

6. God's Word Shows who the True God is

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[0 : 00] So, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 306 and the following page. I was tempted to call the sermon this evening, The Lord of the Flies Gets His Comeuppance, because that is what Beelzebub means.

He is the Lord of the Flies, or more rudely, the dung god. The Alzebub, the god of Ekron. Many of you will know the powerful story by William Golding, written in 1954, which is an allegory of evil, which is both inside human beings and outside of them.

A group of English public schoolboys are marooned on an island, and they soon degenerate into a terrific morass of evil, which comes identified with a pig's head on a stick in a clearing, The Lord of the Flies.

But I didn't call it that, although it was a catchy title, because The Lord of the Flies is only a bit clear. The most striking thing about him is that he is totally ineffective.

Like other idols, he cannot speak, he cannot hear, he cannot act. This is all about God and about his word through Elijah.

[1 : 27] That's why I'm calling it the word which shows who the true God is. Who is the true God? That's what this story raises. There's a quick word about the last two verses of 1 Kings 22.

Ahab has gone. In chapter, in verse 40, we read, Ahab slept with his fathers, and Ahaziah, his son, reigned in his place.

Ahab had involved himself in an ill-considered battle with the Syrians at Ramoth Gilead, the Golan Heights, which are well known nowadays from the various Israeli conflicts throughout the decades. And he almost caused the death of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. Jehoshaphat was a good man, a godly man, but unfortunately he was an utterly naive man who got himself caught up in tangles that a little foresight, a little thought would have avoided.

But Ahab has gone. Is it going to be better? Are things going to improve? You know how when one regime comes to an end, the question always is, are things going to improve?

[2 : 38] Well, look at verse 52. Very far from improving, if anything, they got worse. Ahaziah was an enthusiastic follower of everything that up to this point had caused Israel to sin.

Notice he walked in the way of his father. Ahab's weak capitulation to evil and to idolatry. He walked in the way of his mother, Jezebel, with her enthusiastic pushing of Baal.

The suggestion here surely is that Ahaziah was a fickle guy. Sometimes, like his dad, simply conniving at evil, other times enthusiastically pushing it.

And then, in the way of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom, who set up the golden calves in the city of Bethel and asked for them to be worshipped.

The golden calves, which were supposed to represent Yahweh, God of Israel. And notice, he did what was evil, and he provoked Yahweh.

[3 : 47] Verse 53. He provoked. He's flaunting and defiant. Why is this the case? It's because he clearly thinks that Yahweh is no problem.

He clearly does not believe that the Lord, who made heaven and earth, he does not believe that this is the true God before whom all other gods will worship and bow.

But notice, he provoked Yahweh, God of Israel, to anger. And there already is the ominous sign that Ahaziah's reign is going to be short-lived.

The other thing to notice is the story carries on without a break. There's no real division between one and two kings. And probably the reason they are divided into two books is because they were a lengthy amount of material, too much to fit into one scroll.

So it's probably something as simple as that. But the story carries on. And the story is about God and his word. After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel, reminding us that whatever else Ahab had been, he had been a fairly strong military leader, and things are going wrong.

[4 : 59] It's a story about God and his word. What happens when we defy that word? What happens when we set ourselves up as gods in our own little spheres?

It seems to me the story develops in three movements, three scenes. Verses 1-8, God hates idolatry. Then verses 9-15, God protects his messengers.

God hates idolatry. God protects his messengers. And then finally, verses 17-18, God fulfills his word. Now first of all then, God hates idolatry.

Now there is a perversity in this story. And indeed there's perversity in the whole story of 1 and 2 Kings, which cannot simply be explained by human sinfulness and human stupidity.

There's plenty of both. There's a lot of stupid behaviour, a lot of arrogant behaviour, a lot of downright silly behaviour, but that isn't the only way to explain it.

[6 : 04] Behind this idolatry lurks a figure who is actually not mentioned. And that figure is the serpent, the devil himself. We'll come back to that.

But what is idolatry? Idolatry, on the one hand, is fantasy. Let me read to you a few verses from Psalm 135. You don't need to turn them off.

I'll give you the reference. Psalm 135, verses 15-19. Let me read them to you. The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

They have mouths, but they do not speak. They have eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear. Nor is there any breath in their mouths.

Those who make them become like them. And so do all who trust in them. So idolatry is total stupidity, on the one hand.

[7 : 05] How foolish is it that humanity who is in the image of God, humanity who has this God-shaped blank in their hearts, humanity who has a sense of something greater and vaster beyond us, that we should make something that is lesser than us and bow down and worship it.

It's crazy, it's stupid, it's fantasy, is it not? But there's a darker side as well, which Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 10.

You can read that later as well. 1 Corinthians 10, 19 and following. Paul writes, An idol is not anything, which is what the psalm says. An idol is not anything in itself.

It's fantasy. It's living in an unreal world. But when pagans sacrifice, they offer to demons and not to God.

See, idolatry doesn't just open the door to unreality, it opens the door to Satan. Whenever Satan finds a vacuum, he'll be there to exploit it. So what's happening here?

[8 : 10] This is the serpent, isn't it, of Genesis 3, 15, setting out to destroy the royal line, setting out to destroy the descendant of the woman. Even the words of Genesis 3 are echoed.

Verse 4, and they are mentioned later on, You shall surely die. These are the words, the only of Genesis 3, which the serpent denies.

Now, you shall surely die is a Hebrew phrase, literally dying. You will die. Probably the best way to represent it would be the Americanism, you will die, and I mean die. That's probably the best way to put it.

In other words, there is no possible escape from this. So idolatry is both fantasy, and it's also devilry. And that's why it's so dangerous. Notice it's the same old idolatry.

Verse 2, Go inquire of Beelzebub, the god of Ekron. Now, we're given no reason why Ahaziah should have felt that this godlet was particularly skilled in curing his illness and in raising him from his bed.

[9 : 17] Commentators point out that Beelzebub is a corruption of Beelzebul, Beelzebul, Beelzebub, which means that Baal the prince. But surely the point is not the Zebub bit or the Zebul bit, whatever it is.

It is the Baal bit. He is simply following the old, the old and exposed and useless idolatry of Ahab. Baal had already shown himself totally incapable.

He couldn't bring rain. He couldn't withhold rain. He could not even in his own territory bring down fire from heaven. And Ekron. Ekron is a Philistine city near the coast, near the ancient way of the sea, which was a trade route between Egypt and the Euphrates civilizations.

And what do we know about Philistine gods? What do you read in Scripture about the gods of the Philistines? The other place in Scripture where the Philistine gods are mentioned is 1 Samuel 4 when the sacred Ark of the Covenant is placed in front of Dagon, the Philistine god. And what happens to Dagon? He is turned into Humpty Dumpty. He simply falls in pieces in front of the Ark. Philistine gods are no gods at all.

[10:37] What perversity is it that leads Ahaziah to turn to this useless and pointless God? You see, is this just a momentary lapse?

Well, 1152 shows it's not. He did what was evil. He followed all the ways of his parents and his ancestors. But isn't this so true?

Even in the church today, the last thing people will do is turn to the Lord. The church isn't going anywhere. What are we going to do? Well, let's try all kinds of new exciting things.

The one thing that many people never do is turn to the Lord. They turn to the various gods of Ekron whose impotence has been shown again and again. So you see, it's not just human stupidity. There's plenty of that. But there is the activity of Satan himself. And notice as well, the words of Ahaziah and the words of the Lord clash.

[11:42] Ahaziah is his mother's son. He sends messengers as she had done before the story we saw a few weeks ago in 1 Kings 19. Now, we're not given the details, but clearly what had happened is Ahaziah's messengers had met Elijah who had been sent to intercept them.

And such was his authority that they risked the royal anger to return to Ahaziah with the word of judgment. And notice the repeated phrase, Is it because there is no God in Israel?

Verse 3, verse 6, and verse 16. Now therefore, thus says Yahweh, you shall surely die. This is the big picture. The big picture begins in the Garden of Eden.

The battle between the serpent and the gods. Ahaziah realizes that Elijah is still around. Verse 7, What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?

You can be pretty certain when he was being brought up in the royal palace he would not hear any good things about Elijah. You can hardly imagine Ahab saying to him, by the way, this nice old prophet Elijah is just such a gentle soul.

[12:54] You ought to meet him sometime and have a few non-directive counseling sessions with him. He'll really cheer you up. Jezebel would probably have mentioned him if she mentioned him at all with venom and spite.

So he realized with horror it is Elijah the Tishbite. You see, he gets an answer but he doesn't get it from the god he asked. He asked the god of Ekron who is incapable of answering.

And why was the god of Ekron incapable of answering? Because the god of Ekron didn't exist.

Psalms 115 says, he had a mouth but couldn't speak. He had ears but couldn't hear.

So he gets his answer. So, that's the first thing in the story. The first movement. God hates idolatry.

And God hates idolatry because it turns people away from the light to the darkness.

It turns people away from reality to fantasy. It turns people away from himself to his great enemy.

Now, God protects his messengers. Here again, we have one of those stories that begin to make people get weak-kneed when they read them in the Old Testament.

[14:03] Even evangelical commentators get worried here and they talk of Elijah's vindictiveness.

They say, essentially, that Elijah had no right to say this but God, but since Elijah was actually a bit better proposition than Ahaziah, God simply went along with him.

And many use Luke 9, 54 and 55 in defense of this where Peter and John say, shall we call down fire from heaven on the Samaritans who had refused to receive Jesus into their towns.

But that's ignoring the fact that at a different time in salvation history. Jesus has come as Savior.

He's not yet come as Judge. Remember in Luke, and if they had read the whole Gospel of Luke rather than simply taking these verses out, they would remember that Jesus in his first public sermon preaching from Isaiah said he's come to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

He stopped there and shut the book because had he read on, he would have read the day of vengeance of our God. That hadn't yet come. And also, it's the same issue as at Carmel.

Is Yahweh the true God or is Baalzebub of Ekron the true God? It's not Elijah who sent the fire. It was Yahweh.

[15:27] As Ralph Davis says in an imitable way, let's quit beating up Elijah. Blame Yahweh. He did it. So we've got a problem. We don't have a problem with Elijah.

We have a problem with the Lord. He has, I almost certainly knew about the incident at Carmel. Possibly he was even present. And yet, he remains the fire.

He sends 50 armed men. I suppose you could say that's a welcoming party, but I suspect if you went to visit somewhere and 50 armed men turned up, you wouldn't feel tremendously welcome. Hardly, as I say, a sign of humility or a sign of willingness to listen. Now, the Lord doesn't always defend his servants in this way.

We saw that this morning, didn't we? Many Naboth's die. Many Naboth's still die. The point is, Ahaziah had defied the living God as Ahab had done.

[16:27] Ahab had been shown and Baal had been shown to be futile. And this other God now has to be shown to be futile. Because whichever God rears his head, Ahaziah has to be shown he's no good.

And there's also a kind of swagger. Oh man of God, come down quickly. My own reading of this is that man of God is a sarcastic, will be said in a sarcastic tone, come down quickly.

And there is an air here of swagger and of arrogance. But notice, it's not just Ahaziah as defines. It is God's word here.

If I am a man of God, says Elijah. Look at verse 10. If I am a man of God, then again in verse 12. In other words, you are using the word God, but you're not really meaning it.

That idea of God probably ought to have a capital, a small g. After all, Baal's above, the God of Ekron, is the God that their mates have been sent to.

[17:33] This God is real. So, Elijah is saying, if you believe that this is a real God and not just a three-letter word that you happen to like using, then you'll remember the story.

The fire that burned at the gates of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life. The fire that Moses confronted in the bush. The fire that came down at Sinai. And most recently, the fire that came down at Carmel and burned up the sacrifice.

So, God's word, judges, the unrepentant. But notice that God's word is also merciful because the third captain, the point about the third captain is he fears Yahweh more than he fears Ahaziah, whereas the others fear Ahaziah and what he can do.

So, God protects his messengers. As I say, not all God's messengers are protected in this way. Many brave Christians now, as well as in other generations, have given their lives for their faith and have not been rescued in this world.

And we know that. Nevertheless, God is demonstrating who he is. That really is the third movement. God fulfills his word. And this is really verses 16 and 17 run into each other.

[18:55] Thus says the Lord, because you have sent messengers to inquire of Beelzebub, the God of Ekron. And once again, the telling question, the key to the whole story, is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of his word?

I remember a few years ago, a bishop in the Church of England said at Lent. He was going to give up the Bible for Lent and going to read the Koran instead.

Now, there you have it. Is it because there is no God in Israel that you have to send elsewhere to inquire of his word? Now, notice the words here.

Elijah doesn't deal with perhapses and maybes. He doesn't do shally-shallying. Elijah says, you shall not come down from this bed. Once again, the ominous phrase, you shall surely die.

So God fulfills his word. Kings come and go. Already, judgment is working on Ahab's line as Ahaziah dies childless.

[20:03] Those of you who are here this morning may remember that Elijah had been told by God that the judgment would not come in his reign but in the reign of his sons.

It's already beginning and if you wondered why Ahab's sons were going to be condemned as well as Ahab, then I think this little incident of Ahaziah shows that they not only were inherited their dad's sins, they were contributing others of their own.

He's exceeded by his brother Jehoram, sometimes called Jehoram, who confusingly reigns at the same time as another Jehoram in Judah.

Those of you with sharp eyes may have looked ahead at chapter 3 and seen that it was in the 18th year of Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, the son of Ahab, became king over Israel.

And no doubt you're sitting wondering how on earth you can reconcile that with this. It was in the second year of his reign. If you didn't look ahead and see that then you can pretend you did.

[21 : 13] But what happens here is what so often happened in ancient Israel and in ancient Judah that the son often reigned as co-regent with his father.

So Jehoram, the Judean Jehoram was already on the throne before the Israelite one began. Don't get your Jehorams mixed up, it's not worth it.

And there are other Ahaziahs as well. It's not at all surprising there should be different kings with the same name. That's what's happening here. Already the word of Ahab, the line of Ahab is dying out.

What Yahweh says, Yahweh does. Look at verse 17 again. This is such an important verse. So he died according to the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken.

Notice that it is the word of the Lord. Remember once again what Ralph Davis says, Blame Yahweh. It's he who does the killing. It's he who carries out the sentence. But a key element in that is the word that Elijah had spoken.

[22 : 20] You see, the Lord's word is not collapsed into the prophet's word, but the prophet is a necessary channel for that word. And one of the things you discover as you read the Old Testament, particularly read a book like Jeremiah, is that simply to call someone a prophet doesn't mean they're a true prophet.

Sometime read through the book of Jeremiah. The word prophet is used several hundred times, almost always, to refer to false prophets. Simply because someone calls himself a prophet doesn't mean they're a true prophet.

Elijah is a true prophet and it's interesting, that's why Elijah is called man of God so often, rather than prophet, in order that we don't make any mistake as to who he is and where his words come from.

The prophet is the necessary agent. So you see, it cuts both ways. Ahaziah is condemned as Jehoram is going to be condemned as the whole line of Ahab is going to be condemned.

But God's name and God's honour remain. Because, as I said this morning, as long as Elijah is preaching, when Elijah is taken to heaven to look at next Sunday morning, immediately into his shoes steps Elisha who carries on that ministry and by the time Elisha comes to the end of his ministry, probably prophets like Amos and Isaiah are already beginning their ministry and right on to Isaiah and Jeremiah and all the others.

[23 : 49] So, what is this chapter about? It's not about the Lord of the flies. It's about the word of the Lord which decides our destiny.

Because, ultimately, this is part of the great story. His name isn't mentioned but behind this lurks the serpent. It's whether we follow the way of the serpent which the New Testament also calls the way of Cain, the way of unbelief, the way of defiance.

Or whether we walk humbly with our God as a later prophet, Micah, is to say. So, the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken, that word stands.

Ahaziah is only remembered if he's remembered at all because he takes part in this story. And our choice is the same as his. We can believe the word of the Lord as it comes to us in Scripture or we can reject it.

That's a choice all of us have to make. Let's pray. Our Father, there are many voices in the world which clamour for our attention.

[25 : 04] Some of them are good, some of them are bad, some of them are indifferent. But we need to have an authoritative word that will guide us through the tangles and perplexities of this world and into the world to come.

And so we pray that we will listen to your word, that we will walk in your ways and that like Elijah one day we will stand in your presence and see your glory.

We ask this in his name. Amen.