

## II Kings 1 The fear of the Lord

### Introduction

To put in context the emotions of the people of Israel around the time of the events with which II Kings 1 begins, it is helpful to offer a more modern example to illustrate it. The most obvious example to me from Europe was the overthrow and execution of the feared dictator of Romania Nicolae Ceausescu in December 1989. Over approximately twenty four years as Communist party leader, including twenty-one as President of Romania, his brutal reign of fear seemed totally secure. The secret police, the Securitate had one of the largest networks of spies to ensure the people complied with his orders. In December 1989 when food shortages led to protests in the western city of Timisoara, Pastor Laszlo Tokes and his congregation took the lead in declaring their concerns from 15 December and the crowds grew increasingly large. The dictator ordered a violent response against the pastor and his fellow protestors and on 17 December that year many were killed, but the protests rather than diminishing spread to other cities across the country, including the capital Bucharest. Open revolt in the capital on 21-22 December led to the arrest of the dictator and his wife and a decision was taken by the army chiefs to order their execution by firing squad on Christmas Day, a video of which was shown to the nation to prevent mass slaughter of protesters by the Securitate. ‘Ceausescu is dead’ changed everything? No! for a time his successors tried to retain much of the repressive state apparatus but gradually reformist voices were stronger and a new era for Romania had begun.

Israel in the time of Ahab and Jezebel had been a reign of terror. *After Ahab’s death...* was an incredibly positive way to introduce the next part of the narrative. [We need to remember that until approx. 200BC it was one book of Kings, but the length of the book was such that it was seen as more convenient to divide it into two with these words.] *After Ahab’s death...* was the appropriate close of an era and the beginning of a new one. I Kings 22:51-53 records that upon Ahab’s death his son Ahaziah took over and reigned for two years. The summary statement given is crystal clear of how God viewed his reign. *He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, because he followed the ways of his father and mother and of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin.* <sup>53</sup> *He served and worshipped Baal and aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, just as his father had done* (I Kings 22:52-53). Ahaziah wanted ‘business as usual’ and intended to defy the God of Israel. Our God is a God of grace and mercy, but also of judgement for sin. There is a price to pay for evil acts. In our society today there are individuals who seek to mock God for not striking them down dead and claim that because ‘nothing happens’ God does not exist. The book of Proverbs repeatedly reminds us that *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge* (Proverbs 1:7) and of *wisdom* (Proverbs 9:10). To live life without taking account of God is the ultimate manifestation of folly. Ahaziah was a fool. In the New Testament we read in II Peter 3:9 these words: *The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* The context of those words is our accounting before God on judgement day, not a pleasant chat over coffee in a café! Are you wise or foolish in taking account of God’s call on your life? Elisha is not named in the passage, but he is there as a silent observer at the last major public engagement of Elijah’s ministry. God is making a very clear statement about His identity to Israel that would set the backdrop to Elisha’s ministry and mark the completion of the work of his predecessor. God had a point to make that needed not only to be remembered but acted upon as well.

## **1. A Reckless Decision** (II Kings 1:1-2)

(a) **A thoughtless way of life** *1 After Ahab's death, Moab rebelled against Israel. <sup>2</sup> Now Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. So he sent messengers, saying to them, 'Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury.'* The ending of the reign of terror meant that a lot of people both within and outside the nation of Israel had legitimate grounds for wanting some significant changes now that Ahab was dead. Smaller less powerful neighbouring kingdoms wanted their freedom back and a bad news day for Ahaziah was compounded by his personal accident at home in the palace. It was not a matter of cuts and bruises but a serious fall that without modern medical intervention, unknown back then, might result in life-threatening injuries. All we know of his life and reign prior to his accident was the following summary: *He served and worshipped Baal and aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, just as his father had done* (I Kings 22:53). By contrast towards the end of his life King Ahab finally got the message of how God viewed his misconduct. God gave this revelation to Elijah which is recorded in I Kings 21:27-29: *When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.<sup>28</sup> Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: <sup>29</sup> 'Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.'* The warning had been given by God. The outstanding question was whether the son of Ahab would acknowledge that or not. The sad fact was that this young adult had no time for God or His servant and had no intention of heeding His Word. His life was doing 'just fine'. How many people live their lives like that today? To live life defying God is a very dangerous step to take. When the wooden fence or railings gave way and this arrogant individual plunged towards the hard ground below it was more than part of a building that was in difficulties.

(b) **The life-changing injuries** In serious pain with his injuries on the floor Ahaziah needs help quickly. However, with no medical service as we understand it to assist him, the only sources of help to which he can turn are religious leaders. Will he humble himself and seek the assistance of the God of Israel who had shown Himself so powerful in the test by fire on Mount Carmel? Or will he persist in appealing to the Baals who were so impotent on that momentous day? The choice he made is recorded in I Kings 1:2: *So he sent messengers, saying to them, 'Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury.'* This religious shrine was forty-five miles away. Even with fast horses and a royal chariot his servants would take a considerable amount of time getting there and back when time was of the essence. God will not be mocked. This is the ruler of the covenant people who would have sworn their allegiance to Him not to prostitute their affections to any god they could find in a religious marketplace. It is as unpopular today as it was then to speak of God's exclusive claims on our allegiance. Jesus could not have been clearer to His followers when He said in John 14:6: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.* There are huge pressures to water down this truth today, but Jesus takes exactly the same line as God the Father in the Old Testament on this requirement for absolute loyalty from His people. Ahaziah had no excuse. He as a young adult knew all that had gone on at Carmel and the proof of God's power and authority over these Canaanite gods, but he chose to ignore the evidence presented to the nation. Have you taken a decision to follow Jesus yet? This is the most important choice you will ever take. I urge you to make sure you take it today and commit your life to follow after Him.

## 2. A Resolute Declaration (II Kings 1:3-8)

(a) A divine response (II Kings 1:3-4) *But the angel of the Lord said to Elijah the Tishbite, 'Go up and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and ask them, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?"'*<sup>4</sup> *Therefore this is what the Lord says: "You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!"'* So Elijah went.

Yet in the midst of a crisis in the palace, the private conversation there was reported to the man of God in the mountains. It will become a familiar pattern as an enraged King of Aram searching for a traitor in his inner circle, some years later, received this reply from a senior army officer in II Kings 6:12: *'None of us, my lord the king,' said one of his officers, 'but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.'* We occasionally sing a song in church which has the line 'Our God is greater'. It is true! Sometimes as Christians we can forget the awesomeness of God and fail to acknowledge that He is the sovereign Lord over all. God knows everything. He not only sees the things we do and hears the words we say, but also knows the attitudes and thoughts in our minds. This might be disturbing at one level that someone else knows us so well. However, the amazing thing is that God loves you and me despite knowing all our faults and failings. He sent Jesus to die on the cross for sinners who did not deserve His love and mercy. On our own our situation is serious; but listen to these wonderful words from the apostle Paul in Romans 5:9-11: *Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!*<sup>10</sup> *For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!*<sup>11</sup> *Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.* God's grace is given to the undeserving, not to people who were so good they had to be welcomed into God's family. Paul notes both our plight and its resolution in Romans 6:23: *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Have you received this free gift of salvation? Lots of people try all kind of ways to meet their spiritual needs, but they are dead-ends not a reliable route to your final destination. Ahaziah was willing to try all kinds of gods for assistance from the Baals of his mother Jezebel's homeland in what we call today Lebanon, to the Baal of the Philistine city of Ekron to the south of his kingdom. He knew about Elijah and the God of Israel. He had made a conscious and settled choice to reject Him. The problem of today is not whether a God of love sends people to hell – He doesn't. Instead the problem then and now is that people chose to reject the alternative provision a God of grace has made for sinners like them and God allows them to face the consequences of their own choices. He will not force anyone to enter His eternal kingdom. He has provided the best gift He could give to us in sending Jesus, but we have the duty and responsibility of receiving the gift of salvation for ourselves. What choice have you made?

(b) A clear message (II Kings 1:5-6)<sup>5</sup> *When the messengers returned to the king, he asked them, 'Why have you come back?'*<sup>6</sup> *'A man came to meet us,' they replied. 'And he said to us, "Go back to the king who sent you and tell him, "This is what the Lord says: is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!"'* What did Elijah say to the messengers of the king on their way to Ekron?<sup>4</sup> *Therefore this is what the Lord says: "You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!"'* So Elijah went. The palace officials were doing as they were told on their secret errand. It was bad enough trying to rush to this religious shrine in the hope of getting a quick answer of hopefully good news for their master, but somehow the news had leaked and this strange man standing beside the road was aware of their errand. That reality alone would have sobered the most hardened palace official. There was no way the stranger had found out by some other means. He knows the king's predicament! God's

intervention on roadsides can also be for good news. In the Acts of the Apostles the Lord told Philip the Evangelist to stand by the main Gaza road in the mid-day sun to meet a total stranger with a message from God. This time it was the good news of the gospel (Acts 8:26-40), which led to the Ethiopian official professing faith and being baptised and taking the good news of Jesus home to his nation and led the start of the Ethiopian Church which continues to this day. God will do what it takes to pass on the news He wants us to hear – the problem is that sometimes we are not listening to His voice.

There was no point the messengers continuing to Ekron so they turned round and returned to the palace. However, despite his serious pain the King was well aware it was physically impossible to have got to Ekron and back in the time they had been away. The servants would have been very nervous about telling the King the bad news. In an era where social inferiors could be executed on a whim of those in power, they were taking a chance here, but they had rightly become convinced that God had spoken through Elijah. Why was it that these servants or employees of the King could recognise God's voice, but he could not? It is not new. Carl Henry, the distinguished Christian theologian of the last century was once discussing the views of cosmologists Sir Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinghe. They had concluded that life began on earth from outer space. They had projected 'a supraterrrestrial principle of intelligence, one somewhat more than human yet less than ultimate and absolute and hence not a personal God.' What did they hold this view? 'For one thing it offers the possibility of high intelligence within the universe that is not God.' [Carl Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, Vol.6, pp. 178-179]. Like Ahaziah of old they did want to acknowledge their personal accountability to God. I guess there was an issue of pride. The king believed his own propaganda about his exalted status and his pride got in the way of acknowledging the God of Israel. Have you bowed the knee to King Jesus? Or is there a false sense of pride or something else that has got in the way?

(c) **A recognised messenger** (I Kings 1:7) *The king asked them, 'What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?'* <sup>8</sup> *They replied, 'He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt round his waist.'* *The king said, 'That was Elijah the Tishbite.'* It was not a question of intelligence; the king knew all about the God of Israel and His servant Elijah. All along he was almost certainly fearful of Elijah finding out about his secret mission to consult the Baal at Ekron and raising a protest about it. He made his plans – but remember Proverbs 16:9 which states: *In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.* In his troubled conscience – which he would have vehemently denied- the King knew what he should have done and deliberately chose to take another course of action. God has granted each one of us the privilege of hearing and the responsibility of receiving the good news of Jesus and putting our faith and trust in Him. We can have no excuses if we fail to heed His call- with eternal consequences.

### 3. **A Royal Disaster** (II Kings 1:9-18)

(a) **The God who answers by fire** (II Kings 1:9-12) *Then he sent to Elijah a captain with his company of fifty men. The captain went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, 'Man of God, the king says, "Come down!"'* <sup>10</sup> *Elijah answered the captain, 'If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!'* *Then the fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.* <sup>11</sup> *At this the king sent to Elijah another captain with his fifty men. The captain said to him, 'Man of God, this is what the king says, "Come down at once!"'* <sup>12</sup> *'If I am a man of God,' Elijah replied, 'may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!'* *Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men.* Some commentators on this passage have completely missed the point about what is going on here.

Ahaziah was not inviting Elijah for the ancient equivalent of afternoon tea. To deliver a letter it only requires a postman or woman, not fifty of your finest troops! The intention was to arrest Elijah and possibly execute him- if he was not willing to do whatever the King requested. The first commander came with an order and was fully intending to carry it out. It never occurred to him that there would be a problem. It would have been reasonable to expect that the King having heard what happened would have tried a different approach with Elijah rather than barking orders for compliance. Take two was a repeat with another fifty men with the same outcome. We do want to credit the King with a degree of intelligence, but we have to try harder than usual to find some kind of logic behind his utter arrogant stupidity. God had already spoken to the nation on Mount Carmel. This was the test of authority between the Canaanite gods and Yahweh. The God that answers by fire is the winner (I Kings 18:24, 38-39). There was no doubt on the day that Yahweh was the victor, but the royal family did not listen. They were like the Stuart monarchy in the UK a few hundred years ago who believed in the divine right of kings to choose the religion of all their subjects and everything else that went on in their realms. The particular response by Elijah here was not personal to the soldiers; rather it was a message to the King that God –the God of Israel is in charge. He has not changed. The verdict of Carmel was repeated twice with a view to communicating a clear message to the King, but he foolishly choose to ignore it, as did the commanding officers of the first two groups of soldiers. What does it take you or me to listen to God’s voice?

In the 1920s in the Soviet Union a Baptist pastor with the last name of Martens was arrested for his faith and brought to the local Communist party boss. He was told he would be stripped naked for interrogation. But he responded ever so graciously to all the unreasonable responses. In this case he told them not to bother as he was quite able to undress himself –if required. When he was threatened that he might not go home, he quietly indicated that his life was in God’s hands as to whether he lived or died. The party boss was outraged saying it was he not God who would decide whether he lived or died. In fact, the man declared, I will kill you. He took out his revolver to shoot him dead but his finger froze on the trigger and could not pull it. He paused, relaxed for a few moments and then tried again. Exactly the same thing happened. A third attempt was made by which time he was totally flustered and red-faced totally beside himself that he was not in control. A junior official came in and asked what the problem was. On being told by the boss, the man replied: ‘Martens is a Baptist. Can’t you see God is fighting for him.’ The pastor was ordered to leave the building! Many died in such situations, but here in His sovereignty God was making a point to this official (James and Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood*, pp.233-234). We do not know if Elisha had been on Mount Carmel standing in the crowd and witnessing the extraordinary events of that day. However, he was certainly here to witness the same declaration from the God who answers by fire, that He not Ahaziah the king was in charge. We too need to retain our confidence that the Lord God Almighty reigns!

(b)**The God who responds to a humble plea** (II Kings 1:13-15) *So the king sent a third captain with his fifty men. This third captain went up and fell on his knees before Elijah. ‘Man of God,’ he begged, ‘please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants!’<sup>14</sup> See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!’<sup>15</sup> The angel of the Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go down with him; do not be afraid of him.’* Now there are two ways we can view this captain and the choice he made. We might take the pragmatic option and state that he knows what happened to the previous two groups of soldiers and regardless of his own political or religious opinions he is not so stupid as to order Elijah to come with him as the others had done –in other words self-preservation. The second option is that basic manners and respect for others is always a good policy. So he has nothing to lose by being respectful to Elijah. However, this cannot be separated from a

healthy fear or reverence for the God of Elijah. It was not the man but his God who sent the consuming fire. Behind this course of action I believe was an appropriate respect for the God of Elijah. Too often today in too many churches, never mind people who don't claim faith in God, there is no reverent fear of the Lord. God is not anyone's best mate. He is the sovereign Lord of the Universe, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Over familiarity can too often become disrespect for God. A right fear of God is essential as another aspect of His character as well as His love. Do you honour God enough to do what He says to you in the choices you make? In August 1756 on a temporary stage outside Haworth Parish Church in Yorkshire, the greatest Evangelist of the era George Whitfield looking over the gathered multitude solemnly announced his text: *It is appointed unto men once to die, and then the judgement.* He paused for a few seconds, then a wild terrifying shriek was uttered by someone in the congregation who promptly collapsed and died. The vicar William Grimshaw having confirmed the death walked to the front, ascended the steps and declared with emotion in his voice: 'Brother Whitfield you stand amongst the dead and the dying – an immortal soul has been called into eternity- the destroying angel is passing over the congregation, cry aloud and spare not!'. Another pause, then Whitfield again solemnly read his text and moments later near to where Lady Huntingdon and Lady Margaret Ingham were standing, a second man shrieked and dropped dead. After a suitable delay to remove the dead man, the preacher in an atmosphere of intense stillness began for a third time his sermon- urging sinners to turn to Christ and flee from the wrath to come [A Seymour, *Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon*, Vol.1, pp. 344-345]. It was a right fear of God. John Newton in his well-known hymn Amazing Grace, wrote verse two with these lines: 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed' Do you have a right fear of God?

(c) **The God we fear or trust by faith** (II Kings 1:16-18) *So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king. <sup>16</sup> He told the king, 'This is what the Lord says: is it because there is no God in Israel for you to consult that you have sent messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Because you have done this, you will never leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!'* <sup>17</sup> *So he died, according to the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken. Because Ahaziah had no son, Joram succeeded him as king in the second year of Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah. <sup>18</sup> As for all the other events of Ahaziah's reign, and what he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?* Ahaziah was a fool. He ignored the God of Israel who had convincingly shown his wicked father who is on the throne! God in human history has to our knowledge rarely acted in this direct and blunt way, but He has laid down a marker that those who fail to take Him seriously will one day face the consequences. His grace and mercy offered to evil men like Ahab Ahaziah's father- if they will repent of it- is also shocking to many people today, but we can only understand the generosity and mercy of God if we grasp that He also takes sin and its punishment extremely seriously as well. Anyone no matter how bad they have been can come to God for forgiveness because Jesus' sacrifice can cleanse the worst of sinners and bring them into fellowship with God. No one is too bad to be beyond God's grace and no-one is too good not to need His mercy and grace. I hope and pray each one of us has reached out to Jesus for His saving grace, for His name's sake, Amen.