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THE WORD OF THE TRUE GOD (I)

Introduction

As already noted in the introductory material there is no break in narrative between the end of 1 Kings and the beginning of 2 Kings; the division is because of what can be contained in one scroll. The idolatry in Israel continues unchecked, indeed if anything gets worse, as Ahab's son Ahaziah brings to a crescendo the evil ways of both his parents as well as echoing those of that first notorious idolater, Jeroboam son of Nebat. The only mercy of this evil reign was that it lasted a mere two years (1 Kings 22:51-53). The author here gives us a flavour of that inglorious time by concentrating on the episode which brings about Ahaziah's death.

More significantly the powerful ministry of Elijah occupies centre stage. I argued in the exposition of 1 Kings chapter 19 (in the previous volume) that the interpretation of that chapter which virtually writes him off as a spent force cannot be sustained and we saw how the episode of

Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) already gives the lie to that. Here this chapter and the next confirm that to the end Elijah remains a force for God challenging godless kings and bringing the powerful Word of God.

There is a close parallel between this episode and 1 Kings 18 as on both occasions fire falls from heaven to show who the true God is and to authenticate His genuine servant. The difference is that in 1 Kings 18 the fire is a call to repentance and faith, here it is an act of judgment. Ahaziah and his first two captains do not tremble at the Word of God and thus that Word judges them. However, there is grace in the chapter especially in the mercy shown to the third captain (vv. 13-15). In fact this is a chapter about reactions to the Gospel: to Ahaziah it is the stench of death but to the third captain the fragrance of life (2 Cor. 2:15-16). This is the Gospel for today as we proclaim Christ among the multitude of false gods.

Listening to the text

Context and structure

The setting is the aftermath of the death of Ahab, mentioned here in verse 1 and described in 1 Kings 22:34-38. The detail that Moab rebelled is significant. The implication is that Ahab had kept firm control. There may also be an implied contrast with Jehoshaphat of Judah who kept Edom under control (1 Kings 22:47).

The scene is set for the final clash between Elijah and the house of Ahab and more importantly another contest between Yahweh and the pagan gods.

The text can be divided in the following way:

- ♦ Consulting false gods (1:1-2)

- ✦ Who is the true God? (1:3-8)
- ✦ God protects His man (1:9-12)
- ✦ Humility averts judgment (1:13-15)
- ✦ God's Word carried out (1:16-18)

Working through the text

Consulting false gods (1:1-2)

An apparent accident shows where Ahaziah's trust lies as he falls from a top floor and, badly injured, sends his messengers to consult a pagan god. 1 Kings 22:51-53 have shown that this was no unfortunate lapse but a sign of his regular practice. The god in question is Baal-Zebub of Ekron. This Philistine city was the most northerly one, about twenty-five miles north-west of Jerusalem. The god may have been renowned as a healer but if Ahaziah had been familiar with the earlier history of his people he would have known the bad track record of the Philistine gods. Dagan the chief god had been turned into Humpty Dumpty as the Ark of the Covenant had been put in his temple to show his superiority to Yahweh (1 Sam 5:1-5). Goliath had cursed David by his gods (1 Sam 17:43) and much good it did him. The name 'Baal-Zebub' means 'lord of the flies' or the 'dung god' referring to flies buzzing around decaying matter and is almost certainly a deliberate change from 'Baal-Zebul' – 'Baal the exalted'. This is a god of death not of life. Matthew 10:25 uses it as a name of Satan, a reminder of the demonic activity behind pagan idolatry.

Ahaziah sends messengers to 'consult' this futile deity who like all the other manifestations of Baal is to prove impotent. This consultation would be by means of an

oracle, a practice forbidden in Leviticus 19:31. This is another deliberate flouting of the words of Moses and a contempt for the prophetic Word which Ahaziah must have known about.

Who is the true God? (1:3-8)

Ahaziah may have sent his messengers but God now sends His and Elijah intercepts Ahaziah's men on the road to Ekron. Such was the authority of Elijah that the messengers risk the royal anger and return to the king with a message from God but not the god he had sent them to. The phrase 'is it because there is no God in Israel?' is a powerful reminder of 1 Kings 18 and it brings a message of judgment. Will Ahaziah repent and seek the Lord in his remaining days? What follows shows that he will not. Instead he is only curious about who sent the message (v. 7) and instantly realises that it is Elijah whom he would be well aware of from his father's reign.

The author does not tell us how he responded to this news in terms of his inner thoughts although in the next section we are to see the action he takes. Probably he had forgotten about Elijah (as Belshazzar forgot about Daniel [Dan. 5:10-13]) and Ahaziah certainly cannot have been pleased at this unwelcome reminder of the past.

God protects His man (1:9-12)

What Ahaziah does now shows both his attempt to intimidate Elijah and also a certain superstitious fear as he sends a whole detachment to arrest one man. The foolishness of this is seen when the captain addresses Elijah as 'man of God', a term which marginalises all earthly authority. It also shows the stupidity of believing in pagan gods who might well be manipulated by earthly

powers. Just as the fire from heaven failed to turn Jezebel from her chosen path (see 1 Kings 19:1-2) so the fate of the first detachment does not turn Ahaziah to repentance and he sends a second captain with a second detachment with the same demand and the same result.

This episode has been much criticised for its alleged vindictiveness and Luke 9:54-55 has been used to see what Elijah did here as barbaric. But we must remember first the situation. For many decades now Israel had systematically abandoned the faith of Yahweh, a process accelerated by Ahab and Jezebel and continuing undiminished under Ahaziah. The name and honour of Yahweh were at stake. The king was demanding the kind of allegiance that no human has any right to demand. In any case it was Yahweh who sent the fire not Elijah and therefore we cannot conclude that God felt He had to vindicate His servant publicly although He did not approve of what he did. There is no hint of this in the text and this conclusion calls into question the very character of God. Also Yahweh is protecting His servant and showing he is the same man as the Elijah of Carmel. The Luke passage must be seen in the whole context of the book. Earlier Jesus had read from Isaiah 61:1-2 stopping at 'the year of the Lord's favour' and before 'the day of vengeance of our God' because that had not yet arrived. Here there is an anticipation of that day in the judgment on the military but we are about to see also grace at work.

Humility averts judgment (1:13-15)

Ahaziah has learned nothing and yet again tries brute force. This time, however, the third captain recognises realities and shows proper respect for the man of God. There is

more here than fear for his life; he is obviously more in awe of Elijah and Elijah's God than he is of Ahaziah and for that matter, Baal-Zebub. God alone knows the heart but there is genuine repentance here. The fact that the angel of Yahweh tells Elijah not to be afraid shows that Elijah's life had been in danger. Ahaziah was neither the first nor last person who thought that he could evade the Word of God by killing the messenger.

Fire from heaven had failed to turn Ahaziah to repentance as it had failed with his father and mother. The king had already heard the Word of God but was unwilling to heed it. This meant that unlike the third captain, judgment is inevitable and this is to be the subject of the final section of the chapter.

God's Word carried out (1:16-18)

There comes a time when the Word which is persistently rejected destroys those who oppose it. Here there is to be no deathbed repentance as the Word of judgment already spoken in verse 4 is carried out. Elijah has nothing more to say to Ahaziah and simply repeats that Word which is swiftly carried out. The ominous phrase 'you will certainly die' (vv. 4, 16) is a deliberate echo of Genesis 2:17 and a reminder that this judgment is not unique to Ahaziah but the sentence on all who sin and fall short of the glory of God, which is everyone. Notice the way verse 17 describes why Ahaziah died not because of his injury but 'according to the Word of Yahweh that Elijah had spoken'. Here is yet another confirmation of the power of the Word of God which we have identified as the main theme of Kings as well as another authentication of Elisha's ministry.

Ahaziah's inglorious reign is over but Ahab's house lives on for a time. Yahweh had said to Elijah He would bring disaster in the reign of Ahab's son (1 Kings 21:29). This disaster, to be described in 2 Kings 9, is to happen in the reign of Jehoram or Joram whom we learn in 2 Kings 3:1 is another son of Ahab. Once again we have a brief note that the events of Ahaziah's reign are recorded in the court records of the Israelite kings and once again we are left to reflect how empty these vanished annals are compared with a name written in the book of life.

From text to message

Getting the message clear: the theme

The Word of the true God will always accomplish its purpose no matter the level of opposition. Pagan superstition may have spurious attraction but will be exposed as hollow and impotent.

Getting the message clear: the aim

To increase confidence in the Word of God will be our emphasis in this rather dark chapter and to emphasise that there is a true God among His people even when they have departed from His ways. A further aim would be to show God's faithfulness to His servant in this, Elijah's last public ministry before he is taken to heaven. We need to emphasise that a faithful Word depends on a faithful God.

A way in

We need to alert people to the sinister side of idolatry. One way of doing this would be to refer to William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies*, written in 1956 but subsequently a regular text taught in English departments. Many will

therefore have read the novel and more will have seen the film. Essentially a story of a group of polite English public school boys marooned on an island who soon turn into a pack of savages. Evil is both inside and around them and this becomes identified with the lord of the flies, a pig's head on a stake in a forest clearing. There, as here, evil is both internal to the human heart and external to it, and in both the novel and 1 Kings 1 it is represented by the lord of the flies.

Here we need to emphasise the contrast between 'consulting' false gods with all its mumbo jumbo and simple obedience to the clear Word of God. I shall look at this further in ideas for application but it must be central as we teach the passage.

Ideas for application

- ✦ This chapter, like so much in the Ahab and sons' story is an exposure of idolatry and we need to think through exactly what we are going to say. How easy it is to expose the idolatries of others, whether Catholic or liberal or even charismatic. That is safe as well because it can easily lapse into playing to the prejudices of our own circles. The key here is the repeated phrase 'is it because there is no God in Israel?' (vv. 3, 6, 16) and that is where the emphasis must lie. Most of us are not likely to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, but this repeated question sharply shows the true nature of idolatry which is where do we turn in a time of crisis? We often lose confidence in the Word of God and use the language and techniques of big business and rely on secular models. These can so easily become more important than humble faithfulness and lead

to fellowships which are theoretically evangelical but which are no longer driven by the Word of God.

- ✦ This chapter also highlights the clash of different kinds of power. The first two captains fear the anger of the king. The third captain's faith like Moses' faith (Heb. 11:27) is shown by not fearing the king's anger. So faith is shown by whether we are more afraid of the visible problem or the invisible God.
- ✦ It is also a chapter of Gospel grace particularly to the third captain who shows that repentance leads to rescue from judgment. Ahaziah and his first two captains could have received the same mercy. If we doubt that we need only read Luke 23:40-43 where one of the vilest offenders truly believes and that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.
- ✦ This passage points to Christ the One who has authority over death, demons and disease and whose words not only have power as Elijah's did but is Himself the living Word of God. Also in the figure of the Angel of Yahweh who is both distinct from God but speaks His very words we have a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. Everything He says is not only true but will come to pass.

Suggestions for preaching

Sermon 1: Which God do you trust?

This would take the repeated question 'is it because there is no God in Israel?' (vv. 3, 6, 16) as a structure for the sermon.

Introduction

Place the story in context of 1 Kings 22:51-53 – continuing line of Ahab.

The true God is faithful

The first time the question is asked (v. 3).

- ✦ His faithfulness in the past – God in Israel rather than, for example, God of heaven, emphasises His blessing of His people.
- ✦ The futility of Philistine gods – see comments in exposition.

The true God is active

The second time the question is asked (v. 6).

- ✦ The fire of judgment – first two captains.
- ✦ The mercy which responds to humility – third captain.

The true God keeps His Word

The third time the question is asked (v. 16).

- ✦ The rejected Word becomes the judging Word.
- ✦ God's servant is vindicated.

Sermon 2

This could focus on the human responses.

Blind unbelief

- ✦ Ahaziah's stubborn defiance.
- ✦ The first two captains' arrogance.

Searching humility

- ✦ Third captain shows trembling before God.
- ✦ He recognises Elijah as true messenger.

Strong confidence

- ✦ Elijah's uncompromising Word.

- ✦ Elijah's authentication.

Suggestions for teaching

Questions to help understand the passage

1. Why does the author mention Moab's rebellion against Israel?
2. Why are we not surprised that Ahaziah sends for help to a pagan god? (See 1 Kings 22:51-53.)
3. Why did the king's messengers return to him without consulting Baal-Zebub?
4. What does the fire from heaven tell us about Elijah and his message? (Read again 1 Kings 18, especially vv. 22-39.)
5. How does the third captain show genuine humility? (vv. 13-14)
6. Why does Elijah simply repeat the words of the original message? (vv. 3, 6, 16)
7. What is the point of verse 18?

Questions to help apply the passage

1. In what ways might we lapse into idolatry even though we do not consult Baal-Zebub, god of Ekron?
2. The question 'is it because there is no God in Israel?' (v. 3 and repeated in vv. 6 and 16) goes right to the heart of faith. What can we learn about faith and superstition in our own time from this?

3. The fire from heaven recalls 1 Kings 18 and is not something we expect to happen in our day. However it teaches us important things about the nature of God. Outline what some of these are.
4. What does this chapter teach us about the gospel of grace?
5. How does this chapter teach us to persist in preaching the Word? (Look again at the repeated question in verses 3, 6, 16.)
6. In what ways does this chapter point to Christ? You might look at the angel of the LORD (vv. 3, 15); at the triumph of the Word and the defeat of the powers of darkness.