

1 Kings 22:1-40

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everyone. If you flick back to 1 Kings chapter 22, we'll have a look at this chapter together. Now, this evening, I want to do something slightly different with you.

I'm going to give you four techniques for ignoring God. It's not a usual sermon, isn't it? Four techniques on how not to listen to him.

And King Ahab is our instructor tonight. Because in this chapter, God speaks to Ahab, the Israelite king, through a prophet called Micaiah.

And he tells him not to go to a battle in this place called Ramoth-Gilead, because he is going to be killed and his army will be spread like sheep without a shepherd in verse 17.

Don't go, says God. But if you flick down to verse 29 of our chapter, having heard that warning, the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, went up to Ramoth-Gilead.

[1 : 09] They go into battle anyway. King Ahab is a pro at ignoring God. And I want to take you through how he does that.

How an intelligent, capable person like this king Ahab can ask to hear God's voice. He can hear it clearly spoken to him.

He can understand it and even appreciate it a little bit and then totally ignore it. How to ignore God. Here's method number one that Ahab uses.

Treat what God says like a formality. Treat what God says like a formality. This is one of the classic ways, isn't it, to ignore God.

It's to simulate that you've listened through a kind of formal hearing, through doing the outward procedures of hearing, but nothing more.

[2 : 12] You'll see how Ahab does that. And the backdrop of the story is that he wants to take the Judahite king, Jehoshaphat, with him into this battle in this place, Ramoth-Gilead.

And Jehoshaphat, maybe he's a little bit more pious because he says, well, hang on a minute, Ahab. Shouldn't we ask the Lord first? Shouldn't we inquire whether this is the right thing to do in verse five? And Ahab is ready to do that.

He's prepared a clergy for himself. Verse six, Ahab gathered about 400 prophets together, asking them, shall I go up to battle or not?

Yes, Jehoshaphat, you're absolutely right. Let us hear God's word on this matter. And he's already got an established collection of preachers, hasn't he, on standby.

And these prophets, these 400 prophets, they're not like the false prophets that we've seen already in 1 Kings. They're prophets of the Lord.

[3 : 19] Jehoshaphat says, let's ask the Lord. And Ahab says, actually, yeah, I've got just the guys who can tell us what he wants us to hear. They're not Asherah prophets.

They're not Baal prophets like we've heard of already. Notice they speak in the Lord's name. They say this, thus says the Lord kind of phrase in verse 11.

They claim to have the Lord's spirit in verse 24. They promise the Lord's success for battle in verse 6 and 12.

The Lord will give Ramoth Gilead this place into the hand of the king, they say. They use kind of acted out parables like the prophets did in the Old Testament.

One of them, the kind of ringleader, Zedekiah, makes some horns, doesn't he, out of iron. And he puts them on and he uses them as a sort of sermon illustration, like a parable, like some of the other prophets used to.

[4 : 26] You see, these guys look really legit, don't they? They're well-trained, well-versed, rhetorically skilled. Yahweh prophets, Lord prophets. So on the face of it, Ahab looks like he's good at listening to God.

I'm all ears, Lord. But you see, this is one of the typical ways of ignoring God, actually. To ignore God by pretending you're listening.

To go through the procedures, to obey the formalities. It's really easy to do, isn't it? To formally log in and then log off again.

To simulate that we're listening with a kind of formal adherence. To turn up to church. To pretend. That's what Ahab does here.

Turns it into a formality. But the next thing he does is he manipulates what God says. He manipulates what God says. Because Ahab's preachers seem to think that what God says is something that you can mould for your own purpose, for your own tastes.

[5 : 44] Jehoshaphat kind of smells a rat, doesn't he? There are all these preachers there. But he says to Ahab, hang on, hang on. Haven't you got another prophet that we can inquire from the Lord from?

So in verse 8, Ahab says, yeah, yeah, yeah, Jehoshaphat. There is one other guy whose name is called Micaiah. But, you know, I hate him.

Because he never prophesies anything good about me. Only evil. As if to say, he could say something nice about me if he wanted to.

Because the job of the prophet is to shape God's word to suit. And how this guy Micaiah does that, it never suits me.

And so I hate him. Then look at verse 13. A similar thing goes on with Ahab's preachers. His servant says to Micaiah, just before Micaiah comes and gives his little sermon, he says, Let your words be like the words of one of the other prophets, Micaiah.

[6 : 49] Do you see what they think the job of a prophet is? They think that the preacher is the one who controls what the Lord says for any given situation to suit any given needs.

That you can apply what God says however you want. Come on, Micaiah, just repackage God's word.

Just make it fit with what we want to hear in this moment. You could do that if you wanted to, Micaiah, couldn't you? They think that what God says is under the control of the preacher or the prophet.

So it's possible, isn't it, to have loads of preachers like Ahab does. It's on telly or in books on our bookshelves and bookshops. And there is a variety of stuff out there.

But some of it, possibly most of it, could be this kind of preaching. Just moulded for sort of 21st century contemporary felt needs.

[7 : 54] And you'll see, actually, the way they do this is really sophisticated in the passage. We've got the prophet Zedekiah, who's the ringleader of the 400s. But there's something dodgy about his sermon.

He makes these horns. And it's a really good speech, isn't it, in verse 11. With these horns you shall push the Syrians until they're destroyed. Go and fight in the battle, Ahab.

It's a great sermon illustration. It's really powerful. But actually, it's a bit dodgy. Because making a helmet of horns isn't something that you can do just at the drop of a hat, is it?

Before Zedekiah, this guy, even gets to hear the question that is being asked by Ahab and Jehoshaphat, he is already there with a sermon planned, isn't he?

With an illustration and punchlines to finish it off. His prophecy is a premeditated prophecy, even before he's listened to what God has got to say.

[8 : 57] Now, if he was a modern day preacher, he would be reading into the text of God's word, doesn't he, what he wants to get from it.

Rather than carefully listening and reading and studying from it what God actually wants to say. He comes with his own premeditated ideas that he wants to sort of shoehorn into scripture.

And that's exactly what he does. And it's very sophisticated. His little speech in verse 11 about the horns. He's not just getting that out of thin air. He's actually, I think, quoting scripture there.

Back in Deuteronomy 33, I'm sure you all remember this verse. One of the blessings that Moses gives to the tribes of Israel, especially strong in Ahab's land, was that they would be like a bull and that they would gore their enemies.

So this preacher's sermon has a scriptural basis, doesn't it? If loose. But he's manipulating scripture to suit.

[10:09] He's using a proof text out of context. And you can do that with the Bible if you want. The Bible can say whatever you want it to say.

You can find the right sentence or the right verse to fit what you want. There's even a verse in the Bible that says there is no God. In Psalm 14, if you rip that out of context, you can do that. You can ignore God by using his voice like a sort of pick and mix box of promises to suit your agenda.

If you're not listening carefully. When as readers or as preachers or as listeners of the Bible, we think that we control the words, not the other way around. It's a great way of ignoring God, of only hearing what it is that you want to hear.

So he manipulates what God says. But Ahab's third way of ignoring God is like that, but it goes one step further. And it's a bit more subtle, really, because not only does he manipulate what God is saying, he casts God's words in an overly negative light.

[11:21] You might notice how Ahab uses the excuse that whatever God says is always negative. So I'm just not going to listen to him, full stop.

He says that a couple of times, doesn't he, in verse 7. I hate Micaiah because he never prophesies good concerning me, but always evil. Then later, after Micaiah has spoken, he says in verse 18, Now what he's doing there, he's accenting God's voice as a persistently negative thing.

That is so typical of God, isn't it? He is always so negative about me. He's got a vendetta against me. He's always had it for me, against me.

And if he can pin that accusation on God, well, he's got an excuse not to listen, hasn't he? If God is always negative, if he's only got bad things to say, then I'm not going to engage with the Bible at all. If all the Bible has got to tell me is that I'm an awful sinner, which it will tell you, by the way, then I'm going to not listen. But that's not all the Bible tells us, is it?

[12:49] It's not all that God says to us. But he throws up this excuse, which is a kind of smokescreen. I'm not going to listen to God because he hates me, and he always has, and he always will.

About 30 years ago, there was a big road accident on the M4, not far from here. 10 people were tragically killed, and 25 people were really seriously injured in a massive pileup on the M4. But in the midst of the accident, one man, a man called Alan Bateman, climbed out of his damaged car that he'd crashed and ran along the central reservation into oncoming traffic. And drivers blasted their horns at him and shouted abuse out of their windows at him as they turtled past him. They thought that he was just a negative wacko waving his arms around. But actually, Alan Bateman was trying to warn them as they headed into the wreckage. And what they dismissed and characterized in their minds as an obstruction was actually a faithful and loving warning about a danger ahead.

[14:08] And what Ahab couldn't understand was that the way God speaks, it is candid sometimes, isn't it? God can be quite blunt about us sometimes, but that is not because he is always negative and he's just a negative person.

It's not a vendetta of hatred towards him or us, but it's an act of love when God says negative things that we don't like to hear sometimes, when God gives us bad news.

It's out of loving motives to get us to wake up and turn back to him. And sometimes the things that we hear are hard things, aren't they, from God? But sometimes those hard things are what's best for us.

God is sometimes direct and blunt in his word. But he is always kind in the way that he speaks. He waves at us heading towards a wreckage when he tells us about our sin and the things that we don't like to hear. But Ahab tries to darken God's words, to make it sound like it's God who is the hateful one, so that he doesn't have to listen to God.

[15:28] One famous atheist once wrote that the God of the Old Testament is a petty, unjust, unforgiving, control freak. And that is a typical way of ignoring God.

If you can re-characterize the God of the Bible as someone evil and negative, then you've got the perfect excuse, haven't you, to ignore him.

That's what people are doing when they try to portray the God of the Bible as that. They are trying to excuse their ignorance of him.

The irony is there that you've got to use the categories of evil and negative, haven't you, which have been taught to us by God in the first place. So you can turn it into a formality.

You can manipulate it. Or you can cast it as overly negative. And then number four, the method number four, you can suppress what God says. You can suppress it.

[16:31] And I think the thing about Ahab is that deep down, he knows what God says is true. But he pushes the truth down.

He suppresses it. He holds it down inside. And we see that with some little clues about how he acts in the passage. In the narrative, he finds this one decent prophet, Micaiah.

And Micaiah kind of sarcastically parrots the message of the other 400, doesn't he, in verse 15. Go up and triumph. The Lord will give it into the hand of the king.

With a sort of tongue in his cheek at the same time. But Ahab says, hang on, hang on a minute, Micaiah. I know what this is. How many times, verse 16, have I got to make you swear to tell me the truth, has done nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?

In other words, he knows that what his 400 have said is false. And that Micaiah is playing with him, that he's just parroting them.

[17:39] And that what his preachers have said is a lie. He knows the truth. He knows the truth that he is doomed in this case if he goes into battle. And he's been through this charade again and again and again, hasn't he?

How many times have I got to do this with you, Micaiah? This is the routine that Ahab goes through every time. He goes through the motions, pretends to listen, but deep down he knows what is true of him and his relationship with God.

Another clue is that when Ahab ignores the warning not to go into battle, he disguises himself in verse 30, doesn't he?

He tries to improve his chances of survival in the battle. Now, why would he do that if he thinks he's going to win? Because he suspects that what God says, after all, is the truth.

He's heard the warning and senses it's true, but he suppresses it and tries to get out of it. But deep down he is fearful of what he knows to be true.

[18:51] So he tries in every way to ignore it, doesn't he? To pretend that he's listened, to try and change what he's heard, or to blacken God's word as if God is the hateful one that he can ignore.

But he knows that he is in the wrong. And at the centre of Ahab's really sad situation is that while he persists in doing this, there is a point where God himself will reject Ahab.

There's this funny scene, isn't there, in verses 19 to 23, where Micaiah tells Ahab about a vision that he's seen, a vision of God in his heavenly throne room.

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the multitudes of heaven standing around him, on his right and on his left. And the Lord said, who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?

The thing is that God is going to actively allow a lying spirit to come into the mouths of Ahab's 400 preachers.

[20:01] to entice him to go against God's warning. Now, all kinds of questions come up there, don't they? Why would God do that?

But the thing is, we're meant to be scared here. The scary thing is that there comes a point where God will confirm Ahab in his rejection of his word, his voice.

God even tells him that that's what's going on, doesn't it? And it's another sign of grace that he gives him another chance. He's transparent with Ahab. But this is what is happening to you, Ahab.

That if you are willingly ignoring me in these different and varied ways, that is extremely serious. Because there will come a point where I myself will give you what you are asking for.

And I will let you listen to and follow these lies. The lies that you love to hear. I will let you hear only what you want to hear and nothing else.

[21:05] I'll remove the loving warnings that you hate so much and give you only what seems nice to you.

As we draw things to a close, there's a warning here, isn't there? And an encouragement, I think, from Ahab's story. The warning is for anyone trying their best to ignore God this evening in various ways.

I think we're all tempted to do that, aren't we, actually? But eventually, the man or the woman who tries to break God's words is only ever broken by God's word themselves.

Because everything that God says is true. Ahab, in this chapter, dies, doesn't he? Just like God said he would in the battle.

And the several things that Ahab has already heard God saying and warning him about and have suppressed are fulfilled at the end of this battle to the letter.

[22 : 14] You'll see in verse 37 to 38, that's the kind of summary of what happens. If you pick those verses apart, you'll see that everything that happens at the end fulfills what Ahab has been told on three separate occasions by different prophets in the last couple of chapters.

That he would be devoted to destruction. That his blood would be licked up like Naboth's was, which we saw last week.

That the soldiers would be scattered like sheep without a shepherd. That there would be disaster for Ahab. And I just want you to see the inerrancy of what God says.

That what God says has no errors in it. He doesn't make mistakes in what he says. That what God says comes perfectly true every time. We see that in the way that what God says happens in such a random way, doesn't it?

When a soldier randomly fires this arrow into the enemy masses. And it catches Ahab between the scale armor and the breastplate. And we think, well, what on earth are the chances of that happening?

[23 : 30] What Ahab tries to avoid by getting in a disguise. And therefore his enemy couldn't achieve because he went after the wrong king.

What the enemy had planned to achieve in the battle but failed. The Lord brings to pass through something so random and casual.

It's as if the Lord just does it so easily, doesn't he? So effortlessly. Despite all of the planning and all of the plotting.

And the techniques and the trickery. It comes to pass in God's way. So if we're trying to ignore God. I hope you'll agree that this passage is really terrifying, isn't it? Lord Bolingbroke commented once on the reformer Calvin, who wrote some great things.

[24 : 33] As he was reading Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. Great book. And he was reading this and he said, Calvin is a man of profound sense and vast learning.

He handles the doctrines of grace in a very masterly manner. But the thing with Bolingbroke was that he didn't believe the doctrines of grace at all.

He admired Calvin. He admired the Bible. He discerned the truths of the gospel. But he wouldn't receive them. Listening for him was just a formality.

That was one of these ways that you can ignore God. To treat it as a formality. To manipulate what God says. And only ever hear what you want to hear.

To cast him in an overly negative light. And give yourself an excuse not to listen. But the warnings here are real. The loving warning. To remember Ahab.

[25 : 36] And don't be like him. Because the one who continues to break God's word. And to ignore it. Will only ever be broken by it in the end.

So that's the warning. But there is an encouragement as well. As we close. There's an encouragement for people who do want to listen. Genuinely to God's words.

And to listen to God's voice. And to obey it. However imperfectly we do that. But the encouragement is that his word is going to come to pass.

It is going to happen. I love how the Lord arranges this. But I've not chatted with Paul. About what passage we were going to look at this morning and this evening.

But there are echoes of this passage, aren't there? In our reading from this morning. When Micaiah is slapped round the face by a false prophet in this passage.

[26 : 37] And the Lord Jesus is slapped, isn't he? Just before his execution. He is struck in a similar way for prophetic words that he has spoken about himself.

But nonetheless, we learn in the Gospels and here. That the strikings and the plottings and the killings will only further God's court.

And God's word is true. And it remains so as the unwilling and the unknowing, the random archer, will only ever end up fulfilling what God has promised for his people.

And just as sure as the word about dying King Ahab is his word of the living King Jesus today.

Just as sure as the word about King Ahab's removal is the word of King Jesus' arrival again.

[27 : 44] And just as sure as some might be broken by God's words. Many are held and built up on it. For it will come to pass.

Let's pray.