

The Man of God: Obedience Is Not Optional



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exodus 32, 1 Kings 13:1–34, Dan. 5:13–17, Luke 16:31, John 15:24, 2 Tim. 4:3.*

Memory Text: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20, 21, NIV).

This week we will look at one of the strangest stories in the Old Testament. On first glance we discover a renegade king, a prophet who makes specific food prohibitions, an altar that splits open like a cracked egg, and then, more disturbing, a lying old prophet, and a selectively dangerous lion.

The story takes place in the first years of the divided monarchy, a time of political and religious tension. Under the leadership of Jeroboam (and with the express blessing of the Lord [1 Kings 11:29–39]), the ten tribes of Israel have separated themselves from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon and heir to the Davidic kingdom. War hangs in the air, and it is during this time of instability and change that God sends His prophet with a specific message to King Jeroboam about the idolatrous worship in the northern kingdom, which would prove ultimately to be its ruin.

Below the surface of this story about a nameless prophet lies the important issue of obedience and how seriously God takes our obedience. Whatever the unanswered questions, this story shows that any expression of the gospel without resulting obedience is, of necessity, a false gospel.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 4.*

The Politics of Religion

After the death of Solomon, the poor judgment of Rehoboam, his son, led to the division of the nation, with King Jeroboam ruling in Israel, the northern kingdom, and Rehoboam in Judah, the southern kingdom (*see 1 Kings 12*).

Not long after the break, Jeroboam set the northern kingdom on a very dangerous path. He did not deliberately set out to lead Israel from a worship of God to idolatry; instead, he was acting from political expediency. He created two centers of worship, one at Bethel and one at Dan. He claimed to be trying to make things easier for the Israelites, so that they would not have to travel all the way to Jerusalem in order to worship. The golden calves were simply to be a visual reminder of God (not a representation) and were to make worship more credible for the common Israelite. What started as a political move, however, led to the breaking of the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:4, 5*).

What similarities can be noted between the golden calf episode in Exodus 32 and Jeroboam's golden calves? See 1 Kings 12:25–33.

It is necessary to be innovative in worship and adapt worship to our specific cultural contexts, but we must be so careful. Even a small deviation from a clear command of God has far-reaching effects. In the case of Israel, the golden calves led the nation on a path toward blatant sin. But things did not stop there. Jeroboam was obliged to make other changes as well. He wanted to persuade some of the Levites, living within his borders, to serve as priests at his newly established shrines. However, they saw the dangers and were not prepared to contradict God's commands; thus, Jeroboam was compelled to make priests of common people (*1 Kings 12:31, 32*), which in turn degraded the sacred office.

The story of Jeroboam's religious-political changes should have served as a warning to the early Christian church; however, the same thing happened. Divine commandments were changed due to political or social influences. Sunday instead of Sabbath was now the new "holy" day, in order to distinguish the church from the Jews. The veneration of saints was introduced in order to make the worship of God more visual for heathen believers. The pressures that led to these changes are by no means limited to the time of Jeroboam or early Christianity. Today, as a church, we face many similar challenges.

**What kinds of cultural pressure is your own church facing?
How susceptible are you to cultural pressures around you?
How willingly do you compromise on "little" things?**

God's Move

In the middle of Jeroboam's political moves, God steps in and makes Himself heard. He speaks through a prophet from Judah. This unnamed prophet makes his appearance just as Jeroboam is standing before his altar at the dedication ceremony for the shrine. Anyone who was anybody in the kingdom of Israel would have been there. God selected the most opportune moment to act. The result is dramatic.

Read 1 Kings 13:1–6. What happens here? What immediate lessons come to mind from this narrative?

The prophet, though not named, is referred to as the man of God. This was a common title used for a person recognized as a messenger of God. It was used for Moses (*Deut. 33:1*) and Elijah (*1 Kings 17:18*). This title connects our nameless prophet with some of the great prophets of the Old Testament; thus, the reader's expectations for him are high. The man of God cries out against Jeroboam's altar and gives a prophecy. In the prophecy, a specific name, Josiah, is mentioned (*1 Kings 13:2*). This is amazing, because Josiah is born almost three centuries afterward. It reminds us of Cyrus, the Persian, whose name is mentioned by the prophet Isaiah about two hundred years before his birth (*see Isa. 44:28, 45:1*).

What are the main points of the message the man of God brings? First, the altar is illegal, and the man of God predicts that a descendant of David named Josiah will defile it. This is exactly what Jeroboam most fears. He is establishing these worship centers especially to avoid losing his kingdom to someone who sits on David's throne. The second part of the message provides an immediate demonstration of God's power, thus guaranteeing the prophecy's future fulfillment. Before the eyes of everyone, the altar splits apart. Perhaps this is meant to remind the onlookers of the tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses broke at the worship of the first golden calf.

It seems as if Jeroboam has learned nothing from history. He has two golden calves instead of one. And now instead of being repentant, Jeroboam points at the man of God. Pointing the hand, stick, or scepter has always been a sign of judgment in biblical times. Jeroboam wants to have him arrested. So much for surrendering to the will of God.

How, in this story, do we see the mercy of God presented, even to someone as stubborn as Jeroboam? How often do you find yourself expressing a similar attitude toward the clear leading of God? What have been the personal consequences of that attitude?

The Giver of Gifts

It is a spectacular miracle. Jeroboam's hand, which had "dried up, so that he could not pull it in again" (*1 Kings 13:4*), is immediately restored. After such convincing evidence, we would expect at least a public confession from Jeroboam, the king. But miracles cannot change our will. Even after a dramatic intervention by God, it is surprisingly easy to find a "natural" explanation or just simply go back to our old habits.

What did Jesus say about the connection between miracles and belief? *Luke 16:31, John 10:25–28, 15:24*. **Why** do you think this is so true of us?

Instead of abandoning his worship activities and wholeheartedly beginning a reformation, Jeroboam simply changes tactics (*see 1 Kings 13:7–10*). He invites the man of God home with him and offers him a reward. This was a political move aimed at neutralizing the effect of the message on the people who witnessed the miracle. King Jeroboam is offering to take the man of God into his employ. Only the one who is in charge or who is soliciting a service is in a position to offer a reward, but God's man is never to be on sale. He owes his allegiance to God and cannot let his messages from God be modified by whoever might be sponsoring him.

Read *2 Kings 5:14–16* and *Daniel 5:13–17*. **How** did the prophets respond to the offers of gifts?

Giving a gift places the giver in a position of power, and the receiver "owes" the giver. The man of God refuses the king's gift and goes on to state that he will not eat or drink in the territory of Israel. By not accepting Jeroboam's hospitality, the man of God says "No" to mixing true worship with idolatry. God's people should not be for sale. They should walk a different route. The man of God did not have too far to walk, because the inauguration of the shrine at Bethel took place about 2 kilometers (1.4 miles) from the border with Judah. The next town in Judah's territory was Mizpah, a 10-kilometer (7-mile) walk from Bethel. The man of God was to show how revolting the idolatrous system was to God through a dramatic object lesson of not eating and drinking and even by taking a different route home.

How is the giving of gifts or favors viewed in your culture? Are you indebted to anyone by gifts that you receive? Pray for God's wisdom in helping you disentangle yourself from any compromising situations that you might find yourself in because of gifts given you.

Tempting Lies

God's dramatic intervention at the inauguration ceremony gives the ordinary people plenty to talk about. Some young men go home and tell their father all about the man of God. The father's name is not given, but we learn that he is old and that he is actually a prophet himself. This old prophet decides to go after the man of God and finds him sitting under a tree.

Read 1 Kings 13:11–19. Compare this passage with the first temptation and lie in Genesis 3:1–5. What similarities are there, and what can we learn from these episodes?

The man of God must have understood something of the urgency of his mission. He was told to give his message to the king and then not to take any time for eating or drinking but to return straight back. However, here he is, sitting under a tree in Israel, taking it easy. He could have walked the 2 kilometers (1.4 miles) and then could have sat under a tree in Judah. By losing his sense of urgency, the man of God was opening himself to temptation.

The old prophet deceives the man of God. We do not know what motivates the old prophet to deceive him. Whatever his motivation, the Bible tells us that “he lied” (*1 Kings 13:18, NKJV*). In this moment the old prophet becomes an agent of Satan, the father of lies (*John 8:44*). Perhaps an even more disturbing part of the story is that the man of God seems so easily taken in. After so obviously being led of God, after so obviously doing the Lord's will, he just falls for the trick and goes directly against what God has told him to do.

It's really hard to understand, isn't it? We would like to excuse him for disobeying God, since he was led astray. But God never excuses belief in a lie when the lie is directly opposed to a clear command that He has given.

Temptation revolves around the choice to disobey God's revealed will. Temptations don't change as much as the forms of the temptations do. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was tempted as we are. The same basic temptations we face (albeit in modern disguise) were faced and conquered by Jesus. Jesus promises us insight and a “way of escape” so that we would not be taken in by Satan's lies (*1 Cor. 10:13*).

How easily do you allow temptations to lead you into direct conflict with God's revealed will? What can you do, what choices can you make, to protect yourself from the temptations that so easily trap you?

Twin Temptations

The man of God faced two temptations. The first, which he powerfully resisted, came from the king; the second, which he succumbed to, came from the old prophet. What important lesson can we take from this for ourselves? *See 2 Tim. 4:3, 2 Pet. 2:1, Jude 4–16.*

The greatest threat to our faith is not persecution from the outside by political powers but rather false prophets and teachers who come from within us or who claim to speak in God’s name.

It is important to have a clear word from the Lord. In other words, we need to study God’s Word, the Bible, for ourselves. A true prophet or teacher will not contradict other inspired revelation. Because God never contradicts Himself, any new prophecy or teaching from God will add to established truth and not subtract from it. It also will encourage obedience and never disobedience. Finally, we can judge prophets and teachers by the results of their teaching for their audience and in their own lives.

Read 1 Kings 13:20–34. What happens next, and what lessons are there for us?

What is hard to understand in all this is why the old prophet lies to the man of God to begin with. He starts out in the role of Satan, the deceiver, and then, before the chapter is over, he is the one delivering the “Thus saith the Lord” (*vs. 21*) to him. Although much is hard to understand, one thing in this story shouldn’t be: the man of God should not have so directly and blatantly disregarded the clear command of the Lord.

The death of the man of God is not without effect. Unlike the king, who witnessed a miracle and continued in his sin (*see 1 Kings 13:33, 34*), the old prophet believes that God’s Word will be fulfilled. He tells his sons that when he dies they are to lay his bones beside the bones of the man of God. The prophecy made by the man of God from Judah is literally fulfilled by Josiah three centuries later (*2 Kings 23:15, 16*). As prophesied, Josiah burns bones on the altar; however, he spares the bones of the man of God and also, consequentially, the bones of the old prophet who was buried with him (*2 Kings 23:17, 18*).

Look at this verse: “It is the man of God, who was disobedient unto the word of the Lord” (1 Kings 13:26). What ironic but important message can we take from this for ourselves?

Further Study: “The Saviour overcame to show man how he may overcome. All the temptations of Satan, Christ met with the word of God. By trusting in God’s promises, He received power to obey God’s commandments, and the tempter could gain no advantage. To every temptation His answer was, ‘It is written.’ So God has given us His word wherewith to resist evil. Exceeding great and precious promises are ours, that by these we ‘might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.’ 2 Peter 1:4.

“Bid the tempted one look not to circumstances, to the weakness of self, or to the power of temptation, but to the power of God’s word. All its strength is ours. ‘Thy word,’ says the psalmist, ‘have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee.’ ‘By the word of Thy lips I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer.’ Psalms 119:11; 17:4.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 181.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Truth is progressive. As we better understand God’s truth, we may have to make changes in our lives, beliefs, organization, outreach, and so on. Keeping the *status quo* is not an option. Discuss in your class how we can know whether our proposed actions arise from God’s leading or society’s influence.
- 2 Discuss Jesus’ model of socializing with sinners as opposed to the duty of the man of God not to socialize and thus condone sin. How do we meet people where they are? Give practical examples in your Sabbath School class to show how you have come close to people and shown acceptance without encouraging sinful practices.
- 3 In many societies, the paying of bribes or giving of special gifts is part and parcel of almost all business, legal, and political deals. How can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, individually and as a church, survive in such societies? Based on this week’s lesson, as a class write some guidelines for dealing with this problem.
- 4 Imagine that someone in your church stands up and claims to have a message from the Lord or that your head elder claims to have new biblical light on last-day events. What would you do? How would you evaluate the claims?

Hopeless Case: Part 1

by LIONEL WALCOTT

I had a difficult childhood. I quit school when I was 12 and could barely read or write. I stayed away from home as much as possible, spending most of my time sleeping in boats or on the beach in my homeland of Barbados. I hung around places where tourists passed and I begged for something to eat. I stole and used drugs; as my crimes grew more serious, I went from juvenile homes to jails to prison.

I fled Barbados for a place where the police didn't automatically suspect me of every crime that was committed. But I continued stealing, dealing drugs, and smuggling. Again I was arrested, and this time I was put in a maximum-security prison on a remote island.

It was a terrible place, reserved for the worst criminals. We had almost no food, no change of clothes, no electricity, no toilet facilities—just jungle, snakes, and alligators. People died in that prison.

Desperate, I planned my escape. I borrowed the prison boat and paddled with a plank to an island in the distance. But I was captured and beaten. Prison guards came to get me, and again I was beaten. When I arrived back at the prison, I was beaten again. I was barely alive.

I spent the next 18 months in solitary confinement in an underground cell barely big enough to lie in. When I was finally released, I was malnourished and could barely walk. Once more I was living on the streets, eating from trash cans. But drugs were always available, and I was quickly addicted.

I returned to Barbados and landed in prison again. I tried to commit suicide, but I failed. I pleaded with my mother to get me out, and she posted bond. Once more I was on the streets, where my life of crime had begun.

One day I saw a tent a few blocks away. I was curious and discovered that it was an evangelistic meeting held by Seventh-day Adventists. I went to the meetings with drugs in my pocket and body odor perfuming the air. I sat in the back and listened to the speaker.

After the meeting I waited until everyone had gone. Then I asked Bruce, the night watchman, some questions about God. He answered my questions and became my friend, even when he had to chase us away from the tent where we were smoking and talking. But I sensed that my life was changing.

(continued next week)

LIONEL WALCOTT *shares his faith in Barbados, an island nation in the Caribbean.*