

1 Kings chapter 13

The Lion, the Donkey, and Doubt

by

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all Scriptures quoted from the NASB

The story in 1 Kings chapter 13 is about a man of God who hears the word of the Lord. He receives a command from God and sets out to perform his task. His mission starts out well but ends in disaster. The man of God starts out in obedience and ends in disobedience. We will cover chapter 13 verse by verse. We will discover what went wrong and why.

What is the lesson here that can be learned from the disobedient man of God? If you take the story at face value it would seem to be: always obey God, or don't doubt His word to you. While these may be true, the story gives us another important and much deeper lesson. This lesson concerns God's dealings with His people, particularly when He speaks to you. I think that this story not only reveals the man of God's disobedience, but it also reveals the reason for his disobedience. The fundamental reason that the man of God disobeyed God was that he questioned the word of the Lord. Let's take a look the story in 1 Kings chapter 13.

The Man of God

(1) Now behold, there came a man of God from Judah to Bethel by the word of the Lord, while Jeroboam was standing by the altar to burn incense.

(2) And he cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, "O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, 'Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.'"

(3) Then he gave a sign the same day, saying, "This is the sign which the Lord has spoken, 'Behold, the altar shall be split apart and the ashes which are on it shall be poured out.'"

Rehoboam, Solomon's son, was king over Israel when the kingdom divided. You can read about it in 1 Kings 12. The northern ten tribes called themselves Israel, and the two southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin) called themselves Judah. The dividing line was just north of Jerusalem. Rehoboam ruled Judah and a man named Jeroboam (one of Solomon's administrators, but not related to King David) ruled Israel.

1 Kings chapter 12 tells us that Jeroboam was fearful that the people in his kingdom would desire to worship God in Jerusalem as was their custom. He reasoned that if the people returned

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to Jerusalem to worship, that they would also turn their allegiance back over to Rehoboam, He consulted his advisors and they crafted a plan. Two golden calves were produced to give the people something to worship other than the Lord. One was set up in the southern town Bethel, and the other one in the northern town of Dan.

1 Kings 13 starts out with a man of God traveling north from Judah to the town of Bethel in Israel. Bethel was approximately thirteen miles north of Jerusalem. If you remember from Genesis chapter 28, Jacob named the place Bethel (house of God) after he had the dream about the ladder in which he had an encounter with God. The man of God comes to Bethel and finds King Jeroboam preparing to burn incense on the altar. The man of God then prophesied what would happen to priests who offered sacrifices to other gods on that altar.

Let me point out a couple of things that I found interesting here. First, the man of God is not referred to as a prophet anywhere in this chapter. Even though he utters a prophecy given to him by God, the Bible seems to go out of its way NOT to call him a prophet. He is always referred to as a “man of God.” Is this piece of trivia important? I believe it is. In our church today, you do not need to be a prophet for God to give you a word to speak out. Second, the prophecy, although it was spoken to the altar, was not against the altar itself (an inanimate object), but rather against Jeroboam, who was using the altar unwisely and deliberately leading his people away from the Lord God. What God was essentially saying to the altar was; I will avenge you.

(4) Now it came about when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar in Bethel, that Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, “Seize him.” But his hand which he stretched out against him dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself.

(5) The altar also was split apart and the ashes were poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the Lord.

King Jeroboam heard what the man of God said and became furious. Jeroboam had several options that he could have taken. He could have repented and asked God to forgive him; but he didn't. He could have decided the man was insane and not worth his time; but he didn't. Instead he believed what the man of God had to say; and he did not like what he heard. This begs the question; what did Jeroboam hear that made him so upset? Here is the line that I think made Jeroboam so upset: **Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David.** It would be the house of David, not the house of Jeroboam that would cleanse Israel. God was essentially telling Jeroboam that the days of his rule were numbered. As an act of defiance against God, Jeroboam orders the man of God to be seized. As Jeroboam raised his arm to point at the man of God, his arm dried up and was stuck in place. Jeroboam's arm might have suddenly looked like it was ninety years old and was stuck pointing out toward the man of God. His wrath became terror as the loud crack of the altar splitting in two resounded in the air and he realized just how powerful God really is.

(6) The king answered and said to the man of God, “Please entreat the Lord your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me.” So the man of God entreated the Lord, and the king's hand was restored to him, and it became as it was before.

(7) Then the king said to the man of God, “Come home with me and refresh yourself, and I

will give you a reward.”

(8) But the man of God 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.

(9) “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.'”

(10) So he went another way and did not return by the way which he came to Bethel.

It is unfortunate that Jeroboam's fear of God did not lead to repentance. Did you notice how Jeroboam asked the man of God to pray? He said “Please entreat the Lord **your** (notice the word **your**) God.” I find it interesting that he did not say “Please entreat the Lord **OUR** God.” It shows just how far Jeroboam had already strayed away from God.

After God healed his arm, Jeroboam did not give thanks to God or give him praise or acknowledge God in any way. Instead, he gave the man of God credit for the healing. To show his thanks to the man of God, Jeroboam tried to bribe him with food, drink, and a royal reward. My hunch is that Jeroboam's ultimate goal was to convince this man to become one his priests. The next step would have been to declare that it was the golden calf that healed his arm.

The man of God remembered the word of the Lord and that prevented him being bribed. The Lord had told him to eat no food and drink no water. The man of God obeyed the word of the Lord and departed from Jeroboam's presence. The people who were with Jeroboam watched the man of God walk away.

The Prophet Who Lied

(11) Now an old prophet was living in Bethel; and his sons came and told him all the deeds which the man of God had done that day in Bethel; the words which he had spoken to the king, these also they related to their father.

(12) Their father said to them, “Which way did he go?” Now his sons had seen the way which the man of God who came from Judah had gone.

I find these two verses to be very fascinating. I'll show you why. Verse eleven refers to the prophet as being “old.” We are not told anything else about this man. I don't think that God had given him a prophecy in a long time, and I think his relationship with God was lukewarm at best. Why do I think that? Look at his sons.

The old prophet's sons were part of the crowd that was with Jeroboam to offer incense to the golden calf. The only way they could have seen the deeds of the man of God, was to have been at the altar with Jeroboam. They also saw which way he departed. I wonder if they said to themselves: “Hey look at that, a prophet! Our dad used to be a prophet, I'll bet he sure would like to here about this.”

When the sons tell their dad about the incident, he doesn't ask them what they doing there. He didn't rebuke them or tell them that they didn't belong at the altar of an idol. It doesn't seem to even trouble him that his sons were worshiping a golden calf. Instead, he only wants to meet the man of God. His motives are not good as the next verses will show us.

(13) Then he said to his sons, “Saddle the donkey for me.” So they saddled the donkey for him and he rode away on it.

(14) So he went after the man of God and found him sitting under an oak; and he said to him, “Are you the man of God who came from Judah?” And he said, “I am.”

(15) Then he said to him, “Come home with me and eat bread.”

(16) He said, “I cannot return with you, nor go with you, nor will I eat bread or drink water with you in this place.

(17) “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.'”

(18) He 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.'” But he lied to him.

(19) So he went back with him, and ate bread in his house and drank water.

I personally think that the old prophet was jealous of the man of God. The old prophet's sons had already told him everything that they had seen and heard. It is very possible that the old prophet knew about God's command that the man of God was not to eat or drink until he returned home. He would have known about Jeroboam's offer and the man of God's refusal. So why endeavor to tempt him with same offer (minus the reward)? If the old prophet was jealous, his offer would cause the man of God to stumble. A jealous prophet might have thought if God wasn't talking to him, he would ensure that God would not talk to this man either.

The man of God refuses the old prophet's offer and restates the word of the Lord that he is not to eat or drink until he gets home. The crafty old prophet quickly improvises and tries another approach. He realizes that the approach that Jeroboam used will not work. He is determined to trip up the man of man of God so his tactic changes to one of familiarity. **He said to him, "I also am a prophet like you** (verse 18). Do you see how the old prophet is saying to the man of God, “I am not Jeroboam, I am a prophet just like you. You and I are brothers, you can trust me. Furthermore, the word from my angel trumps your word from God. You should listen to me.” What the old prophet neglected to add was that even though Jeroboam was trying to lead all of Israel astray, he was only trying to lead the man of God astray.

The cunning old prophet then adds “proof” that he is indeed a prophet: **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** (verse 18). Without shame or remorse, the old prophet blatantly lied to the man of God. But his tactic worked. For the first time the man of God questioned the word of the Lord. He must have reasoned that the old man was a prophet, and he had seen an angel who had an additional word from the Lord. The man of God knew what God had commanded, but when doubt was introduced, it caused him to question the original word of God. The man of God did not say no to the old prophet's offer. He did not say, “I heard the word of the Lord. I know what I heard and I am staying with that word.” Unfortunately, the counsel of the old prophet seemed good to the man of God, so he went back to Bethel and his doom. The deception and lies of the old prophet had their desired effects. The man of God succumbed to the temptation and doubted the original word of the Lord.

Now before we jump up and down and condemn the old prophet for deliberately trying (and succeeding) to cause the man of God to fail, we need to take a good close look in the mirror. As much as it pains me to say it, this happens in the church today on a regular basis. Petty jealousy and envy slip in unnoticed and we find ourselves despising someone whom the Lord is using. We must ask God to search our hearts and our motives and reveal anything that would displease God and discredit fellow Christians. We must never bring a false report against anyone or give a false word from God. We need to be on our knees praying that we do not become just like that old prophet. We must be diligent so that we do not travel down that path.

(20) Now it came about, as they were sitting down at the table, that the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back;

(21) and he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, saying, "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,

(22) 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."

(23) It came about after he had eaten bread and after he had drunk, that he saddled the donkey for him, for the prophet whom he had brought back.

The old prophet finally got a real word from the Lord. The word condemned the man of God for disobedience and passed down judgment. The man of God must have shaken his head in dismay. He probably wondered why he had questioned what the Lord originally told him. He probably wondered why he had doubted what he had heard so clearly. He almost certainly figured out at that instant that the old prophet had lied to him about the message from the angel. I imagine the man of God bowed his head in despair and cried. Judgment had been pronounced; there was nothing he could do.

The old prophet saddled his own donkey for the man of God to ride. It was the least he could do for a man he had essentially condemned to death. The man of God left Bethel for the second time, but this time it was in defeat. His disobedience covered him like a blanket of shame.

I have been there and I have done that. I have heard the word of the Lord and not obeyed. I thought I knew better than God. I thought I was wiser than God. That is what we do when we disobey God isn't it? I was wrong, very wrong. God let me see just how wrong I was. The results of my disobedience were many years of grief and anguish. Fortunately God had mercy on me, forgave me of my disobedience, and restored my relationship with Him. He will do the same for you, if you ask him.

What about you? Have you ever heard the word of the Lord and then disobeyed? If you have, then you know the shame of disobedience. You may have wondered why you listened to the advice of others when you had heard the word of the Lord so clearly. We tend to forget that we have an enemy, the devil, who does not want us to obey God. He will do anything he can; using anyone he can, to get us to doubt the word of the Lord. When God speaks a word into hearts, we must hold fast to it. We must turn neither to the right nor to the left. When the devil sends the "old prophet" to cause us to doubt the word of the Lord, ignore that "old prophet" and follow

God. If you are going to doubt anyone, doubt the devil.

Don't make the mistake of the man of God in our story. He heard “another” word supposedly from the Lord, and he decided that superseded the original command. He did not stop to ask God about this “new” word from the Lord. The mistake he made in doubting the word of the Lord is an easy mistake to make. It is something that we need to prayerfully be on guard against. Don't seek the word of the Lord without first seeking the Lord of the word. We need to be very careful, and very prayerful not to make the same mistake the man of God made. He did not say to God: “God I know what you told me before and this 'new' word is completely different. Is this word really from you?”

The Lion and the Donkey

(24) Now when he had gone, a lion met him on the way and killed him, and his body was thrown on the road, with the donkey standing beside it; the lion also was standing beside the body.

(25) And behold, men passed by and saw the body thrown on the road, and the lion standing beside the body; so they came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived.

(26) Now when the prophet who brought him back from the way heard it, he said, “It is the man of God, who disobeyed the command of the Lord; therefore the Lord has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke to him.”

(27) Then he spoke to his sons, saying, “Saddle the donkey for me.” And they saddled it.

That must have been a very curious sight for anyone walking along that road. A dead man killed by a lion, with the lion standing on one side of the body, and the dead man's donkey standing on the other side of the body. The lion had killed the man of God but did not eat him, It would have been a very curious sight indeed. In Old Testament times, the lion was a symbol of Judah. It was also a symbol of power and truth. The donkey was considered an unclean animal that symbolized many things, among them, stubbornness and pride.

The lion and the donkey represented the two choices he had when he heard the word from the Lord. When the man of God was following God's command, he was walking as a lion in power and truth. God's prophesy was given and the altar was split in two. God's power and truth were visible and evident. When the man of God doubted and became disobedient, he no longer walked as a lion; instead he rode on the donkey of stubbornness and pride. Now they stood on either side of the dead man of God, symbols of the choices available to him, and his dead body was the evidence of the wrong choice he made.

It didn't take long for the news about a man killed by a lion to sweep through the streets of Bethel. They probably figured out from the description that it was the man of God who had prophesied against the altar. When the old prophet heard the news, he knew right away that it was the man of God who had disobeyed the command of the Lord. He told his sons to saddle a donkey so that he could go and see for himself. I wonder if he felt guilty for causing the man of God to disobey the Lord. I wonder if he felt any remorse for his actions and his lies. I think that he did. Let's read the next four verses.

(28) He went and found his body thrown on the road with the donkey and the lion standing beside the body; the lion had not eaten the body nor torn the donkey.

(29) So the prophet took up the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey and brought it back, and he came to the city of the old prophet to mourn and to bury him.

(30) He laid his body in his own grave, and they mourned over him, saying, "Alas, my brother!"

(31) After he had buried him, he spoke to his sons, saying, "When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones.

(32) "For the thing shall surely come to pass which he cried by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places which are in the cities of Samaria."

When the old prophet first met the man of God, he wanted him to stumble. He wanted the man of God to disobey. He was willing to lie and be the stumbling block that would cause the man of God to fall down. But look at his actions now. Now he buries the man of God in his own tomb. He requests to be buried alongside the man of God when it comes time. I think he may have realized that the man of God was the better man. His actions suggest to me that he regretted the role he played in the death of the man of God.

(33) After this event Jeroboam did not return from his evil way, but again he made priests of the high places from among all the people; any who would; he ordained, to be priests of the high places.

(34) This event became sin to the house of Jeroboam, even to blot it out and destroy it from off the face of the earth.

I am going on an assumption that King Jeroboam was quickly informed that the man killed by the lion was the man of God who prophesied against his altar. I think he became arrogant and decided that his god killed the man of God. Why do I say this? Because after the altar was split in two, after his arm was dried up and then subsequently healed, Jeroboam did not turn back to God. Instead he embraced his new religion with even more fervor and zeal. He pushed it onto the people and they accepted it with open arms. After all, the man who had prophesied against the altar and against Jeroboam was dead. Jeroboam must have believed that there was no one who could stop him.

Why is this story in the Bible? What purpose does it serve? The lion and the donkey also represent the two choices we have when we hear a word from the Lord. When we as men and women of God are following God's command, we will walk as a lion in power and truth. God's power and truth can split any problem or circumstance in two. God's power and truth will be visible and evident both to us and anyone around us. When we doubt, however, and become disobedient, we will no longer walk as a lion; instead we will ride on the donkey of stubbornness and pride. The lion and the donkey still stand on either side of us, symbols of the choices available to us.

Which choice will you make? When you hear from God, will you hold fast to that word? When someone (perhaps a well meaning Christian, perhaps not) introduces doubt into the word from

the Lord, will you question what God originally told you? Your choice is the lion or the donkey. Will you choose power and truth, or stubbornness and pride? Be on your guard, remain vigilant and pray without ceasing. Choose the lion. Choose life.