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A war of words

Please read 2 Kings 1:1–18

The Book of 2 Kings begins with a troubled king on the throne of Israel. In short, swift strokes the author informs us that Moab had rebelled against Israel (1:1) and the king, Ahaziah, had suffered a serious fall. This may seem to be a rather peculiar way to begin unless we remind ourselves that 1 and 2 Kings were originally one book. The division was for the sake of convenience and apparently without regard to a natural place to break the narrative.

The account of Ahaziah's reign begins in the closing verses of 1 Kings. It was a short but dreadful reign as he continued the idolatrous ways of his father Ahab (1 Kings 22:51–53). Suddenly the opening verses of 2 Kings make sense. We are intended to interpret the rebellion of Moab and Ahaziah's fall against the backdrop of Ahaziah's idolatry. The king continues the wicked ways of his father and he immediately encounters troubles on every side. Was that just coincidence? Many would say it was,

but what follows in this chapter shows us that the living God was confronting Ahaziah and giving him the opportunity to break with his idols. Our coincidences are God's providences.

How gracious God is! He would have been justified in discharging Ahaziah into the eternal realm without so much as a single warning, but God continued to strive with him by sending him trouble.

And how did the king respond to his troubles? Did he regard them as kind messengers from the Lord God and turn from his sins? Verse 2 tells us that he responded to his sickness by sending messengers to enquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, whether he would recover. (Because the name 'Baal-Zebub', which means 'lord of a fly', is rather unflattering, some think a God-fearing scribe may have changed it from 'Baal-Zebul', which means 'glorious Baal'.)

Ekron was the northernmost city in the land of the Philistines. Some suggest that Ahaziah sent to consult this particular Baal because of the god's well-known prowess in healing. But it could very well be that Ahaziah had to send to Ekron because of the effectiveness of the ministry of Elijah the prophet. Ronald S. Wallace writes, 'What happened at Carmel changed the religious balance of power in Israel. Public opinion moved decisively to the side of the old religion of the Covenant. Elijah became the dominant figure in the background of the nation's life, and the prophets of the Lord were free to speak his word, give counsel, and intervene in national affairs. Yet Baalism became a still-powerful underground movement and, as the Naboth affair showed (1 Kings 21), it continued for nearly a generation to do severe damage here and there to what was traditional to Israel's life.'¹

Ahaziah's decision to consult with Baal presented the original

readers with a message of sharp significance. It is a message of immense relevance for us as well. We can make this message stand out in bold relief by underscoring three phrases: ‘Thus says the LORD ...’ (1:4, 6, 16); ‘The king has said ...’ (1:9, 11); and ‘So Ahaziah died according to the word of the LORD’ (1:17). These phrases take us to the heart of this chapter. What we have here is a war between conflicting words, with one word eventually triumphing over the other.

‘Thus says the LORD ...’

The Lord had not finished striving with Ahaziah. As the messengers made their way to Baal-Zebub, Elijah the prophet confronted them with these words: ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to enquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Now therefore, thus says the LORD: “You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die” (1:3-4).

In sending to Baal-Zebub, Ahaziah was attributing to Baal the power that belonged to God alone. His father Ahab had attributed the rains and the lightning to Baal, but God had used Elijah on Mount Carmel to show that it was he, and not Baal, who controlled the weather. Here God uses Elijah again to teach Ahaziah the same lesson. It is God alone who controls life and death. Ahaziah’s crisis was deepened by Elijah’s sudden intervention with the Word of God. Would Ahaziah now believe the Word of God and humble himself before it?

Ahaziah had spent his whole life ignoring God and worshipping idols, but he could not escape. He was in God’s hands, not those of Baal-Zebub, and God had determined that he would die.

‘The king has said ...’

If ever there was an individual who had reason to respect the

Word of God, it was Ahaziah. He had first-hand knowledge of the Word of God being confirmed again and again. His father Ahab had disregarded the Word of God and gone after Baal, lock, stock and barrel. What happened? God sent Elijah to announce a severe famine on the land (1 Kings 17:1). Ahaziah knew that the famine had come upon the land just as Elijah had said, and he also knew that the famine had ended at the word of Elijah (1 Kings 18:1, 41-45). In addition to that Ahaziah had seen Elijah's word fulfilled in the death of his father. Ahab had further violated the Word of God by unlawfully seizing the vineyard of Naboth. God responded to Ahab's sin by again sending Elijah with a message of devastating judgement. This time Elijah was to tell Ahab that dogs would lick his own blood where the dogs of Jezreel had licked the blood of Naboth (1 Kings 21:1-29; 22:37-38). Ahaziah knew that this prophecy had been fulfilled down to the last detail.

But Ahaziah was an apostate. He was one who had decisively rejected the truth of God. Enraged by the message of Elijah, he sent in succession three captains, each with a company of fifty men.

The first captain

The first captain approached Elijah with these words: 'Man of God, the king has said, "Come down!"' (1:9).

We should not be impressed by his use of the term 'man of God' in addressing Elijah. It is evident that he employed this title with contempt and ridicule, and not with respect. What we have here is a man setting himself against God and his Word. Elijah had already spoken God's message to King Ahaziah, but this captain had no hesitation in pitting the king's word against God's word.

Elijah responded by saying, 'If I am a man of God, then let

fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men' (1:10). Elijah's request was immediately honoured as 'fire came down from heaven' (1:10) to consume the captain and his company.

The second captain

The second captain, undoubtedly knowing the fate of his predecessor, approached Elijah without the slightest trace of respect or fear. Indeed, he showed even more contempt for Elijah by adding the words: 'Come down quickly!' (1:11). This captain wanted Elijah to know that he was not a man to be trifled with and that the prophet had better obey, and do so quickly, or face very unpleasant consequences.

Elijah responded to this captain with the very same words he had used in reply to the first one, and this captain and his company were also consumed (1:12). More defiance led to more fire.

Centuries later the Lord Jesus Christ and his disciples entered a Samaritan village where the inhabitants had rejected them. James and John, thinking of Elijah's response to these captains, asked Jesus for permission to call fire down from heaven. But Jesus rebuked them: 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them' (Luke 9:55-56). Some take Jesus' words to mean that Elijah was wrong in calling down fire from heaven. But we cannot take this position because it was God who sent the fire. If Elijah was wrong to call for the fire, God did not have to send it.

We are faced, then, with this question: why was it appropriate for Elijah to call down fire and inappropriate for Jesus' disciples to do the same? The answer lies in the change of dispensation. Matthew Henry writes, 'Elijah was sent to display the terrors

of the law, and to give proof of that, and to witness as a bold reprover against the idolatries and wickednesses of the court of Ahab, and it was agreeable enough to him to have his commission thus proved; but it is a dispensation of grace that is now to be introduced, to which such a terrible display of divine justice will not be at all agreeable.²

The *MacArthur Study Bible* adds: ‘Elijah was commissioned to a special ministry as a prophet in a theocracy, and it was his God-ordained task to confront an evil monarch [Ahab] who was attempting to usurp God’s authority. Elijah was specifically authorized to measure out the reprisal of God’s wrath. Elijah acted with an authority comparable to that of modern civil authorities (cf. Romans 13:4)—not in a capacity that parallels that of ministers of the gospel.’³

The third captain

The king’s intense hatred for God and his defiance of God’s Word are revealed by his sending yet another captain.

But this captain had taken to heart what had happened to those who had preceded him. He came to Elijah with a meek and submissive spirit: ‘And the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and pleaded with him, and said to him: “Man of God, please let my life and the life of these fifty servants of yours be precious in your sight” ’ (1:13). His plea for mercy was heard and he and his company were spared.

Now this captain has a vital lesson to teach us—the way to avoid God’s wrath is to stop showing contempt for his Word and beg for his mercy. Joseph Hall says, ‘There is nothing to be gotten from God by strong hand, any thing by suit.’⁴

This third captain and his company also serve as happy reminders that individuals can heed the Word of God even while the whole of society around them is steadily drifting from it.

‘So Ahaziah died according to the word of the LORD’

We cannot leave this chapter without considering how it all turned out. After hearing the plea of the third captain and a word from ‘the angel of the LORD’ (1:14, 15), Elijah went back to Ahaziah. The king had defied the Word of God, but he had not succeeded in silencing it or changing it in any way. Elijah repeated the message (1:16), and the account reaches its climax with these words: ‘So Ahaziah died according to the word of the LORD which Elijah had spoken’ (1:17).

Joseph Hall summarizes Ahaziah’s reign in this way: ‘Wickedness shortens his reign; he had too much of Ahab and Jezebel, to expect the blessing, either of length or prosperity of government. As always in the other, so oft-times in this world, doth God testify his anger to wicked men. Some live long, that they may aggravate their judgement; others die soon, that they may hasten it.’⁵

The solemn account of Ahaziah and his two captains and their companies is yet another example of God using judgement in the temporal realm to warn of eternal judgement (see Luke 13:1-5). This account reminds us that our God is indeed ‘a consuming fire’ (Hebrews 12:29) and that those who fight against him are destined to lose.

What this account teaches

1. For the captives in Babylon

It is not hard to see the significance of 2 Kings 1 for the captives in Babylon. It served as a pointed reminder of why they were there. Ahaziah’s true illness was apostasy, and with that illness he was emblematic of both Israel and Judah and their illness. As he went after Baal, so both nations went after idols. As his devotion to Baal led to his destruction, so the devotion of Israel and Judah to idols led them to destruction.

But the application of this account went even further. The captives had the Word of God there in Babylon, and they were called to function on the basis of that Word. They were called to believe that its promises to them were still intact, that their nation would eventually be released from captivity and restored to their homeland and their Messiah would finally come. They were called to live in obedience to its precepts, yes, even there in Babylon.

But the Word of God was not the only message sounding in their ears. They also constantly heard the message of Babylonian culture and religion. This message urged them to abandon their faith in God and become Babylonian in their thinking and doing.

The message of 2 Kings 1 must have come as a powerful reminder to those captives in that Babylonian pressure-cooker that the two messages they were hearing were not equal. They had been very eager to disregard God's truth and believe the message of false prophets, a message that cried, 'Peace, peace!' (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11). But their very presence in Babylon proved that God's Word had triumphed over the message of the false prophets, and there was, therefore, every reason to believe it would triumph over the Babylonian message.

2. For the church today

It is also not hard to see the significance of this chapter for the church today. The very same God who gave Ahaziah such a clear message has given his church a message to convey to her world. This message tells us that we are not mere earthbound creatures who cease to exist at death, but that we are destined to go out into eternity and meet him when life is over. He tells us that we are not by nature prepared for this meeting. He tells us that he is holy and that he demands that we be holy. He tells us that we are sinners and, as such, deserving of his condemnation. He tells

us that he is a consuming fire, and that if we appear before him in our sins, we shall most certainly be consumed by his wrath.

What a frightening message! But there is more. God also tells us that he has prepared a way by which we can have our sins forgiven and be granted eternal life and eternal fellowship with him. That way is his Son, Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus took unto himself our humanity, and in that humanity went to the cross and there endured the wrath of God in the stead of all those who believe.

Many disdain this message, just as Ahaz and his captains disdained the message of Elijah. As the church says, 'Thus says the Lord,' our secular age responds with 'Thus says the king'. In other words, our world responds to the message of the church with one of its own, a message that flatly denies that proclaimed by the church. The message of this world always sounds so very sweet and appealing. And the church all too often places herself in an impossible situation, one in which she tries to embrace both the message of God and that of the world. She takes out of God's message those things that are considered most objectionable, and she suddenly discovers in God's message those beliefs that her society most cherishes.

All the while 2 Kings 1 joins with other scriptures to thunder out this truth to the church: 'Thus says the king' never takes precedence over 'Thus says the Lord'. Those who forget this do so to their own shame. They may feel very proud of themselves now for being so up-to-date and sophisticated and for making the church more palatable to modern folk. But when in eternity they encounter the living God who is zealous for his truth, their folly will be horrendously apparent to themselves and to the watching universe. Those who struggle against the Lord's truth struggle in vain.