

This morning we continue our study of the stories in the Bible in which the OT prophet Elijah is an important character. What I am planning to do in the coming weeks is to preach on some of the passages beyond Elijah's time in which Elijah is mentioned. Next week we will consider the story in which Elijah is taken up into heaven, but there are a number of passages after that in Scripture that mention Elijah and so we will look at least some of those.

This morning we will hear God's word to us from this story concerning Ahaziah and Elijah. Ahaziah was a king in Israel. He was the son of Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel were a godless king and queen. They introduced the worship of the pagan God Baal into Israel. That was in defiance of the command of the true God – the God whom the Bible is about – who had commanded that his people not worship other gods. Ahaziah was catechized to worship Baal instead of the true God. He followed in the footsteps of his parents. This is one of those instances in which the sins of the parents have a deadly impact on their children.

I want to remind you of the larger biblical context of this story. I want to remind you of how it fits in the storyline of the Bible because it is intended to be understood in the light of the whole. It is about a king of Israel. It is about one of the evil kings of Israel. Israel was God's chosen people. God had chosen this people to receive the greatest possible blessing of being loved and blessed by God above all the other nations of the world. But God's choice came with a calling, as it always does. Israel was called to witness to the rest of the world by its godly life and testimony about her God and the blessedness of belonging to him. Israel was chosen by God to be the conduit through which he would make himself known to the rest of the world and bring salvation to them.

So Israel was a significant part of God's plan to bring the knowledge of God and his salvation to the rest of the world. She was part of God's plan that led to Jesus Christ and through him to the NT church which has the same calling to bring the knowledge of God and his salvation to the rest of the world. But the church comes after the life, death and resurrection of Christ and that always matters. We look at this passage as NT believers – people of God who have received the salvation that Jesus came to bring. We are looking back at an earlier time in the history of God's plan of salvation. Because it is about the same God and the same plan of salvation, it is relevant to us. But because it is about God's plan of salvation before the earthly ministry of Christ, we must take that into account in our interpretation and in our application.

So we have the story of an evil king who ruled over the people of God. The story tells us what Ahaziah did when he had a serious accident. He fell through the lattice in his upper chamber. Basically he fell out of his second story window. There is no interest in the story about how or why he fell. However it happened, he was seriously injured. It was serious enough that he did not know whether he would live or die. This was long before modern medicine and so a broken bone or a wound that could get infected could be life-threatening.

What he did in his hour of need showed him to be one of the evil kings of Israel. He sent messengers to "inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether [he would] recover from [his] sickness." He did not reach

out to the God who had chosen Israel to be his people. He reached out to a pagan god instead. He wanted to know whether he would live or whether he would die.

This is something that the God of the Bible will not tolerate. It was a sin for the **people of Ekron** to worship this Baal-zebul, but it was a much more serious matter for **a king in Israel** to look to this pagan god for help because God had chosen Israel to be his people. For Ahaziah to turn to a pagan god meant bypassing the God who had chosen Israel and had called them to be his kingdom on earth.

So God tasks Elijah to intercept the messengers who are on their way to Ekron. The God of Israel knows what is going on in his world. The God of Israel is hidden in the story, but at the same time he is the major presence and the major character in the story. He is offstage as it were, but he not absent and he is not distant. Nothing happens on earth of which he is not aware and so he knows that Ahaziah has bypassed him and has sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron.

God knows and he cares. This is an important part of how God reveals himself to us in the Bible. He knows what is going on, on the earth and he cares. He is above and beyond earth and its activities, but he is not isolated or uninvolved or unaware. Hebrews 4:13 says of this same God, "And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." We cannot hide from God. He knows all and he sees all and he evaluates all.

So the God of Israel tells Elijah to intercept Ahaziah's messengers and say to them, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebul, 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."

The Lord knew what Ahaziah was up to. The Lord cared about what Ahaziah was doing. And the Lord confronted him with a question. "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron?" This was a huge issue in Israel's story. Throughout the majority of her history she worshipped the gods of the nations and did not keep God's command to have no other gods besides him. God had chosen this people to be his people – to represent him on the earth before the other nations of the world – but she often refused to keep that first and fundamental command.

This story was meant to be read and pondered by the people of Israel after this time. This is not a news report. This is not the equivalent of a video clip. This story was remembered in the schools of the prophets and eventually it was written down to be the word of God to later generations of Israelites. Probably the book that we now know as 1 and 2 Kings was originally compiled to address the people of Israel after God had sent powerful empires to defeat them and take them out of the land of the promised land into exile in a foreign land. Probably the first recipients of these stories were Israelites who were living in exile and the stories were told to explain the reason that God had sent foreign invaders to conquer them, destroy their land and take them away as prisoners in a foreign land.

And no doubt part of the message of this story is, “Don’t be like Ahaziah.” This is part of the Bible’s message. Do not worship any other gods besides the God who reveals himself in the Bible. This is one of the great burdens of the message of the Bible. There is one God and we must worship and serve him only.

Now we are NT Christians. There may be some among us who are not Christians, but for the most part we are a gathering of those who have professed faith in Jesus together with our children. We are a gathering of the church of Jesus Christ. And we must take that into account in applying this story that is before us this morning.

We are not exactly like Ahaziah – although if you are not a Christian you are by definition a worshipper of gods that are not the God of the Bible. But as a whole – as a congregation, we are not a gathering of idol worshippers. The NT refers to us as saints. We are believers in Jesus. We are followers of Jesus. We are beloved children of the living God. Paul writes to the church of Ephesus and thus also to us, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” This is how God addresses us in the NT. We are not Ahaziah. We are not apostate Israel. The Bible does not address us as the NT church as a gathering of idolaters.

That does not mean that this passage is irrelevant for us. It does not mean that it applies only to those who do not believe in Jesus and submit to him as Lord. We get direction on how to apply this verse to our lives by a verse like 1 John 5:21 which says, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Or 1 Corinthians 10:14, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” A Christian is not an idolater. But we are called to flee from idolatry.

That means that we are not yet free from worshipping other gods. If we are believers we are worshippers of the true God. The true God is our God and we worship and serve him. But we are not yet free from worshipping idols. An idol is anything in our life that is more important than God. An idol is anything or anyone in our life that we love more than God or trust more than God. And so we must look at this story about Ahaziah and ask whether his example exposes idolatry in our hearts and lives. Ahaziah bypassed God and turned to Baal-zebub instead to answer the question of whether he would recover from his injuries after falling from his second story window.

How might we do something like that? I think that we might do something like that in our attitude towards modern medicine. If we are Christians we will not completely bypass God when it comes to our health as Ahaziah did. If we do completely bypass God, we are not even Christians. But it is possible for us to trust in medicine more than we should and trust God less than we should when it comes to our health. There is nothing wrong, of course, with using modern medicine and trusting it appropriately. But this passage calls us to consider if there is something of Ahaziah in us in that we perhaps trust modern medicine more than we trust God when it comes to our health.

The right way is to use modern medicine, but trust God for the outcome. God has given us modern medicine and quite often he uses it to heal us. Having God as our only God in this area means that we entrust our health

to the Lord while using whatever means he has given us to maintain our health and seek healing when we are sick.

So let's say that we get a cancer diagnosis. What do we want to know from the doctor in the appointment when we will hear the results of the biopsy or other test results? We want to know exactly what Ahaziah wanted to know. Shall I recover from this sickness? How bad is it? What is the outlook? We can ask this question in an idolatrous way or we can ask it in a way that shows that our greatest trust is in God.

The difference is how we are thinking about God at that moment. Thoughts of God can be far away and the only thing that we care about is what medicine is able to do for us, or thoughts of God can be "front and center" and we can have a spirit of trust that God will take care of us whether we live or whether we die. Trusting God does not mean trusting him to make us better, because God does not promise to do that. But God does promise to care for us and bless us regardless of the outcome and that must be our focus.

Now because we are not yet completely delivered from our sins, we will not be trusting God perfectly. John and Paul warn us to flee from idolatry because we are not yet free from idolatry. So our goal as Christians must be to grow in trusting God and turn away from wrongly trusting what is not God. And as we engage in that struggle we do so as people who believe in Jesus and so this is not a matter of trying to get God to be pleased with us. We do want to please God, but God is already pleased with us in Christ and we must never forget that as we struggle to do what he calls us to do in whatever part of his word.

We all struggle with idolatry in one way or another or in many different ways. Anything that we love more than God or trust more than God is idolatry. But if our trust is in Christ we must remember what the Bible says about us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." When God looks at us, he sees Christ's righteousness. That means that he accepts us and our efforts as perfect even though neither we nor our efforts are perfect. As we try to implement God's call on our lives from any passage, we do so as those in whom God is well pleased. We are beloved. God delights in us. He looks upon us as children in whom he takes pleasure.

So hear the word of the Lord calling you to consider the example of Ahaziah. Examine your heart and your attitudes for anything that is more important to you than God is or in which you trust more than you trust God. God, from this passage, calls you to fight against idols in your life. We might make an idol of modern medicine by trusting it more than we trust God, but we may also make idols of many other things. Ourselves. Money. Certain people. Technology. And many other things.

But as you engage in that fight and that struggle do not do so weighed down by guilt and failure and shame. Engage in that fight with joy in your hearts knowing that your Father loves you for Jesus' sake. He is not frowning because of your failures. You are embraced in love because your sins have been all forgiven and God

looks upon you as if you have obeyed him perfectly every moment of your life, because that is what Jesus did and his perfect obedience has been given to you.

But God was not pleased with Ahaziah. This story calls us away from idolatry. But it also impresses upon us the judgment of God against idolaters. Elijah was to tell Ahaziah's messengers that Ahaziah would surely die. The latter part of the chapter tells the story of Ahaziah sending soldiers to bring Elijah to see him.

Ahaziah's messengers tell Ahaziah what Elijah had told them. Ahaziah asks what the person looked like who had given them that message from the Lord. By their description, Ahaziah concludes that the bearer of the word of the Lord was "Elijah the Tishbite." And he sends a captain with fifty soldiers under him to bring Elijah back to him.

We don't know what exactly Ahaziah was planning to say to Elijah, but it is clear that it was not to repent and submit to the God of Elijah. The king sends 50 soldiers. It is a show of force. And he does not humbly ask Elijah to come. He commands. He intends to apprehend Elijah. When Elijah is commanded to come down, he says, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." And we read, "Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

So Ahaziah sends another captain with his fifty men. Ahaziah asserts his authority. The message to Elijah was "O man of God, this is the king's order, 'Come down quickly.'" Fire again comes down from heaven and the captain and his fifty are consumed.

Ahaziah tries again. Clearly he is not getting the message. But that captain that he sends has gotten the message and so he asks that his life and the lives of his men might be spared, and no fire comes down from heaven. And the angel of the Lord tells Elijah to accompany the soldiers to see the king. But the message has not changed. Verse 16, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, 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 have gone up, but you shall surely die.'"

What are we to make of this story? Clearly, God does not tolerate being ordered around by some king. Ahaziah thought that he could demand that Elijah appear before him. Elijah was God's messenger. As a result of Ahaziah's attitude which is reflected in the first two groups of soldiers, 100 soldiers are consumed with fire and Ahaziah himself dies of his injuries.

This is telling us something about God. Those who defy God and do not recognize his existence and his authority get consumed. The God of the Bible is a God who consumes his enemies. Certainly the Bible emphasizes God's love and mercy and grace, but it also has much to say about God as one who destroys those who refuse his mercy and continue to defy him. The whole story could have been so different if Ahaziah had inquired of the Lord rather than bypassing the Lord and sending messengers to Baal-zebub instead. The question that God asks of Ahaziah makes it clear that the outcome of this story would have been so different

had Ahaziah turn to the Lord instead of Baal. “Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?” The God of Israel was there ready to be inquired of. God’s revelation of himself to Israel made it clear that God shows mercy to those who come to him. That is highlighted in this story by the mercy that God showed to the third captain who asked for God’s mercy.

The readiness of God to show mercy to those who come to him in their need is part of the message of this story. But the dramatic part is what happens to those who defy God and fail to humble themselves to God’s authority over them. It is fire from heaven.

God often uses the imagery of fire to convey the idea of his destruction of his enemies. Psalm 97:3-4 says, “Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.”

This is how God reveals himself to us. Like he did to the captain who pleaded for mercy, the Lord is more than ready to show mercy to those who humble themselves before him, but in this passage God is also revealing himself to us as the God who consumes those who defy him – he consumes his enemies.

This truth about God is also revealed through what the Bible teaches about the return of Jesus Christ at the end of the world. In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 Paul speaks of the time “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

This is a very important part of how God reveals himself to us in his word. There are four ways that we must respond to this truth. First it is clearly a warning for those who defy God. We are to read a passage like this and if we are not submitting to God and following him, this is a call to repentance. Think of the message of John the Baptist. “[F]lee from the wrath to come.” Of Jesus he said, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Flee the wrath to come by turning to Christ and receiving salvation in him which includes submission to him.

Second, if we are believing in Jesus, this is what we are saved from. This is what Jesus endured in our place. The fire of God’s wrath fell on him instead of us. And so for believers we must be thankful for what we are saved from and for what Jesus endured for us.

Third, even if we are believers we must fear the Lord. Remember what the book of Hebrews says to believers in chapter 12:28-29, “[L]et us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” When we believe in Jesus we are accepted as righteous by God and secure in his love, but at the same time we may not forget the awesome majesty of God so that we fail to worship him with reverence and awe. In Christ we are loved and accepted. But the proper attitude before God is a mixture of confidence in

his love and reverence at his majestic glory. It is to God's people that Hebrews says, "[O]ur God is a consuming fire."

And finally we as God's people are called to rejoice in the fact that God will destroy his enemies. Our first desire must be for their salvation. But it is also clear from the Bible that one aspect of true joy in the Lord is joy in the victory that he has won over his enemies and that includes celebration of the consummation of that victory that is to come. Psalm 97, which I quoted earlier where it speaks of "Fire [going] before [God] and burning up his adversaries all around," ends by saying, "Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name." Truly rejoicing in the Lord includes rejoicing in all that he reveals about himself and all that he does. Verse 8 of Psalm 97 says, "Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O LORD."

Certainly we are to rejoice in God's salvation, and we are to seek the salvation of as many people as we possibly can. But we may not forget that God's program for the world includes both salvation and judgment. And God, in the Bible, is not in any way hesitant to reveal his coming destruction of his enemies as reason for joy and reason for worship.

In Revelation 19:1-2 we read of the "loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.'"

So when we read in our text of fire from heaven consuming the enemies of God, one of the responses that the word of God calls for is for us to sing, "Hallelujah! Salvation and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just."