

2 Kings 1:
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I. Introduction

A. Context

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of 2 Kings 1.

In our time together over the past few months, we've been studying the life and times of the prophet Elijah. Elijah ministered to God's people in Israel during the time of King Ahab. Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, were wicked, corrupting influences in Israel. They were like a sewage pipe that pumped idolatry into the community of God's people.

Though God graciously showed the utter powerlessness of Ahab's idol, Baal, through such miraculous events like sending fire from heaven at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), Ahab would not abandon his false god for the true God.

During Elijah's ministry, you may recall how King Ahab—in quite a reversal of the what the kings of God's people should have been like—murdered a man named Naboth and stole his family land. We read about this in 1 Kings 21. I remind you of this story because it was in the wake of Ahab's sin against Naboth that God pronounced this judgment on Ahab and his house: God was going to wipe out Ahab's family line and he would do this during the generation of Ahab's sons (1 Kings 21:20–24, 29).

B. Read 1 Kings 22:51–53 and 2 Kings 1

C. Introduction & Historical Context

I wonder: do you have an opinion about William Henry Harrison?

If you don't know who William Henry Harrison is, I'll forgive you. Though he served as the ninth president of the United States, he held that distinction for exactly 31 days before he died of pneumonia.

In the history books, Harrison's brief fling with presidential power is not likely to be given much, if any, space. He held office for such a brief period of time that apart from his tragic end, he's more of a factoid than a factor.

With our attention turned to the reign of Ahaziah this evening, we may have understood if the author of Kings had skipped over—or at least skimmed over—his reign. Ahaziah was king over Israel for only two years. Though more than 31 days, Ahaziah's reign was a blip compared to the 20+ year reigns of his father Ahab or his contemporary Jehoshaphat.¹

But here is Ahaziah. Not merely mentioned, but featured in a fantastic account.

Maybe the first boys and girls who first heard the book of Kings would have reacted with the same foggy recognition that we did upon hearing the name of President Harrison: "Ahaziah, who was he again? Why does that name sound vaguely familiar?"

¹ Ahab reigned 874/873–853 BC and Jehosaphat reigned in Judah from 872–848 BC).

That's because when Kings was first written it was written to God's people living in exile 150-200 years after Ahaziah's brief reign. Between the time of Ahaziah and when Kings was written, God's people persistently chased after other gods so that God would say through Hosea:

“...I will punish [Israel] for the feast days of the Baals when she burned offerings to them and adorned herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers and forgot me, declares the LORD” (Hosea 2:13).

And that is what God does. God's people are evicted from the land God had given to them and for 70 years they live as servants in exile.

But God had promised that they wouldn't stay there. He'd graciously rescue them and bring them back home. So when God's people are hearing these words in their church services they're a people in waiting and preparation. They're waiting for God to bring them back home and they're needing to be prepared for life back in the land.²

This story—like the rest of Kings—was meant to explain the reason they were a people in exile and what it meant to live as God's penitent/repentant people waiting to go home; specifically, this is the warning message that God speaks to his people through this event: **all idolatry, as opposition to God and his Word, is foolish, offensive, and dangerous**; therefore, we should humble ourselves, turn from our idols, and cast ourselves upon the mercies of God who has dealt with the offense of your idolatry and mine.

II. A Deadly Misstep (v. 2)

² “Introduction to 1–2 Kings,” in NIV Study Bible, p. 594, “Thus, the purpose of 1–2 Kings probably was to explain the exile and to prepare the exiles for the anticipated return. To prepare, the exiles must reckon with the rebellion and idolatry (a string of covenant violations) that had angered Yahweh and led to the many decades in Babylon. The history contained in 1–2 Kings confronted them with reasons for their tragic story and taught them what to do to avoid repeating it when the opportunity to go home came.”

When the curtain rises on the second act of the book of the Kings, we find ourselves staring at a horrific accident. Something had gone wrong and the king of Israel had fallen from the second story of his palace in Samaria. When the dust settles from his fall, we see a wounded King Ahaziah bedridden, gravely injured.

But notice what Ahaziah does next. When an emergency strikes, who is on speed dial? “...so [Ahaziah] sent messengers, telling them, ‘Go, ask Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness.’”

Baal-Zebub. Baal-Zebub is just another title for one of the foreign Baal ‘gods’. Baal-Zebub was probably a sarcastic rendering of the title ‘Baal-Zebul’ (which means Lord Prince). Baal-Zebub means ‘Lord of the Flies’.

When Ahaziah is wounded he calls upon Baal, the so-called god of life and fertility, that was worshiped by the neighboring Philistines. This decision—more than any physical injury he sustained—was disastrous for Ahaziah.

That Ahaziah would solicit help from Baal should and shouldn’t surprise us.

It shouldn’t surprise us given what we read at the end of 1 Kings 22. Ahaziah’s reign is summed up with this miserable obituary:

“[Ahaziah] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and walked in the way of his mother and in the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. He served Baal and

worshiped him and provoked the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger in every way that his father had done.”³

Though Ahaziah was king of Israel, king over Yahweh’s people, his loyalties lay with the same idols that would destroy his father. He was, through and through, a Baal man

But then again, perhaps it would surprise us because here is a man who would have certainly known about the battles that his father Ahab had with Elijah. Ahaziah would have known how God had sent a drought for three years (!) to show that Baal was not the bringer of rain. Ahaziah would have known about Baal being exposed as a powerless, no-show in the contest with the LORD at Mount Carmel. He would have known his father’s persistent resistance to God’s Word, and how that would ultimately cost Ahab his life.

So it might shock us—perhaps in the way we are shocked when a child, though they see the destructive power of addiction in their parent, is herself destroyed by that same addiction later in life! You think having a front-row seat to the carnage caused by Ahab’s idolatry would have sent Ahaziah running from Baal... but sadly, here, we find him running to Baal.

What’s also surprising—and emphasized by being repeated three times in our chapter—is that Ahaziah would actually leave Israel to consult with the god of another nation. Though he knew of Yahweh, the God of Israel, Ahaziah would actually go well out his way—at least 40 miles—to consult *a god other than Yahweh!*

³ 1 Kings 22:52–53.

So we have the question asked for the first time by the angel of the LORD in v. 3, “Is it because there is *no God in Israel* that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the *god of Ekron*?” (vv. 3, 6, 16).

The question is rhetorical. Of course there is a God in Israel! We’ve seen and heard from him throughout the book of Kings, just as Ahaziah would have known about these things. The point is that Ahaziah—as his life hangs in the balance—so brazenly spurns the Lord for another god.

The repetition of the question is meant to drive home the offensiveness of Ahaziah’s turning to Baal of Ekron.

Married ladies, imagine that you took your husband to the emergency room. The nurse asks a bunch of questions during intake: name, birth date, allergies, etc. You know the types of questions they ask and you can probably answer the questions more accurately than your husband! Then the nurse asks your husband for his emergency contact.

What would you say if your husband gives the name of another woman—and I’m not talking about his mom!—as his emergency contact?

It would be a good thing that you’re at the hospital already because now there might be other injuries to attend to! You would be shocked by such a personal affront. You might say, “Excuse me? I’m your wife. I know you, I take care of you, I drove you here... and yet you want them to reach out to *her*? What’s she going to do?” You would find that incredibly offensive because you are right there! By the promises of marriage, you belong to each other. You’re best suited for care.

His choosing someone else—someone who is not even close by—would say something about what he thought of you, about your relationship. It would be a personal affront because he was purposefully bypassing you for a lesser option.

In a similar way, Ahaziah indicates that his emergency contact remains, even on the precipice of eternity, the foreign idol, Baal. Disastrously, Ahaziah chooses to snub the God of Israel; the God who had promised himself to this people, the one who was best suited for their care.

This is our first point: quite consciously, Ahaziah makes a deadly misstep when he snubs the true God, the God of Israel, in favor of a foreign false god. Ahaziah's idolatrous choice sets up a contest, through proxies/representatives, between Ahaziah and the LORD.

Ahaziah will send messengers. The Lord will send messengers.

Both are under orders. The question is: which messengers carry words of authority with them?

III. A War of Words

A. Elijah vs. the Messengers

The first contest of messengers is found starting in v. 3. When Ahaziah sends messengers to get a word about the future from Baal in Ekron, the LORD sends a messenger of his own: the angel—which, in the original language, is the same word as messenger—of the LORD. This heavenly messenger comes to Elijah and instructs him to track down the king's envoys and give the following message, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Because of this, the LORD says to Ahaziah, you won't get better. You will die" (vv. 3–4).

Though not stated outright, what we have again in Kings is a contest to demonstrate supremacy. Think back to the head-to-head show down at Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18 or the contrast between the godly Micaiah and the prophets of Ahab in 1 Kings 22. An ungodly, human king dismisses the authority and power of God through his false hopes, which God will then challenge and expose.

That's how it was under Ahab. It's also how, unfortunately, it is under his son.

So the author of Kings gives us a contrast: wounded Ahaziah sends his messengers from Samaria and the LORD sends his messenger from heaven, and by extension through Elijah, out onto the roads leading to Ekron. Both the king of Israel and the king of heaven have expressed their purposes/given their orders.

We're not given a direct account of what happened when Elijah encountered Ahaziah's men, but from vv. 5–8 we find out that when Elijah confronted Ahaziah's men they are convinced to abandon their mission and turn back to Samaria.

Now, here's the thing about working for a Ancient Near Eastern King in the 9th Century BC: they tended to have a very low tolerance for disobedience and a very high tolerance for execution/the death penalty. And everyone in the king's employ would know that!

So we're left to imagine what authority that Elijah must have exuded if it caused the men to turn around before completing their mission as a result of meeting an unidentified, scruffy dude on the road to Ekron!

The king is surprised by their return but when he hears the explanation he knows to blame his father's old nemesis: Elijah! (V. 8)

Some have said that God's intervention of the messengers is an act of grace upon Ahaziah... but I don't think that's the best conclusion to draw. This was part of God's fulfillment of his Word upon Ahab that he would cut down Ahab's family tree (1 Kings 21). God has spoken and this judgment will certainly happen. And what's more, God says in v. 4 without conditions, that Ahaziah will die for seeking out Baal.

When God through Elijah turns back Ahaziah's messengers, it is a curbing of sin; a preventing a sinful action from being added to a sinful intention. But more significantly, I would argue, this is the first of three instances where God demonstrates his exceeding power over Ahaziah and his idolatry before beginning to show that his word of judgment against Ahab's family line *will* be kept.

B. Elijah vs. Captains # 1 and 2

Ahaziah sends a captain with fifty soldiers to shut the prophet of God up (you don't send 50 armed men if you're just looking to have a friendly little chat! Ahaziah has more threatening purposes in mind!). It's rather intrusive for Elijah to tell Ahaziah he can't put his trust in Baal. Why does Elijah have to speak out against Ahaziah's religious choice? Isn't that rather a personal choice? And yet Elijah tells Ahaziah he's *wrong* and that he's condemned!

Ahaziah is going to use his royal powers to get Yahweh's pesky prophet out of the way; and so, we have a show down. A power contest once again between King Ahaziah—through his guards—and King Yahweh—through his prophet.

The King's Guards find Elijah and order him—according to the authority of the king—to surrender himself to them. “O man of God, the *king* says, ‘Come down’” (v. 9). Elijah responds, “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your gift.” And *whoosh!* Fire pours down and burns them up.

Ahaziah would have known that fire from heaven was a trademark of Elijah's God, Yahweh. In 1 Kings 18, on Mount Carmel, God sends fire from heaven to show that he, not Baal, was the true God who reigned supreme over all. Fire from heaven was a sign of who the true God is, that he is jealous for his own glory, and that he will not let idolatry go unpunished.

Ahaziah though, foolishly, is not deterred. He sends a second troop. They come with even more force or insistence. “The king orders you, Elijah: Come down *quickly!*” Or, in parent-speak, “Come here *now!*” But again, as Ahaziah tries to assert his authority over God's spokesman, God sends fire to wipe the Ahaziah's men out.

C. Elijah vs. Captain # 3

So God shows his Word's authority over Ahaziah's messengers by turning them back, by turning them to ashes, and finally, he shows his authority by causing Ahaziah's messenger to plead for mercy.

When Ahaziah sends orders out for a third time to bring Elijah in, the captain in charge must have scrambled to look over his life insurance policy. As soon as he sees Elijah, the captain, sensing the true nature of the LORD's power through him, begs to be spared.

“Man of God, 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!” (NIV 2011).

The passage doesn't tell us clearly whether the captain was filled with godly fear or whether he was simply scared and motivated by self-preservation. That is really secondary. What matters is that in this captain's humble submission was now a third sign of God's Word through his messenger having more power, more authority, than Ahaziah's orders.

This petrified captain gets it – God is to be feared!

Ahaziah's supposedly authoritative orders are ineffective bluster. His guards are decapitated. In three different encounters between Ahaziah's messengers and the Lord's messenger, it is the LORD—whom Ahaziah has rejected and resists—that has been shown to possess a true, authoritative word.

IV. A Judgment Kept

The angelic messenger reassures Elijah that this envoy of the king will not—cannot—do him any harm and so Yahweh's messenger goes to meet Ahaziah face-to-face. His message remains the same as the first two times we heard it: "Ahaziah, you will *certainly* die!"

And that is exactly what happened. Ahaziah died, just as God said he would (v. 17). And what's more, since Ahaziah had no son to take his place, the throne passed to his brother, Joram (v. 18). The pruning shears of God's judgment were beginning to lop off the branches of Ahab's family tree in accordance with God's word.

God's words of warning—and his words of judgment—are to be taken seriously. He doesn't play around. What he says, he'll do. That's why Ahaziah is cut down in the prime of his life without any heirs— God was certain to keep his word of judgment on Ahab's family.

If you insist and persist in opposing him, choosing to make anything other than him the center of your life, you will come under his judgment of condemnation. There's no hoping to slip away. There's no hoping God will forget.

God, the living God, is not to be trifled with.

V. Christ-Focus and Application

A. Warning: The Foolish, Offensive, and Dangerous Nature of our Idols

I said at the outset that this story was supposed to prepare God's people, as they lived in exile, for the day when God would bring them into the promised land. Because idolatry wasn't just Ahaziah's story, it was Israel's story. Ahaziah was emblematic of the idolatry of God's people as a whole. As king he both contributed to, but also illustrated, how the hearts of God's people chased after false gods.

So this book—and this story—is written to idolaters. Not “pagan” idolaters, but “religious” idolaters. Written to Israel, Ahaziah's story is part of God's warning to idolaters whose names are on the church membership rolls.

And it's for this reason that this story—strange fire and all—speaks to you and me also.

Because idolatry is not just a problem back then. Idolatry is not just a problem for people outside the church. Idolatry is a constant human problem. It's a you and me problem.

Idolatry, as the Bible understands it, “...is having or inventing something in which [you trust] in place of or alongside of the one true God...”⁴ Or, as Martin Luther put it, “Idolatry is trusting in something other than God for your ultimate security and your happiness.”⁵

So more than just statues, idols can be material things—like money or sex or stuff—or immaterial things—power, politics, nationality, personal choice. It can be the identity we claim to construct for ourselves. Our idols can be the identity we promote on social media or in private conversations.

If you don’t think you have an idol problem, ask yourself:

1. **Joy:** What or who do you dream about? What do you spend your time hoping for, thinking about?
2. **Security:** What worries you or keeps you awake? What people think of you? An election outcome?
3. **Peace:** What soothes you? When you’re anxious, what thoughts or actions calm you down?

Because of our sinful condition, our hearts are always bent away from God, in worship, to the things he’s made. So whatever these questions uncover for you, God, in this passage, is warning you that the place you’ve given to that thing—whatever it is—is foolish, is offensive, and is dangerous.

Is that how you think about your idols?

Sure, as an abstract principle, most of us would likely confess that idolatry is wrong or sinful; but our passage wants to press us to say more. Idolatry is sinful, absolutely; but, idolatry also goes against wisdom, it goes against God, and, as such, it goes against our own well-being.

⁴ Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 95, c.f. 1 Chronicles 16:26; Galatians 4:8–9; Ephesians 5:5; Philipians 3:19

⁵ Quoted by Beale

1. Our idolatry is foolish

Our idols are powerless to deliver us; so, our idolatry is a foolish substitution. Ahaziah foolishly thinks that his idol can give him what he needs. His father's life had shown just how powerless the family gods were. And in Ahaziah's own life, the LORD had showed his power as he trumped Ahaziah's messengers three times. Yet he stakes his life, his happiness, on an idol that some guy made. It's foolish! It is stupid!

Yet this is what we do.

When we run to idols for what God is ultimately intended to give us, and has promised he would give us, it's madness.

Like Ahaziah, we should know better. We've seen how our idols, whatever they are, don't satisfy us; and, by contrast, we have testimony of God's power at work. Yet we still run to them. Our idolatry is a foolish substitution.

2. Our idolatry is offensive

Our idols also cause us to substitute God as our highest treasure; so, our idolatry is offensive to God. Is it because there is no god among us—among the church—that we spend money, waste time, and sacrifice relationships to worship the god of sex? Why do you run to videos on your phone to validate you or give you relief or make you happy? Is it because there is no God who can do that?

Our idolatry says what we won't admit with our mouths: no, I don't trust that God can give me what I need, I don't trust that he will. Though there is a God who has made promises to his people, has

demonstrated his power to his people, and has promised that he is always with his people, I'd try and get that from my girlfriend or my kids or my boss.

God finds it completely offensive. He won't stand for it. It is an offense, an abomination, that he will deal with.

3. Our idolatry is dangerous

That being the case, since our idolatry offends God, we must say that *since our idols offend God they bring us under His judgment; so, our idolatry is dangerous*. In that our idolatry provokes God to anger, as we see with Ahaziah, it endangers us.

Sometimes our idols will bring upon us earthly consequences as Ahaziah experienced. We destroy our bodies, destroy our families, destroy other people. But always idolatry without repentance has eternal consequences.

1 Corinthians 6:9–11, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: ...idolaters... will [not] inherit the kingdom of God.”⁶ That is another way of saying, “The punishment for idolatry is to be separated from the enjoyment of God’s goodness and favor forever and to know only his holy contempt.” Or put yet another way, our idolatry deserves hell.

And so in that man’s idolatry is a flagrant offense against God and brings God’s judgment against him, it is dangerous... eternally so.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 6:9–10. “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

So let me ask you again: do you view the things that are vying for the center of your life like this? Maybe one of the idols vying for your heart is food or drink. You go to food to relieve boredom, to find comfort, to cope with stress.⁷ Raiding the fridge seems so innocent. But if it has become what you count on—your emergency contact, your idol—you must see it as a foolish, offensive, and dangerous thing!⁸

In the right place, under God, many of the things that become idols are good; yet, when they usurp God (even prompting us to do things we know would be displeasing to God), we must see them for what they are: foolish, offensive, and eternally dangerous.

B. Objection: Seems harsh, severe. That’s not the God I recognize. Point to Luke 9.

But isn’t this all a bit exaggerated?

Apparently, to make this point, God was willing to put to death 400 men at Mount Carmel and another 103 men in our story. Isn’t such bloodshed a little over the top? This isn’t the loving, friendly God we want to imagine. Where’s the grace?

In Luke 9, this story actually comes up in an exchange with Jesus and his disciples. In Luke 9:51f, Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, is passing through Samaria ‘to go to Jerusalem’ when the Samaritans reject him. God has come down to them and they don’t want him. And so James and John ask Jesus, “Lord,

⁷ For an example, see: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/my-struggle-to-smash-food-idol/>

⁸ Or maybe your idol is money: the satisfaction you get from spending it or the security you find in saving it. Neither are intrinsically wrong (like food), but when saving or spending becomes your fundamental joy or hope then they have become foolish, offensive, and dangerous.

do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" In other words, should we give them the Elijah treatment?

And Jesus, unlike Elijah, rebukes his disciples.

And so you might say, "See! With Jesus, things are now different. No fire and brim stone. Grace covers us."

And while I'd say yes, there is grace for our idolatry, you've misunderstood the point. Jesus is going to Jerusalem in this story *to die*. The reason Jesus rebukes James and John is not because the Samaritans rejection of him wasn't a serious offense, but because Jesus was on a very specific mission.

All idolatry is foolish, offensive, and dangerous.

We can look at God's judgment on Ahaziah and we can look on his sending fire from heaven to consume 102 men and we might recoil and ask: is my idolatry really that serious?

It is not a bad question. It's just a question in the wrong place at the wrong time. For what we must do, is walk together to the Jerusalem, to stand outside her gates, beneath the cross, and see him dying there, Jesus, the Precious Son of God, as the fire of God's judgment is poured out upon him who took upon himself the sin of his people.

There we can ask the question: Is my idolatry *really* that serious?

And there we know we know the answer: it is. For him to die for me, it is.

Here's the thing though: if the cross is where we see most more clearly the greatness of the offense of our idolatry toward God, it also there where we see most clearly the greatness of the love of God toward us. For out of the riches of his mercy, at the cross God gave his Son for foolish and offensive idolatrous sinners. There God substitutes himself for us because we've sinfully substituted idols for Him. Jesus bears the fire which we deserve, has been borne. There our sinful passions are crucified with Christ and the grip of our idols upon us begin to weaken.