

October 17, 2021

God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha
VI. The Holiness of God
II Kings 1:1-18, Hebrews 10:31

King Ahaziah really should have known better. Maybe he had not been old enough to be there with his father Ahab on Mt. Carmel the day God had sent down fire from heaven to consume the offering and to put to flight the prophets of Baal.¹ But surely he had heard about that day. And surely he had heard his parents groaning about Elijah and what a nuisance he was – his father perhaps doing so with a little awe mixed in with the annoyance, but his mother Jezebel no doubt with nothing but an attitude of hatred and contempt. So, King Ahaziah really should have known better.

But clearly he didn't. He falls from an upper chamber in his palace and injures himself badly enough to wonder whether he will live or die. But instead of calling for Elijah – and, through Elijah, the true God of Israel – he sends out messengers to inquire of the prophets of Baal in Ekron (Philistine country, no less!) whether he will live or die. The Lord God sends Elijah to interrupt these messengers, to say to Ahaziah through them: *“Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron? 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.”* The messengers turn back to report this encounter, this message, to the king. Ahaziah puts two and two together and comes up with Elijah. And, in that moment, knowing what he had to have known about Elijah, he had a choice – better yet, he had a chance – a chance right then and there to repent, like his father would have done. A chance to turn away from the false god Baal, back to the true God of Israel. A chance to repent, to be healed, and to live instead of to die.

What does he do? King Ahaziah chooses unwisely. And the next thing we know, we are in an Old Testament version of the climactic scene in Stephen Spielberg's “Raiders of the Lost Ark”, with Nazi soldiers melting away beneath the fire of the Lord God of Israel. And when King Ahaziah finally does come to his senses – or, really, it's not even him coming to his senses. It's just captain number three not wanting to share the fate of captains one and two, and therefore approaching Elijah with fear and reverence for the God he serves. But when this happens, and God tells Elijah to go with this third troop of soldiers to see the king, it's already too late. King Ahaziah, by sticking with Baal, by defying the living God in trying to capture or even kill His prophet, Elijah – in doing these things, King Ahaziah has already sealed his fate. And he dies. He dies when he could have lived – if only he had bowed down before the right God, the true God, the God of Israel.

What are we to make of such a story? It is a story, I think, that speaks to us of the holiness of our God. Of that great truth that our God is a holy God, and therefore is not to be mocked, not to be trifled with, not to be disregarded, and most of all not to be defied. It's right there in the First Commandment, that we should have no other gods before him²; and we get it again in the Third, that we should not take His name in vain³. The letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: that it is a

“fearful thing” to fall into the hands of the living God. Which is a reminder that we mortals live only by His pleasure, that our continued existence rests solely upon His good favor – that He is Almighty God, maker of the heavens and the earth; and that we are but the mortal creatures formed by His hand. That’s the relationship between God and human beings defined by this doctrine of the holiness of God. And that’s what Hebrews means when it says that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Not that we should, at all times, be terrified of Him or terrified of His anger – for Scripture has taught us to know also that He is good towards us, that He is merciful and kind, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love⁴. Indeed, in the Incarnation of Jesus, we see that His very nature towards us is love.⁵ But that, nonetheless, we should always understand that He is God, and we are not. He is God – and that it is in Him alone that we live and move and have our being. He is God – and that is He, in all things and at all times, with whom we have to do in this world. He is God – and we are but the fragile and contingent and dependent creatures of His hand.

No one in the modern era has captured this aspect of the holiness of God perhaps as well as C. S. Lewis in his wonderful Chronicles of Narnia – which every child should read, and probably every grown-up too! In the very first book of the series, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the children – Peter, Susan, Lucy, and Edmund – enter the Kingdom of Narnia through a wardrobe in their uncle’s house. Edmund, much like King Ahaziah, has already given his allegiance to the wrong party – in this case, to the witch – and he sneaks off to join her. The other children go to the home of the Beavers, who take them in. Mr. and Mrs. Beaver tell the children that they will take them to see the great King of Narnia, Aslan. This is what follows:

“Is – is he a man?” asked Lucy.
“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not . . . Don’t you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion.”
“Ooh,” said Susan, “I thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”
“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”
“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.
“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king, I tell you.”⁶

“Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe . . . He’s the king.” That is the holiness of our God. He is not safe – in the sense that we dare not dismiss Him, dare not deny Him, dare not defy Him, dare not live in indifference towards Him on a daily basis. He is holy – He is not safe. He holds in His hands power over our living and our dying. And, therefore, *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”*

But He is also good. Which means that the only thing more fearful than to fall into His hands – is not to fall into His hands. This, too, we find in King Ahaziah’s story. By refusing to call upon the name of the true God of Israel, by refusing to repent of Baal when given the chance,

Ahaziah brings upon himself an entirely avoidable death. This too, then, is the holiness of God – simply that our response to Him is quite literally a matter of life and death. Turn our backs upon Him, the Source of our life – live daily as if His presence and His power and His claim upon us are irrelevant to our daily aims and conduct, or even objectionable to our sense of self – and we are courting death instead of life. But to give ourselves into His hands, to fall into the hands of the living and holy God who made us, and to do so with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, is to gain life, more and more life, deeper and deeper life, day by day – and so to be delivered not only from our death, but even from our fear of death.

Which brings to mind a certain sort of funeral that I have no doubt we have all attended – a certain sort of funeral sermon which we have all heard. That one where the preacher, having told us of how the dearly departed found Christ in time, found Christ before the hour of his passing, then turns to the congregation and asks, *“What about you? This could happen to you at any moment – death! Are you ready? Are you prepared to meet your God? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Or will you wait until it is too late?”* My Presbyterian soul always cringes at that message. In great part because I am not convinced that such a message is the right one in such a moment of grief. But also because that message is not wrong. It is absolutely the truth. To fall into the hands of the living and holy God may be a fearful thing – but not to do so? That is terrifying – for it is literally a matter of life and death, of eternal life and eternal death. To fall into the hands of the living God, fearful as it may be, to give ourselves to Him without holding anything back, is to find life – and to have it abundantly. *“Safe? . . . Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe.”* Give our lives to Him and He will turn them upside-down, reorient our daily living towards His Way and His Truth and His Life⁷. *“But he’s good”* – meaning that in giving ourselves to Him, we will at last find everything that our hearts have been longing for, in fact were created for. Life with God, and that abundantly.

Which brings up something else about the holiness of God which is found in our story. We’ve been looking at this story, so far, from the perspective of King Ahaziah, and of his failure to bow down before the holiness of God. But there is another perspective available to us – that of Elijah, God’s prophet. The story reads very differently from his perspective. When King Ahaziah sends those captains and their fifty soldiers to Elijah, they are not coming to engage Elijah in a polite theological discussion, nor to invite him to come have tea with the king in the palace. They are coming, at the very least, to lay hold of him and bring him in chains back to the king. And that’s the best-case scenario. The most likely scenario is that they have been sent by Ahaziah to put Elijah to the sword. And yet, look at Elijah, calmly sitting there on top of his hill as they approach. No fear, not even a quiver of alarm. Why? Because Elijah has fallen into the hands of the living God – and completely so. And, therefore, because the Holy God is now with him. Or, to say it better, because Elijah is now on the side of the holy God. For King Ahaziah, the holiness of God is a profound, life or death irruption condemning his idolatry and indifference. But for Elijah, the holiness of God is a powerful protection. In the words of the Psalmist:

*Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—
no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.⁸*

To fall into the hands of the living and holy God may be a fearful thing – but it is precisely that “fearful thing” which causes all our other fears to be relieved.

We can picture it this way. Presbyterian pastor John Ortberg tells of watching with his children a movie entitled, *The Bear*. In this movie, an orphaned bear cub is adopted by a giant Kodiak bear. The Kodiak watches over the cub, teaches him how to be a bear, protects him. Watching this, you know this little cub will have a future. But then one day the cub becomes separated from the Kodiak and finds himself being stalked by a mountain lion. The mountain lion draws closer and closer, until he is nearly face to face with the cub. The little cub does what he has seen the Kodiak do – he rears back on his hind legs, raises his paws, and growls. But the mountain lion is not frightened at all by this display from this little cub – and everyone fears what is about to happen. The camera closes in on the snarling face of the mountain lion – which suddenly begins to register alarm, and then outright terror. The mountain lion turns and runs away as fast as he can. And, as the camera pulls back slowly, the reason is revealed. Just behind that little bear cub rearing up on his hind legs is that massive Kodiak rearing up on his hind legs, enormous paws ready to defend the cub.⁹

To fall into the hands of the living God is a fearful thing – because He is not safe, He is holy. Which means that to fall into His hands is to surrender the right to run our lives as we see fit – it is to learn to pray, “*Not my will, but Thine be done.*” It is to live no longer for self, but for Him above all else. But if He is not safe for our lives as they have been, He is – and in all things will prove Himself to be – absolutely good for our lives as they shall become in Him. Meaning that to fall into His hands is to fall into a safety, a security, an “all things will work together for good¹⁰” sort of peace which will take our other fears away. We may still be that little cub facing a world of woes and ills and enemies – but behind us always now is that great Kodiak bear of the power and providence of Almighty God. In learning to fear and reverence the living and holy God above all else, we lose any need to fear all lesser things and beings. For what we fear can no longer overwhelm or overcome us – once we have fallen in the hands of the holy and almighty God.

And then there is just one more thing we find in our passage about the holiness of God. We’ve been hinting out it – but now we should bring it out into the open. So back to that first encounter between Elijah and the messengers King Ahaziah had send to Baal in Ekron. This last thing is there in the message God gives Elijah to pass on to the king: “*Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?*” Did you hear it? I completely missed it, until I read it in an old, 1865 sermon by a German Reformed pastor named Friedrich Wilhelm Kummacher. In his classic work, *Elijah the Tishbite*, he finds in this word God speaks to Ahaziah through Elijah something more than just God’s anger, God’s condemnation of Ahaziah’s pursuit of Baal. He finds also the longing of God that Ahaziah – and that all of us – should indeed seek after Him. The longing of God that we should always freely seek after Him.¹¹ Krummacher links that longing of God in our passage to other divine expressions of that same longing – particularly to those God would later express through His prophet Isaiah:

*I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;
I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me . . .¹²
Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob;
but you have been weary of me, O Israel!¹³*

Kummacher calls this “*the mournful complaint of a neglected and disregarded friend.*”¹⁴ An unveiling of the deepest longing of our holy God – which is that we should indeed seek Him, seek to fall into His loving, creating, protecting hands. Would that God’s longing, says Kummacher, should find in us a “*ready ear and an open heart.*”¹⁵

It may be a fearful thing to fall into the hands of our living and holy God. If we have not found it to be so, it may just be because we have not yet fully grasped what is demanded of us. But it is this same living and holy God who longs for us to do just that. That we should give ourselves into His hands, body and soul, in life and in death – that we should be His and He should be ours, forever.

¹ I Kings 18:20-40.

² Exodus 20:3.

³ Exodus 20:7.

⁴ Psalm 103:8.

⁵ John 3:16.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (New York: Puffin Books, 1978), p. 75.

⁷ John 14:6.

⁸ Psalm 91:9-10.

⁹ John Ortberg, Love Beyond Reason (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 166-167.

¹⁰ Romans 8:28.

¹¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher, Elijah the Tishbite (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1865), pp. 275-277.

¹² Isaiah 65:1.

¹³ Isaiah 43:22.

¹⁴ Krummacher, p. 275.

¹⁵ Krummacher, p. 276.