

Allan MacRae: Isaiah 1-6: Lecture 17

Biblical Theological Seminary, 1976

We have finished our discussion of Isaiah, but we have this class period left, and I want to use it to show how stories from the Old Testament can guide us in our Christian living and witness today. Turn, this morning, to the first book of Kings, the 22nd chapter. Here at the beginning of this chapter we have two men brought before us. One of them is Ahab, the king of Israel. Ahab, the man who was one of the most able, probably, of the kings of Israel: One who, from a political viewpoint, was one of the most effective. But one who was one of the worst kings in that he compromised with the Baal worship for political purposes. He brought on one of the greatest crises in the history of Israel.

The other man, who meets with him here, is Jehoshaphat, one of the very best of the kings of Judah. And this king of Judah--of a smaller area to the south, a third as large as the northern kingdom, and about half as populous--joined with the northern kingdom for a purely political purpose. And we'll read what happens. "And they continued three years without war between Syria and Israel. And it came to pass in the third year that Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, came down to the king of Israel." It says he came down and went from South to North. In our idiom we would say he went up. But Jehoshaphat was going from higher to lower elevation, so he went down to meet Ahab. "But he went to the king of Israel, and the king of Israel said to his servants, 'Know ye that Ramoth-Gilead is ours, and we are still and do not take it out of the hand of the king of Syria.' And he said to Jehoshaphat, 'Will thou go with me to battle, to Ramoth-Gilead?' And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, 'I am as thou art, my people as thy people, my horses as thy horses.'" Here we have Jehoshaphat, the great noble king, one of the finest, one of the most godly of the kings of Judah, making this alliance for

political purposes and going to this extreme, saying, "I'm right with you, whatever you want to do."

But then I think Jehoshaphat had a second thought about it. He thought "I've promised too much here. I better hold back just a little bit before I promise to go into this battle with the king of Israel. Let's find out what the Lord's will is." And I think he should have done that before he made his promise. Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Inquire, I pray you, at the word of the Lord today." Ahab claimed to be a worshiper of the true God. Ahab gave his sons, who turned out to be wicked men, names that included the name of the God of Israel. He followed his wife Jezebel for political purposes and she endeavored to bring the Baal worship into the land, and if it had not been for the way God raised up Elijah and Elisha, humanly speaking, she would have succeeded. And the whole witness to the true God would have been destroyed in that land. But Ahab claimed to be a worshiper of the Lord. He only permitted his wife to bring in this Baal worship. And so Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Inquire, I pray thee, at the word of the LORD today." The Lord here is in capitals. Recent scholars would probably say, "Inquire at the word of Yahweh." The translators of the American Standard Version of 1901 would say, "at the word of Jehovah today." We don't know how the name of God was pronounced. But I think it is unfortunate that we all would say "LORD" when we mean a proper name. And then when we say "God" we mean the title. That is, a type of being of which there is only one God. And yet the average person gets exactly the opposite impression of God as the proper name, and they think of LORD as a title. The Bible it is very clear that you know the difference between "God" and "LORD." So here Jehoshaphat is saying, "Now, don't look to Baal; don't look to your advisor here; don't look to these false things. Look to Jehovah, look to the true God. See what He says."

And so the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about 400 men, and these were not the prophets of Baal, of course. Jezebel had killed most of them, shortly before. Probably Jezebel had brought some new ones in. But if any of them

were in this group, they're not mentioned. They kept their identity secret if they were of them. These were men who claimed to be prophets of the true God. There were four hundred of them, and Ahab said to them, "Should I go up against Ramoth-Gilead, and shall I forbear." And they said, "Go up, for the Lord will deliver them into the hand of the king," and that should have settled it. Four hundred prophets all agree that God said go up, and I will give you this victory; shouldn't that settle it? But when you find too much unanimity, there is a good reason to hesitate. People don't agree with others that readily, so, I am always skeptical when people make numerous decrees and want you to sign all of them. It is hard to find even two people who will agree on everything. There are many things that are absolutely clear in the word of God. There are facts about the universe that we can be absolutely positive of, but there is a great deal that we must use caution to see exactly what the facts are. And so when you find four hundred prophets here agreeing, and all saying the same thing together, and nobody raising any questions, it certainly sounds as if they are trying to please Ahab.

And so Jehoshaphat said in verse seven, "Is there not here another prophet of the LORD that we might inquire him?" I've known of people who have tried to interpret this as, "Instead of these prophets of Baal, is there a prophet of the LORD we might inquire of him?" But that is not what the Hebrew says. The English could be understood that way but the Hebrew is, "Is there not another additional prophet, is there not another one?" These are all claiming to be prophets of the LORD. Jehoshaphat doesn't enter into the question. He just says, "Let's find out if we can get better light on it from somebody else, and is there someone else?" And the King of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is just yet one man named Michaiah, the son of Imla, whom we could inquire of the LORD, but I hate him. For he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil". But that word "evil" has changed its meaning. Today "evil" means what is morally wrong. But in old English, "evil" means anything that is harmful, whether morally wrong or

physically wrong. In this case, he means he doesn't prophesy good luck, he prophesies calamity. "He doesn't prophesy good concerning me, but evil." Jehoshaphat said "Let not the King's say so." Now, that's a very weak answer. Let's see what happens next. "So the king of Israel called an officer and said, 'Hurry and bring Michaiah the son of Imla'. And the King of Israel and Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah, sat each on his throne having put on their robes in an empty place near the entrance of the gate of Samaria, and all the prophets prophesied before them. And Zedekiah the son of Hanniah made him horns of iron, and he said, "thus says the LORD, 'with these shall thou push the Syrians until thou has consumed them.'" This is an object lesson, one of many we find in the Scripture. We find in the book of Ezekiel that God caused him to use many object lessons. God wants us to use every way we can to get his truth across to reach people with it. But here we have a man who was not a true prophet who uses an object lesson and all the prophets agreed, saying, "Go up to Ramoth-Gilead and prosper for the Lord shall deliver it into the king's hand." Now a messenger spoke to Michaiah and said, "Behold now the words of the prophets declared good unto the king with one mouth. Let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of them and speak that which is good." This is good advice if you want to get along well, you say what the other people think. And if you get into any, almost any, group anywhere you are going to find a temptation to do that. God doesn't want us to be contentious, always causing trouble, always making difficulties. That's one of two extremes. Oh, but how many fall into the other extreme; they just go along with whatever will advance them in the group that they are in. Even men who are really accomplishing things for the Lord can fall into this temptation; it's one of the traps of the Devil that we want to watch out for.

And so this man gave good advice to Michaiah. Michaiah answered him, "As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that will I speak." But then he appears to contradict himself in the next verse. The next verse says, "So he came to the King and the King said to Michaiah, 'Shall we go against Ramoth-Gilead in

battle or shall we forbear?’ And he answered, ‘Go and prosper! For the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the King.’” Michaiah did exactly what the man told him. His word was exactly like the rest of them. But this shows us some of the difficulty of writing. They are two different, altogether different arts, writing and speaking. When you speak, you use gestures, you use expressions in your face. You use your accent; you emphasize by the tone of your voice; you use all these outward actions to get ideas across. But when you write, its just cold sentences. When you write, you have entirely different methods of getting your thought across, and those methods are hard to express when you speak. I’m giving a paper at the meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society this coming December. And the man who placed it on the program said, “I believe everybody will be greatly interested in this, can you bring your paper with you and give it to our editor so we can put it in our journal?” And I wrote back and I said, "speaking and writing are two entirely different arts, and I want to get my thoughts across to those who will be listening. If I prepare a paper, I will use quite different language, and it will be quite a bit of work. Whether I will get that particular paper in shape for publication, I don’t know."

But here we often have to judge what is said by the context. And here look at verse 16, “And the King said to him, ‘How many times shall I adjure thee that thou tell me nothing but that which is true in the name of the Lord.’” Why on earth did Ahab say that? Why didn’t Ahab simply say to Jehoshaphat, “See, even this man who always speaks evil to me, even this man agrees with the rest, let’s go.” It’s perfectly obvious that there is something going on that the plain words do not indicate. I think we should read it something like this. So verse 15, “And the King said to him, ‘Michaiah, shall we go against Ramoth-Gilead in battle or shall we forbear?’ And he answered him, “Go and prosper! For the Lord will deliver it into thy hand.” Not sure that’s a good representation, but I’m sure that there was something in his tone and manner of diction that said to anyone who heard, "I’m saying what you want, but this isn’t what I mean at all." Otherwise, I am sure

Ahab wouldn't have answered the way he did. And I think that's important in reading the Scripture, that we recognize that when things are quoted from people, often there is an expression which may not be expressed by the written words. And sometimes we can get an erroneous impression if we don't examine what we read carefully from that viewpoint. But here it's made absolutely clear; Ahab said to him, "How many times shall I adjure thee, that thou tell me nothing but that which is true in the name of the LORD." And then Michaiah had built a verbal platform for himself from which he could better address Ahab's question. Michaiah might have come right out and said, "No, don't go up to Ramoth-Gilead." And if he had, Ahab would have said, "See Jehoshaphat, this fellow here, he's just always giving us this awful stuff." Ahab could have cut him off after a sentence or two if Micaiah had started negatively. Jehoshaphat might have said, "Well, if they don't all agree, I won't go" and Ahab would have said, "Well, it's only one against four hundred, you said you would be with me whatever happened, after all he's a follower of the LORD, but why pay much attention to him?" But Michaiah worked up a situation in which he would get a chance to speak in length. And I think he gave us an example of that. When we are presenting the Word of God, it's not enough simply to go and present the Word of God; we want to find an opportunity, we want to build a platform to make a situation where people will be ready to listen. Now, of course, the church is supposed to do that when we speak in the pulpit. And it did, a hundred years ago or a hundred and fifty. Then everybody worked in the field; they worked, most of them, as farmers or blacksmiths or something like that. They did hard, physical labor all week, and they had little chance to use their minds. So it was a treat to hear the minister expound the Scripture, often for an hour or two. But nowadays, when our minds are full of so many things, just simply standing in the pulpit doesn't necessarily build you enough of a platform. And many people won't even come to the church. But God wants us to find ways of getting a hearing; to find ways of getting people interested so they are willing to let us talk. And in this situation, when Ahab

adjured him not to say anything but what's true he means, "Tell us what you really have in mind." Then Michaiah has a perfect opportunity to speak fully. But even then he doesn't come right out and use language that will give Ahab an opportunity immediately to say, "O look at this awful fellow, the way he always rails on me!" Michaiah takes an oblique approach, he makes very clear what he means, but he takes an oblique approach that makes it difficult to interrupt him. This gives an opportunity for him to speak fully and get his message through to Jehoshaphat.

And so Michaiah said, "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hill as sheep who have not a shepherd. And the Lord said, 'These have no master; let them return, every man to his house in peace.'" Of course, it is easy to see what he means, the king's gonna be killed. The people will be left without a leader. He doesn't come right out and say it, but he gets the idea across. So that when the king of Israel said in verse 18 to Jehoshaphat, "Did I not tell thee that he will prophesy no good concerning me but evil?" Jehoshaphat wasn't ready to say, "That's right; he's a troublemaker; lets go." Jehoshaphat was rather ready to say, "Let's hear a little more. What really does he mean?" The passage continues, "And here is the word of the Lord. I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing by Him on his right hand and on his left. And the LORD said, 'Who shall persuade Ahab so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said on this matter and another said on that matter.'" Do you think this really happened? Do you think God asked some of his emissaries "What do you think we should do?" Certainly not! God is omniscient. God knows all things. God plans all things. He controls all things. But here in a figurative way the truth is presented. In a figuratively interesting way. The Bible has figures of speech, and we can use figures of speech too, but let's be careful that people understand them. The way people often speak about heaven gives the outsider the impression, well, we're going up there and were gonna strum harps day after day, year after year. I was just reading a book by a professor at a university where he said nothing could be

more terrible and disgusting than the Christian idea of heaven. Who would want to sit strumming harps and singing for thousands of years? He said he'd prefer hell to that anytime. Well, the Bible never said heaven was like that, but many, many people have the idea that it is. And we want to be careful distinguishing figures of speech that have a meaning but must not be carried too far, and that which is actually specifically taught. Actually, the Bible teaches very little about heaven. The main thing we know is that we cannot imagine the glories that God has prepared for those that love him. But the details we know nothing about, and it's certainly won't be something that is monotonous or tiring. There will be change; there will be plenty of worship, plenty of glorifying God, but there will be change; there will be interesting work; there will be all that will satisfy our deepest needs. We can be sure of that.

But Michaiah went on; he said, "There came forth a spirit that stood before the LORD and said, 'I will persuade him'. And the Lord said, 'Where with,' and he said, 'I will go forth and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets; and He said 'Thou shall persuade him and prevail upon all to go forth and do so.' Now therefore, behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets and the Lord has spoken even with certainty." Now, the phrase "the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all thy prophets," that is figurative. The Lord has permitted wickedness to be made clear. The Lord has permitted Ahab to go on in his wicked ways to reach his death at Ramoth-Gilead. God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but before we read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, we read several times that Pharaoh harden his own heart. God permits us, if we turn against him and follow wickedness, to go on in the way of destruction. Yet, even a man that may seem to you absolutely hopeless, God may use you to bring the word of God to that man and lead him to salvation. You may talk to one man over and over, day after day for years, but he may never become a Christian. And another man with one witness only and he may accept the Lord. You don't know what God's deal is. But until a man has actually died, and only if you'd known

the thoughts of his mind during those last few minutes, can you say that that particular individual was lost. God knows; we don't know; God alone knows the heart. But God gives us the mission of presenting his word, of building a platform on which to present it, getting people to be interested and willing to hear, and then presenting the word to them.

In this case, Ahab refused to hear. Ahab went on in his own way and Ahab died at Ramoth-Gilead. And Jehoshaphat suffered loss, too. As a result of this his grandson Ahaziah was murdered because Jehoshaphat worked together with Ahab. God wants us to think through what we're to do. He doesn't want us off in the corner working with no one, but he doesn't want us to compromise with that which is evil, which will hurt our testimony and lead us off into wickedness and perhaps into death. There is much to learn from these Old Testament stories. There is more of great interest in this chapter, but I think these few matters we can think upon and pray that God will drive the truth of his glory deep into our hearts.

Let's pray! "God, our father, we thank you for Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat, a man, who did so much good and yet who made unfortunate mistakes. Help us, our Father, to emulate his good qualities and help us to avoid the mistakes that he made. And our Father, we thank you for Michaiah. We know nothing more about him, Ahab said, "Put him into prison. Hold him there until I come back safely." We don't know what happened to him, but we know that you know, and we know that Michaiah has a place of glory in the courts of the LORD because he stood true despite all efforts to destroy his testimony. O lord God, we pray for each one here, that you will use us to lead souls into your kingdom, our primary purpose of the Christian being left in this world. That you will help us to show others how to grow in grace and how to grow in grace ourselves. In the knowledge of the Lord, O our Father, help us to stand true despite all the efforts of Satan to lead us astray we ask in Jesus name. Amen".

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