

2 Kings 1

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[0 : 00] Carrying on in our series in 1 and 2 Kings. I wonder if you can remember the moment that you felt real fear. Perhaps a critical moment in your life where you felt very fragile.

! Many people have felt that, haven't they, recently? Maybe you feel like that right now, or you feel like that all the time. Tonight, the message I want to bring to you is that when there is real fear, you need a real God.

When there is a real need, you need a real God. There are lots of ways that you could apply this chapter in 2 Kings 1, but I want you to see three responses to fearful and terrifying things that happen.

It's a passage full of scary things, isn't it? You've got random accidents that threaten life. Someone falls out of a window. You've got fire coming from heaven and consuming people.

You've got threatening armed thugs confronting the prophet Elijah. And we see different responses to these very frightening things that happen.

[1 : 13] And what I want us to see really is that when we become gripped by real fear, although we feel that is a bad thing, it can bring us to the real God.

Three responses. The first response to fear comes with King Ahaziah, doesn't it? We see him first of all. And we see here our fear and our folly.

Our fear and our folly. If you look at Ahaziah, the problem with him isn't that he's afraid, but it's what he does with his fear. Where he goes to to feel safe.

It's his folly. Something critical happens to him in verse two. If you look down. Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria and lay sick.

It's a random accident, isn't it? That has taken him by surprise. A sudden turn of unexpected peril in something so unspectacular.

[2 : 18] He falls through this lattice. It shows that even the strongest people are vulnerable in the end, aren't they? There he is in his upper chamber. And he thinks to himself, I'm untouchable.

I'm in my palace. I'm the king. But things like this can happen to anyone and everyone, can't they? Suddenly, the man who felt so secure is now, he's quite afraid, I think.

That word isn't used, but we're told that he sends his messengers to go and find out whether he is going to recover from this sickness. King Ahaziah, he's rattled, isn't he, by this accident.

He begins to question his life. He faces his fragility. And so it's an opportunity to ask the big questions of life. He's got a real need.

And perhaps it will lead him to the real God. Things like this can have an effect on people, can't they? Unexpected tragedy in our lives.

[3 : 23] Things like this that can bring us to our senses or sober us up. Or at least they should do, shouldn't they? Fear.

King Ahaziah should be sobered by it. But instead, he's stupid. Because where does he go to for help? He gets his messengers to go and ask the God of Ekron, Baal Zebub.

Now, he's not the real God, is he? He's an idol outside of Israel. And what we see is just the folly in his fear.

That at his most critical moment, at his most desperate moment, he's still playing around with dead-end idols. A real need should have led him to the real God.

And it could have done, couldn't it? God says that the same line, I don't know if you noticed it, repeated three times in the chapter, in verse 3, verse 6 and verse 16.

[4 : 30] Then he says to Ahaziah, is it because there is no God in Israel that you should go and inquire of Baal Zebub, the God of Ekron? Ahaziah, I am real.

And I am right here in Israel. I am right here in your moment of disaster. But tragically, this is the folly that any of us might show.

The opportunity for sobriety to be brought to our senses. And yet tragedy like this can actually expose our stupidity.

That we won't go to the real God, even in our desperation. We refuse to turn to him. C.S. Lewis was famous for saying that God whispers to us in our pleasures and he shouts to us in our pain.

But in our folly, how often do we just make the earplugs even bigger? Ahaziah said to himself, what other gods are there besides the Lord in Israel?

[5 : 36] And the answer that he came up with was plenty. The Lord is there, but he is either irrelevant to me or he is inadequate to deal with my fears.

So I will go somewhere else. And it's folly. Idols like Baal's above, this false gods, weren't the real gods, but they were attractive gods nonetheless.

They were convenient. They met you on your terms. They were easy. They didn't require you to be holy or to change your life in major ways.

You could be selfish with them. As long as you give them particular sacrifices, they would give you what you want. Kind of, I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine. And they couldn't speak, could they?

They couldn't speak to you and challenge you and change you. Couldn't speak to you about your sin and your need to be forgiven. And that sounds good, maybe.

[6 : 36] And this was Ahaziah's entrenched way. This wasn't just a knee-jerk reaction in a disaster. This was how he'd lived his life. Do you remember at the end of 1 Kings, we're told that Baal worship was his policy.

His deity of choice has always been Baal. And his real need in this moment of disaster wasn't enough to prize him away from his entrenched idols to the real God.

Is there another God in Britain that we can go to when we face unexpected disaster? Isn't the answer that we so often give, yes, there are plenty.

We go to the long-held idols of our lives and of our times. We go to the comforts that we've sought from other gods.

We should be sober in these critical moments, but we can so often be quite stupid. We've prayed, haven't we, and we do pray that in our current situation, it will bring many to their senses and back to the real God.

[7 : 53] But sadly, the reality is that many will go in fear and folly to Ekron. We learn not to wait for a disaster and to rely upon a disaster in our lives to help us bring to our senses.

We shouldn't wait, should we, for a deathbed conversion or something like that. The prospect of death and disaster in our lives doesn't necessarily produce the good sense that we need to go back to the real God.

If we allow ourselves to become entrenched in trusting other gods, because by then disaster may not be the thing that will bring you to him, to the real God.

Thomas Brooks said that though true repentance is never too late, late repentance is seldom true. He commented that there's only one deathbed conversion in the Bible. It's the thief on the cross, isn't it, next to Jesus. There's only one so that no one may despair.

[9 : 08] But there is only one so that no one may presume repentance. Is there no God in Britain that you should go and inquire elsewhere in your fear and in your time of need when calamity comes?

Our fear and our folly. But secondly, our fear and our humility. Our fear and our humility. Because there's another response to fear in this passage.

And it comes in the third of three captains are the bunch of soldiers. Soldiers that King Ahaziah sends to confront Elijah.

Have a look at him in verse 13. Again, the king sent the captain of a third 50 with his 50. And the third captain of 50 went up and came and fell on his knees before Elijah and entreated him.

Oh, man of God, please let my life and the life of these 50 servants of yours be precious in your sight. Now, this man was a hardened war commander, wasn't he?

[10 : 20] A commander of 50 soldiers. And he is brought to his knees before Elijah. He is terrified. And he is humbled.

And he is spared. His life is spared. His fear leads to humility. Not to folly. But what leads him to that point?

It's a really strange passage, isn't it? Ahaziah sends three groups of soldiers to arrest Elijah. And the first two groups are destroyed by fire from heaven.

It's an absolutely terrifying picture. They are burnt alive by fire. So verse 10, with the first detachment of soldiers, Elijah says, If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your 50.

And that happens again to the second group. And we think to ourselves, Elijah, isn't that overkill? Why do that? Well, one thing to say is that even though Elijah called down the fire from heaven, it was actually God who sent it, wasn't it?

[11 : 33] The fire came down from heaven from God. If Elijah was being over the top or wrongheaded, then God simply would have answered by doing nothing, wouldn't he?

No, God decided that these soldiers had to be stopped in the most extreme way. They were the military arms of a king who was defiant against God until the very end.

They come strutting up to Elijah. Do you hear what they say? The king says, come down. On the king's orders, get down here, Elijah.

And you don't send 50 men to meet someone for a nice chat, do you? This was a show of aggression and force against God's man. It was a sign of hostility.

So God sends fire. And we know about fire in one kings, don't we? But God sent it to show that he was and is the real God.

[12 : 37] Do you remember Elijah and the prophets of Baal? He's done it before. But Ahaziah is still defiant, isn't he? And so he faces against the fiery jealousy of God.

This is God's way of repeating the first commandment. I am the real God. You shall have no other gods before me. So it's not just folly not to go to the real God in a time of crisis.

It's downright dangerous as well. But this captain then is in a crisis of his own, isn't he? He is terrified by God himself.

He watches as God judges those who defy him. And it brings him to seek God, to seek the real God.

That's what he does with Elijah. Oh, man of God, please let my life be precious in your sight. He spoke to God's man. It's like a prayer, isn't it?

[13 : 44] It was the only way he knew of praying to God himself, really. In fear of the real God, he seeks the mercy of the real God.

The story goes of George Whitefield in the 18th century. He was a preacher. And in 1756, a friend of his, William Grimshaw, invited George Whitefield to come and preach at his church in Yorkshire. And William Grimshaw had a pulpit outside the church. It was lifted up so that the preacher could speak to big crowds, more people than would have been inside the church.

So when Whitefield came there, there were huge crowds to come and hear him preach. He stood in the pulpit and announced his text for the sermon. Hebrews chapter 9, verse 27.

Just as it is appointed for man to die once. And after that comes judgment. Just as Whitefield was about to start the sermon, he was cut off by a wild shriek coming from within the congregation.

[14 : 57] Grimshaw, the minister, went to investigate what was happening. And then he returned to speak to Whitefield in the pulpit and whispered in his ear, an immortal soul has just been called into eternity.

Someone had just died in the congregation before the sermon began. That was announced to the congregation. And after a pause, Whitefield again announced his text.

Just as it is appointed for man to die once. And after that comes judgment. Just as he was about to start preaching, unbelievably, another piercing shriek came from another part of the congregation.

A second person had fallen dead. After the commotion had calmed down, Whitefield amazingly indicated that he was going to continue with the service and the sermon.

And at this point, the congregation was under a stony silence. Do you think they listened to George Whitefield that Sunday morning?

[16 : 03] Why did they listen? Fear. Terror. It was unnerving, wasn't it? Must have been.

But not unhealthy. Not if they were humbled by what they saw and what they heard that morning. Not if they were sobered by it.

Certain kinds of terror are healthy for us, aren't they? They can become saving terror. Certain kinds of fear can motivate true repentance and humility.

The captain gets a glimpse of the judgment of God on sinners like you and me, doesn't he? And the next thing he knows, he is humbling himself on his knees.

And verse 15, he then is walking with the man of God to see King Ahaziah. I'd suggest that that captain is a very different man at that point to the man he was as he strapped on his armor that morning.

[17:12] Crisis can bring the possibility of change with God. The apostle Peter, he speaks about fire, God's fire coming down from heaven in 2 Peter 3.

He says, The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

No one likes a hellfire and brimstone preacher, do they? And sometimes that's for a very good reason, actually.

And some people speak about God's judgment as if God were just vindictive. And they speak about it without much grief for people who are lost.

But even if he were the most tender hearted and wonderful preacher you've ever heard, most people don't like thinking about these sort of passages and that passage in 2 Peter, do they?

[18:15] God sending fire from heaven, God judging the ungodly. But it's clear that God is going to do it again, that he is going to send fire and it will consume all who hate him and all who defy him until the end.

Ahaziah hears that, doesn't he? And he hates God even more because of it. But the captain sees a glimpse of that and he goes to his knees.

And when he hears God speaking to him like this and sees God, it humbles him and it saves him. Peter goes on to say in that passage in verse 8, The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Just as it's appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment, sometimes we need the fear of God in us to remove our folly and to humble us in a crisis.

Is it because there's no God in Britain, no God in the world, that we go elsewhere? Real fear can bring us to the real God, can't it, when we humble ourselves?

[19:47] So our fear and our folly, our fear and our humility, and then thirdly and briefly, our fear and our certainty. Our fear and our certainty. And there is another response to fear in the passage with Elijah himself.

And if you look at verse 15, An angel of the Lord said to Elijah, Go down with him. Do not be afraid of him. He's speaking about the captain, isn't he, of the army.

Do not be afraid of him, the angel says. And we read between the lines on that. Elijah faces a threat as well here. 50 and then another 50 and then another 50 of Ahaziah's hit men.

They're not here to have a nice chat. They're hostile against Elijah. Elijah is alone on a hill against the troop of enemies.

But the Lord's judgment not only stops those who are defiant against him, but it protects those who trust in him. I think we can assume that Elijah was not going to last very long if Ahaziah got his hands on him at first.

[20:58] Otherwise, why would the angel say to Elijah, Don't be afraid. This was a threatening situation. But on this occasion, God shows in a spectacular and unusual way that his people are ultimately certain of protection and rescue in the end.

In their fear, there is certainty. The story goes in 1920s Soviet Russia. You might have heard this before of a Baptist preacher called Cornelius Martins.

And Martins was taken to a Communist Party boss for interrogation. The boss got him into a room with two officials and he ordered the two officials to remove Martin's clothes.

Martin said that he would do it himself. And he responded to the boss. I don't fear to die here today, for I shall be going home to the Lord.

If he has decided that my hour hasn't come, though, you cannot do me any harm here. The boss in defiance shouted back at Martin's.

[22:11] I'll prove that your God won't deliver you out of my hands today. He lifted up a revolver and pointed it at Martin's head.

But as he tried to pull the trigger, his finger froze. Three times he tried to fire the pistol, but failed. The boss's face grew more and more red and began shaking. He lowered his gun and asked one of the other officials what this man was being condemned for. And the official responded, he is a Baptist. Can't you see that God is fighting for him? The boss orders Martins to get out. And, of course, that kind of thing doesn't happen to everyone, to all of God's people all of the time, does it? There were plenty of Christians who were killed in the gulags. There are plenty of God's people today who don't get to tell such miraculous stories to live to tell the tale. [23 : 19] Fire doesn't come down from heaven for them in every situation. But sometimes God gives the oppressor a sign of just how powerless they really are.

And that's what's happening in this passage. It is a reminder to Elijah that all of God's people ultimately will be rescued from what they fear. Both Ahaziah and his henchmen are removed with immediate effect by the end of this chapter. And we learn that God's assurances of rescue for his people are just as sure as his warnings of judgment.

In fear, there is great certainty. The fear of death is our greatest enemy, isn't it? The writer to the Hebrews says that. It pervades all of life. It exposes our folly as we reach out to idols to give us hope and not to the real God. [24 : 28] But paradoxically, God, in his grace, can use the fear of death to be our friend. In real need to humble us before the real God.

Ahaziah's story ends in verse 17 and 18, where he dies. God removes him. And the narrator adds those comments in verse 18.

Now, the rest of the acts of Ahaziah that he did, are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of Israel? Now, notice what he's doing there as he finishes Ahaziah's story. He's saying, you know, I've edited quite a lot of stuff out here about this king.

He's done a lot of good stuff and bad stuff. But you can read all about that in the public chronicles. Just go down to the library. You can see all of that stuff. But I've edited all of that out to give you what matters about this man.

That in his real need, he refused the real God. As if to say, King Ahaziah was so successful in all of the things that just don't matter in the end.

[25 : 42] He was a fearful man. But he was a foolish man. To have missed this opportunity to be humbled before God. So the last few months have been quite scary, haven't they?

And there is an opportunity still now, this evening, to be sober about this. And to be sober with the real God. And to admit that we have a real need for him.

But soon that opportunity may well pass. As things get back to normal. At least for a time. So we shouldn't waste it.

Going back to entrenched idols. To succeed most in things that might not matter most. But to be humble.

And call out to God. To spare us. From his judgment. In Jesus Christ. And if we do that.

[26 : 46] We can be certain. Of rescue. From all of our fears. Our fear and our folly. Our fear and our humility. Our fear and our certainty.

Let's pray. Let's pray.