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## **A GREY HEAD OF INTEGRITY OR INTRIGUE?**

**Today's Text: 1 Kings 13: 1-34; Prov. 16: 31**

### **Extracts:**

1. **“Now there dwelt *an old prophet* in Bethel; and his sons came and told him all the works that the man of God had done that day in Bethel: the words which he had spoken unto the king, them they told also to their father. And their father said unto them, what way went he? For his sons had seen what way the man of God went, which came from Judah. So they saddled him the ass, ... and (he) went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak. ... Then he said unto him, Come home with me and eat bread (but he replied) I may not return with thee, nor go in with thee: neither will I eat bread nor drink water with thee in this place; *for it was said to me by the word of the Lord, Thou shalt eat no bread nor drink water there, nor turn again by the way that thou camest.* (The old prophet) said unto him, I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the Lord, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. *But he lied unto him.* So he went back with him, and did eat bread in his house and drank water” [1 Kgs 13: 11-18]**
2. **“The hoary (grey) head is a crown of glory if it be found in the way of righteousness” [Prov. 16:31]**

*The grey [spelt gray in American English] head symbolizes old age in most cultures. It is also associated with honour for, in the words of God Himself, “thou shalt rise up before the hoary (grey) head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the Lord” [Lev. 19:32].*

*During the 2002 FIFA World Cup, which was co-hosted by Japan and South Korea, Coca Cola ran a very popular TV commercial. It featured a Japanese (or Korean) old man dancing lustfully to hip-hop music! Viewers loved it because it was a rare, if not an impossible event. An Asian grey-headed man dancing to Western music? That is unheard of! In other words, there are certain things that we can associate with certain people or certain age groups. With old people, there are certain things that we would not expect of or from them. One such thing, for example, is showing bad example because of the impact that that can have on younger people who are looking up to them. That is why the word of God says “the hoary head is a crown of glory if it be found in the way of righteousness” [Prov. 16: 31].*

*However, if we look around in our families, communities, offices, churches, etc, are we encouraged by the examples being shown by our elders? Are they acting with integrity or to distract younger people from the truth? That is the subject of today's lesson. For background, we shall use the case of how an old prophet of Israel misled a young prophet from Judah to disobey God during the reign of king Jeroboam*

## 1. Greying symbolizes ageing!

Jesus told us emphatically during His Sermon on the Mount, “Neither shalt thou swear by thy head because *thou canst not make one hair white or black*” [Matt. 5: 36]. The hair dyeing industry is a billion dollar business and by it we seem to be telling our Lord that He is wrong! The truth is that Jesus is *absolutely right*!

Hair colour comes from cells containing a pigment called *melanin* that is found in living hair underneath your skin.<sup>1</sup> You develop grey hair when the living cells underneath your skin stop making melanin. *This occurs slowly with ageing*. So, as long as your living cells keep producing melanin, your hair remains dark. As you grow older, those cells that no longer make melanin bring out white hair. It is the mixture of white and dark hair that produces the *grey head*.

Another interesting fact to note is that the hair that you see on your head is already dead! Hair grows slowly from deep inside your skin. As it grows from deep beneath the skin, it pushes the visible ends forward. So, the living hair is underneath the skin, while the one that you see is already dead and *cannot change colour*. Therefore, the hair that you spend so much money to colour is already dead. The living hair underneath is beyond your reach and you cannot make one such hair white or black. That is the point that Jesus was making!

Since grey hair is a sign of ageing, our dyeing it does not stop the ageing process. Therefore, if at the age of 50+, you have been able to colour your grey hair dark, that has not stopped the onset of menopause (in women) or balding or skin changes or slight memory or hearing loss or eye changes, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Having dismissed all our rationalizations about ageing, let us now face reality. Whether we like it or not, we are getting older each new day we spend on earth. Little by little, the grey hair will start to sprout in trickles [Hosea 7:9], and then the head begins to look like a dark starry night. One day, the whole head is a mass of silvery hair, graceful and dignifying for “the glory of young men is their strength *and the beauty of old men is the grey head*” [Prov. 20:29]. However, that you are now grey-headed does not automatically earn you respect from others. That is another matter. Before discussing it, let us introduce today’s case study.

## 2. An old prophet misleads a young prophet

Last week, we saw how the kingdom of Israel was divided into two. The tribe of Judah and the city of Jerusalem became the kingdom of Judah under king Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. The other eleven northern tribes made Solomon’s servant, Jeroboam, king over them. That became the kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria [1 Kgs 12: 16-25]. However, since the house of the Lord

<sup>1</sup> The ideas used in this section come from Gabe Mirkin, M.D., “Sudden Graying of the Hair,” [www.drmirkin.com/morehealth/1400.html](http://www.drmirkin.com/morehealth/1400.html)

<sup>2</sup> “Symptoms of Aging,” [www.wrongdiagnosis.com/a/aging/symptoms.htm](http://www.wrongdiagnosis.com/a/aging/symptoms.htm)

remained in Jerusalem, Jeroboam knew that he could not stop his subjects from going there to offer sacrifices. Nevertheless, he knew the loyalty implications of allowing such freedom. So, after consulting with his advisors, he built an altar in Bethel which was within his kingdom and told his people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” [1 Kgs 12: 26-28]. He built another such altar in Dan and “made priests of the lowest of the people which were not of the sons of Levi” [vv.29-31]. He did many other abominable things that offended God who had made it possible for Jeroboam to become king. It was in that setting that God sent a young prophet from the kingdom of Judah to go over to the other kingdom to give a prophetic word to the erring king.

The young prophet arrived Bethel during a worship service with the king himself standing by the altar and burning incense. He poured out the word of God as follows [1 Kgs 13: 1-2]:

*O altar, altar, thus saith the Lord, Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; and upon thee shall he offer the priests of the high places that burn incense upon thee, and men’s bones shall be burnt upon it.*

He then gave Jeroboam a sign, saying, “This is the sign which the Lord hath spoken: Behold, the altar shall be rent, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out” [v. 3]. The king was so angry that he asked his servants to arrest the young prophet. The hand that the king pointed at him suddenly withered and the altar broke and ashes poured out as the Lord had said! The king got scared and begged the prophet to plead with God to restore his hand. The prophet did and God restored the king’s hand [vv. 4-6].

The king was so impressed that he invited the young prophet to his home for a reward. The young man refused, saying [vv. 8-9]:

*If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place. For it was charged me by the word of the Lord saying, eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest.*

If the story had ended here, it is possible that the erring king might have been influenced to change his evil ways and return to the worship of the true God. It was here that the grey-headed prophet came in.

Such news travels fast. The old prophet’s sons who had witnessed such spectacular display of God’s power ran home to tell their father what had happened. Now, as a resident prophet who might have spoken in vain all this while to win back a recalcitrant and evil-minded king, you would have expected that the old man would raise his hands to thank God for what he had been told.

Instead, after learning from his sons how to look for the young prophet from Judah, the old prophet found him sitting under an oak tree [vv. 11-14]. Exhausted by hunger and thirst, he might have been resting under the shade in the hot afternoon. The least thing he expected was temptation. After all, he had fought off one such temptation from the king. Now, he was on the way home, looking forward to breaking his fast on his return.

The old prophet introduced himself and offered to take the young man to his house there in Bethel. The young man turned down the offer on the grounds that the Lord had so commanded him. Then, the old prophet lied to the young man, saying [vv. 15-18]:

*I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the Lord, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water.*

Poor fellow! His hunger prevented him from hearing that the old man had attributed his message to an angel, not to God or the Holy Spirit. He listened to the old man, went to his home, ate and drank, and thereby disobeyed the word of God. Immediately, the true word of God came through the mischievous old man who turned to the young prophet from Judah and told him, “Thus saith *the Lord*, forasmuch as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the Lord, and hast not kept the commandment which the Lord thy God commanded thee, ... thy carcass shall not come into the sepulchre of thy fathers” [vv. 19-22].

You may want to ask, why would God speak through such a “treacherous” prophet? We cannot question God and He alone can tell us why. Having not tested the spirit that spoke the first word by the old prophet, the young man had predisposed himself for the disobedient act. On his way home, a lion came from nowhere and killed him without touching the ass upon which he rode [vv. 23-28]. The same old prophet went for his carcass and buried it in his own grave. He enjoined his sons to also bury him there when he died “for the saying which he cried by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel, and against all the houses of the high places which are in the cities of Samaria *shall surely come to pass*” [vv. 29-32].

Having heard that the young prophet that came to “disturb” his worship had been killed by a lion on his way home, how did you expect king Jeroboam to change from his evil ways? In fact, he got worse! He consecrated more debased people as priests, and “whosoever would, he consecrated him, and he became one of the priests of the high places” [v. 33]. So, how do you explain the old prophet’s actions? What did he achieve for God and what lessons were his sons to learn from their father’s actions?

### 3. So what kind of old person are you?

Are you impressed with the old prophet? Let us summarize what comes out from the story:

a) *He demonstrated spiritual ambivalence*

If his sons went to church service on the day that the young prophet came from Judah, that suggests that the old prophet had not spoken strongly against Jeroboam's false system of worship. Yet, God still spoke His word through him and he believed the message that the young prophet delivered. He buried the young prophet in his own grave and commanded his sons to also bury him there when he died.

We do find growing evidence of this kind of ambivalence being shown by elders in our midst. In their own personal lives, they are very fervent for the Lord. However, in their public lives, they tend to do only what is politically correct. They will hardly come out openly against what they know contradicts the word of God. For example, you would think that the suspended Chief Justice of Alabama State in the United States had done the abominable by the sounds of silence that greeted his insistence on displaying a monument of the Ten Commandments in the court premises. Yet, a recent CNN poll shows that 77% of Americans supported his action. So, how come that they never spoke up in his favour?

b) *He sent a wrong message to the king and his sons*

By misleading the young prophet to death, the old man succeeded in sending a wrong message to the king who felt vindicated. As a result, instead of repenting and changing his evil ways, he turned worse in his idolatrous worship. Also, what lessons did he teach his children? I believe that they might have become more confused about what was right or wrong!

c) *He betrayed a spirit of envy*

A possible motive for the old prophet's actions was a spirit of envy. Bethel was his territory. So, why should God send a young man from another "country" to deliver an earth-shaking message that he himself was gifted to do? By the young man's achievement, the reputation of all the prophets in the northern territory had been rubbished. How could he explain such a defeat to his own sons?

This spirit is a major obstacle to the unity of the church of Christ on earth today. Every denomination claims to have a monopoly of Christian wisdom and down plays what God is doing through others. The elders in each such denomination are the ones spearheading the prevailing attitude.

#### 4. Conclusion: watch your posterity!

In my mother tongue, the word for an elder is *owanlen* [pronounced OR-WAN-LEN]. Literally, it means “the wise one.” The word of God says, “better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king” [Eccl. 4:13]. Therefore, that title is scriptural in that it links old age with wisdom, which we all know begins with fear of the Lord. That is why God commands respect for the grey-headed [Lev. 19:32]. So, when they call you an *owanlen*, it is a great compliment if you are living to the title or a rebuke if you are disgracing it!

Grey hair can be disgraced if you behave foolishly, such as showing bad examples [professionally, morally and spiritually], plotting intrigues on how to hurt rather than help others, or refusing responsibility for your actions. That is why the word of God says that the grey head “is a crown of glory if it be found in the way of righteousness” [Prov. 16: 31].

Look around yourself today, this moment. You can dye your hair or do a face-lift or act young, but you are ageing! Sooner than later, you will answer the call of every living creature. You will die. When you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, what are you going to tell Him? He gave you the grace of long life. Your head turned grey and graceful. Did you use the accompanying wisdom with integrity to uplift others and to glorify God? Or did you use it to plot intrigue and to pull others down?

Whatever answer you give, Christ is ready for you!