

Fire From Heaven

2 Kings 1

The episode we'll be looking at this morning is in 2 Kings chapter 1. We'll cover the whole chapter this morning. And in order to get through it, I want to take a different approach. I want to walk you through the narrative of the entire chapter. And then we'll tie it all up at the end with a look at three important spiritual lessons we can glean from this account.

Let me begin reading in 2 Kings 1.

"After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel." Stop there for a moment, and I'll do my best to explain the political, historical, and geographical context with the simplest possible overview.

Moab was the nation on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. If you can visualize the area, Israel and Judah occupied the area West of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. Moab occupied a region of similar size on the *east* side of the Dead Sea. The Moabites were the descendants of Moab, who was the son born to Lot's eldest daughter after her incestuous relationship with her own father.

Genesis 19 describes how after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's daughters were living in a cave in the wilderness. Their mother was dead (turned into a pillar of

salt). The city where they grew up and had all their relationships had been reduced to a smoldering wasteland filled with volcanic rocks. And Lot's daughters despaired of ever getting married. So they got their own father drunk and each had sex with him. The wicked immorality of Sodom had so defiled them that they thought that was the best way to carry on the family name. Both girls became pregnant, and the elder daughter bore a son whom she named Moab. He was the father of the Moabites. Lot's younger daughter had a son named Ben-Ammi—and he was the father of the Ammonites.

The Israelites considered the Moabites close relatives as well as close neighbors. They spoke the same language. They had common ancestors and many common traditions. But they served different Gods. (More about that in a minute.)

So the relationship between Israel and the Moabites was an uneasy one. Sometimes the Moabites and Israelites were allies, and sometimes they were enemies. The most familiar Moabite in Scripture was Ruth, grandmother of David. She became a proselyte to the Hebrew faith, so her marriage to Boaz was legal and legitimate. And it meant that the Davidic line, from which Christ descended, included at least one wife who came from the Moabite nation. It also meant that king David himself was one-quarter Moabite.

And when David was being pursued by Saul, it was the Moabites who helped hide and preserve him. According to 1

Samuel 22:3-4, David put his parents under the protective care of the king of Moab while David himself hid from Saul in caves and desolate regions.

But when David ascended the throne, the relationship changed, and the Moabites for a time became David's enemies. Scripture doesn't describe any particular conflict or event that led to this change. I gather the Moabites had political reasons to be friendly to David while he was the chief rival of Israel's sitting king, but as soon as he became king himself, he instantly and automatically became a political rival to the king of the Moabites, so they no longer regarded him as a friend.

In any case, during David's reign there was a war between Israel and Moab, and David conquered the Moabites and completely subjugated them. For several generations the Moabites were forced to pay tribute to the king of Israel. But for the remainder of David's life, and increasingly during the reign of Solomon, relations between Israel and Moab were essentially peaceful.

I mentioned that the Moabites worshiped a deity of their own making. Their god was an idol named Chemosh (keMOSH). They are sometimes referred to in Scripture as "**The people of Chemosh**" (Numbers 21:29; Jeremiah 48:46)—and Chemosh himself is referred to in 1 Kings 11:7 as "**Chemosh the abomination of Moab.**" Both the culture and the pagan worship of the Moabites became a serious

stumbling-block to the Israelites during that prolonged peace that began under David and extended into Solomon's reign.

In fact, Solomon's backsliding began with a kind of ecumenical embrace of Moabite culture and religion. (Solomon also absorbed corrupt spiritual values from other neighboring nations, too, so the Moabites weren't the only bad influence on him.)

Solomon's decline was motivated, first of all, by his desire to please the women in his harem. First Kings 11 is a chronicle of Solomon's spiritual collapse. First Kings 11:1-2 says, **"Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.' Solomon clung to these in love."** Verses 6-8 go on to say,

So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done.

7 Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem.

8 And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

**9 And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice
10 and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the LORD commanded.**

In other words, Solomon, living the life of a Lothario, embraced a kind of ecumenical compromise that mirrored his moral promiscuity. He let his passion for women degrade his character, undermine his faith, and overrule the wisdom God had given him—and that compromised the entire nation under his rule. It led to a nationwide spiritual decline and religious confusion that culminated in the divided kingdom and opened the door to abominations like Jezebel and Ahab. It also left the people of Israel susceptible to divine judgment and earthly defeat. So all Israel suffered years of exile, misery, and spiritual confusion. That all began in Solomon's time, and the Moabite influence was one of the major factors that sabotaged Solomon's faithfulness.

Anyway, when Solomon died, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah split. Judah, the southern nation (consisting of just two tribes—Judah and Benjamin) stayed true to the line of Davidic kings. The northern kingdom, Israel, consisted of the other ten tribes, and they were ruled by a succession of renegade kings, none of whom had any legitimate right under

God to rule. All the kings of Israel were wicked—no exceptions. And some of them were profoundly wicked.

Control over Moab seems to have passed out of Solomon's line and was taken over by the northern kingdom, under that long dynasty of wicked and unbelieving Israelite kings. We draw that conclusion because when the Moabites finally revolted against the Hebrews, it was the Kings of Israel they waged war against.

The first Moabite revolt was in the time of Omri. Omri was the father of Ahab. (You know Ahab from our study of Elijah's life years ago. He was the hapless king who married Jezebel and unleashed the rankest kind of idolatry into the northern kingdom.) Scripture doesn't record anything about the Moabite revolt against Omri, but a thorough record of that whole episode was later made and inscribed in stone in Phoenician letters by King Mesha, the Moabite king who led the revolt mentioned here in 2 Kings 1. The stone on which that inscription was made was discovered by a German missionary in 1868. It's one of modern archaeology's most intriguing finds, known as the Moabite stone.

And we don't have time to get into it this morning, but if you want to read a good story, look up the history of the Moabite stone on the Internet or in a Bible encyclopedia when you get home. The French and the Germans got into a bidding war over the stone. Each country wanted it in their national museum. And when Ottoman government officials

discovered what incredible sums of money were being offered for this artifact, they decided to handle the bidding themselves, so they sent word from Damascus to the Bedouins who had possession of the stone and ordered them to turn it over. The Bedouins decided they didn't want *anyone* else getting possession of the artifact, so they built a fire under it, and when it was fiery hot, they poured cold water over it, shattering it into several pieces. They distributed the smaller fragments among themselves for good-luck charms. The larger pieces were collected and reassembled, and you can see the Moabite Stone in the Louvre Museum in Paris today.

Anyway, fortunately for the study of archaeology, before the Arabs destroyed the stone, the French had made what is known as a "squeeze." They used *papier mâché* to take an impression of it. Their squeeze was partly damaged because the paper was still too wet when it was removed from the stone. But most of the inscription was good enough to enable archaeologists to reassemble the fragments. And the inscription told the history of the Moabite nation during a period of time that coincides almost precisely with the life of Elijah and the record of 2 Kings. Like every other archaeological discovery so far, it confirms every detail of the biblical account.

We learn from the Moabite stone that the Moabites revolted during Omri's reign, but they were subdued again

and forced to pay tribute to Ahab. Second Kings 3:4 describes the tribute Ahab demanded: "**Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheep breeder, and he had to deliver to the king of Israel 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams.**" (The statement uses a verb tense that suggests this tribute was paid regularly, probably annually.)

But 2 Kings 3:5 says when Ahab died and his son Ahaziah took the throne, the Moabites revolted a second time. (Here's the verse: "**But when Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.**" That simply reiterates what we already read in the opening verse of 2 Kings 1: "**After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel.**" This second revolt was successful where the earlier revolt in Ahab's time had failed. Both the Scriptures and the Moabite stone focus on this second Moabite revolt.

From the biblical narrative, it appears the Moabites were successful at least partly because of Ahaziah's failure to respond aggressively to the revolt. He sent his armies out to wage war, but he himself stayed home, in the safety of his palace.

I have a suspicion about why Ahaziah may have stayed home. In 1 Kings 21, when Elijah confronted Ahab, Elijah prophesied that Ahab and all his offspring would be utterly destroyed, his bloodline wiped from the face of the earth. First Kings 21:21. Elijah confronts Ahab in the vineyard of Naboth, and the Lord speaking prophetically through Elijah

tells Ahab: "I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin." He goes on (verse 24): "Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat."

(So this was a gruesome prophecy of utter destruction, and 2 Kings 10:1 says Ahab had 70 sons in Samaria, so this was no small family, and it was no small judgment to wipe them all out.)

Now remember that Ahab was killed in battle, even though he disguised himself as the king of Judah. An archer fired off a random arrow, and it penetrated between the joints of Ahab's armor, and he was fatally wounded. That arrow was clearly guided by God Himself. The judgment Elijah foretold was obviously beginning to come to pass. No wonder Ahaziah was afraid to go into battle. He may have figured he would be safe if he just stayed away from the battlefield. As if he could escape the wrath of God by hiding in the safety of his own palace! As if God's hand of judgment couldn't reach him there!

But Ahaziah's palace turned out not to be such a safe place, either. Second Kings 1:2: "**Now Ahaziah fell through the**

lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay sick"—that is, he was seriously injured, bedridden with internal bleeding or a wound of some kind that was clearly life-threatening.

A *lattice* is a screen or a grate made of crisscrossed wooden strips. This could have been a vent or a kind of skylight between the roof and a lower floor. Or more likely it was a flimsy decorative substitute for a parapet or a balustrade around the perimeter of the roof. Moses' law demanded that every rooftop that was accessible to people have a parapet. The idea clearly was to have a guard-rail so sturdy that people couldn't accidentally fall off the roof. But some builders obeyed only the letter of the law and ignored its purpose. They sometimes made decorative but flimsy parapets out of wooden lattice-work. Those may have been the kind of parapets used on the king's palace in Israel.

So Ahaziah either carelessly backed into the lattice-work or stupidly stepped on a flimsy vent or skylight made of lattice-work, and the lattice gave way. He fell, obviously some distance—either into the courtyard of the palace, or through the roof into one of the rooms

Scripture doesn't describe his injuries, but they were clearly serious. And naturally, Ahaziah wanted to know if his injuries were going to prove fatal. See the second half of verse 2: **"he sent messengers, telling them, 'Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness.'"**

Now this is the first mention of Baalzebub in Scripture. Baalzebub was a Philistine deity. His name meant, "Lord of the flies." That was fitting, for the land of the Philistines was thick with flies—as that area still is to this day. And the Philistines evidently believed the infestation of flies signified that the Lord of the flies lived in their land, so they made this fly-god one of their main deities. They had some famous oracles who claimed to be able to tell the future. They usually gave flattering prophecies with predictions so ambiguous that they could hardly miss, but the Philistine oracles nonetheless had gained fame throughout Israel. They were sort of the "Psychic Friends Network" of Elijah's time.

And Ahaziah decided he would send messengers to the fly-god's oracles to tell him if he could expect to live.

This occult curiosity about the future cost him his life. God despises all forms of occult fortune-telling, and He strictly forbade His people to engage in that sort of evil. Listen to Deuteronomy 18:9-12:

When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations.

10 There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer

**11 or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead,
12 for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you.**

There were several similar prohibitions in the law. Through Moses, God gave the people a zero-tolerance policy against all the occult arts. It is absolutely clear from those commandments that God does not regard any form of occult fortune-telling as a matter to be trifled with. Before you read a horoscope or consult a fortune-teller and make a superstitious decision because of what some self-styled prophet says, remember that this is a *very* serious sin. It was an especially serious sin for a ruler on the throne of Israel. He of all people needed to honor and obey God, not consult these petty Philistine deities like the fly-god. It was bad enough for the people to be tempted to be lured into occult and pagan practices. But when the king engaged in such behavior, it always brought certain and severe judgment. Saul lost his kingdom because he went to a fortune-teller. And here Ahaziah lost his life because he wanted to inquire about his future from the fly-god.

Notice, however, that God sovereignly hindered Ahaziah from getting any advice from Baalzebub. Verse 3:

**But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite,
"Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of**

Samaria, 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?

4 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.'" So Elijah went.

Here we see an instance of Elijah's trademark appearances. Some of you will remember from our study of Elijah several years ago that one of Elijah's idiosyncrasies is the way he always appears out of nowhere, confronts his enemies, and then disappears before they have time to react. This episode is no exception.

And Elijah has bad news for Ahaziah: "**You shall surely die.**" *You'll never get out of bed again.* And he tells Ahaziah's messengers to go back with that message to their king.

It will become apparent in a moment that these men had no idea who Elijah was. Maybe they were too young to remember the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. They were servants in Ahaziah's court, the next generation after Ahab, it's probably a given that tales of Elijah's spiritual triumphs were not frequently the topic of conversation in *that* household.

But it is interesting (isn't it?) that these men immediately halted their journey, turned right around, and went straight back to Ahaziah's bedside. They had been sent on a mission by their king, but after this one short encounter with a

stranger, they abandoned their assignment and returned home.

What was it about Elijah that made them take orders from him rather than obeying their master's orders? Obviously, his physical presence alone was somewhat intimidating. Furthermore, from what we know of the character and personality of Elijah, it is probably safe to assume that his delivery was stern, and severe, and intense.

But it wasn't merely a matter of *style* that prompted these men to obey Elijah rather than their master. When a man of God is under the control of the Spirit of God, that man's message is empowered by the spirit in an inscrutable way so that the message penetrates even the hardest of hearts. Elijah clearly knew what they were sent on their quest to learn. And Elijah spoke with the authority and the power of God Himself. Who can resist that?

Verse 5: **"The messengers returned to the king, and he said to them, 'Why have you returned?'"** Ahaziah *knew* they had not been gone long enough to get to Ekron and back. Verse 6:

And they said to him, "There came a man to meet us, and said to us, 'Go back to the king who sent you, and say to him, Thus says the LORD, Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.'"

7 He said to them, "What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?"

8 They answered him, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."

You would think Ahaziah would be terrified at this, right? He knows from long experience that Elijah speaks for God. Elijah had never once been wrong about anything. At his word a three-year long drought was started—and then finally after three years he gave the word and it rained again. He called down fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel. *(He was about to do a couple of repeat performances, but Ahaziah didn't know about that yet.)*

When Elijah confronted Ahab in Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21, the prophet knew everything about Ahab's treachery against Naboth. He correctly predicted Ahab's demise because of it. Now he was telling Ahaziah that he too would die soon.

But Ahaziah's response, rather than fear and repentance, is anger and vindictiveness against Elijah.

But Elijah was only the messenger. God was the one Ahaziah was really opposing. It was a foolish response.

Verse 9:

Then the king sent to him a captain of fifty men with his fifty. He went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a

hill, and said to him, "O man of God, the king says, 'Come down.'"

10 But Elijah answered the captain of fifty, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

Wow. This was apparently an instantaneous thing. This fire from heaven didn't just kill these guys and char their bodies. It consumed them. All fifty fit neatly into an ash tray when Elijah was done with them.

(One of the earliest viral videos on the Internet showed a guy igniting a sack of charcoal by burning some liquid oxygen. He poured the stuff from a container he held on a pole from at least 10 feet away. And it flared up for a second, and then immediately went away. And what was left was a melted steel barbecue grill and the ashes from a sack of Charcoal. Instantly consumed. That's something like what happened here, only the fire fell from heaven.)

That should have waked Ahaziah up. Because somehow word got back to him about what had happened. Evidently there were witnesses to this instantaneous cremation, and the witnesses reported back to the king.

Verse 11:

Again the king sent to him another captain of fifty men with his fifty. And he answered and said to him, "O man of God, this is the king's order, 'Come down quickly!'"

12 But Elijah answered them, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

This guy doesn't learn, does he? You'd think the point would be clear by now. But—

Verse 13: **"Again the king sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty."** You get the feeling Ahaziah would have kept sending men until his whole army was destroyed by fire from heaven. But this third captain was a wise man, and he humbled himself before Elijah:

And the third captain of fifty went up and came and fell on his knees before Elijah and entreated him, "O man of God, please let my life, and the life of these fifty servants of yours, be precious in your sight.

14 Behold, fire came down from heaven and consumed the two former captains of fifty men with their fifties, but now let my life be precious in your sight."

15 Then the angel of the LORD said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So he arose and went down with him to the king.

That scene always makes me smile. After all that spontaneous human compunction, Elijah just agrees to go with these men to Ahaziah's bedside. They didn't have to force or cajole him. He comes to Ahaziah of his own free will—and I mean "free will" in the Calvinist sense, because

notice that he goes at the Lord's bidding. He arrives at the Palace, and he is shown into the room where Ahaziah lies on his deathbed.

Verse 16:

and [Elijah] said to him, "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.'"

17 So he died according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken. Jehoram became king in his place in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, because Ahaziah had no son.

Then the biblical record of Ahaziah closes with the last verse in this chapter (verse 18): **"Now the rest of the acts of Ahaziah that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel?"**

So there you have the story. It's a simple one, really, but it's filled with spiritual lessons. I want to draw out a few of the key ones for you.

First, consider—

1. HOW LOW SIN BROUGHT AHAZIAH

Ahaziah had followed in his father's wicked footsteps. He had also followed his mother's wickedness—and to the degree that he was really just a puppet ruler for Jezebel. She told him what to do. She was the real power behind the throne in Israel, just as she had been during her husband's wicked reign. Ahaziah's short reign was so marked by wickedness that God judgment was inevitable, sooner rather than later. And you can see the hand of divine displeasure in the accident Ahaziah suffered.

Ahaziah despised God. So God gave him over to his own sin. In fact, Ahaziah's life reveals how often our sinful rebellion carries its own consequences. Ahaziah had already rejected the truth. Therefore he had no option but to pursue a lie. And that is why he sought a forecast from a lying, demonic oracle.

You need to understand the character of this Philistine god Baalzebub. His very name, "Lord of the Flies," has a filthy, foul sound to it, doesn't it? And Baalzebub was as vile a deity as anyone ever invented. He supposedly ruled the flies—those revolting insects that swarm around every kind of decay and filth and spread disease and spawn maggots. It was a fitting image for this kind of god. Who would ever think of worshiping a deity whose realm was everything foul and unclean?

The whole idea of a god who delighted in all that was unclean was so revolting to the Jews that they altered the name *Baal-zebub* slightly to make it *Beel-zebul*—which meant "god of dung." But you get a sense of how utterly abhorrent Baal-zebub was to a typical Jew.

In fact, this dung-god Beel-zebul was the consummate example of a demonic false god. He so epitomized everything impure and unholy—everything that opposes the true God—so that by the time of Jesus, the name *Beelzebul* had become a way to refer to Satan. So when you read the name *Beelzebul* in the New Testament, it is a reference to the devil. And that's a fitting, name for the evil one, isn't it? *God of dung*. And Satan himself was in a true but spiritual sense the real object of every Baal-worshiper's devotion. In 1 Corinthians 10:20, Paul writes "**What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.**" There is a real demonic energy in all false religion and occultism, and that is one of the chief reasons the people of God are forbidden to trifle with such things.

Now consider the irony of the fact that Ahaziah, sitting on the throne in Israel, had so much contempt for Israel's God that he would be willing to inquire after the lying oracles of a loathsome being like Baal-zebub.

But Ahaziah had already rejected the truth, so God gave him over to lies.

It is inherently irrational to reject the truth, isn't it? Suppose the oracle at Ekron had told Ahaziah what he wanted to hear—that he would live. That wouldn't make it *true*, would it? If the morning horoscope says this is an auspicious day to launch a new business venture, that doesn't make it true, does it? Who knows how many people have destroyed their lives pursuing lies because they have no choice after they reject the truth.

Listen, we need to hold fast to the truth God has given us and order our lives by what Scripture says. Modern society in general has gone the opposite direction, rejecting Scripture in favor of astrology, psychology, evolution, humanism, secularism, and a host of other superstitious or rationalistic lies. But if you turn away from the truth to follow fables, you in effect give yourself over to Satan, the father of lies. That's why it was sheer folly for Ahaziah to inquire of the Philistine oracle in the first place.

Many wicked men sat on the throne of Israel after Jeroboam's revolt. But this episode was something of a low point for the whole era, that an Israelite king would inquire of a Philistine god.

Here's a second lesson. Consider—

2. HOW FAR FAITH HAD BROUGHT ELIJAH

There's a remarkable contrast between the Elijah of this episode and the immature prophet who ran from Jezebel all the way to the southern end of the Sinai peninsula. Here we see Elijah confident, bold, unmovable. First, he arrests the messengers on the road, boldly ordering them to go back and tell their king what he doesn't want to hear. Then notice in verse 9 that when Ahaziah's soldiers came looking for him, **"Elijah . . . was sitting on the top of a hill."** He knows Ahaziah wants to kill him, but he doesn't run and hide. He sits in plain view, on top of a hill, where they will be sure and find him. And then when they threaten him, he more or less casually calls down fire out of heaven and reduces them to ashes. *Don't you sort of wish he had shown that kind of confidence when Jezebel threatened to kill him after the Mount Carmel showdown?*

This is the true Elijah. This is the prophet at his best, most mature. And what is the reason for the difference? His *faith*. As his faith grew strong, so did Elijah. And here he reveals an amazing, superhuman level of faith. He stands unflinching before an detachment of fifty armed men, Ahaziah's best fighting men. And he displays the kind of faith spoken of in Matthew 17:20 where Jesus says, **"If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."**

Let me explain something: That kind of faith is a supernatural faith. Its source is God. Jesus wasn't suggesting you can summon this sort of faith from within yourself. He wasn't teaching that if you try real hard you can believe in yourself strongly enough to command mountains. *That wasn't His point at all.* The point is that true faith is trust in a promise God has made—belief in what God has said. Elijah was a prophet. He knew through his prophetic gifts that God intended to carry out His judgment this way. In other words, true faith has both its source and object in God. Elijah was not exercising some kind of superstitious self-confidence. His trust was in God, and it was God who performed this miracle.

In that same vein, it's important to note that Elijah didn't call down fire from heaven against these men out of any personal or petty vindictiveness. If that had been any part of his motive, God would not have answered with fire.

Some people have trouble reconciling this passage with Luke 9:55, where James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven against some Samaritans because they refused to allow Jesus to pass through their village on His way to Jerusalem. And Jesus rebuked James and John. And what about John 3:17? **"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."**

Just to be clear; Scripture never condemns what Elijah did, because it wasn't even Elijah who did this; God did it. Contrary to what a lot of people think, the New Testament doesn't promote a pacifist agenda. What happened when Elijah encountered these messengers was an act of God, done for God's own glory. As a matter of fact, Jesus Himself will one day destroy His enemies with a fiery retribution from heaven.

But on that day in Samaria with James and John, Jesus' mission was a mission of salvation, and James and John were reacting because they had been personally insulted. Therefore their desire to call down fire from heaven was inappropriate and wicked. For all of us who don't have Elijah's prophetic gift and specific instructions from heaven, that's pretty much a universal rule. The desire to seek vengeance is carnal.

But Elijah's fire from heaven was meant by God as a public display of divine vindication, and a public judgment against an evil regime that sat on Israel's throne, opposing Jehovah and all He stood for. Such extreme wickedness called for a breathtaking, awe-inspiring judgment. That's why fire was warranted against Ahaziah's soldiers, but it was not warranted against the Samaritans.

And that brings us to a third spiritual lesson we draw from this account. Consider—

3. HOW PATIENTLY GOD'S MERCY PURSUES THE WICKED

In the midst of all this judgment, there is still a constant display of the Lord's great mercy to His foes. Ahaziah's injuries are one clear example. He could have died immediately from his fall. But the Lord graciously spared his life for a time, giving him an opportunity to contemplate his impending ruin and an opportunity for repentance. Such an opportunity is never to be taken for granted. God owes such mercy to no one.

In fact, contrast Ahaziah's fate with that of his soldiers, who were destroyed on the spot with no opportunity to seek any remedy. God is not unrighteous to judge instantly and summarily like that. But so often He does not. I would guess that there is not a person in this room who has not been the beneficiary of the kind of Divine mercy that fires a warning shot before dispensing justice. God often gives us time to reflect and warning signs to reflect on before He makes us taste the consequences of our sin. And those are opportunities for repentance. I hope you never waste them or take them for granted. Because Proverbs 29:1 says, "**He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.**"

This whole episode reminds us that "**It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God**" (Hebrews 10:31). "**our God is a consuming fire**" (Hebrews 12:29). Quite literally we

see the fulfillment of that in what happened to the first two captains and their fifties.

But the third group of soldiers is a reminder that "**God . . . gives grace to the humble**" (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). God's mercies are never exhausted, and those who humble themselves before Him and confess their sins can always find mercy.

The patience of God is truly a marvel, but we are cautioned again and again not to take God's longsuffering for granted or presume on His grace. Scripture says, "**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.**" Whether you are a believer or not, all these truths are poignant incentives to careful self-examination. In the words of 2 Peter 3:15, "**Count the patience of our Lord as salvation.**"

And meanwhile, "**exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.**" Or, quoting 2 Peter 3 again, "**You therefore, beloved . . . take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen**"