

# God's Messengers

## The Story: Headed South

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Have you noticed that there are more and more warning labels on things? And some of those warning labels are almost nonsensical. For instance, if you buy a cup of coffee from McDonalds, printed on the styrofoam cup is this warning: Caution, Contents are hot.

Years ago somebody spilled coffee on themselves and sued McDonalds for having hot coffee in their hot coffee and won! There are a lot of warning labels out there that seem to not make much sense but they were probably born of a law suit somewhere.

- Like the warning label on an infant stroller: Remove infant before folding stroller for storage.
- Or, there is the warning label on a Batman costume: Cape does not allow you to fly. That warning label is so unnecessary. Everybody knows Batman doesn't fly. Superman flies.
- How about the chain saw with the label: Do not attempt to stop chain with hands.
- Or, there's the label for taking off your fuel cap: Twist cap counter clockwise. Never use a lit match to check fuel level.
- I like the washing instructions on a garment: Machine wash, Gentle cycle, No bleach, Line Dry, No iron, Do not use for sumo wrestling.
- How about this one: Touching wires causes instant death. \$200 fine. I don't think the \$200 fine will matter if you're dead.

Warning labels and signs sometimes seem dumb. But sometimes we need warning signs. As we go through The Story, we see a lot of warning signs for the people of Israel.

And the warning signs were always brought before the people by this group Scripture calls prophets. Before there was full blown sin, God would send a prophet, and the prophet would say, "You need to turn around and make some changes or what's going to happen to your family or your life or your country will not be good" or something of that nature.

And what we have been seeing is that the kings of Israel and the people of Israel didn't listen. We saw that last week as we learned that **the Nation of Israel was in a Downward Spiral.**

You remember that after Solomon's death, the kingdom split in two: the Northern Kingdom, called Israel under King Jeroboam and the Southern Kingdom, called Judah under Rehoboam.

**In the North** we read how the first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam, was described:

*"You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have provoked me to anger and thrust me behind your back."* 1 Kings 14:9

And the next king did the same, as did the next. All in all, there were 19 kings over the course of 208 years that the Northern Kingdom was in existence and all of the kings were evil.

Jeroboam was described as more evil than anyone else until we get to King Ahab (who we will look at in a moment) and we find that he was described as being more evil than anyone else.

*“In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.”* 1 Kings 16:29-30

If Jeroboam was the evilest and Ahab who came later was even more evil, that means the Northern Kingdom was on a downward spiral.

**In the South things were only slightly better.** The Southern Kingdom lasted 344 years and of the 19 kings of the Southern Kingdom there were 6 good kings and 13 evil ones. This was not a good track record. Kind of like the season record of the Tennessee Titans this year – 2 wins, 14 losses. Not really good.

If you were God and you saw this downward spiral in both the northern and the southern kingdom, you might be tempted to hit the reset button. You might want to resurrect Noah and wipe out the entire nation and start over.

But, God had made that promise that a Messiah would come from the Southern Kingdom, from Judah, and God had that ardent desire to bring His people back to Him, so God would not do that. Instead, He waited patiently for His people to come back to Him. He waited for 208 years in the North and 344 years in the South. He waited patiently but not passively.

**God Sent Prophets** who delivered important warnings to the people. These were not frivolous warnings like, “Caution, this hot coffee is hot and if you pour it on your lap you are going to do a little dance”.

God sent prophets to warn the people. Next week we’ll focus on the prophets God sent to the Southern Kingdom, to Judah. Today we’ll focus on the messengers God sent to the Northern Kingdom. 9 prophets sent to the 19 kings of the Northern Kingdom during the 208 years of it existed.

**And the first prophet we’ll look at is Elijah.** One of the stories about Elijah is the story of the **duelling sacrifices**. Elijah was a prophet during the reign of King Ahab, arguably the worst king of Israel in either the northern or southern kingdom.

Here’s how the Scriptures describe some of the evil things he did;

*“He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.”* 1 Kings 16:31-33

You see, as we saw last week, it always comes down to the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment that we should have no other gods. Ahab not only allowed for other gods, he promoted them and God was going to send a warning to Ahab via the prophet Elijah. Elijah challenged this king to a supernatural duel of sorts.

The plan was for Ahab to gather the prophets of his god, Baal, 450 of them, who would go up against Elijah and the one true God. First, the people of Israel were assembled.

*“Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.”* 1 Kings 18:21

Elijah presented them with a choice: follow God or follow Baal. The people said nothing, so Elijah decided he had to prove it to them. Here’s how the duel with the prophets of Baal went down.

The prophets of Baal were to build an altar and slaughter a bull for a sacrifice. Then they were to call upon their god to send fire down and consume the sacrifice. Elijah would do the same after them.

So, the prophets of Baal called out to their god. Nothing happened. They called louder. They shouted. About that time, Elijah started trash talking them. “Maybe your god is hard of hearing. Shout louder! Maybe he’s too busy or he went on vacation.”

That angered the prophets of Baal. They started dancing. You know it is bad when they start to dance. They started cutting themselves figuring a fresh flow of blood would do the trick. Nothing! Nada! Zip! They finally gave up. Baal did not respond.

Then, it was Elijah’s turn. And just to make it sporting, Elijah poured water over his sacrifice: gallons and gallons of water. There was so much water that even an Eagle Scout with a propane torch could not get a fire going. When everything was drenched, Elijah called out to God and God sent a fire down and consumed the sacrifice. God won and the people cried out, “The Lord is God! The Lord is God.” Oh, now they get all spiritual and stuff.

The question for us may be: **how long does it take us to waver between two opinions?** There’s a funny thing about our God that goes against the grain of modern day thinking in our world. The world buys into this Oprah Winfrey style of theology that says that all the religions of the world are following to the same god. We see bumper stickers that say, “Co-exist” and “Tolerance.”

The problem is our God tends to think differently about this. The first commandment tells us that we are to have no other gods. God is pretty exclusive about this thing.

If all the religions of the world lead to the same God then why would Elijah bother to have the dueling sacrifices? Why wouldn’t Elijah just coexist with the prophets of Baal? Why wouldn’t Elijah have tolerance for these 450 prophets?

Do you want to know how much tolerance he had for them? After this duel was over, Elijah had all the prophets of Baal killed. So much for tolerance. Our God does not condone throwing all the religions of the world into a pot, stirring it up, and everybody doing their own thing.

Our God is pretty exclusive and He says to us, “How long will you waver between two opinions?” Our God says, “Choose this day who you will serve.” Our God says: *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* John 14:6

Here’s the bottom line: either Jesus is the Savior of the world or He’s nothing. The first commandment says: There shall be no other gods.

And this is not just a theological statement but a practical one as well. Because when we look at how we live our lives, we need to ask ourselves if God is our God or if we've substituted God with something else, some other idol?

An idol is anything or anyone we value greater than God. It can be a spouse or a child or a career or our money. How long will you waver between two opinions?

A second prophet to look at is **Hosea**. While Elijah's story shows us how God will use supernatural events to bring us back to Him, Hosea's story shows us how far God's love will go to do the same.

As one of God's prophets, Hosea begged the people of the Northern Kingdom to return to the one true God but to no avail. But Israel continued to worship other gods. So, God gave them a kind of object lesson.

God told Hosea to marry a prostitute. (Don't try this one at home). And Hosea obeyed. He married a prostitute whose name, unfortunately, was Gomer. Despite her marriage to Hosea, Gomer kept her night job and sometimes was away for days.

God told Hosea to go to his wayward wife and do something extraordinary: love her. Which doesn't make sense to us because we only love those who love us back. But God told Hosea to love Gomer without expecting anything in return.

He was to love her unconditionally. He was to love her even when she was farthest from Him. He was to love his wife and to go and get her. Can you imagine the scene when Hosea handed over money to Gomer's "bookkeeper" and knocks on her door?

Here she is expecting some guy named John and her husband walks in the door. And, what did Hosea say to Gomer? "Oh Gomer, I love you more than anything you will ever know. Please come home with me."

Now this is a Les Miserable moment. This is a pure grace moment. This is an illustration of exactly how God seeks out the people of the Northern Kingdom. The kings and the people of the Northern Kingdom had prostituted themselves with other gods. Listen to how Hosea himself describes the people:

*"Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. . . . "Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the Lord." Hosea 4:1-2, 5:4*

And listen to what God was saying to them;

*"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall!"*

Hosea 14:1

Israel had been unfaithful. But, God still loved them and His greatest desire was to bring them back to Him. He said to them, "I love you more than anything you will ever know. Please come home to me."

**How do we apply Hosea's story to our lives?** Quite frankly, some of us have prostituted ourselves searching for other gods. Some of us have indulged in the unfaithfulness of sin. Some of us are dealing with sin and the guilt that sin produces right now.

And here's the amazing thing – something more shocking than Gomer seeing Hosea at her door. God say: "I love you more than anything you will ever know. Please come home."

And to prove that love, to let us know what an incredible worth God places on your soul, He points to that Baby of Bethlehem who years later would become the sacrificial lamb. God points to His one and only Son who hangs on the cross. God points to Jesus and says, "This is how much I love you. Please come home." Isn't it time to come home?

God gives us warning labels, not the frivolous kind. warning labels in the form of messages from the prophets to the people of the Northern Kingdom, and, as we'll see next week, to the people of the Southern Kingdom.

Unfortunately, they didn't heed the warnings and both kingdoms fell. Both kingdoms are conquered by enemies, the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC and the Southern Kingdom in 586BC, and the people are forced into exile and slavery.

In time the Northern Kingdom will pretty much sink into oblivion while the Southern Kingdom would return once again from the tribe of Judah, God will provide the hope of the world.

Is God calling you to make Him the only God of your life? Is God calling you to remove anything or anyone that you've made more important than Him off the throne of your life? Is God calling you to come back home into His arms outstretched with love in His eyes saying to you, "I love you more than anything you will ever know. Please come home to me."

If so, the question is: will you listen to God's messengers? Will you listen to God's warning labels?