

“Ahaziah: The Fire from Heaven King”

Who's the Boss? – A series on the Kings

2 Kings 1

Introduction: Take your Bible turn to 2 Kings 1, 2 Kings chapter 1.

News moved much slower just 100 years ago. The year was 1912 and Woodrow Wilson had just been elected as the President of the United States. Shortly after his election he went to visit his elderly aunt. He hadn't seen her in a long time and so naturally one of her first questions was, “Well, Woodrow, what have you been doing lately?” To which, after pausing for a moment, he replied, “Auntie, I've just been elected president.” In a rather surprised tone his aunt replied, “Oh? Of what?” To which Woodrow quickly replied, “Of the United States of America. At these words she bristled and snorted out, “Oh, don't be silly.”

It seems amazing that President Wilson's aunt could be so unaware of something so major, but yet she was. And so is the case for us as 21st Century Christians living in a modernized and sophisticated society. Our text this morning is filled with idolatry, and this is a topic we think very little of today. Sure it is what pagans living in third world countries do, but idols play almost no role in our lives, or so we think. We might be mildly aware of the tendency of our hearts to make idols out of money or pleasure or a cultural icon, but we still don't really think that we are all that prone to idolatry. But maybe we are. What if, like Woodrow Wilson's aunt, we were painfully unaware of something so major?

As we come to 2 Kings 1 we find a man who led God's people in idolatrous ways because his own heart was dripping with idolatrous lusts. This is nothing new for us. We have seen this throughout our study of the Kings of Israel, but this account will provide for us some poignant lessons about idolatry. We most recently considered one of the kings of Judah by the name of Jehoshaphat. Our passage this morning tells us about the life and the very short reign of a king of Israel who reigned during the time of Jehoshaphat by the name of Ahaziah. Ahaziah was the son of Ahab and Jezebel, the wicked duo that led Israel into the depths of idolatry like never before. You will remember that the great wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel was met with great revelation by God to prove that He was indeed the one and only God. The Prophet Elijah's ministry was marked by miraculous works that put God on display to this idolatrous people. They had ample witness of the one true God, and yet Ahab and Jezebel perpetuated Baal worship to its grossest extent. And then along comes their son at the end of 1 Kings and the beginning of 2 Kings. If you have your Bible let's start reading in 1 Kings 22 at verse 51. *Read 1 Kings 22:51-2 Kings 1:18.*

Ahaziah was an idolatrous king who had a short reign and a disastrous end. His life puts on display however the nature of idolatry and the pull in mankind's heart to worship an idol.

I. Idolatry is an Appealing Option – vs. 1-2

- a. In verses 1-3 we see that idolatry is an appealing option. Things are not going well for Ahaziah. Other than being made the king, he is in rough shape from the very outset. His father has died, which actually from the perspective of Yahweh worshipers this is good news not bad news but for Ahaziah we will consider it bad news, and also Moab has rebelled against him and he has also fallen through a faulty window screen in his palace and is badly injured to the point where he doesn't know if he will live or die. It is at this point where we see the DNA of a man's spiritual beliefs. What does he believe about God and what does he believe about life and death?

Well, put him in a situation where things are this bad and you will find out. And what we find with Ahaziah is that he is dyed in the wool Baal worshiper. He is an idolater. What we see in this is that idolatry is really an appealing option for Ahaziah, and I will argue for you and for me as well. Consider three reasons why idolatry is so appealing to the human heart.

- b. Because it is natural
 - i. It is appealing because it is natural. In Ahaziah's case, this rampant idolatry was all that he knew. It was the most natural thing in the world to Ahaziah to consult Baal when he was in need of an answer. It was like putting on his sandals or tightening his belt. It's just what he did. We know this from the description he received at the end of 1 Kings. It says there that he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord to the extent that he did everything those who went before him did. This was the inclination of his life. It was away from Yahweh God and toward false gods, and in particular Baal.
 - ii. It is especially interesting to note that the god he pursued and sought after in the normal course of life is the one that he relied upon in the crises of life. He sought Baal in the routine and so he naturally went to Baal when the going got rough. And, so as he lays there on his sick bed wondering whether he will live or die, who does he call? Not Yahweh, but Baal because it has been Baal that he has called upon all the way up to this point.
 - iii. We would be remiss if we just stood back and cast stones at Ahaziah as though his life of idolatrous worship was some foreign aberration in the human condition. It's not. This picture of idolatry that flows so freely out of Ahaziah's heart is an accurate portrayal of the natural human condition. This is what we are and this is what we do. Ever since the Garden of Eden we have been on the run from the one true God. He made us and to Him we are accountable. He placed us in His created world with clear instructions and with a right relationship with Him, and yet we rebelled and went our own way. We, the human race as represented in Adam and Eve, disbelieved God and disregarded His authority and did our own thing and from that moment on our hearts have been given to idolatry. It has been our natural course. And therefore idolatry is a very appealing course for our heart because apart from the intervening grace of God it is the course that we know the best.
- c. Because it is normal
 - i. Idolatry is also an appealing option because it is normal. In Ahaziah's case, he was surrounded by it as he grew up in the royal palace. I mean, his dad was Ahab and his mother was Jezebel – enough said! The chief idolaters of Israel's history were this man's parents, so normalcy in his life was infused with idolatry. So much so that as the text says, he walked in all the ways of his dad and his mom and of Jeroboam, who was the first great idolatrous king of the ten northern tribes. He did not falter one iota from the way that was normal for the kings of Israel at the time. Far be it from him to think on his own and be any different than anyone else. Idolatry was an appealing option for Ahaziah because idolatry was normal.
 - ii. This is what he did because this is what everyone else around him did. It was the popular option and it is no different for us. Idolatry is the popular option today. We may not have the graven image and the multiple shrines, but we most certainly have the idolatrous hearts abounding in our lives as the normal option. The human race, whether sophisticated and westernized or backwards and uncivilized, makes idolatry its status quo. Anything other than seeking after and heeding the one true God of Heaven. Anything other than listening to His commands, heeding His Word, or seeking His face. Any option other than the God of the Bible is the right option in our sin-saturated human race. This makes idolatry appealing. Everyone else is doing it!

d. Because it is neutral

- i. But it is also an appealing option because it is neutral. And this really is the core reason why idolatry is so appealing of an option. It is in and of itself a neutral source of power that we can tap into for our own purposes. An idol of our heart makes no demands of our time or of our allegiance or of our obedience. An idol is happy being consulted every so often or worshiped here and there. An idol doesn't raise a fuss or cry foul when you bow down at the altar of another. An idol is content to be one among many. It is a neutral option rather than an authoritative one. And this hits at the heart of why we clamor after idols. We long for them to do for us what we need them to do for us, but we know that they do not make any demands upon us to control us or to command us. In that sense, an idol is neutral, and therefore very appealing. This neutral power source is appealing because we have been on a mission since the Garden of Eden to get out from under the power and authority of the one true God. This is what was wrapped up in Eve taking the fruit and penetrating its skin with her teeth. She thought that this moment of partaking of the previously forbidden would instantly raise her to the height and stature of God. Autonomy from God was the promise and equality with God was the hope. Then Adam saw that Eve didn't immediately die and so he took the fruit and ate of it too because he wasn't going to miss out on the promised independence and power. And ever since then, ever since through that one man, Adam, sin entered the human race, and the human race has ever been on a pursuit of autonomy from God. This is what idolatry is all about – autonomy from God. We want independence. We want to run our own life. We want to do our own thing our own way. We want to answer to no one. And yet in running our own life we still find that we need some things. We are not self-sufficient and so therefore we cannot be truly independent, can we? And so we who desire independence from God find ourselves in need. What are we to do? Well, what did Ahaziah do? He was a man in desperate need. He stubbornly and selfishly thought too highly of himself and lived his life in independence, or shall I say rebellion, against the God of Heaven. But this autonomy from the true God produced in Ahaziah a deep need. And so he sought to fill that void with idols – most specifically with Baal.
- ii. Consider what he is doing in this chapter alone. He has fallen and he literally can't get up. Laying on his sick bed he needs answers. And so, he naturally sends messengers to seek out Baal-Zebub the god of Ekron. This god in Ekron was one of the many different Baals that dotted the landscape of the pagan worship of Ahaziah's day. There is meaning in the name "Zebub", but honestly there is no way to know for sure what it meant in Ahaziah's day. What is important to know is that Ahaziah sought after Baal. That is the bottom line. He went after the god of his life. This is what he always did – he went after Baal. What we see in Ahaziah's idolatry is from the same playbook as the Garden of Eden. It is a grab for autonomy from the one true God. It is a grasping after control over a situation through a neutral source of power while disregarding the only true source of power.
- iii. To make this clear look at what God says to Elijah in verse 3. He tells him to go and confront the messengers sent from Ahaziah and say to them, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?" Do you see what God is saying through these words of confrontation? At the heart of Ahaziah's idolatry is a complete disregard for the preeminent existence of Yahweh God. By seeking after Baal-zebub Ahaziah is essentially saying that he doesn't care that Yahweh God exists and he doesn't care to search out his answer. Ahaziah is on a mission to disregard God, which means that he will have a vacuum in his life which will send him on a

mission to find what he needs from something other than God. This is the heart of idolatry. A disregard for the one true God and a seeking after something that God should provide for us from a replacement for God. This is idolatry. But why doesn't Ahaziah just consult Yahweh God for his answer? Part of that answer is because idolatry was the more natural and normal path since this is what he knew best. But there is a more fundamental answer. He doesn't seek the answer from Yahweh because consulting Yahweh involves more than getting an answer. Consulting Yahweh means admitting that He is God and to admit that Yahweh is God is different than admitting that Baal is a god. Yahweh God doesn't play nice with other gods like Baal does. He demands total allegiance and unfaltering loyalty. Ahaziah knew this and so he didn't seek after Yahweh God because that would have been inconvenient. Ahaziah wanted to maintain control and consulting Baal-zebub of Ekron would allow him to get an answer and maintain control. Consulting Yahweh would probably get him an answer that would demand a return to Yahweh's control.

iv. In the book entitled *No God But God* Richard Keyes writes that:

1. "At the most basic level, idols are what we make out of the evidence for God within ourselves and in the world – if we do not want to face the face of God Himself in His majesty and holiness. Rather than look to the Creator and have to deal with his lordship, we orient our lives toward the creation, where we can be more free to control and shape our lives in our desired direction." (Richard Keyes, *No God But God*, pg. 31-32)

v. You see Ahaziah wanted autonomy from God because he sought fullness in life without accountability to God. But we can never be truly autonomous and so he sought what he needed from something that he thought he could control – an idol. The words of a later prophet, Jeremiah, warn against this very thing in the idols of other nations. He says in Jeremiah chapter 10:

1. ⁵ Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good." (Jeremiah 10:5 ESV)
2. According to the Lord, an idol is like a scarecrow. It is an inanimate object with no power to speak or to move on its own. Its only power is to fulfill a job for its owner – to scare off crows from eating the cucumbers. A scarecrow will never rebuke its owner or talk back to its owner or demand anything from its owner. An idol is like this in every way. Like a scarecrow, an idol's owner uses it to accomplish some purpose and part of the appeal is that it will never have to be accountable to this god that he or she worships. Think about Baal. He was a god who was worshipped with vile acts of sexual promiscuity so as to provoke his power to bring fertility to the ground and produce a crop and to provoke power to bring fertility to the womb to produce male children. These acts of sexual promiscuity are just like stuffing a scarecrow. One handful of straw at a time so as to have this god do something for you without ever requiring anything of you.
3. This is an appealing option isn't it? Get something from a supposed higher power without any accountability. It is as close to autonomy as the human soul can get in this world, which is why it is such a popular option.

II. Idolatry is a Provoking Option – vs. 3-8

- a. But it is not just a popular option. It is also a provoking option. In verses 3-8 we are told that the messenger of the Lord is sent to tell Elijah to intercept the messengers of Ahaziah and give them the answer that Ahaziah is seeking from Baal-zebub. This severe intervention in the idolatrous

ways of the king is nothing new either. Back in chapter 21 of 1 Kings, God told Elijah to do the very same thing to Ahab because he allowed Jezebel to violently murder Naboth and his sons all so that Ahab could have his vineyard. The words to Elijah are virtually identical in that chapter as they are here – “Arise, go up.” The prophet of God was given the Word of God to confront the idolatry of the people of God. God was provoked by Ahaziah’s idolatrous ways. He wasn’t just going to sit around while Ahaziah sought autonomy from Him, and this act of sending messengers over 50 miles away to get an answer was filled with such blatant disregard for Yahweh that he was provoked to confront it.

- b. Notice that the confrontation is the same throughout the text. In verse 3 Elijah is told to ask the question – “Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?” This same question is then repeated in verse 6 as the messengers convey the message of Yahweh to Ahaziah and then again in verse 16 when Elijah speaks to Ahaziah face to face. This then is the central question of this encounter between Ahaziah and the one true God. This shows to us that the heart of the problem that provoked Yahweh to action was Ahaziah’s blatant disregard for the existence and relevancy of Yahweh God. This sin has provoked God from the beginning and will continue to do so. There is a reason why the very first commandment says – “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2-3 ESV)
- c. God is preeminently concerned that his people do not go after another god because he knows that there is no other true god. He knows that mankind has turned to worship the created rather than the Creator and in so doing they think that they are worshiping a higher power than themselves, but in reality they are worshiping something created just like they are. In Isaiah 10:5, which we already looked at, and again in 1 Corinthians 8 it is made clear to us that idols have no real existence and that there is only one true God. So Paul says:
 - i. ⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-- as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”-- ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1Cor. 8:4-6 ESV)
- d. So God is provoked by idolatry because at the root of idolatry is a lie about Him of which He knows the truth. And it isn’t just a cute little lie that has no effect, but rather it is a lie that has the power to condemn men to Hell. God is serious about the truth about Himself, and rightly so. God is also provoked by idolatry because behind idolatry is demonic and satanic work. So Paul goes on in chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians to say this about idols:
 - i. ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. (1Cor. 10:19-20 ESV)
- e. Idolatry is demonic and satanic. Since the beginning Satan has been conniving and deceiving to get mankind to turn from the truth about God to a lie. He has been spewing his lies since the Garden to get us to doubt God’s existence and worship at the altar of another supposed God. The idol that we worship is nothing and has no power, but the deception that perpetuates and idol is itself perpetuated by the work of Satan and his forces of evil. I think it is particularly interesting that in the text Ahaziah consults Baal-zebub. By the time we get to Jesus’ day the Jewish leaders use this name and link it with the prince of demons. The name has morphed in its pronunciation by that time, but there is a clear association to this text. So, you remember the scenario in Jesus’ ministry, don’t you? He had just cast out a demon from a man that had made

the man mute for years. As the man begins to speak and proves that the demon is gone from him some in the crowd said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.” So, apparently by the time of Jesus the Jews thought of Beelzebul as the prince of demons – or in other words – Satan. And Jesus didn’t refute their statement because all idols are Satanic. It is no wonder then that God is provoked by idolatry in the human heart.

III. Idolatry is a Punishing Option – vs. 9-17

- a. Idolatry is not just a provoking option, but it is also a punishing option. So, we know the appealing pull of idolatry in that it allows us to escape from God’s authority and get from another source what we should be getting from God. But our idolatrous ways lose their appeal as we consider how idolatry provokes God and is ultimately punished by God. In Ahaziah’s life this punishment meant that he would not get off of that bed. He is told this in so many words by the messengers as they return, but it is made especially clear in verse 16 when Elijah confronts him and says “Because you have sent . . . therefore you shall not come down . . . but you shall surely die.” His idolatry is the cause of his severe punishment. But Ahaziah isn’t the only one in the chapter who knows the severity of God’s punishment because of the idolatrous ways of the king. Two different times in verses 9-12 Ahaziah sends a captain with his fifty men to command that Elijah come to Ahaziah and both times fire falls from Heaven and consumes them. So by verse 12 Elijah is still on the top of the hill and he is now surrounded by 102 charred remains. No wonder the third captain comes with great fear and trembling and pleading for his life.
- b. But why fire from Heaven? Well, the authority of Yahweh God was not seen as legit in the first place by Ahaziah, and this trend continues in how these men approach Elijah. The first captain comes with an emphasis on the king’s authority over Elijah – “The king says, ‘Come down.’” It is as though Ahaziah assumes that Yahweh is as impotent as any other god that he has worshiped and that his prophet is simply another man to be discarded of. The second captain comes with authority and urgency – “O man of God, this is the king’s order, ‘Come down quickly.’” Notice the response of Elijah both times – “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.” In other words, if you want to play the authority game and treat Yahweh God like he is a puppet to be manipulated rather than a God to be served then here is what will happen. And what happens – well, fire fell from Heaven which indeed validates that Yahweh alone is God and that Elijah is His prophet. There truly is a God and Elijah represents him. Idolatry makes you think that you can command the powerful hand of God just like you can command the idol to meet a need, but it is here that we are confronted with the true power of God. Yahweh God is not a god to be manipulated and controlled, but rather He is a God who is always in control.
- c. Ahaziah thought that he could use Yahweh God like he used Baal-zebub. He thought he could command His hand and bully his prophet. But he couldn’t because Yahweh God is not an idol to be used for our own ends, but rather Yahweh God controls all things for His own ends. God is not just interested in giving Ahaziah an answer about whether or not he will live or die, but rather Yahweh God is seeking to make it clear that He is the one who gives and takes life by the power of His Word. There are 102 dead bodies on a hill to prove this to Ahaziah. And by the end of the chapter there are 103 dead bodies because Ahaziah dies according to the word of the Lord.
- d. You see Yahweh God is not just a god among many who might have the answer, but rather he is the only God who controls the answer. Idolatry is appealing in many ways, but when we consider it for what it truly is we see that it provokes God and brings punishment to us. This chapter sets the stage for the rest of the story of the nations of Israel and Judah. There will be a few rare bright spots along the way as we continue our journey through the kings, but for the most part we will find that they are bent toward idolatrous ways that will provoke God’s wrath and induce His punishment. By the end of 2 Kings we will find both Israel and Judah in captivity

in other lands because Yahweh God is that serious about the first command. You shall have no other gods before me.

IV. Application:

- a. So, I wonder about us this morning. I realize that we are not Ahaziah and we are not in charge of God's people, but I also realize that in Ahaziah we see a pretty clear picture of the idolatry that is present in all of our hearts. Therefore, this would be a good time to consider our own heart.
- b. Consider your heart
 - i. You are prone to idolatry so look for it.
 1. Remember that your idolatry is rooted in a desire to be independent from God. When you live life in the flesh you will find a constant clamoring after autonomy from God. So, where are you prone to this? Where does your heart long for independence from God? Do you want to be free from his commands in a certain category and do things your own way? Maybe you want to be free from God's sovereign control so that a certain circumstance could be different than it is now. Your idolatrous heart will seek a solution for this apart from God. So, consider your heart! Where are you prone to this idolatry?
 2. You must also remember that your idolatry finds its expression in seeking from another source something that God can and will provide.
 - a. This may look like running to a controlled substance for satisfaction or comfort rather than running to God. The funny thing about an idol like this is that instead of you controlling it to meet a felt need, it often starts to control you. So you may run to entertainment or to food or to drugs or to alcohol or to nicotine to get something that God is supposed to give you, but instead of just getting that thing that you are looking for and leaving your heart gets drawn in to subservience to the idol. What an ironic cycle. The thing we pursue to get out from under God's authority actually ends up placing us in bondage to another that has no hope of actually saving us.
 - b. This other source that we seek may even be God reinvented as we would like him to be. So we may still fool ourselves into thinking that we are seeking the one true God, but we seek after Him in ways that create Him in our image – what we want him to be. Idolatry doesn't require a whole new god because our hearts are good at making the God of Heaven be what we want him to be instead of what he already is. So, this kind of idolatry takes the form of religious expression as we seek after God on our terms to do for us what we think he should. So we pray to the God of our own imagination to give us something on our terms instead of going to the one True God of Heaven and declaring our trust in Him to do as He sovereignly chooses to do in our lives. This form of idolatry is no different than the more blatant forms, and it is just as dangerous. Therefore, we must consider our hearts this morning for the purpose of rooting out our idolatrous ways.
- c. Heed the Word
 - i. We must not just consider our hearts, but we must also heed the Word of God.
 - ii. God sends His Word to our hearts to confront our own idolatry. He will even often send a kind severity that is meant to stop us in our tracks and call us back to singular worship. Rather than being hardened by the conviction that the Spirit brings through the Word,

we must heed this Word and humbly submit to God's authority. We must repent of our multiplicitous devotion and we must seek after the one true God alone.

- iii. The person and work of Jesus Christ only confirms this. He calls for this same singular devotion to Him. But Jesus doesn't just confirm the heinousness of our idolatry but he also enables our singular devotion. Because we will not be fully freed from our fleshly tendency to worship another until we see Jesus face to face, we need help. And the help we receive comes from Jesus himself. In John 17 he prays this to the Father on the night before his crucifixion. *Read John 17:10-19.*

Conclusion: It is this Jesus who demands singular devotion that also enables this singular devotion. We who know forgiveness of sins and new life through Jesus Christ have been united with Him and are kept by His sustaining and enabling grace. God the Father is at work in our lives today to sanctify us with His truth. He is provoked by our idolatry to bring His Word to purify us of our idolatry. So, consider your heart, and heed His Word! Let's pray.

Benediction:

²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.
(Rom 16:20 ESV)