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The Sanctity of Yahweh's Word

I Kings 13:1-34

Intro: Back in the 1920s, a law was passed by Congress that made the manufacture, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages illegal – Prohibition, as it was called. While this was the law of the land, a good many people refused to entertain the idea of living a sober life and decided to make their own. These intrepid entrepreneurs were known as bootleggers and they produced bootleg, their own home-brewed elixir. This is exactly what Jeroboam does with religion at the end of ch12. He makes his own bootleg belief system. The last section of ch12 flows naturally into ch13 so it's best for us to take them both in together.

23-33 – Here is a man that had been raised up in good, old fashion Jewish orthodoxy. He knew the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, et. al. Yet, as soon as Jeroboam is installed as the new king of the new nation of Israel, he decides that this new nation needs a new religion! How did it come to this so quickly? Well, first off, Jeroboam didn't get into trouble until he began talking to himself. There's nothing wrong with a little self-reflection; it all depends on what one says to oneself. The new king's personal conversation is ominous mainly because we have just come through a chapter highlighting a formerly wise king's gradual turn from the truth of Yahweh to worship of false idols.

Calvin was right in saying that man's nature is a perpetual factory of idols. How critical it is to guard our hearts!

Jeroboam realized that the mere fact of a divided kingdom didn't exempt the northern tribes from their covenant obligations to Yahweh. He was still there God and they were still His chosen people. They were still as much under the Law of Moses as the southern tribes were but Jeroboam feared the political implications of the yearly trips down to Jerusalem, the capitol city of the kingdom of Judah. His problem wasn't that orthodoxy was dull or boring; for him, it was unnerving! OT orthodoxy consisted of David's dynasty and Yahweh's temple. It was focused specifically on a royal person and an atoning place. Now, Yahweh had promised Jeroboam a 10 tribe kingdom but it appears that this promise, this word, wasn't enough for him. He wanted something more secure than Yahweh's Word.

So, Jeroboam quickly turns from orthodoxy, not because it is no longer true but because it is no longer useful. He doesn't find it false – just fearful. You can see the gears turning in his mind. He has to hold on to “his” kingdom and since he can't just trust Yahweh's word for that, he must make himself secure. Politicians have a habit of using religion as long as it serves their purposes and goals. But, we must also confess that kings and politicians aren't alone in this guilt. We might not use religion as blatantly as Jeroboam did but how many times have we shared in his sin by allowing security to become our god? How often are we tempted to walk by logic and not by faith; to live our lives by calculation and not by commitment?

Our security (or success) is not what's going to draw lost sinners to Christ; it's our faithfulness to the Lord, our commitment to not only studying His Word but living it out as a witness and testimony to the lost around us. These are the people who are searching for truth, who are looking for some shred of hope in a world gone mad. We have all been granted certain rights as citizens and blessed with opportunities to make a good life; but, while we are responsible to use these blessings properly, we are never to rely on them as our security. The only rock we have to stand on is Jesus Christ and the stand that we take for Him is more important than everything else in our lives.

At first glance, v28 seems to be an appeal to convenience but in reality, the Hebrew idiom used here seems more like our phrase, “That's enough of that!” His argument was, “You've chosen a new king, now choose new places of worship.” He doesn't provide a real reason for the change. After all, he's a politician so he deals more in propaganda than he does in truth. Even the locations of this new religion were selected with purpose. Bethel had sacred links to the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob. How can their descendents go wrong worshipping in the same place where their ancestors worshipped and encountered God? Dan was the site of “alternative” worship as far back as the time of the judges with no less than a descendent of Moses presiding as priest. Bethel and Dan had “religious” significance.

So, Jeroboam institutes his own deviant religious cult; creating it entire out of thin air. He came up with his own religious calendar, clearly rejecting revelation concerning Israel's worship that Yahweh had previously

prescribed. He had picked the personnel (Levites) the periods (feasts) and the place (Jerusalem) for public worship and Jeroboam violated all these divine stipulations. Religion for him wasn't a "given" but something pliable to be molded and shaped to suit his needs and preferences.

What are we to make of this? Well, it may be hard to see but the author is mocking the king's new cult even as he is describing it. In essence, he's telling us that this new religion is both different and stupid. He does this subtly but clearly. In v28, he tells us that Jeroboam made 2 bull-calves of gold. The Hebrew verb is *asah*: to make or to do. It's a common verb, just as it is in English, but when we get down to the last 3 verses, notice how the writer begins to pile up this verb in describing the king's new cult. Do you see it now? The writer has dipped his pen in acid. He's saying that Jeroboam's religion is his own concoction; it's a lot of bull-logna. Concoctions shouldn't be taken seriously. How closely does Jeroboam's new belief system reflect the mindset of modern society today?

1-10 – 12:33 flows right into 13:1. There's the king standing by the altar, officiating over a solemn service at the Bethel Bull-logna Church. The crowd is raptured in sanctimonious wonder as a strange man "excused-me" his way to the front row. There, he suddenly launches into a loud outburst against the altar, prophesying on its future demise. Not content to rudely interrupt a solemn worship service, he also says an immediate sign would prove his prophecy: the altar would be torn apart and its ashes would be spilled. I'm sure the crowd was shocked at the audacity. This was a southerner, from Judah. Of course he's going to have a negative opinion of our new worship setup.

The king was a take-charge kind of guy and he would handle this rude intruder. The royal index finger targeted the man of God. The ushers rushed to grab him but then, the king's authority and anger turned to confusion and fear: he couldn't bring his hand and arm back to his body – they were frozen in paralysis. At the very same instant, the altar did split apart and the ashes did pour out of it, just as the man from Judah had said. Jeroboam had no choice but to change his approach. Instead of "Off with his head!" he asked the man of God to pray for his healing. When the miraculous healing cured the miraculous affliction, the king offered to reward the man of God, but he refused it.

11-34 – An old prophet lived in Bethel and his sons came home with one of those you’ll-never-believe-what-happened-in-church-today stories. The old prophet wants to meet the man of God so off he goes. The rest of the story is as baffling as it is sobering. There are so many questions: why were the old man’s sons at the sacrilegious church service? Why was the old prophet so weird? Why did he lie to the man of God? Why was the man of God so gullible? Why didn’t he rebuke the old man for lying to him? Why is his punishment so severe? Was the lion vegan? Most importantly – why doesn’t the author give us any answers or even clues to all of these critical questions?

Though the writer frustrates our curiosity with his non-answers, he is clear about his focus. We are left clueless about many details but we are clear about the matter that matters. Nine times, either the writer or one of the characters refers to the “word of Yahweh.” This is the theme of the story and if we keep this as our focus, we won’t go wrong in our study no matter how many unanswered questions clutter our minds. There are 3 main characters in this story and they each typify a specific relationship to the word of God.

Jeroboam – the word of God was his mercy and he rejected it. It didn’t seem like mercy at first, more like mayhem! He had a perfectly fine church service going when this uninvited intruder suddenly starts ranting against his altar. But something important happened that day in Bethel. A divine word shattered a smooth liturgy. It was a sudden mercy. It was also a severe mercy. Jeroboam acted like an insulted king and Yahweh acted like an insulted God. The king meant to do this intruder harm but Yahweh was clearly strong-arming Jeroboam in order to protect His servant from Judah. “Keep it up, buddy! How many limbs can you afford to lose?” Even kings can be fast learners. Jeroboam quickly got the point and wisely asked for a season of intercessory prayer. Was there an altar call at this point?

God struck the king’s arm and his altar simultaneously! This was a clear mercy. Jeroboam possibly didn’t see the mercy but he couldn’t miss the clarity. The Judean had just declared this sign or wonder in v3. His prophecy in v2 predicted something in the future (340 yrs). How could anyone be sure it would come to pass? So, to evidence the reliability of the distant prophecy, he said God would provide an immediate sign. When it happened before their eyes, they could reasonably argue that if the predicted wonder had occurred, then the predicted word will also occur.

The God who can make short term prophecy come to pass can surely be trusted to do the same over the long term.

Notice how Yahweh bends over backwards to speak to Jeroboam clearly. He provided him a barrage of signs. His paralyzed arm was a sign of power, which basically said, “Keep your hands off My guy!” The broken altar was a sign of truth that gave present proof of future fulfillment. No one could dispute that an unseen hand had torn the altar. He also granted the king a sign of grace, for when the man of God interceded for him, God restored the king’s hand. Was that not the immense kindness of God? Was it not a small glimpse of what Yahweh was prepared to do for the good of Jeroboam? Was this not a clear invitation for the king to return and enjoy God’s goodness?

Obviously, the only proper course of action was repentance and rededication to the covenant God of Israel, the very God who placed the king in his royal position in the first place. But, it appears Jeroboam would rely on manipulation instead of repentance. But even in this, the man of God’s rejection of Jeroboam’s thankfulness and hospitality was a sign of repudiation. Rejecting royal hospitality was a form of acted out excommunication – the true man of God was to have no dealings, enjoy no fellowship or carry on no relations with this apostate regime. If they choose to live like pagan Gentiles then they should be treated like pagan Gentiles. Jeroboam and his nation were cut off from the true people of God. The acted out sermon should have been as clear as the spoken sermon.

Guess what? The God we serve hasn’t changed a bit. He won’t hesitate to come barging right up to you, even in the middle of your idolatries. He’ll throw road blocks in your path and maybe even send one of His obnoxious servants to cramp your style, ruffle your feathers or harsh your mellow. But this is all good news! It’s good to know that God will do almost anything to pry you away from your golden calves. His mercy makes waves before His judgment arrives.

What happens to Jeroboam? He just repaired the altar and went right back to phony baloney religion. The word of God was his mercy – and he rejected it!

The man from Judah – the word of God was his safety and he abandoned it.

This guy is a bit of a mystery. He had a clear word of God for Jeroboam and for himself; he knew Yahweh's "abstinence orders" but when the old prophet flashes his clergy card and claims to have received a divine revelation that contradicted the word he had personally received from God, there's no protest, rebuke or even any suspicion that we can see. He swallowed a counter-revelation in opposition to the clear word already received without any debate or question. That's the real problem.

Faithfulness matters. This man from Judah was guilty of submitting to the tone of authority without closely examining the word it speaks. For good reason the Apostle John admonishes believers to test the spirits" (I Jn 4:1)! How we need to remember this in our modern church! Our contemporary Christian society is flooded with people claiming, "The Lord told me" this or that or "teachers" who claim to have some exclusive connection with Jesus. Are we to blindly or mindlessly swallow these claims – or are we to only cling to the sure and written word of the apostles and prophets? Surely our text teaches us that the given Word of God is adequate for His servants and that it is not safe to receive anything beyond or beside that word.

That's what the man from Judah did; he "rebelled against the mouth of the Lord" (21, 26). This is a sobering text for anyone in a teaching ministry. It warns us in particular that the ministry of proclaiming the word does not exempt us from the duty of obeying that word. It's not enough to just believe it, we must also take it seriously. That's what this man did. He demonstrated the impurity of Israel's new religion in the clearest way possible but as soon as he passed the first hill on his way home; he stopped to rest and reflect. It was only 6 miles from Bethel to the border of Judah – why the delay? Clearly, it is never safe to venture outside the shelter of God's explicit word. Ministry must be grounded in both the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The old prophet – the word of God was his profession – he abused it. How? He lied. He does go to the scene of the carnage and there's not the typical flurry of activity common for such tragedies. No people attempting to provide aid, no crowd of rubberneckers holding up traffic to get a glimpse of the mess. There was something more surprising happening at the scene – the donkey and the lion were calmly standing next to the corpse. The lion was apathetic; it didn't attack the donkey or the still warm pile of meat lying by the road. To all who witnessed this tragic scene, the strange lion was the

signature of God. Its actions were inexplicable. It seemed to be on a Yahweh's leash.

This eccentric lion was the testimony of God's presence in this situation. This was no normal lion attack: God was at work in judgment here. His disobedient servant laid slain in the street and nothing more; no mauling, munching or dragging off. The man was killed then guarded by the lion. The event had supernatural written all over it. Is it sad that of all the characters mentioned in this chapter, only the lion was completely obedient to God's direction and will?

What about the old codger? We'll never know why he lied to the man from Judah but his motive doesn't matter – he lied. Though God does give him a true word of judgment to speak against the man from Judah, it doesn't excuse his previous deception. Sure, the man of God should have discerned and rejected the old prophet's invitation. But the fact remains: through his lie, he destroyed a servant of Yahweh. Just because the man of God was foolish doesn't mean the old prophet was guiltless. This double-edged situation is reflective of Mk 14:21. One may be instrumental in accomplishing God's sovereign purpose and still be blameworthy in doing so. This is definitely a head-scratcher but it is in the text.

This old prophet carries an alarming combination: he speaks the truth of God and destroys the servant of God. We could say that he has orthodoxy without sanctification. He knows the language and can talk the talk but doesn't feel the need to walk the walk. Jesus said there would be people like this (Mt 7:21-23). Many will try to present their earthly ministry efforts to Him on the last day, but they will be rejected as those who do lawlessness. You should be terrified by this if you possess the truth and yet, fail to allow that truth to grip, control and transform you. For this old prophet, the truth seemed to be more of a game than a love. "I too am a prophet." The word of God was his profession – and he abused it.

"How can God speak through someone of such questionable scruples?" He spoke through Baalam, He even spoke through Baalam's donkey. Clearly, God can use any vessel but He delights in using a holy, dedicated vessels. Does the truth you claim to believe have a life-changing effect on you? "It did in the past." What about today, because only today matters. What is God doing in your life right now? A faith that doesn't change you cannot

save you. 😊