

## PRAYING TO THE WRONG GOD

### 2 Kings 1: 1-17

Our reading today tells us of God's judgement on King Ahaziah for his total disregard of Yahweh. It tells us not about Ahaziah's life but rather his death. You can find the main text on page [\*\*\*] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen,

Immediately after the death of King Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel, look at verse 1:

"After Ahab's death, Moab rebelled against Israel." (verse 1)

Moab had been conquered by King David and had been subject to Israel from that time on:

"David also defeated the Moabites. He made them lie down on the ground and measured them off with a length of cord. Every two lengths of them were put to death, and the third length was allowed to live. So the Moabites became subject to David and brought tribute." (2 Samuel 8:2 NIV)

But after the end of the reign of King Ahab they successfully rebelled. Both Edom and Libnah also gained independence during the reign of Joram (2 Kings 8:20, 22). The days of the Israelite empire built up by King David and Solomon were over. The alliance of Ahab with the Arameans at the battle of Qarqar around 853 BC marked the end of the period of international influence for Israel – although strangely this important battle is not noted in the OT.

King Ahaziah has injured himself, but instead of seeking help from Yahweh he turns to foreign gods – look at verse 2:

"Now Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. So he sent messengers, saying to them, "Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury.'" (verse 2)

The name "Ahaziah" means "held by Jehovah", but Ahaziah did not live up to his name, at least not in a positive fashion. The Bible tells us that he was basically evil:

“Ahaziah son of Ahab became king of Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel for two years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, because he walked in the ways of his father and mother and in the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin.” (1 Kings 22:51-52 NIV)

Here in verse 1 Ahaziah was hiding away in Samaria where he thought he was safe. He believed no one could get to him. But, he suffered a serious fall and was apparently doubtful as to whether he would survive. Ahaziah was apostate like his parents Ahab and Jezebel and here he committed a terrible sin by rejecting Yahweh and turning for help to Baal-Zebub, the god of the Philistine city of Ekron, the northernmost of five Philistine cities on the border with Israel. Ahaziah is behaving as if there were no God in Israel, behaving as if Yahweh didn't exist. He has no excuse for this. As we'll see in a moment Ahaziah knew of Elijah and he could easily have turned to the prophet of the true God for help. Worse, Ahaziah was not merely a turning to idol worship, but was turning to the demonic, because Baal Zebub was the “Lord of the Flies” a demonic prince and in Christian thought Baal Zebub is another name for the devil. Jesus was accused of driving out demons by the power of Beelzebub – a corruption of Baal Zebub:

“And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."” (Mark 3:22 NIV)

as we can see, Beelzebub was said to be the prince of demons or Satan, the devil. Just as Saul lost his kingdom by seeking to enquire of the witch of Endor, so Ahaziah will lose his life by turning to the Satanic god of Ekron.

So Ahaziah is guilty not merely of apostasy and idol worship but of demon or devil worship. He's rejecting Yahweh and turning to the devil. It's no wonder that God punishes him severely – look at verses 3 and 4:

“But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, "Go up and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and ask them, 'Is it

because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?’ Therefore this is what the LORD says: ‘You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!’” So Elijah went.” (verses 3 and 4)

So Elijah is once again instructed to confront the king of Israel. The messenger of Yahweh commissions Elijah to intercept the messengers of the king with an oracle of doom, telling the king that he will not recover from his injuries. This incites a conflict between Elijah and the messengers of the king, which in reality is a conflict between Ahaziah and Yahweh. It’s interesting that the Hebrew word for ‘messenger’ - *mal’āk* – is also the word for ‘angel’. God’s angelic messengers in effect overpower the messengers of Ahaziah, subverting their quest. Indeed the king’s messengers in effect return with an oracle from Yahweh, not Baal Zebub – look at verses 5 and 6: “When the messengers returned to the king, he asked them, "Why have you come back?" "A man came to meet us," they replied. "And he said to us, ‘Go back to the king who sent you and tell him, "This is what the LORD says: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending men to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!’”” (verses 5-6)

Ahaziah asks his messengers to describe the man who met them and realises it’s Elijah – look at verses 7-8:

“The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?" They replied, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt round his waist." The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite.”” (verses 7-8)

John the Baptist had a similar appearance:

“John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt round his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” (Matthew 3:4 NIV)

which is why many people thought that John the Baptist was actually Elijah returning to his people.

However, his recognition of the prophet Elijah doesn't lead Ahaziah to repentance, but rather to use force. He seems to think he can intimidate and control Elijah. So, Ahaziah takes up the implied challenge and sends a military unit to arrest Elijah, but the power of the prince of demons is no match for the power of Yahweh – look at verses 9-10:

“Then he sent to Elijah a captain with his company of fifty men. The captain went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, "Man of God, the king says, ‘Come down!’" Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then the fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.” (verses 9-10)

No doubt these events are what the disciples were thinking of when they asked Jesus if they should call down fire from Heaven when the Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus:

“When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"” (Luke 9:54 NIV)

In our passage, the captain is arrogant, after all he's speaking for king Ahaziah, but Elijah's position on top of the hill reminds us of his victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. Perhaps that should have caused the captain to be more cautious, but he challenges Elijah and God's power destroys him and all his men. Here God's reputation was at stake. Was the evil Ahaziah going to be able to exert his authority over the servants of the true God and command their obedience?

The whole process is then repeated with an even more arrogant captain with the same result – look at verses 11-12:

“At this the king sent to Elijah another captain with his fifty men. The captain said to him, "Man of God, this is what the king says, ‘Come down at once!’" "If I am a man of God," Elijah replied, "may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men.” (verses 11-12)

Our God is a God of second and even third chances, but Ahaziah still hasn't learned anything from the destruction of his two military expeditions. He's not repenting and turning to Yahweh. In fact the king sends yet a third military unit, but this time they try a different approach to Elijah – look at verses 13 and 14:

“So the king sent a third captain with his fifty men. This third captain went up and fell on his knees before Elijah. "Man of God," he begged, "please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!"” (verses 13-14)

This time the messengers are successful, but I don't believe this had anything to do with the different approach taken by the captain or the power of Ahaziah. The messengers are successful because Yahweh has sent an angelic messenger instructing Elijah to go with these men and convey his oracle directly to Ahaziah – look at verse 15 and 16:

“The angel of the LORD said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king. He told the king, "This is what the LORD says: Is it because there is no God in Israel for you to consult that you have sent messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Because you have done this, you will never leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!"” (verses 15-16)

Elijah is Ahaziah's nemesis. Ahaziah is portrayed as someone relentlessly driven to his own destruction. The king intended to solicit the power of foreknowledge and healing from the god of Ekron, but when frustrated in his efforts by the messenger of Yahweh, he turned his focus on Elijah. In treating Elijah as his enemy he inadvertently, but inevitably, keeps coming into direct conflict with Yahweh through his military messengers. Obsessively calling down Elijah the Tishbite was in reality to summon the Lord of Israel whom he was seeking to deny. Although Ahaziah refuses to acknowledge this reality, we can clearly see that Ahaziah cannot escape the presence and judgment of Yahweh.

Each of Ahaziah's actions moves him inexorably toward the judgment reserved for him because of his rejection of the God of the covenant. This account of Ahaziah does not tell us about his life but about his death. With the appearance of Elijah before the king, Ahaziah's death according to the divine oracle, the judgement of Yahweh, is simply reported.

Our text concludes with a report of Ahaziah's death, a brief summary of Ahaziah's reign and an introduction of the next king, Joram – look at verse 17:

“So he died, according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken. Because Ahaziah had no son, Joram succeeded him as king in the second year of Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah.” (verse 17).

Elijah's declaration of the judgement of death on Ahaziah because he has denied Yahweh and turned to the demonic, turned to Satan, was one of Elijah's last acts as God's prophet – this is a time of transition of the prophetic oracle to Elisha.

So, what have we learned this morning. The life of Ahaziah calls on the Israelites to make a stark and important choice. They can choose to be people of God and have life, or, like Ahaziah, they can reject Yahweh and have death. Will the Israelites hear the word of the Lord spoken through the prophets and have life or will they turn to other gods, or even the demonic, and have death? We have exactly the same choice. We can accept the free pardon from our sins won for us on the cross by Jesus and have eternal life with our Father, or we can reject Christ and what he did for us on that cross and have death. I choose to acknowledge Christ as my Lord and saviour and accept his free offer of eternal life – how about you? Don't be like Ahaziah and make the wrong choice, the choice that leads to death. If you've never truly accepted Christ as your Lord and Saviour, or you're not sure if you've really and truly done that, then I urge you to turn to Christ right here, right now, this morning whilst there's still time. Your salvation is too important to put off to another day.