

The Book of Kings (Continued; 2 Kings 1-)

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Sermon 36, Idolatry Kills 103, 2 Kings 1

Proposition: God repeatedly warns us against worshipping other gods, and His fiery wrath will consume those who will not submit to His exclusive claims.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, our text tonight is troubling. Tonight we see not a battle, or a war; we don't see human beings murdering each other. Rather, we see the grisly consequences of idolatry. That's why I've titled this sermon "Idolatry Kills 103." It kills Ahaziah, of course. It kills 2 captains of 50, and it kills two units of 50. All told, the body count here is 103 men, every last one of them struck down by God for failing to keep the first

commandment. Yet what our text highlights is not only the exclusive demands of God, but first and foremost His persistent grace. God warns against idolatry *seven times* in this chapter. Six times the warning goes unheeded, but before the climactic seventh warning the third captain of fifty shows us what it looks like to heed such a warning and to repent before God. Yet Ahaziah missed it. He ignored the first six warnings, and by the time the seventh one came, it was too late. Idolatry killed him.

Brothers and sisters, tonight with God's help I will show you that idolatry kills. God's fiery wrath will consume every last person who refuses to heed His insistent, repeated warnings.

I. Two Providential Warnings, vv. 1-2a

The book of 2 Kings begins with a seemingly isolated notice about Moab. But this is actually a very deliberate placement. You see, it forms the first warning in the events leading up to Ahaziah's death. (Mark that: we are told almost nothing of Ahaziah's life; the narrator is interested almost entirely in the events culminating in his death.)

A. Political Instability for Ahab's Dynasty, v. 1

Briefly put, this revolt on the part of Moab signaled that Ahab's dynasty was already on the skids. Ahab's long reign had held things together, but as soon as he was gone, political instability mounted. This fact has a double significance. First, the previous chapter mentioned that under godly Jehoshaphat, Judah maintained its control over Edom. But under wicked Ahaziah and Jehoram, Israel lost control over Moab. Second, this instability was a warning to Ahaziah and Jehoram. Ignore Yahweh and you will suffer. Forsake God, and your life will eventually fall apart.

B. Injury to Ahab's Son, v. 2a

But God not only touched Ahaziah in his kingdom; He touched him in his home. Ahaziah fell through a lattice and injured himself badly enough that he wondered whether he would live. Even today, of course, domestic accidents are deadly. One of our friends in New Hampshire was building a house. He was installing a staircase, and he had nailed the stringers in place but had not yet put on the stair treads. He was climbing up the center stringer when it broke under his weight. He fell and was badly injured, even coming within an inch of losing an eye, and he was unable to work for about 3 months. There's no question that Ahaziah could have been badly injured by a fall through a lattice.

This incident, too, was not without meaning. It was a warning to Ahaziah to get right with God. It was a reminder that he wasn't immortal and that he would soon be facing his creator.

II. Ahaziah Defies Yahweh's Warnings, v. 2b

But how did this man respond to political disaster and personal injury? By sending to seek Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron. Ekron was a Philistine city, and this deity is that city's particular local manifestation of Baal. His name means "Lord of the Flies," a title taken by most to be a corruption of the original "Baal-zebul," "Exalted Lord." In other words, our text seems to be teaching that it is valid to mock idols and to deflate their pompous titles. Beelzebub appears

again in some NT manuscripts as title ascribed by Jesus to Satan himself. Yes, Satan is a mighty ruler and one whom we should never take lightly — and yet at the same time, he is nothing more than a lord of flies. He rules nothing.

It is to this god, who is at best a manifestation of Satan, that Ahaziah sends for help. He wants to know whether he will recover, and rather than seeking the God of Israel, he seeks the god of Ekron.

A. The Stubbornness of Idolatry

From this we see the stubbornness of idolatry. What had Baal-zebub ever done for Ahaziah? And yet Ahaziah is bound and determined to follow him. Presumably it was during Ahaziah's lifetime that Elijah had proven Yahweh to be the true God on Mount Carmel. Almost certainly, Ahaziah was aware of the oracles against his father and how precisely they had been fulfilled. He had to have known that Yahweh was the true god and the one who rules in Israel, and that Baal is incapable of giving rain, giving life, or giving protection. Yet in spite of it all, Ahaziah was determined to follow Baal and not Jehovah.

Have you been there? Are you living there? If you continue to trust in money, or in physical health, or in romantic love, or in material possessions, or in technology and technological progress, or in entertainment and pleasure, then you too are a stubborn idolater. You too are looking to the god of Ekron, or the god of Hollywood, or the god of Madison Avenue, or the god of Wall Street, or the god of Silicon Valley, or the god of the NFL.

You have all kinds of evidence proving that God is the true God and that these other gods cannot and will not deliver. But if your ultimate trust and ultimate recourse is to money, to pleasure, to food, or to stuff, then you are worshipping an idol just like Ahaziah was.

B. The Folly of Idolatry

And if you're doing that, then you are a fool like he was! Ahaziah was looking for help from a deity that couldn't give it. He was turning toward a broken cistern that couldn't hold water. He was living in the senseless folly of idolatry. Idols don't save. Idols don't help. That thing that in your heart of hearts you really desire, that you really think will make your life worth living, is a liar and a cheat. It will be no more help than Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron.

So Ahaziah was providentially warned to seek the true God — but instead, he sought help from a false god who cannot save.

III. Two Verbal Warnings, vv. 3-6

So God amped up the warnings. Rather than just giving providential hints, He spelled out His warning explicitly.

A. The Angel of Yahweh Asserts His Exclusivity, vv. 3-4

The first commandment is to have no other gods before Yahweh. The greatest commandment is to love Yahweh exclusively and to seek everything else for His sake and in submission to Him. God sent Elijah to remind Ahaziah of that truth. The message was simple: Ahaziah, Yahweh is God in Israel. You don't need to inquire of Baal-zebub; in fact, it is sinful for you to do so. Because you're resorting to an idol in your hour of need, you will die.

B. The Messengers Repeat Yahweh’s Demand for Exclusive Worship, vv. 5-6

That was the message, duly delivered by Elijah — perhaps before the messengers ever got out of town. So when they returned to Ahaziah in minutes from a journey that he probably expected to take two days, the king was stunned. How did they get back so quickly? They repeat God’s warning. Ahaziah, Yahweh is God in Israel. You may not dishonor and blaspheme Him by seeking other gods to help you in your crisis. Because you have done this, you will die.”

IV. Ahaziah Attempts to Silence Yahweh’s Warnings, vv. 7-9

How did Ahaziah take this warning, a warning which the text doubles to drive it into our thick skulls?

A. He Investigates Their Source, vv. 7-8

First of all, he sought to discover where the warning came from. In the process, he elicits one of the few physical descriptions in the Bible of what a major character looks like. We find out that Elijah is a “Lord of hair” and girded with a leather belt. Instantly, the king knows who it is. Clearly, then he was aware of this famous prophet and perhaps even knew him by sight. He knew, too, then, something of the relationship between his parents and this man of God.

B. He Attempts to Arrest Elijah, v. 9

And yet, in spite of that knowledge, he instantly sets out to do what his parents repeatedly failed to do — that is, to arrest and silence Elijah. Perhaps he thought that Ahab and Jezebel’s mistake was simply in their use of insufficient force. Rather than overwhelm the prophet all at once, they had foolishly met him one-on-one, or sent messengers rather than acting decisively. Determined not to repeat that mistake, Ahaziah sends overwhelming force with no warning. Clearly, he’s not interested in a friendly discussion. He wants to silence this nagging voice of Yahweh once and for all.

V. Two Enacted Warnings, vv. 10-12

In response, God warns Ahaziah twice. Elijah simply tells both captains of 50, “If, as you so thoughtlessly assert, I am indeed a man of God, then there’s a lesson you need to learn.” That lesson had two parts.

A. God Protects His Servant

First, God protects His servant. God will not abandon one of His men. And thus, 50 men was just as insufficient as 5, or 50,000. The point here is not that God will always protect His people and none of them will ever be harmed by the wicked. The story of Naboth two chapters ago should have taught us that. Rather, the point is that God will preserve every one of His servants for as long as that servant has a task to do on earth. If you are serving God, you are immortal until the time when He is ready to bring you home.

A further ironic twist here is that the king said “Come down,” when the king would not “come down” any more off his bed and that in the next chapter Elijah would only “go up” to Heaven and not come back down.

In short, brothers and sisters, don’t fear those who can kill the body. They cannot hurt you unless God allows them to. You are in His hands, whether you’re on a battlefield or in your

bedroom. Elijah had learned that lesson before, when Ahab and Jezebel threatened him — and now, when Ahaziah threatens him, Elijah simply appeals to God’s protection.

B. God Demonstrates His Judgment on Those Who Refuse to Listen

Yet we all wonder “Why did God’s protection take this form? Surely idolatry doesn’t need to be so deadly!” Yet brothers and sisters, God had a serious point. He was sending a warning to Ahaziah, and that warning was this: “Ahaziah, I take idolatry seriously. Human life is important to me, but human worship is more important to me!” Ultimately, God has solemnly promised to judge by consuming fire every last person who will not listen to His warnings. In this case, He decided that these captains and their fifties had already been warned enough. They weren’t stupid. They had to have known about the history between their royal boss and Elijah the Tishbite.

Imagine someone in the American armed forces of today who didn’t know something of the history of Bill and Hillary Clinton. It’s hardly possible. Well, in the same way, these captains and their fifties knew that Ahab and now his son Ahaziah had fallen foul of Elijah (and thus of Yahweh) in the past, and furthermore that the prophet always won these encounters. Yet neither of these captains seems disposed to show any humility or even average respect. “Come down! Come down quickly!” That’s all they say.

You see, God is a consuming fire. God will judge those who refuse to listen to His warnings. He is not obligated to wait forever to impose His judgments; He can unleash them at any time. Elijah didn’t send this fire; God did, because He was vindicating Elijah as His messenger. Again, God is not always obligated to vindicate His servants like this — but the truth is that He will eventually pour His fiery wrath on those who refuse to listen.

C. God’s Wrath Will Not Always Fall on a Propitiatory Sacrifice!

Furthermore, we need to mentally go back to 1 Kings 18, where Elijah also prayed for fire from Heaven. Looking at that passage, we noted that the people deserved God’s judgment, but instead they received God’s blessing of rain. How did that happen? By God’s sovereign choice to pour out the fire of His wrath on a properly prepared propitiatory sacrifice. The fire of the Lord fell at that time not on the wicked people of Israel, but on the sacrifice. But this time, God’s patience has reached its limit. This time, no sacrifice takes the place of the guilty. This time, God’s wrath falls directly on those who deserve it.

Take heed! I beg you, take heed! If you are here tonight and you do not know Christ, recollect this incident. God snuffed out 102 lives because He insists on His prerogatives over against Baal and other false gods. Claim the protecting cover of Christ’s blood! Hide from the fire of God’s wrath under the shelter of Jesus Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice.

If you do know Christ today, if you have hidden under His blood for yourself, then take pity on the souls of your friends, loved ones, strangers who do not know Christ. They will be consumed by the fire of God’s wrath unless they repent and take cover. Warn them. Plead with them. Seek for opportunities to evangelize them. And above all, *pray for them!* God’s wrath is fierce and unrelenting, and it will fall someday on everyone who refuses to listen. Don’t let them

go unwarned. Don't let them go to the fire without your pleas, your prayers, your warnings! I say this to myself as much as to you: *who cares whether evangelizing makes you look dumb?* Far more than 102 lives are at stake here.

VI. The Warning Heeded, vv. 13-15

Yet, mercifully, the narrator has included a vignette showing us what it looks like to heed God's warning. The third captain paid attention to God's warning, which has been repeated now six times.

1. Moab's revolt
2. Ahaziah's injury
3. The word to Elijah
4. The word delivered to Ahaziah
5. The first unit burned up
6. The second unit burned up

God is a merciful God! He doesn't simply warn once and then drop the hammer. He warns over and over because He wants us to turn and repent!

In light of what had happened, this captain comes and kneels before Elijah. He bows down, not to worship Elijah but to show his respect for Almighty God.

A. God's Word Demands Submission, v. 13

This man who heeded the repeated warning shows us that God's word demands submission. He is willing to bow before God, to indicate his utter helplessness and utter dependence upon God. He wants to make it clear that he is not there to arrest Elijah, but rather to plead with him.

B. God Answers Prayer, v. 14

He asks that his life and the lives of his men be precious in the sight of Elijah. In other words, don't treat our lives as cheap! Don't burn us up too! Ultimately, he is pleading with God, and God answers prayers. God does regard human life as valuable. He made us what we are. He takes care of us. He has preserved the human race down to this day. But earthly human flourishing is not His highest goal. He is more interested in making us holy than in making us happy; He is more interested in vindicating Himself than in showing us a good time. Yet this man pleads with God to recognize his life as precious, while at the same time showing his submission to God.

Do you want God to value your life? Then you need to show that you value Him and His instructions. He will take care of your life if you will worship Him.

Why does God demand this? Because we were created to know and worship and love Him. We are incomplete without a close, loving relationship to God. Just as an orphan constantly feels the pain of missing his parents, so a rebellious human being constantly feels the pain of missing the God with Whom he was created to have fellowship. And so, when you truly pray, that is, when you talk to God with a trustful, submissive attitude (as this captain did), then He hears you and responds. I've said it before and I'll say it again: No one who truly prayed ever went to Hell.

This man truly prayed, and God heard him.

C. God Deals with Humans on His Own Terms, v. 15

Yet even then, the angel of the LORD made it clear that Elijah — and thus, by extension Yahweh — only deals with humans on God’s terms. Why couldn’t the Angel have told Elijah to go with the first captain? He certainly could have told him that. But then the larger point would have been lost, a point underscored with the lives of 102 men. That point is simply that God is free. He relates to us on His terms, not ours. You simply cannot compel God, arrest Him, harness Him and make Him go the direction you want. And God wanted to make that very clear to Ahaziah. The Angel of the LORD is merciful and gracious, and forgiving — but He is not tame.

Do you try to tame God? Do you make little bargains with Him? “God, if you do this, then I’ll do that”? Do you get angry when He doesn’t come through on His end of what you thought was your bargain with Him? Do you insist that He heal you, fix you, give you a boyfriend or a job or a toy or some other thing that you want? Do you insist that He sanctify you right now and take away those unwanted feelings of anger, or lust, or same-sex attraction, or any of a myriad of other sins and temptations? If so, then you are acting like the first two captains, not the third. You aren’t submitting to God on His terms. You are demanding that He cooperate with yours. On the authority of the word of God, I solemnly warn you that such a procedure is likely to end in fire.

VII. The Verbal Warning Repeated, v. 16

After all that, all the fireworks, Elijah finally comes to deliver his message in person. He doesn’t alter it. He simply gives it. Once more, the point is driven home: God will not allow anyone, and especially not those who are nominally part of His people, to seek salvation elsewhere. God insists that you and I worship Him alone. Those who refuse will be killed by their idolatry. How often have the books of Kings underlined the truth that God kills and makes alive, and that idols are powerless to save?

VIII. The Finality of God’s Word: Ahaziah Dies Childless, vv. 17-18

This ending almost feels anticlimactic. That’s it? Isn’t there any more payoff? Why tell us this whole story, and then simply add “And Ahaziah died”? The reason, of course, is that the warnings *are* the story. God’s power over life and death is the story. God’s exclusivist demands with regard to worship are the story. The point is not Ahaziah; the point is that God patiently warns us over and over and over to turn to Him, listen to Him, and worship Him exclusively. Those who heed the warnings are spared; those who insist on not listening will be destroyed. Our God is a consuming fire. Yes, in His mercy He has provided an atoning sacrifice for all those who avail themselves of it. Yes, in His love and pity He warns sinners of their fate — a trait we must imitate. But at the end of the day, it is Christ the mediator, Christ the Angel of the LORD who gave Himself for our sins, who also demands exclusive worship. He will not bargain with us. He will not overlook us seeking comfort, help, and refuge in idols. He will warn us not to do that — and if we neglect His warnings long enough, He will smite us with His overwhelming wrath. Brothers and sisters, get the idols out of your life. There is a God in the Presbyterian

Church, and you have no need to go to American materialism or social progressivism to find yourself some help. Don't resort to the idols of our age and place. There is a God right here among us, and He answers prayer. Call on Him; take refuge under the blood of His Son. He will hear you, and your life will be precious in His sight. Amen.