

2 Kings 1

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Date: 14 November 2021

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[0:00] Now, if you would take out your Bible and turn to 2 Kings, chapter 1, page 307. This is like an old nursery rhyme from England, which I'm appalled to tell you is not taught in the Canadian school system anymore.

It's just a little joke. It goes like this. It's called the Grand Old Duke of York. Anyone heard that? Thank you. The Grand Old Duke of York, he had 10,000 men.

He marched them up to the top of the hill and marched them down again. And when they were up, they were up. And when they were down, they were down. And when they were only halfway up, they were neither up nor down.

All together now. This poem's been going around our house this week as we've been talking about 2 Kings, chapter 1, because it's about the complete futility and effectiveness of so much furious action by kings and leaders and armies and power politics.

And every week we hear the news about world leaders marching their forces up to the top of the hill and down again and marching them up. And in the end of the day, they're neither halfway up nor down. And here in 2 Kings 1, if the subject matter was not so serious, it would be funny.

[1:19] It's actually written with comedy in mind, I think. The writer takes up and down those two concepts, those two words, and throws them at us 23 times in 16 verses.

Because the ups and downs are about the futile attempt of this son of Ahab, King Ahaziah, to stop the word of God, to overturn the word of God, to silence the word of God, and to control his own life and death.

It's a completely futile exercise because it changes nothing except puts a lot of lives in danger around him. And it's the last contest between the house of Ahab and the Lord God of Israel.

And it is a complete triumph for the word and work of God. And back at the end of 1 Kings, Ahaziah is introduced as Ahab's son.

He does exactly what his father and mother does. Jezebel's still rattling around in the palace somewhere. And he takes the policy of Baal worship and continues it.

[2:28] And I've got three points. This passage makes three points to us. Firstly, the shape of the story. I just want to move over it quickly. Secondly, the triumph of the word.

And thirdly, the greatness of God's grace. So three points. Number one, the shape of the story. This chapter is about death. It begins with a mention of the death of Ahab, verse 1, to the great relief of all true believers in Israel.

And it ends with the death of Ahab's son Ahaziah. In verse 17, he died according to the word of the Lord that Elijah spoke. And in between those two, death hangs heavy in the story.

And the action kicks off in verse 2 with the new king Ahaziah falling down from a window through a lattice probably, a railing.

And he lies critically injured. It's an inglorious way to start his rule. He plummets down and is critically injured. They get him up on his bed. And he lies down on the bed and he can't come down from the bed under his own strength anymore.

[3:37] And as he lies dying, instead of sending to the Lord God of Israel, who has power of life and death in his hands, he sends his servants out of the land of Israel to the pagan town of Ekron to consult the god Beelzebub.

Literally, he says in verse 2, to see if I shall live and not die from my injury. And in verse 3, there is another messenger, not from the king, but from heaven, the angel of the Lord, speaks to Elijah. Elijah has set up shop on top of Mount Carmel, where the great triumph over Baal had happened, showing with great clarity that the Lord is God and Baal is a block of wood.

And this message says this, verse 3, Elijah, get up, go up, and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and say to them, is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Beelzebub, the god of Ekron?

Now thus says the Lord, you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up. You shall surely die. And Elijah intercepts Ahaziah's messengers before they get to Ekron, and they instantly turn around with the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken.

[5 : 01] They go straight back to the king, who is absolutely shocked to see them so soon, and they deliver the message word for word in verse 6 because of how important these words are. They get repeated three times.

Is it because there's no God in Israel that you inquire of Beelzebub? And when Ahaziah hears these words, he's very angry, verse 7, he says, who does this person think he is?

And they describe what he looks like and what he wears, and Ahaziah says in verse 8, it's Elijah, which means he knows exactly who he is and what he stands for and all that's happened between him and his father, including the drought and the fire and the rain.

And here is an opportunity for Ahaziah to repent. The word of the Lord has been spoken twice clearly, but instead the king, who can't even come down from his own bed in fury, demands that Elijah come down from his mount.

I refuse to believe I'm going to die. If anyone's going to die around here, it's got to be Elijah. And the shape of verses 9 to 17 move up and down the mountain, Mount Carmel, where Elijah is.

[6 : 12] And after the three attempts to drag Elijah down from the mountain, finally the Lord releases Elijah to go down with the soldiers to the king and he arrives and Elijah changes not a syllable in the message and he repeats the question for the third time, is there no God in Israel that you could inquire of his word?

And the shape of the story shows us that all the ups and downs of power succeed in doing nothing, particularly in bringing life. That's the shape of the story, point one.

Point two, the triumph of the word. Now, there's a little bit of mockery going on in this story with reference to Baal.

One of the local names for Baal at this time was Bealzebul, ending with an L, which means Lord over gods. But the people of Ekron had developed their own name, which ends with a B, Bealzebub.

And that means Lord of the flies, Lord of the dung heap, Lord of dead bodies. Perhaps by magic incantation, this God could guess who was going to die. And why does Ahaziah appeal to Bealzebub, the Lord of the flies, and not to God, the Lord of Israel?

[7 : 30] It's because he says, I want to hear a God who will tell me what I want to hear. I don't want a God who's going to say that if I sin, I'm going to die, a God who speaks by fire.

Ahaziah's not interested in changing. He's interested in a change in his circumstances, so he'll try and find a God who will suit. And Satan whispers in our ears all the time, has God really said? Doesn't really matter. He's only trying to do that to stay in power. You will not die. You will not die. That's always been Satan's message. And three times Ahaziah tries to drag Elijah off the mountain, and you may think that the contest between God and Baal, back in 1 Kings 18, was completely settled with fire from heaven.

It is not. So long as our hearts cling to idols, we will continue to contest the word of God. And as the king uses his power to threaten and to intimidate the prophet, to block this word of the Lord that he's heard about his death, he puts his hands up to his ears.

And the writer uses ups and downs now on the Mount Carmel to show the power of God's word. So first up, he sends 50 soldiers with a captain to haul, to overpower Elijah and haul him down off the mountain to arrest and silence this wretched prophet.

[8 : 58] And when they get to the mountain, they go up to Elijah. They say, this is the word of the king, come down. And Elijah says, if I belong to the Lord, fire will come down and consume you.

And it does. So the king, knowing what happened, sends a second 50 with a captain. This is slightly more demanding. Come down now, quickly. And then fire comes down and consumes them.

And so the king sends a third captain with 50. And I'm going to call him Captain Humble. Because with this captain, everything changes. He too goes up the mountain.

But for the first time in this passage, someone deliberately chooses to go down. In verse 13, he falls down on his knees. Literally in Hebrew, he bows down on his knees.

He believes and he bows. And he prays for his life and the life of his soldiers. Three times he speaks about life and how precious it is.

[10:03] Because he knows there's a God in Israel. And what he's doing by kneeling is an incredibly dangerous thing to do. Not because of Elijah. But because he's changing sides from the king.

It's mutiny and betrayal to the mission of trying to silence the word of God. And he bows his knees, showing that he has a higher allegiance to the Lord God and the prophet than to the king. Something believers have always had to do. It's a beautiful moment in the chapter. The main action of those in power is to control and crush the word of the Lord. But in the midst of death and all this death, this man and his soldiers enter into life by believing the word of the Lord, by bowing and praying for life.

And the Lord spares him and his 50 men with him. And that's how the word of God works. It triumphs through humility and faith. It raises up those who are bowed down.

Jesus himself said, this is the will of my father, that everyone who looks on the son and believes in him should have eternal life. And I will raise him up at the last day.

[11:16] And it helps explain, I think, why God uses fire. It's not just as a sort of a protection for Elijah. It's a reminder of the power of God back on Mount Sinai.

In the book of Deuteronomy that we looked at in the last couple of years, when Moses is speaking about Mount Sinai, again and again he says, God let you hear his words in the midst of the fire. He says this, The mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but you saw no form.

It was only a voice. Years ago, when we were at the old church, we had a wooden lectern made for preaching and teaching.

And I had the text from Jeremiah carved here on the top. And it said, Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord.

[12:19] Just as a reminder to all of us who teach the word of God, that the power is not in us to change anything, but is in the word of the Lord. And on this Artizo Sunday, I'm so very thankful the Lord continues to raise up young men and women to serve his word and to spread his word of fire.

And in response to the humility of Captain Humble, the angel of the Lord says to Elijah, Go down with them. So he gets up and goes down. And then in verse 16, We have the word of the Lord for the third time.

Thus says the Lord, Because you sent messengers to inquire of Beelzebub, the God of Ekron, is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of his word? Therefore, you shall not come down from the bed to which you've gone up, but you shall surely die.

And then he dies, according to the word of the Lord. This too is the triumph of the word of the Lord. It brings life in the midst of death and death in the midst of life.

It raises the one who bows down and it puts down those who raise themselves up. And by rejecting this word, Ahaziah achieves nothing, since the word of the Lord never returns to him void.

[13:45] And that is the triumph of the word of God. Now, why is this so? It is because of the goodness, greatness and grace of God.

So my third point is the greatness of God's grace. And I just want to stop here for a few minutes on this one central question, the one central verse that comes three times in this chapter, repeated three times, all three times.

It's the reason for Ahaziah's death. And all three times it comes as a question. Is it because there's no God in Israel that you go off and search to the Lord of the flies and don't inquire of my word?

It's such a simple and deep question. And it has three aspects, three things about it I want to say.

The first is this, and I say it humbly, it is as though God is flabbergasted and dumbfounded at Ahaziah's unbelief.

He asks, is there no God in Israel? Israel would not exist without me. It is the Lord who called Abraham and gave him children when it was humanly impossible by complete grace and gift.

[14:57] And he promised the children this land. It was the Lord who created the nation of Israel, took them out of slavery in Egypt by his mighty hand, brought them to the land flowing with milk and honey, driving out the enemies before them.

He brought them to himself at Mount Sinai and bound himself to covenant by covenant with them, saying, I will be your God and you will be my people. He let them hear his voice out of the fire, have

no other gods before me.

They're all fake. They all deal death. If you persist in going after other gods, he said, I will fling you out of the land because it's my land. But when you've been cast out among the nations and you seek for me, I will have mercy and bring you back.

There is no one like the Lord. There is no God like the Lord. You have everything you need in him. You need nothing more. There is a God in Israel. It's astonishing hardness and deliberate blindness by Ahaziah.

But there's a second aspect to this as well. The question bears witness to the deep pain that God is experiencing, if I can say that reverently. It's the question of an abandoned lover.

[16:12] Is there no one at home? He's been terribly wounded. And most of us have an impersonal view of idolatry and sin. You know, the things I do, so long as I don't harm others, right?

But sin and idolatry are intensely personal to God because he has bound himself to us as a lover. That's what the Old Testament tells us. The God of the Bible gives himself to us and desires that we give ourselves to him.

He desires a shared intimacy with us, a communion, mutual love, care, affection, giving, receiving. So the central question in this chapter shows us how God experiences our sin.

He's acted out of kindness and goodness and grace. He's given life, gave life to Ahaziah, bound himself in covenant to his people, being faithful every day of his life.

And this sin is a personal betrayal. Going to Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies, is getting into bed with another God. It is more than breaking commandment.

[17:20] It's breaking the heart of God. It's not just a violation of the law. It's a violation of God's love. Is it because there's no God in Israel you've got to inquire? I think it's a question of deep truthfulness and pain.

Israel exists because of the word of the Lord, because of his faithfulness to his promises. And he'd given his people his words so that we might inquire and go deeper rather than chasing after other gods elsewhere.

So God, it's a flabbergasted question. It's a question of pain. And then thirdly, the question comes and opens the door of grace to even Ahaziah that he might come back.

You think about it. God could just easily have sent fire down the first time Ahaziah stepped badly, and zotted him. And that would be the end of the story.

But he does not. The Lord asks a question. It's an invitation for Ahaziah to respond and to enter into some sort of real relationship.

[18:28] We see, again, the sheer greatness of the grace of God even to Ahaziah. He doesn't deserve it. He's done everything to not deserve it.

He's done the opposite, just as we do. And at the same time as Ahaziah is trying to eliminate the word of God, God continues to offer him his word and gives him a chance to turn back, seeking to draw him back into relation with himself, offering him a last chance to turn.

It's amazing. This question, this word from the Lord, comes to the king as he is dying, tells him he's got days to live. It is mercy so that he will see this as an opportunity to turn back to the Lord.

The God who said, you shall have no other gods but me, is now speaking to him, giving him the opportunity to put away these stupid idols and to hear the words of life. And even when the reports come back from Carmel of the fire from heaven on the soldiers, he continues to play games with his own life because he plays games with the word of life.

But this Lord is rich in mercy and continues to hold out his hand to Ahaziah right to the very end. Do you know, 19 chapters later, there is another king in Israel who is dying.

[19:50] And when he hears the words of the prophet telling him that he's going to die, he cries out to the Lord to spare him. His prayer is self-serving and self-righteous. He cares nothing for the people of God, but the Lord answers his prayer and gives him 15 more years, which he proceeds to waste in foolishness.

And I think we're just meant to stand here and say, the grace of God is astonishing. Here is God who would respond even to Ahab when he humbled himself, giving his son Ahaziah every opportunity.

And though God's word is opposed in every age, the great comfort for us here is that God himself stands behind his word and he has given us his very precious and great promises.

Listen to this. Jesus said, Listen to this.

There is no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ Jesus. Well, listen to this. Hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

[21 : 14] So Christian growth and the Christian life is not about waiting and working for that decisive breakthrough. It's not a quest for some new gift or some change or some experience that we lack.

It's progressively taking hold of and entering into and trusting what God has already revealed in his word. In the New Testament, in the book of 2 Thessalonians, as the Apostle Paul prays, that the word of God would speed on and have triumph.

And that's what we pray. We pray it for our tinsel. We pray it for the two who are baptised. We pray it for the synod this week and for Dan, for the new property. We pray it for ourselves.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.