this truth. Will we learn it? ■

*Lesson To Be Learned:
Error kills; truth brings life.*

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