

## May 2 Lesson 9 (NIV)

### SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 John 3:23–4:3a; Deuteronomy 18:19–22

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 22:1–40

#### 1 KINGS 22:15–23, 26–28

<sup>15</sup> When he arrived, the king asked him, “Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or not?”

“Attack and be victorious,” he answered, “for the LORD will give it into the king’s hand.”

<sup>16</sup> 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?”

<sup>17</sup> Then Micaiah answered, “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.’ ”

<sup>18</sup> The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Didn’t I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?”

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?’

“One suggested this, and another that. <sup>21</sup> Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’

<sup>22</sup> “ ‘By what means?’ the LORD asked.

“ ‘I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,’ he said.

“ ‘You will succeed in enticing him,’ said the LORD. ‘Go and do it.’

<sup>23</sup> “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.”

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<sup>26</sup> The king of Israel then ordered, “Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king’s son <sup>27</sup> and say, ‘This is what the king says: Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely.’ ”

<sup>28</sup> Micaiah declared, “If you ever return safely, the LORD has not spoken through me.” Then he added, “Mark my words, all you people!”

#### KEY VERSE

*Micaiah said, "As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me."* —1 Kings 22:14

## PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD'S COVENANT

### Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change

LESSONS 9–13

#### LESSON OUTLINE

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*Quantity over Quality*
  - B. Prophet's Promise (v. 28)

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- A. Truth Displayed
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

#### HOW TO SAY IT

AhabAy-hab.

AiAy-eye.

AmonAy-mun.

ArameansAr-uh-me-uns.

AthaliahAth-uh-lye-uh.

Israellz-ray-el.

Jehoram *Jeh-ho-rum*.

Jehoshaphat *Jeh-hosh-uh-fat*.

Joash *Jo-ash*.

Josephus *Jo-see-fus*.

Micaiah *My-kay-uh*.

Naboth *Nay-bawth*.

Ramoth Gilead *Ray-muth Gil-ee-ud*.

## Introduction

### A. Truth Distorted

Have you ever sought out counsel that would tell you what you want to hear, rather than truth, so that you could press forward with your own agenda? Herein is an important lesson we can learn from George Washington.

As the first president of the United States, Washington had no precedent to follow when choosing the men who would shape his thinking and the new government. Wisely, Washington chose an eclectic group of people to fill cabinet positions and be his closest advisers. They were from different parts of the country, and they had different views on how the government should operate. Instead of choosing advisers exclusively from his state of Virginia, Washington chose to surround himself with people who had the same ultimate goals in mind. The varied opinions about how to achieve common goals helped President Washington make choices that were more informed and wiser.

Unfortunately, Ahab did not make similar decisions. He surrounded himself with false prophets who told him whatever he wanted to hear. But this lesson focuses on the one prophet who refused to compromise the truth.

### B. Lesson Context

The role of the books 1 & 2 Kings is often misunderstood by the modern reader. Because they cover much of the same times and events as 1 & 2 Chronicles, we often read them as retelling the same story, slightly differently. (In fact, today's text has a parallel in 2 Chronicles 18.) While there is truth to this, the original readers of 1 & 2 Kings actually associated them with 1 & 2 Samuel; in the Greek version translated before Christ, these four books are known as 1, 2, 3, and 4 Kingdoms. And although it's natural to categorize these as books of history, we do well to remember that no book of the Bible seeks merely to give us a history lesson. Every book in the Bible intends to tell us something about God.

The Old Testament narratives, 1 & 2 Kings included, were passed down with the intention of revealing truth about the relationship between God and his people. These books were read by the Babylonian exiles, who had many deep and painful questions regarding the benefits of being chosen by God. Jerusalem's destruction and the exile of its people raised questions about God's sovereignty and love.

The books we think of as history address these issues by telling the story of God's people, picking up with the conquest of the promised land in Joshua and ending with the exile in 2 Kings. Collectively, the books tell the story of Israel's persistent rebellions against the terms of the covenant, divine judgment in the form of the curses prescribed in Deuteronomy 27–28, Israel's returns to God, and God's resulting mercy.

First Kings 22 opens by describing a conversation between two kings: Ahab of northern Israel (reigned 874–853 BC) and Jehoshaphat of southern Judah (reigned 873–849 BC). Before launching a joint military initiative, Ahab decided to consult his prophets to learn whether God would give him victory (1 Kings 22:10). Consulting God (or false gods) before battle was customary (examples: Judges 20:18; 1 Samuel 23:2; Ezekiel 21:21).

Ahab followed this practice, but he sought divine guidance from about 400 false prophets. These men were charged with discerning God's will while having no access to him! Their counsel was united: God would grant victory in the expected battle (1 Kings 22:1–6). A favorable

report, delivered from a unified front, would certainly convince the two kings of the veracity of their message!

But King Jehoshaphat was unimpressed by the verdict of the false prophets. Jehoshaphat's reign was characterized by religious reform and the suppression of idolatry (2 Chronicles 17:3–6). But he found himself in a compromised position because he had entered into a political alliance with the spiritually lapsed northern kingdom. In an attempt to do right, Jehoshaphat asked Ahab if he didn't have a prophet of the true God who could be consulted. Ahab admitted that Micaiah was such a prophet.

## I. A Sarcastic Prophecy

(1 KINGS 22:15–16)

### A. Leading Question (v. 15)

**15. When he arrived, the king asked him, "Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or not?" "Attack and be victorious," he answered, "for the LORD will give it into the king's hand."**

Ahab despised *Micaiah* because of the series of negative reports that the prophet had made against the king. The unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 20:35–43 was suggested by both the Talmud and the first-century Jewish historian Josephus to have been Micaiah. Little else is known about this prophet.

*Ramoth Gilead* was a city of refuge within the tribe of Gad (Deuteronomy 4:43). It was located on a large plain, making chariot warfare possible (see 1 Kings 22:31–38, not in our printed text). In Ahab's day, the Arameans held the city (22:3, not in our printed text). In the days of Rome, this people group came to be known as Syrians. Israel had some ethnic relationship to Arameans (see Deuteronomy 26:5), including Bethuel who was Rebekah's father (Genesis 22:20–23). Despite

these ancestral links, the Arameans were often opposed to Israel, either instigating or experiencing warfare with the nation (examples: Judges 3:8, 10; 2 Samuel 8:5–6).

Micaiah surprised *the king*, Ahab, by telling him exactly what he wanted to hear and what the other prophets had already told him. Based on Ahab's prior characterization of Micaiah (1 Kings 22:8, not in our printed text), we might also be surprised that Micaiah has immediately agreed with the majority of prophets affirming Ahab's future success (22:13–15).

### **B. Frustrated Retort (v. 16)**

**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?”**

King Ahab interpreted Micaiah's affirming response as a bald-faced lie, not even meant to be believed. Ahab's asking *how many times* implies that Micaiah had fallen into the pattern of sardonically telling the king whatever it was he wanted to hear.

*The king* ironically demanded that Micaiah fulfill his prophetic duty and only relay God's word (Deuteronomy 18:18). But Ahab wasn't interested in hearing God's actual will. He only used his prophets to legitimize the plans that were already in his heart (see 1 Kings 22:22, below).

## **II. A Sincere Prophecy (1 KINGS 22:17–23)**

### **A. God's Truth, Part 1 (v. 17)**

**17. Then Micaiah answered, “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.’ ”**

Micaiah dropped his act, causing the atmosphere in the room to immediately darken. *Israel* would be thrown into as much disarray as *sheep without a shepherd* (see 1 Kings 22:28, below). When they realized they had *no master*, the army would scatter—not haphazardly but *each one* to his *home*. Returning *in peace* might mean that, though leaderless, the army would be better off without their previous master. Or it might simply mean that the fighting would be over for a time.

### **B. King's Irritation (v. 18)**

**18. The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?”**

Ahab's response to Micaiah's prophecy suggests that the prophet was brought to court more as a jester or curiosity than as a legitimate adviser. Ahab's heart was so hardened against God that he was able to dismiss Micaiah's warning as just one more *bad* thing the prophet said about *the king of Israel*.

King Jehoshaphat's nonreaction is equally disturbing. Jehoshaphat worshipped the God of Israel and took measures to suppress idolatry in his nation (see Lesson Context). But here he failed to advise the other king to heed the word of the Lord. The northern kingdom enjoyed military prowess during this period of their combined histories. With their allies, Israel held off

the encroaching Assyrian Empire. The alliance between Israel and Judah was secured by the marriage of Ahab's daughter Athaliah to Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram (2 Kings 8:16–18). So we see two kings, one idolatrous and one godly, who witnessed the testimony of God's true prophet and for their own reasons refused to alter their foolhardy plans.

### C. God's Truth, Part 2 (vv. 19–23)

**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.**

Unlike verse 15, here Micaiah uses the *word of the Lord* formula to reveal that what followed came from God, not the prophet's own mind. *All the multitudes of heaven* may refer to angels (see Psalms 103:20–21; 148:2; Luke 2:13); another possibility is that the phrase refers to the heavenly bodies worshipped as gods by pagan nations (see Deuteronomy 4:19; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3; Jeremiah 19:13). Whether real angels or fictitious deities, the image is that God is the only one *sitting on a throne*. This is a visual image of God's sovereignty over everything, real or imagined.

**20. "And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?' "One suggested this, and another that.**

This verse makes explicit what was implied in 1 Kings 22:17, above: *Ahab* would die on the battlefield. Such a sentence was just since Ahab had followed the ways of his evil queen, Jezebel, and led the northern kingdom into the idolatrous worship of Baal (1 Kings 16:31–33). Unlike Ahab's prophets, who all answered the king in unison, God's court was filled with lots of ideas, giving various plans for how to lure Ahab to his death.

**21. "Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.'**

From among the council, a volunteer stepped forward and expressed willingness to take up the task of luring King Ahab into battle, and, by extension, to his death. Keeping in mind that court members might be composed of fictitious deities, the exact identity of the *spirit* is less significant than is his depicted role in the unfolding spiritual drama (compare and contrast Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7).

**22. " 'By what means?' the LORD asked. " 'I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said. " 'You will succeed in enticing him,' said the LORD. 'Go and do it.'**

Psychologists today might say that the spirit enticed Ahab with the king's own confirmation bias. This false belief arises from choosing only to consider evidence that confirms what a person already wanted to believe. In this case, the *deceiving spirit* unified *all* the king's *prophets* in order to strengthen the evidence that favored Ahab's false hope: that he would have victory over his enemies.

*The Lord* giving approval to this plan is one example of God's sovereign right to judge evildoers. Although Ahab had humbled himself following the theft of Naboth's vineyard (see 1 Kings 21), old habits apparently die hard. Ahab did not want to listen to the prophet of the Lord, preferring the pleasant prophecies of his old prophets. Ironically, if Ahab chose to listen to Micaiah now, the prophecy would not have come true! But the man's character was known not only to the prophet but also to God (see 22:29–38).

**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.”**

Micaiah presented Ahab with a message of judgment. But implicit in that message was the opportunity for repentance (compare Jonah 3). Mercifully, Ahab was given the opportunity to admit his sinful state, repent, and break off his doomed campaign.

*The Lord* used Ahab’s character and the deference of the king’s prophets to deceive the man. God never lies, but he does work through humans to accomplish his purposes, whether they do good or ill. God also never does moral evil, but he can put events into motion that from a human perspective are catastrophic. In this case, the *deceiving spirit* intensified human dynamics already in play to ensure that Ahab would be fooled.

### III. A Sure Prophecy

(1 KINGS 22:26–28)

#### A. King’s Fury (vv. 26–27)

**26. The king of Israel then ordered, “Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king’s son**

Ahab’s response was anything but one of repentance. Referencing *the ruler of the city* and *the king’s son* lets the reader know that Ahab was so determined to silence Micaiah that he evoked both local and national authorities to ensure the prophet’s secure incarceration.

**27. “and say, ‘This is what the king says: Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely.’”**

Micaiah was to remain in his cell and be given grim rations until Ahab returned *safely* from battle. Ahab’s sentence assumed that his triumphant return would expose the jailed prophet as a charlatan. Though Ahab expected to *return safely*, the prophecy had revealed that only his men would do so (1 Kings 22:17, 28).

Ahab’s command had the effect of silencing the prophet. The king knew that if word got out that he himself was under divine judgment, it could lead to poor troop morale on the eve of battle or even embolden a rival to attempt a coup. Plus, the king just didn’t like the prophet.

#### B. Prophet’s Promise (v. 28)

**28. Micaiah declared, “If you ever return safely, the LORD has not spoken through me.” Then he added, “Mark my words, all you people!”**

The question of whether *Micaiah* spoke the truth would be determined on the battlefield. If Micaiah truly spoke for God, then Ahab would die, never returning home *safely* as the king assumed. Micaiah was so confident in what he’d heard from God that he challenged those present to be witnesses. Ahab’s death would not only vindicate Micaiah, but God as well.

Ahab died, just as Micaiah said (1 Kings 22:29–38). Micaiah’s fate in prison is unknown.

## Conclusion

## **A. Truth Displayed**

Today's passage illustrates the timeless struggle to relate to the truth properly. The individuals in today's lesson provide us with three stances that people exposed to God's truth can take.

King Ahab is easily vilified due to his idolatry, miscarriages of justice, and antipathy toward God's prophets. However, whenever we find ourselves willfully in rebellion to the truth, we see shades of Ahab within our own spirits. When we find ourselves in this precarious state and are then admonished by concerned friends, we should realize that this is a form of God's mercy, even when their words challenge and inconvenience us (Proverbs 27:5–6). Yet we need to be alert to possible Ahab-like tendencies in others and be prepared to admonish those who clearly ignore God in their choosing of unholy paths.

In Jehoshaphat, we have a case study of a person who desired to please God but lacked consistent, faithful follow-through. All believers, from senior ministers to occasional pew-fillers, can find themselves walking in this king's shoes. That happens when we are hesitant, for whatever reason, to execute a God-given plan. Any of us can find ourselves tempted as Jehoshaphat was. So when we encounter a fellow believer in a similar situation, the correct response is to offer encouragement and wise counsel.

As a prophet, Micaiah was bound by the simple adage that he was only to preach the word that God gave him and not add or subtract from that word (compare Deuteronomy 4:2). We see Micaiah's ability to think and speak independently in the face of a hostile crowd of 400 false prophets, two powerful leaders, and a prevailing climate of wickedness. The prophet's outspokenness reminds us that speaking truth can result in very negative consequences. Micaiah was aware of this, but was still obedient to God. We can build a life centered on truth through the regular study of God's Word. That's how we discipline ourselves to hear the voice of the Lord and to obey that voice—one opportunity at a time.

Many people today, as in Micaiah's day, prefer to question God's truth rather than their own sinful patterns. This isn't to say that doubt and confusion are never legitimate. But we must be aware of the possibility that sometimes our "confusion" over truth has the function of legitimizing ungodly behavior. We must echo apostle Paul's words, "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (Romans 3:4).

## **B. Prayer**

God, we thank you for revealing your truth. Now we ask that your truth be revealed in our words and actions. Help us not only to be people knowledgeable of your Word, but also be people who make decisions that are consistent with your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **C. Thought to Remember**

Our commitment to truth is measured in our actions.<sup>1</sup>

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