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The Goodness and Severity of God

II Kings 1:1-18

Intro: As we noted in our last study, II Kings is not a separate book but a continuation of I Kings. They are two halves of the same historical document. The Greek translation of the OT divided the book of Kings into two books (probably because of its length) and this division continues in our English translations. Despite this artificial division, each book carries its own distinct emphasis while following a similar pattern that moves from an outlook that's generally positive to one that is downright terrifying. I Kings begins with the blessing and wisdom of Solomon's reign and ends with the folly of his descendants in the southern kingdom of Judah and the paganism of the kings in the northern kingdom of Israel. II Kings similarly begins with a moment of grace under the ministry of Elisha, through whom God reveals the power He so desired to pour out upon Israel. But, when that grace is ultimately rejected, the process of judgment commences until God consigns His people to the tender mercies of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires.

It would be difficult to begin a study in II Kings without an extensive review of what came before in I Kings but since we have already had our extensive review, we can jump right in. Any competent Bible teacher could rightly develop the exposition of this book under a number of various themes or viewpoints but, since the OT historical narrative has been called a declaration from God about God, we'll focus our attention on how God has revealed Himself in the text

1 – So, the book opens on a positive note: Ahab is dead. You might think it unkind to speak ill of the dead but just remember that Ahab was the pipeline that allowed pagan sewage to swamp Israel; he was the one who tolerated injustice (Naboth) and who hated God's word. But, Ahab always eventually die and that's the good news. The bad news is that he was succeeded by his son Ahaziah or Ahab Jr. He is a chip off the old dead block.

There is more bad news from the fallout of Ahab's death. It seems the nation of Moab took advantage of Ahaziah's inexperience as king and broke the bonds of servitude that had chained them to Israel since the reign of David. While the reign of Ahab had been a spiritual disaster for Israel, it

was still a time of political security and economic prosperity. This rebellion of Moab in the days of Ahaziah is significant of the decline of Israel's power and the first, small inklings of God's judgment against them. There will be a concerted effort by Ahaziah's successor to bring Moab back under Israelite domination but it will not succeed. The Lord is in charge of the nations of the earth and His decrees determine history and cannot be altered. When the Lord isn't allowed to rule - He overrules.

2-8 – We don't know how it happened, just that it happened – the king fell from the second floor after some lattice work gave way. Things like this happen to kings and commoners alike. Apparently, his injuries were serious enough that his question implies he was uncertain of any recovery. There's no need to debate the origin of this particular god; the Baal- prefix tells us the Ahaziah walks in the same religious rut as his father. He honestly believes his hope for the future squats in a temple some 45 miles away in Philistia. Curiously, Ahaziah only seeks a prognosis from the Baal's priests, a complete healing never seems to have crossed his mind. I guess pagan gods have their limitations.

But, there's one small problem... The problem is it appears that the king's messengers never even make it out of the city! The Angel of the Lord bends Elijah's ear and sends him on another intercept mission, much like when He sent Elijah to go rain on Ahab's parade as the king was just beginning to enjoy his new vineyard. God doesn't play around when apostasy is in play. We have Ahaziah's messengers on one hand and God's messenger on the other sent to give them a message they weren't looking for (**3b**). Elijah's message is both a question and a judgment. There is no doubt that Ahaziah believed that Yahweh existed but he lived as if there was no God in Israel. He was a practical atheist – his knowledge of the truth didn't affect his belief or his actions.

Oddly enough and against royal orders, the king's messengers turn on their heels and immediately report back to Ahaziah. The king knows they have aborted their royal mission and demands to know why. "We were accosted by a stranger who ordered us to return and deliver this message." They obey his orders: the stranger's authority trumped the king's authority! Ahaziah asks for a description of the culprit and upon hearing it, he immediately knew it was Elijah, probably with a mix of despair and rage. This was not the prognosis he was hoping to receive. Yahweh's words, "you

shall surely die” were phrased as a medical diagnosis. The implication was that Ahaziah’s condition was both fatal and irreversible. Since the king didn’t seek help from a real God, he will get no real help. Instead, this will be an occasion for the real God to send a message of judgment to Ahaziah

What do we see so far in this story? First we notice an intolerant God. Here’s a God who is unwilling to allow His rebellious king continue in his rebellion unchecked and unwarned, despite him being in pain. Modern purveyors of the feel-good gospel would be aghast at the mere suggestion of such an insensitive and upsetting divine intrusion. How can a holy and loving God sentence a man to death for simply exercising his religious preferences in the most critical hour of his life? God is not the democratic, live-and-let-live kind of god that many in our society seem to crave. They would much prefer the mythological gods of the ancient Near East that were permissive and never demanded exclusive loyalty. But, the 1st commandment is 1st for a reason: the God of the OT won’t accept any lesser substitutes and it is any better in the NT. There we see Jesus going around insisting we must smash our idols if we would be His disciples ([Mk 10:21-22](#)). He is as obnoxious to modern sensibilities as Yahweh. Who does He think He is?

We also see an entrenched idolatry. Ahaziah’s seeking Baal wasn’t a knee-jerk reaction in a moment of weakness; it was just a display of the consistency of his faith. Baal was always his deity of choice; he’s had no place for Yahweh. His idolatry was due to preference, not to ignorance or weakness. And yet, we can see that it was a foolish idolatry. For the believer, this is a sad scene. Here is the king, most likely at his life’s end, and in this desperate moment, he seeks the counsel of a false god. The moment is so crucial, yet the action is so foolish. The closeness of death does not necessarily produce good sense. Death is no time to playing with dead-end religious options. We need to draw close to the One who has the words of eternal life ([Jn 6:68](#)). Ahaziah is about to step off into the unknown with nothing but Baal – which *is* nothing!

Finally, we see a kind severity in this section. There’s no missing the severity: Yahweh’s anger glows white hot, His disdain for Ahaziah’s idolatry oozes out of His question (3) and His judgment is unsparing (4). Yahweh’s words are repeated 3 times, to emphasize the central concern of the story. Ahaziah’s sending to Philistia implies Israel has no God; when he appeals to

Baal-Zebub he implies that Yahweh is irrelevant or inadequate. Is this not the essence of all our idolatry? When problems arise and our first recourse is to try to figure it out or work it out on our own or with other helps or supports, are we not confessing the inadequacy or insufficiency of God to handle our dilemma? If I look to other things (better job, more hours, folks, govt, powerball) before seeking God, who am I trusting in? The king was clearly trusting in the wrong thing and God sent Elijah to nail him in his tracks.

But, if Yahweh is severe, He is also merciful. His rude interruption of Ahaziah's mission was also a last opportunity, if the king would only see it. God has told him something that very few people ever know: that his death was imminent and he had time to repent and prepare to meet his God. Yahweh didn't allow Ahaziah's idolatry to proceed in peace. He invaded the royal personal space and rubbed the king's nose in the 1st commandment. This is our uncomfortable God – He is furious, not tolerant; holy, not reassuring; loving, not nice. But there is love in His fury. He won't let you walk down a path of idolatry or rebellion easily; His mercy litters the way with roadblocks, many of which are painful. This is a marvelous wonder seeing that He detests our idols so much.

9-12 – This section causes a few modern commentators much grief and hand-wringing. Their opinions concerning Elijah's actions range from being morally pointless, to preposterous and even inhumane. I will admit that reading of 102 individuals being reduced to their carbon footprint is a little disconcerting but morally pointless? Really?

Let's start with the blame. Why did Elijah do this? He didn't! These 2 captains came strolling onto the scene, each with his brand of arrogance. The 1st emphasized royal authority (the king has said...); the 2nd demand speed (Come down quickly). In each case, they called Elijah a man of God and Elijah replies to each the same way, "If I am a man of God..." What he is implying is that they are using the term without really knowing what it means. Elijah is informing them that if he is a man of God than wherever he is, God is likely to be acting. This is what Elijah is calling for. When he says, "let fire come down from heaven..." he means, "Let Yahweh send it!" The fact that fire fell means God answered Elijah's call affirmatively. If Elijah's request had been morally pointless, etc. then God would not have honored it. But He did so we can stop beating up on Elijah – blame Yahweh, He did

it!

Let's consider the intent of the captains. What was Ahaziah's purpose in sending 2 military contingents to retrieve an unarmed prophet? Maybe he desired a personal consultation with Elijah. Do you send a 50-man posse to escort a consultant? This was no honor guard; this was an open declaration of hostilities. Ahaziah planned to silence the Word of God through Elijah by eliminating Elijah, most likely at the hands of these soldiers. "He was shot trying to escape – with 30 arrows." The king wasn't inviting Elijah to dinner, unless it was to be his last. Here's an undefended prophet being accosted by royal military might. The king intends to dispose of Elijah once and for all. It was no more possible for Elijah to bring fire down from heaven than for these captains to do it. God alone could send the fire and He is just and good; He wouldn't have destroyed these men if there hadn't been sufficient cause to do so.

What function did the fire serve? What was God's purpose in sending His judgment in this way? Do you remember Elijah's God-contest on Mt Carmel (**I K 18**)? Fire was the burning issue of the day: the God who answered by fire would show Himself to be the real God. The fire was the proof. Fire serves the same function in our text, although it shouldn't have been necessary. The Mt. Carmel contest was a few years in the past but wasn't done in secret. It was a public, prime time affair that scared the dickens out of everyone who witnessed it and they couldn't stop talking about it. The contest established the undeniable point: Yahweh is the real God; Baal is just an imaginary poser.

But Ahaziah didn't get the point! When he is in dire need of health care, he appeals to Baal – the loser! What do you do with someone who is so dense they can't grasp what fire from heaven means? You send more fire! The point is still the same: Yahweh is the only God. But, the fire is not only demonstrative (as on Carmel); it's also destructive (crispy military critters). The 1st commandment really matters to Yahweh and Ahaziah still doesn't get it.

The fire also functions as protection. It was Yahweh's means of defending the bearer of His word, His undefended prophet. God doesn't always work miraculously to provide such protection. Even in Elijah's own time there were many faithful prophets that were victims of Jezebel's religious

extermination programs. But here, Elijah is protected from Ahaziah's evil schemes. The significance of this is seen in what it represents. Ahaziah stands in the place of any throne, ruler or government that tries to stifle God's Word or silence His witnesses. This story testifies that no king or tyrant will ever be able to totally extinguish the witness of God's word in this world. They have tried and the history of the church is awash in the blood of its martyrs but the believer's continued ability to stand in the face of persecution lies in knowing that God's Word will have free course and no power in this world can ever stop it!

13-15 – Now here's a guy who learns from the mistakes of others! This captain seems to have been aware of what was happening around that little hill. Imagine the look on his face when his commander walks into the barracks and says, "Hey, I need you to take 50 men..." This guy doesn't spout the same arrogance as the first 2 captains. He approached Elijah differently. He was different in his posture (on knees), in his purpose (plea for grace) and in his petition (value our lives). The man was clearly terrified – he knew he was a hair's breadth away from destruction, as evidenced by the scorched earth around him. He knelt, he pled, he trembled – and he lived!

His response stands in stark opposition to those of his former brothers-in-arms, that much is clear. But, could it be that the scene has a deeper meaning, that the author wanted us to have a broader understanding of the implications here? Do we not find in this 3rd captain's plea a model for Israel's own response to Yahweh's wrath? Israel's path to restoration is blatantly on display. Some may disagree with this, citing that the motives should be more positive, that we shouldn't be driven to repentance by something as negative as the terror that possessed this captain. Yet, this captain is walking down the hill alive with Elijah and he knows these objections are simply hogwash. There's nothing wrong with terror as long as it becomes a saving terror. Better to be trembling and alive than just a flash in the pan.

In the end, it wasn't that God didn't want Elijah to go to King Ahaziah; it was that the king, his captains and soldiers all acted as if there were no God in Israel. When the request was made wisely and humbly, Elijah went. Again, we don't know exactly why Ahaziah wanted Elijah arrested. It could be that he wanted Elijah to reverse his word of judgment or use force to compel him

to do it. Maybe he just wanted to vent his rage on this prophet who had troubled him and his father for so long. Maybe he wanted to make an example of Elijah to discourage any other prophets from speaking boldly against the king of Israel. However evil his intentions, God assured Elijah he had nothing to fear.

16-18 – In the end, there was no consultations, no threats, no interviews. Elijah stood eye-to-eye with Ahaziah and simply declared the very same word the king had already heard and rejected. That word ended with, “You shall surely die” and the very next words tell us that that’s exactly what happened. The writer’s comment is short and sweet and to the point. Its almost as if he’s saying, “What did you expect? When Yahweh speaks, it comes to pass.”

This is a major theme of I & II Kings – the fulfillment of Yahweh’s Word. This is just another example of it. What Yahweh says, He does. He is the God who delivers on His threats (17a).

But this principle cuts both ways. The implications of our text is that if God so certainly fulfills His threats then He will just as certainly fulfill His promises. What God declares can be counted on – that’s the point! His assurances are as reliable as His judgments. We need to know this, and believe this, when we read **Jn 6:37**, “All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” Or **Jn 14:3**, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” Or **Rom 8:28, 38-39; Phil 1:6, 4:19; Eph 3:20**...the list goes on and on.

King Ahaziah experienced one side of the certainty of God’s Word but that sure word can shield you just as well as it can shatter you; it can support you just as easily as it can smash you. The only question is which would you prefer? Ahaziah had the clear word of God from Elijah; the clear mercies of God in this last opportunity to repent; the clear model to follow in the example of the 3rd captain and yet, he persisted in his rebellion. The 3rd captain humbled himself, sought for grace, pleaded for mercy and lived. Ahaziah rebuffed God’s word, rejected God’s mercy and refused to repent – and he died according to the word of the Lord...

The author tidies up Ahaziah’s short but miserable reign with a familiar formula. But aside from that short blurb about Moab in v1, this story in ch1 is

the only incident reported from his tenure as king. Oddly enough, the author doesn't tell us how Ahaziah reigned; he only tells us how he died. Thus, the short record of Ahaziah's reign is haunting. In the supreme need of his life he did not seek the real God - that's all we know about him and what we know about him is both sad and foolish. But again, this story is not really about Ahaziah, it's about God; the real God. This is the God you need to deal with. You can do what you want with this story: rebuff it, reject it, refuse it. But regardless of which you choose, you will one day face the God of whom this story speaks. My advice: seek Him now and find grace! 😊