

1 Kings 22 – When God’s Word and Human Will Collide.

Introduction

Most of us have received news we didn’t want to hear this past week. Lockdown extended for at least another week. And, I’m sure there were a number of you who had all sorts of plans and goals for this week. But instead of those, we get another week of being confined to our homes, back on zoom and constantly distracted by the latest Covid headlines. Lockdown was the message I expected to hear, it was not the message I wanted to hear.

It’s always hard to receive bad news. Sometimes we accept it, other times in we fight against it.

In our passage today, we see king Ahab receive some news he doesn’t want to hear. God, through his prophet Micaiah gives him a final message of judgment for his rebellion and wickedness against God. This is a message that he likely expected to hear, but did not want to hear. And so, he fights to the death against both the message and the messenger in a futile attempt to change the equation.

Now, we’ll consider the foolishness of Ahab in this passage. But I particularly, want to think about the role of Micaiah in this chapter and the way he gets caught up in Ahab’s resistance towards God and His word. I think there is something we can learn from him.

You see, Jesus tells us, that as Christians, we too will get caught up in the world’s resistance against God. We too will have people rage against us because of God’s confronting word which we believe in and which calls out human sin and rebellion. In John 15 Jesus says:

19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Micaiah's experience teaches us what it looks like to keep trusting God when the world hates you. There are four features I want to consider: (1) the way Micaiah is hated because of the word, (2) the way he is pressured to change the word, (3) the way he is faithful with the word, and (4) the way he is vindicated (proved true) by the word. Hated, pressured, faithful, vindicated.

So let's jump into the first one.

1. Hated because of the word.

Micaiah is hated because of God's word. Ahab thinks about Micaiah like a drug Lord thinks about a cop. A hated enemy that is hell bent on ruining all his illicit fun and personal plans.

And the start of this chapter tell us what Ahab's personal plans were at this point in time. Just like with Naboth in the previous chapter, this passage starts with Ahab wanting more stuff. But this time, it's not just a vineyard he wants, but an entire city. In v.3 we see him saying to his officials:

"Don't you know that Ramoth Gilead belongs to us and yet we are doing nothing to retake it from the king of Aram?"

Ramoth Gilead sat just east of the Jordan river, and while *it is* true that at one point this city belonged to Israel, it's also true that it was stood as a vital trade route between nations that

brought in loads of money through tax revenue. And, I suspect it's the potential revenue that is driving things here.

And so Ahab decides to end a three-year peace with Aram and take the city means of war. Now, interestingly, Israel at this point in history had an alliance with the Southern kingdom of Judah. And so, during one particular state visit by King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Ahab asks him to help reclaim the city. Verse 4:

⁴ So he asked Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to fight against Ramoth Gilead?"

Jehoshaphat agrees in verse 4, but on one condition, v.5:

"First seek the counsel of the LORD."

Now, this request fits with the picture we get of Jehoshaphat in verse 43 of this chapter. He is described as one of the *pretty good* kings of Judah. He wasn't perfect, but in general sought to do "what was right in the eyes of the Lord." And here, he rightly desires to have *God's* word guide the decision-making process when it comes to war with the nation of Aram.

Now while Ahab agrees to Jehoshaphat's request, it's clear that something is suspect about the 400 "prophets" he brings in to give the Lord's counsel. They seem just a little *too* willing to give Ahab the message he wants to hear.

"Go," they answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand."

Ahab seems to have brought in the yes-men. All 400 hundred of them

And clearly Jehoshaphat thinks something is fishy about it all. That's why he says in verse 7:

"Is there no longer a prophet of the LORD here whom we can inquire of?"

No offense, but these guys just seem like yes men to me. Is there anyone else who might be willing to give us a word from God even if it's a hard word?

Ahab is forced into a corner with his chief ally. And so he mentions the name of the man he has grown to hate. Look at verse 8:

*⁸ The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, "There is still one prophet through whom we can inquire of the LORD, **but I hate him** because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah."*

Before Micaiah even comes on the scene, we learn that he is *hated* for the word of God he bears.

That's what happens when you get caught up in the collision between God's word and human will.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:22 that *'you will be hated by everyone because of me.'* Sticking with Jesus, put us in the firing line of a world that is rebellion to Him and his King Jesus.

I don't think Aussie Christians have really felt the hate historically, but I think that's changing. Even just 20 years ago when I was in high school, I felt like most people boxed Christians as "do-gooders" who took the rules too seriously - odd types who seemed a little uptight but ultimately had their own beliefs and were harmless.

I think that view is changing so that now Christians are increasingly viewed as "do-baders" – people who have dangerous, bigoted and oppressive beliefs.

In his book, *being the bad guys*, Stephen McAlpine, points out that in the west, Christianity is increasingly viewed as the bad guy. He writes that we are increasingly seen as being:

“On the wrong side of history, the wrong side of so many issues and conversations. If this were a Western, we would be the guys wearing the black hats whose appearance is accompanied by the foreboding soundtrack.”

Like Ahab with Micaiah, many in our world are look at Christians today and think, “they never have anything good to say about us, but always bad.” That may be hard for some of us to hear, particularly when we know that the message of Jesus is primarily one of good news. But we need to be aware of the changing attitude in our culture or we could be taken off guard and unprepared.

Both Micaiah and Jesus remind us that being linked with the word of God brings hatred and irritation by many in the world around us. And as such, it also brings pressure. Which is what we see next.

2. Pressured to change the word.

Second, Micaiah is pressured to change the word.

I want you to try to picture in your mind the scene described for us in vv.10-12. As you do that think about how intimidating it would be to walk into that scene with a message that no one wants to hear. For starters you might immediately feel intimidated by the sight of the two most powerful men in Israel and Judah “dressed in their royal robes and sitting on their thrones” (v.10). That would be a scary sight, particularly when you know at least one of those kings will only be happy with one word from God.

But the pressure gets worse as you see the hoard of other so-called prophets standing in the room with you – every one of them united in the message that the kings should (v.12):

“Attack Ramoth Gilead and be victorious,” they said, “for the LORD will give it into the king’s hand.”

Verse 11 even tells us that one of these prophets, Zedekiah, even brings in spectacle of props (iron horns) to show just how the Lord intends to gore the enemy.

Imagine walking into that scene thinking you might have to be the lone voice in a sea of four hundred other prophets giving the opposite message.

Oh and just to add to all the pressure you also have a well-intentioned messenger boy giving you some “helpful” advice on the way in. Look at what he says in v.13:

“Look, the other prophets without exception are predicting success for the king. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favourably.”

There’s a real positive vibe in there Micaiah, don’t kill the mood, just give them what they want to hear!

Imagine if you were in that position and being pressured to conform the word of God you know with the popular message they believe.

You may not have to imagine too hard. I suspect many of you have had a taste of that pressure in the work place, or around the family table, or over the fence. That kind of “just speak favourably” pressure is everywhere.

I remember feeling that pressure some years ago when advocacy for sex marriage was starting to gain a lot of traction in the media. I was at a friend’s backyard bbq happily chatting with a number of other people around a fire. But the happy chat suddenly switched gears when one particular neighbour heard me mention my Christianity. Almost immediately, she asked me this question: “So, if you’re a Christian, do you believe homosexual sex is wrong and if so why?” I just remember standing there, with all these eyes fixed on me, waiting for an answer. It was one of those moments where you feel a little tongue-tied, where your heart-beat rises, where you play out in your head what might come next. I’m sure you know this feeling. In that moment, the words of the messenger to Micaiah ring in your ear: *“look, so many are on board with this, let your word agree with hers and speak favourably.”*

You don't have to be standing before an Ahab or his prophets to know the pressure that the world puts on God's people to change His word. What does God call for in these moments? He calls for faithfulness. Which leads us to point 3.

3. Faithful with the word.

Third. Micaiah is faithful to the word even amidst hatred and pressure.

Most of us are not going to find ourselves standing in the pressure cooker situation of Micaiah, there have been some in church history who have come pretty close to it.

Martin Luther was the German monk who sparked the Protestant reformation. He found himself under similar circumstances to Micaiah in 1521 at the Diet of Worms (or to make things less confusing the *assembly which occurred in the city of Worms*).

Luther was under pressure at this assembly to recant statements he had made condemning the Roman Catholic Church. Luther had declared that various practices and beliefs of the Church were wrong and had no basis in the Word of God. When Luther walked into that room he stood before the most powerful man in Europe (Emperor Charles V), dressed in his royal robes and some of the most powerful clergymen in the Roman Catholic Church – all saying the same thing – recant! Imagine the pressure to simply say what they want to hear.

And yet, here is what Luther said in his concluding statement:

I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand I can do no other. May God help me. Amen

I am bound to the word of God said Luther. I cannot say anything it does not say. And notice, this is the same response of Micaiah to that messenger as he walks into the throne room. Look at v.15:

14 But Micaiah said, "As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me."

Here I stand, I can do no other.

So what is the word that Micaiah faithfully speaks to Ahab. Put simply, it's the word of judgment that will spoil all his plans – the very word he has been trying to avoid.

But there are a couple of things that surprise us about what Micaiah says.

The first surprise is that Micaiah, initially, appears to say the exact same things as all the false prophets. When asked by Ahab if they should go to war against Ramoth Gilead, Micaiah says (verse 15):

"Attack and be victorious," he answered, "for the LORD will give it into the king's hand."

Now this seems odd. Why does Micaiah seem to just give Ahab what he wants to hear?

Now, it could be that in the pressure of the moment, he has a momentary lapse of courage. I could perhaps see myself doing that. Maybe you could too. But I'm not sure that's what's

going on here. I actually think Micaiah is using a kind of sarcasm here – a tone which is obviously difficult to convey in written text. I think it's sarcasm for a couple of reasons. One, Micaiah has literally just committed himself to saying only what the Lord tells him (v.14) – it would seem a little odd for there to be such an immediate change of conviction. And we know, that he *has* a history of saying the hard truth to Ahab.

And two, Ahab seems to be annoyed rather than satisfied with his response. He senses Micaiah is deliberately holding something back from him and he doesn't like it:

¹⁶ The king said to him, "How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?"

I think Micaiah speaks sarcastically here in order to expose Ahab's stubborn heart. It's like he's saying, "It doesn't matter what I say, I know there's only one message you want to hear, so just do what all those false prophets are telling you - attack and be victorious."

But it just infuriates Ahab, and he demands Micaiah spits out the truth.

Well, in verse 17, it's like Micaiah says: "Alright Ahab, you want the truth. Well the truth is this that I didn't see victory at all, instead, verse 17:

¹⁷ ... "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'"

The truth is Ahab, “you will be killed and your army will be scattered when you go to war.”

Micaiah swims against the stream of 400 other prophets and faithfully speaks the hard truth to Ahab.

I wonder how it's been for you, when/if you've taken the bold step of telling someone the bad news of sin and judgment before the good news of forgiveness and life in the gospel. I wonder if you can remember the last time you made it clear that without repentance and trust in Christ, they will die in their sin, and come under God's judgment in Hell? Before you get to the good news of Jesus, a person must be aware of the bad news of their sin.

But sometimes, when that hard truth comes, it's not “thanks for warning me” but “What a negative message.” It's like that with Ahab. Instead of heeding the word of imminent danger, he just gets irritated that Micaiah's insists on being so negative.

¹⁸ ... *“Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?”*

Now I said a moment ago, that there were a couple of surprises in what Micaiah says to Ahab. The second surprise is the sneak-peak he gives us behind the curtain of Heaven. It's

not often we see this in the Bible. But here, God chooses to reveal the formation of His heavenly plan to bring judgment on Ahab. Look at what Micaiah says (v.19)

¹⁹ Micaiah continued, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the multitudes of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. ²⁰ And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?’

Although a few suggestions are given among the host of heaven, the one that God goes with comes from a spirit who offers to go down to earth and become a “deceiving spirit” in the mouths of Ahab’s prophets. God says this spirit will succeed in enticing Ahab and sends him off to get the job done.

²³ “So now the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you.”

Now, while talk of deceiving spirits raises questions for us, there are a few things we need to keep in mind about this extra piece of information Micaiah gives to Ahab.

1. This vision is showing Ahab who really rules. The image of God’s throne room is deliberately set in contrast to the throne room of Ahab (v.10). Ahab wrongly believes it’s his rule and his will that will prevail, but God is reminding him who is really in charge. We are supposed to see how puny Ahab’s throne in verse 10 now looks compared to God’s throne in verse 19.

2. This vision reveals the fitting nature of Ahab's judgment. Ahab has lived his whole life willingly believing lies not truth. Thus, the deceiving words in the mouths of the prophets act as a punishment that fits the crime. Just as he loved lies, so he will be destroyed by them. This is a little like the picture of judgment given in Romans 1: 24 – In which God gives people over to the sinful desires of their hearts.
3. This vision comes as Ahab's last chance to repent. While some might accuse God of unfairly deceiving Ahab, but the reality is that there is no ultimate deception. God's reveals all to Ahab. He tells Ahab that in listening to the lie he wants to believe that he will come to disaster (v.23). This message is Ahab's last chance to hear the hard truth and repent before it's too late!

And so Micaiah faithfully speaks the hard word of truth to Ahab. And yet, still, he sticks with the lie. No repentance. No change of plans. Micaiah finds no love in that room. Just cold hard rejection. First, from Zedekiah, one of the false prophets, who slaps him in the face (v.24) and next from Ahab has him locked up and put on bread and water.

I was speaking to a Christian brother recently who spoke about his evangelistic ministry in the city and how he was headbutted while sharing the gospel. Now, I don't know about you but I can't say that I've ever experienced a head-but, or a face slap, and certainly not jail time. But Jesus is clear, that sticking with his word will bring real and uncomfortable cost.

- You might be socially marginalised for being too religious.
- You might be cut off from family inheritance for departing from a former religion.
- You might be reprimanded in your workplace for your commitment to Jesus' teaching on sexuality.

John 15:20:

“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

So why remain faithful to God’s word if it’s going to mean hate, pressure and the persecution? What happens at the battle of Ramoth-Gilead gives us the answer.

4. Vindicated by God’s faithful word.

Micaiah is vindicated by the faithful word of God.

You see, while we read of a battle between Israel and Aram. The real battle here is between God’s word (spoken by Micaiah) and Ahab’s will (endorsed by the prophets).

And Ahab has a wild level of self-confidence in this battle! He actually thinks he can outsmart God’s word with a plan of his own.

You see it there in verse 30:

³⁰ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “I will enter the battle in disguise, but you wear your royal robes.” So the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle.

Ahab thinks he’s got it made. “How will they get me if they can’t find me!?! I guess it’s check mate God!”

Now, at first Ahab’s plan to outsmart God seems to be working? Vv 31-33 describe how the King of Aram and his army are all confused about where Ahab is.

But it's not long before Ahab gets a sudden and painful reminder of whos will and word truly rule. Verse 34:

³⁴ But someone drew his bow at "random" and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armor.

No one escapes the word of God. The arrow of his judgment always hits its target.

As Ahab is hit, it dawns on him that God's word has defeated His will. Ahab is wheeled out of the fighting and is kept alive in his chariot just long enough to see the battle lost and to hear the panicked cry of his army, shouting (v.36) "Every man to his town, every man to his land." I imagine Ahab lying down to die on the floor of his chariot with the words of Micaiah running through his mind:

"I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd."

Or perhaps it was the word of Elijah following Naboth's death:

"As dogs licked up Naboth's blood they will lick up yours."

One thing is for sure. Ahab dies knowing that Micaiah was speaking truth and that God's word of justice has been fulfilled on him.

*³⁸ They washed the chariot at a pool in Samaria (where the prostitutes bathed),^[b] and the dogs licked up his blood, **as the word of the LORD had declared.***

Micaiah spoke God's word to Ahab and was hated for it, pressured to change it, faithful to it and finally vindicated by it.

There are two things I want to say as we come to close. The first is a warning the second is an encouragement.

First, heed the warning of Ahab.

Did you notice that in the final verses the narrator writes about Ahab's other achievements as if they are somewhat irrelevant.

³⁹ As for the other events of Ahab's reign, including all he did, the palace he built and adorned with ivory, and the cities he fortified, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?

It's like he's saying, there was only one thing mattered in Ahab's life, it wasn't the palace he built or the cities he fortified. It was his relationship with God and whether or not He listen to God's word – five chapters are given to this, one verse given to his building projects.

Maybe you're here tonight and you know your relationship with God is not sorted out.

Maybe, like Ahab you've been unwilling to give God and His word any air time. Maybe, like Ahab, you've taken some comfort in the multitude of other voices telling you it's fine to live life on your terms, not God's terms. Ahab's life is a warning to you to make it your chief priority to get right with God:

Jesus says not to be like the rich fool in his parable who had everything and yet died without that one thing that truly mattered. “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

The big thing that God will truly care about at the end of your life when you go to rest with your ancestors is not going to be:

- How many properties you owned.
- The type of career you had.
- How many adventures you went on.
- Who you fell in love with.

The big thing will be whether or not you listened to His word of forgiveness and life that He gives you now in Jesus – the saviour who takes away the sin that separates you from God by his death and resurrection. God’s word of life in Jesus is as certain as his word of judgment we read of in this passage.

Prepare to walk the path of Micaiah.

But for those of you who are already listening to God’s word and daring to speak of it where you get the chance, I’d encourage you prepare to walk the path of Micaiah. Micaiah shows us that the uncomfortable path of faithfulness in a world resistant to God’s word is worth it. Though you might be hated and feel pressured for the gospel word, if you keep faithfully holding to it, you will be vindicated – proved right before a world who wrote you off as a fool.

In fact, *Jesus* shows us the glory of this path in far greater detail than Micaiah.

Jesus was hated for the word He preached about himself. He was pressured to change the message. Yet he was faithful to the point of death on a cross. And God vindicated Him and all His promises by raising him from the dead – Jesus has now been shown to be the One who really can forgive our sin and who really can give eternal life and who really will be present with us in our struggle to hold fast to the word of God in a hostile world. Hebrew 12 gets us to both take hope in Jesus and then follow his lead :1-3:

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

I'll finish on the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who like Micaiah, felt the cost of proclaiming the word of God under the rule of a tyrant in Hitler.

“The messengers of Jesus will be hated to the end of time. They will be blamed for all the division which rend cities and homes. Jesus and his disciples will be condemned on all sides for undermining family life, and for leading the nation astray; they will be called crazy fanatics and disturbers of the peace. The disciples will be sorely tempted to desert their Lord. But the end is also near, and they must hold on and persevere until it comes. Only he will be blessed who remains loyal to Jesus and his word until the end.”

Hated, Pressured, Faithful, Vindicated.

Let's pray.

