



2 Kings



REFORMED

EXPOSITORY

COMMENTARY

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

2 Kings

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

Testament Editors

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

2 Kings

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2019 by Philip Graham Ryken

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865–0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. ESV Text Edition: 2016. The ESV® text appearing in this publication is reproduced and published by cooperation between Good News Publishers and P&R Publishing and by permission of Good News Publishers. Unauthorized reproduction of this publication is prohibited.

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved. English Standard Version®, ESV®, and the ESV® logo are trademarks of Good News Publishers located in Wheaton, Illinois. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

ISBN: 978-1-62995-446-2 (cloth)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-447-9 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-448-6 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ryken, Philip Graham, 1966- author.

Title: 2 Kings / Philip Graham Ryken.

Other titles: Second Kings

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2019. | Series: Reformed expository commentaries | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018042726 | ISBN 9781629954462 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781629954479 (epub) | ISBN 9781629954486 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Kings, 2nd--Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS1335.53 .R95 2019 | DDC 222/.54077--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018042726>

To David Gieser,
whose faithful, sacrificial leadership of the
Wheaton College Board of Trustees
has served to advance the kingdom of Jesus Christ

CONTENTS

Series Introduction ix

Preface xiii

Part 1: Elisha: The Prophet Who Followed the Forerunner

1. No Chance of Recovery (2 Kings 1:1–18) 5
2. Chariots of Fire (2 Kings 2:1–18) 18
3. A Tale of Two Cities (2 Kings 2:19–25) 30
4. It Depends on Whom You Ask (2 Kings 3:1–27) 43
5. Jars and Jars Full (2 Kings 4:1–7) 56
6. Get Your Hopes Up! (2 Kings 4:8–37) 69
7. Elisha’s Secret Recipe (2 Kings 4:38–44) 82
8. The Gospel of Free Grace (2 Kings 5:1–18) 94
9. The Root of All (Kinds of) Evil (2 Kings 5:19–27) 108
10. We Have Them Outnumbered! (2 Kings 6:1–23) 120
11. This Is a Day of Good News (2 Kings 6:24–7:20) 135
12. The Resurrection and the Life (2 Kings 8:1–6) 147
13. In the Days of Evil Kings (2 Kings 8:7–27) 159
14. Vengeance Belongs to the Lord (2 Kings 8:28–9:37) 173
15. A Halfhearted Effort (2 Kings 10:1–36) 186
16. Long Live the King! (2 Kings 11:1–21) 201
17. How to Run a Building Campaign (2 Kings 12:1–21) 213
18. There’s Still Life in Elisha’s Old Bones (2 Kings 13:1–25) 229

Contents

Part 2: Rush to Judgment: A Tragedy of Two Kingdoms

| | |
|--|-----|
| 19. After the Death of Elisha (2 Kings 14:1–22) | 247 |
| 20. Game of Thrones (2 Kings 14:23–15:31) | 259 |
| 21. Extreme Makeover: Temple Edition (2 Kings 15:32–16:20) | 273 |
| 22. When Judgment Comes (2 Kings 17:1–23) | 287 |
| 23. They Were the Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24–41) | 299 |
| 24. Conviction and Compromise (2 Kings 18:1–37) | 313 |
| 25. Bad-News Prayers (2 Kings 19:1–37) | 328 |
| 26. In Sickness and in Health (2 Kings 20:1–21) | 344 |
| 27. From Bad to Worst (2 Kings 21:1–26) | 360 |
| 28. Lost and Found (2 Kings 22:1–20) | 372 |
| 29. Josiah’s Reformation (2 Kings 23:1–30) | 385 |
| 30. The Beginning of the End (2 Kings 23:31–24:20) | 401 |
| 31. The Babylonian Captivity (2 Kings 25:1–30) | 413 |
| | |
| Bibliography | 429 |
| Index of Scripture | 435 |
| Index of Subjects and Names | 447 |

SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confes-

Series Introduction

sion of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

This book has taken several decades to write. It began with messages on the ministry of Elisha that I first preached in the 1990s when I served at Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church. Much later, I taught the same passages for the Joint Heirs Sunday school class at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. As I continued to teach all the way through to the end of 2 Kings, I began to write the full manuscript for this expository commentary.

It takes a kingdom community to produce a book like this one. I am eternally grateful for the encouragement I received at Tenth Church when I began to preach 2 Kings. I am also very thankful for the opportunity to teach at College Church, where members of Joint Heirs improved this commentary by offering fresh insights and raising thoughtful questions.

As usual, this writing project for the Reformed Expository Commentary has been thoroughly reviewed by Iain Duguid and Rick Phillips, who corrected mistakes, introduced new ideas, strengthened the practical application, and generally elevated the manuscript. Lynn Wartsbaugh painstakingly entered all the edits before I entrusted the book to P&R for its good work as publisher. Mary Ryken kindly assisted with the final proofs.

These friends join me in the hope that studying 2 Kings will bring readers as much spiritual conviction and gospel encouragement as it has brought to us. The kingdom stories of the Old Testament are vitally important to our Christian faith and witness. When the German pastor Justus Menius published a commentary on 1 Samuel in 1532, he asked Martin Luther to provide the preface. What Luther said about 1 Samuel applies equally well to our engagement with 2 Kings: "You will see that these histories are being reborn and renovated through the use of faith, as if through a baptism of their own, and that they live for us in our own age—or, rather, forever—and, with their magnificent and most glorious examples of faith they serve usefully for instruction, for argument, for

Preface

teaching, for consolation, indeed, for everything for which, as Paul writes, the word of faith is powerful.”¹

Philip Graham Ryken
President, Wheaton College

1. Derek Cooper, ed., *1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), liv.

 *2 Kings*

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF
ISRAEL AND JUDAH

PART 1



*Elisha: The Prophet Who
Followed the Forerunner*

1

NO CHANCE OF RECOVERY

2 Kings 1:1–18

Thus says the LORD, “Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebul, 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.” So he died according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken. (2 Kings 1:16–17)



uring the summer of 1995, Mickey Mantle lay in his hospital bed with severe cancer of the liver. A lifetime of the drinking that had begun during his days as a center fielder for the New York Yankees had finally caught up with him. Mickey was having chemo, but really there was no chance of recovery.

Things that matter when you are a big baseball star do not seem to matter very much when you are just another cancer patient. A career total of 536 home runs, a lifetime batting average of .298, seven World Series Championships, three Most Valuable Player awards, and a Triple Crown will get you into the Hall of Fame. But they will not get you into heaven. Everything a man has done with his life amounts to nothing when he is lying on his deathbed.

Just ask Ahaziah, who came into power “after the death of Ahab,” in the

days when “Moab rebelled against Israel” (2 Kings 1:1). Second Kings opens with Ahaziah lying on his deathbed. The next king in the troubled kingdom of Israel has had an unfortunate little accident at home. Whether because he was drunk, clumsy, or simply attempting dangerous repairs around the palace, Ahaziah had fallen “through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay sick” (v. 2). The Hebrew word for *lattice* means “window” or “balcony.” Perhaps the king was cleaning the windows when he fell from the second story. Or maybe the balustrade he was leaning against gave way. In any case, his injuries turned out to be serious. So as the story opens, Ahaziah’s life hangs in the balance. He is lying on his couch in the royal apartment, afraid that he might not recover.

What would you do if you were badly hurt? What if you thought you might be lying on your deathbed? Ahaziah did two things, and they were both the wrong things to do: he consulted the devil and confronted God.

DANCING WITH THE DEVIL

Given where he stands in Israel’s continuing story, as told in the unified narrative of 1 and 2 Kings, it is not surprising to see the son of King Ahab—the epitome of evil—do the wrong thing. Ahaziah “sent messengers, telling them, ‘Go, inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness’” (2 Kings 1:2). The name *Baal-zebul* means “lord of the flies.” Perhaps he was a god who was supposed to protect his worshipers from flies and other insects. Or perhaps the name *Baal-zebul* is a Hebrew insult. It sounds almost like the title *Baal-zebul*, which means “prince of Baal.” Maybe his real name was Baal-zebul but the Israelites called him Baal-zebul just to make fun of him. Whoever he was, he was one of the false gods of the Canaanites.

In the New Testament, the same deity is called Beelzebul, or Beelzebub. When Jesus cast out demons, some people said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons” (Luke 11:15). Jesus answered by acknowledging the spiritual reality of such demons: “If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebub. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out?” (vv. 18–19). These questions indicate that *Beelzebub* is another name for Satan, for the master of the house of demons (Matt.

10:25). So when King Ahaziah tried to consult Baal-zebub, he was consulting the devil himself.

Of course, there was no good reason for Ahaziah to send for Baal-zebub. The king could (and should) have called upon the God of Israel instead. As his messengers were traveling toward Ekron, they met one of God's true prophets on the road. Elijah had been sent to tell them that their king had no chance of recovery. For "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? 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" (2 Kings 1:3-4). How typical of Elijah to catch the house of Ahab unawares! Whether it was to announce God's judgment on Israel's idolatry (1 Kings 17:1) or to pronounce disaster against Ahab himself for his murderous greed (21:20-22), the prophet was always turning up where he was least welcome, and with bad news, too.

The king was shocked to see his messengers back at the palace so soon. "Why have you returned?" Ahaziah demanded (2 Kings 1:5). They replied, "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'" (v. 6). Unfortunately, Ahaziah was more concerned about the man than his message. "He said to them, 'What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?' They answered him, 'He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.'" The king recognized him at once: "It is Elijah the Tishbite" (vv. 7-8).

If he really wanted to know the truth, Ahaziah could have found out what God's prophet had to say about his chances of recovery. Like godly King Jehoshaphat, Ahaziah could have sought the counsel of the Lord (see 1 Kings 22:5). He could have sent for Elijah instead of going to Ekron. He knew very well where to get hold of God's prophet, but he chose to talk to the devil instead. He was looking for healing in all the wrong places. This is why God condemned him three times with this rhetorical question: "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?" (2 Kings 1:3, 6, 16).

No Chance of Recovery

Is there no God in Israel? Of course there is! He is the God who sent three years of drought on the land (1 Kings 17:1). He is the God who fed Elijah with ravens, gave bread to the widow of Zarephath, and raised her son from the dead (vv. 8–24). He is the God who sent fire on the mountain and destroyed the prophets of Baal (18:20–40). He is the God who spoke to Elijah in the still, small voice (1 Kings 19:9–18). He is the God who met Ahab in the vineyard and judged him for his sins by striking him down in battle (1 Kings 21; 22:29–40). Yes, there *is* a God in Israel! The burden of Elijah’s ministry had been to demonstrate the reality and the sovereignty of almighty God. But Ahaziah would have nothing to do with him. By consulting with evil powers, he was denying the sovereign reality of God. He chose to dance with the devil rather than to walk with God.

Ahaziah’s bad example teaches us not to go to the devil for help, which may be more tempting in our culture than we sometimes realize. Witchcraft, astrology, and the occult are alive and well in postmodern America. When I lived and served in the city of Philadelphia, I could walk out the doors of Tenth Presbyterian Church, take a short stroll in any direction, and consult a medium: up 17th Street to the north, over to Walnut Street to the west, across Spruce Street to the east, or down to South Street. Crystal balls, tarot cards, palm readings—you name it, I could get it—to say nothing of the psychic hotlines advertised on television and the horoscopes in the newspapers and magazines.

The devil would be happy to set up an appointment with you, too, but if you follow Christ you must *not* consult him. To know God’s will, do what King Jehoshaphat did: seek the counsel of the Lord (see 1 Kings 22:5). Read the Bible and pray for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. But do not send for Beelzebub.

Most people—including some Christians—have too little respect for the power of Satan. They consider horoscopes relatively harmless. They may even check them from time to time, just for fun. When they walk by a spiritist shop, they feel a little spooky, but do not sense the spiritual danger and stop to pray against it. Yet these are the kinds of spiritual powers—astrology, witchcraft, spiritism, and consulting with Beelzebub—that are condemned everywhere in Scripture. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,” the Bible teaches, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).

One way to tell whether we have enough respect for demonic powers is to notice how often we pray against them. Jesus instructs his disciples to pray *every day* for spiritual protection. Remember the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13). Read literally, this is not a general prayer about evil but a specific prayer for deliverance from *the evil one*, Satan himself. Christians should pray daily that their churches and pastors will not stumble into his traps. We should pray daily that our friends and families will be delivered from his temptations. And we should pray daily that God would protect our own hearts from satanic powers.

Not that Christians are afraid of Satan. The devil may be stronger than the Christian, but he is not stronger than Christ, "for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). By his death on the cross and his return from the grave, Jesus destroyed "the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). Satan cannot destroy anyone who has the Spirit of the risen Christ living in his or her heart. The Bible gives us this command, with a promise: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

TRUSTING GOD THROUGH MEDICAL CARE

Admittedly, most Christians are not tempted to send for Beelzebub when they get sick. Yet there is a false god that many Christians are tempted to trust. Calling a doctor *can* be a way of going to Ekron. It is possible to get so wrapped up in medical concerns, so preoccupied with medical coverage, so absorbed in treatment schedules, so fascinated by the latest cures, and so reliant on traditional or alternative medication that one forgets to trust in God. Faith in modern medicine—or in folk medicine, for that matter—can become a form of idolatry.

So what is the right way to approach medical treatment? Good medical care is one of the ways in which God can take care of us. Although he sometimes heals in miraculous ways, and is always free to do so, his usual practice is to heal people through the ordinary means of his providence. Thus, there is nothing wrong with getting the best medical advice and most advanced treatment. But we are called to place our ultimate confidence not in our medical doctor but in our divine Lord. For this reason, prayer is

No Chance of Recovery

indispensable to every Christian's health plan. The only safe place to put our trust—for life and for death—is in the Lord God himself. Someone who says, "I am at peace about this operation because there is a 95 percent chance of success," is not trusting in God. It is much better to say: "I hope this operation will be successful. But whether it is or not, I am at peace because my trust is in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ."

Jesus Christ is the Lord of the body. As he walked this earth, Jesus was always touching people to heal them. He gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, healthy skin to the leper, and legs to the crippled. The Gospels tell how Jesus "went throughout all Galilee, . . . healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them" (Matt. 4:23–24). Jesus even brought the dead back to life. He did all these things to show that he is Lord of the body.

Sooner or later, we will all get sick. Many of us will end up lying on a deathbed. When we do, it will not help to consult with Baal-zebub to see whether we will recover. Nor will it be of any use to send for a new team of doctors, if there is no chance of recovery. The only thing we can do then is to trust in the Savior, who holds power over death and can save us to eternal life.

FIGHTING WITH GOD

King Ahaziah did not trust in the Lord, and sadly, a man who consults the devil or any other false god is doomed. Ahaziah's death sentence is pronounced three times in this chapter. Elijah insists on writing the same prognosis on his medical charts over and over again: "You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die" (2 Kings 1:4, 6, 16).

At this point, Ahaziah did what a lot of other people do when they get a diagnosis they do not like: he tried to get a second opinion. He also tried to confront God. Ahaziah sent one of his captains to find Elijah, with an armed guard of fifty men. The king wanted to seize Elijah and compel him to give a different prophecy. Notice how his captain ordered God's prophet around: "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”’” (2 Kings 1:9). Then the captain learned a valuable lesson: to be careful what you ask for! “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” (v. 10). He came down, all right: not God’s prophet but God himself, in fiery judgment!

Some interpreters have tried to claim that Elijah’s capacities began to diminish toward the end of his ministry. They suggest that it was all downhill after Mount Carmel, that after Elijah ran away to Horeb and felt suicidal, he was never the same prophet again. Doubtless Ahaziah’s captain would disagree! He confronted Elijah when he was still at the height of his powers, fully capable of calling down fire from heaven.

Yet Ahaziah remained unimpressed. When word got back to him that his men had gone missing, “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!”’” (2 Kings 1:11). The second captain was even more impatient than the first. He told Elijah to come down *right this minute!* This proved to be another big mistake, for “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” (v. 12).

Fires of judgment are the proper punishment for those who mistreat God’s prophets (see 2 Thess. 1:6–8). When the disciples saw the Samaritans reject Jesus, they thought at once of this incident from the Old Testament (which also took place in Samaria). They wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy God’s enemies (Luke 9:52–54). Jesus rebuked them because it was not the time and place for them to judge. But at times it is God’s righteous place to judge those who stand against him. When Ahaziah sent for Elijah, it was one of those times. As he had done on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38), God answered with fire. God was teaching the king not to mess with his prophet. Ahaziah’s soldiers had come to do the prophet harm, which is why Elijah stayed on the hill, fearing for his safety. It was only later that “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” (2 Kings 1:15). Ahaziah was attacking God’s prophet to get back at God. This is why his soldiers addressed Elijah specifically as “man of God” (vv. 9, 13). Ahaziah was so

No Chance of Recovery

angry with God for not giving him a chance of recovery that he lashed out at God's man, Elijah.

This is a good place to pause for personal reflection. Perhaps we do not make a regular habit of getting angry with God. But are there any areas of life where we are resisting his plan, or grumbling against his purpose?

By confronting God, Ahaziah was repeating the sins of his father. King Ahab had always opposed the Lord's prophets. When he met Elijah on the road during a long drought, he called him a troublemaker (1 Kings 18:17). When Ahab met the prophet again in Naboth's vineyard, he called him his "enemy" (21:20). And when he sent for the prophet Micaiah, he testified how much he "hated" him (22:8).

Ahaziah was just like his dad: he "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and walked in the way of his father and in the way of his mother He served Baal and worshiped him and provoked the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger in every way that his father had done" (1 Kings 22:52-53). Like father, like son. The sins of the father will be visited upon the son (as will the sins of the mother). The Bible rarely mentions a mother's sins like this, but Jezebel is singled out for dishonorable mention. Her sins had worked their poison into Ahaziah's veins.

Intergenerational judgment is one of the things that keep parents awake at night. When they watch their children sin, fathers and mothers sometimes feel as if there is something familiar about those sins. Then they realize what it is: their children commit the same transgressions that they commit. This does not mean that we cannot escape what people call a "bad background." God is so rich in mercy that his grace can change the entire direction of a family. In fact, some of the greatest saints have come from the most sinful families. There is a notable example in my own lineage: one of my great-grandfathers was saved from wasting his life on the streets of London, and as a result his children grew up knowing the Lord. No one is doomed to be stuck in sin; God's grace can always intervene.

Intervening grace is what parents need to pray for in their families. They need to intercede for the regenerating, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. They need to pray that their children will receive Christ so that their sins will be forgiven. And they need to pray that they themselves would become better examples of the character of Jesus Christ.

A simple illustration of God's grace at work in the life of a family comes

from a 1997 news story. In January of that year, a Brinks truck overturned and spilled nearly a million dollars in loose change onto a poor Miami street. People ran to the scene of the accident, scrambling for nickels on the pavement and stuffing their pockets with fistfuls of money. Most of them kept it. But one woman later returned \$19.53. She explained why: “I have children, and I needed to set a good example.” This is a good reason to do the right thing. Mothers and fathers must be holy parents partly because they love God, and partly so that their children will not turn out like Ahaziah.

BEGGING FOR MERCY

Sadly, Ahaziah never did learn how to behave himself. After committing 102 of his men to the flames, he kept trying to get his way: “The king sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty” (2 Kings 1:13). It is sometimes said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. By that standard, Ahaziah was out of his mind!

But although the king may have been crazy, his third captain certainly wasn't. In his commentary on this passage, Dale Ralph Davis imagines the look on the man's face when he saw the first line in Ahaziah's orders: “Take fifty men”¹ What we don't have to imagine is what the wise man did:

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. 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.” (2 Kings 1:13-14)

Divine judgment had put the proper fear of God into the third captain. Like Ahaziah, he had every reason to believe that he was about to die. If fire fell from heaven, he would have no chance of recovery. So he threw himself on the mercy of God. As Davis notes, both the captain's posture (on his knees) and his petition (“Please let us live”) distinguished him from his late comrades: “He knelt, he pled, he trembled—he lived.”²

This is exactly the posture that King Ahaziah should have adopted! When

1. Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005), 23.

2. *Ibid.*

No Chance of Recovery

he realized that he had no chance of recovery, he should have thrown himself on God's mercy. God is full of mercy. Surely, then, he would have spared Ahaziah's life the way he spared the third captain and his men. Surely he would have shown Ahaziah the kind of mercy that he showed to Ahab—even Ahab!—when he spared the wicked king's life in Naboth's vineyard (see 1 Kings 21:29).

Or surely God would have shown Ahaziah the kind of mercy that he later showed to King Hezekiah. Like Ahaziah, Hezekiah “became sick and was at the point of death” (2 Kings 20:1). The Lord's prophet even told him that he had no chance of recovery: “Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover”’” (v. 1). But Hezekiah did not send for Baal-zebub. He did not dance with the devil or depend on doctors. Instead, “Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, ‘Now, O LORD, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.’ And Hezekiah wept bitterly” (vv. 2–3).

This prayer was not the best one that Hezekiah might have offered. He was not as penitent as he might have been, or as cheerful in trusting God. But at least he prayed to the right God—the living God who can do what Beelzebub could never do! God heard Hezekiah's plea for mercy and said, “I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you” (2 Kings 20:5). Even when there was no chance of recovery, humanly speaking, God healed Hezekiah.

For Israel—and for us—the lesson of Ahaziah's death is to turn to God alone in times of trouble. Whenever we are sick, injured, or dying, the thing to do is to throw ourselves on the mercy of God. The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal suffered from a variety of illnesses for many years before dying at the tender age of thirty-nine. Once, when he was sick in bed and wondering whether he would ever recover, he prayed to the living God:

Lord, whose spirit is so good and so gentle in all things, . . . grant me the favor not to act towards me as towards a heathen in the condition to which thy justice has reduced me: that like a true Christian I may recognize thee for my Father and my God, in whatever condition I may find myself . . .

Thou gavest me health to serve thee, and I made a profane use of it. Thou sendest me sickness now to correct me; suffer not that I use it to irritate thee by my impatience. . . . If my heart was full of affection for the world while it retained its vigor, destroy this vigor for my salvation; and render me incapable of enjoying the world, either through weakness of body or through zeal of charity, that I may enjoy but thee alone.³

Another example of praying for healing comes from the experience of Rick and Lenore Brown, who served as Wycliffe missionaries in a remote region of Africa. During an especially hot season, Rick became ill with hepatitis. His body became dangerously dehydrated, unable to retain fluids. Despite Lenore's best efforts as a nurse, Rick began to fear for his life. In fact, from his sickbed he could see vultures lined up on a nearby fence, patiently waiting for his demise.

Unbeknownst to the Browns, a women's prayer group at their home church back in the United States was interceding for their deliverance. The group had not received any word of Rick's desperate condition; they were simply meeting at their regular time to support their missionaries through prayer. Yet one of the women sensed that either Rick or Lenore was dangerously ill. The group prayed in earnest, and then shared the possible need with the rest of their congregation.

Meanwhile, Rick had reached a point of resignation. He prayed, "Lord, if you want to take me, I am ready to go be with you. But what about my wife? How will this affect my mother? What about this work You prepared us for? Lord, Your will be done."

Moments later, Rick felt a deep peace—the compassionate presence of God. A short while later he began to feel better, and within three weeks he had fully recovered. Eventually, news of his illness and recovery reached his church back home, where everyone recognized the healing power of God in response to the faithful prayers of his people.⁴

Surely if Ahaziah had prayed with the humility of Pascal, or the faith of Rick and Lenore Brown, God would have spared his life! If he had turned to God in fear like his third captain, or in repentance like Ahab, or in desper-

3. Blaise Pascal, "To Ask of God the Proper Use of Sickness," in *The Harvard Classics*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, trans. O. W. Wight (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 48:266.

4. Lenore and Rick Brown recount their story in "Prayer Mail: A Wycliffe Couple Learns the Value of God's Wireless Communication," *In Other Words* (Spring 1999): 13.

tion like Hezekiah, then God would have healed him. God gave Ahaziah ample opportunity to beg for mercy. But the man never repented. Thus, the next medical report we read is not a prognosis but a postmortem: “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” (2 Kings 1:17).

God did what God said. His word came true, as it always does, whether in promise or judgment. And without any further word of hope or commendation, the Bible closes the book on the king’s reign: “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?” (2 Kings 1:18).

FULL RECOVERY

King Ahaziah, lying on his deathbed with no chance of recovery, is a picture of a sinner without Christ. Every human being is born alive in the body but dead in the soul because of sin. From the moment we draw our first breath, we are dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1). It is almost as though we were born into this world on our deathbed, laid in a coffin instead of a cradle. We were as good as dead, spiritually speaking, and spiritual death leads to eternal death. Outside Christ, there remains only “a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire” (Heb. 10:27). Thus, Elijah’s prognosis applies to anyone who refuses to worship Jesus: “You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die” (2 Kings 1:4).

If we want to live—really live!—we must turn to Jesus Christ. We must go to him for mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. Jesus Christ died on the cross to atone for sins. Then on the third day he was raised from the dead to conquer death. There is no way to get saving mercy or eternal life from God except through Jesus Christ. He is our only hope: “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). The only way to make a full recovery from sin and death is to throw ourselves on the mercy of Christ.

Believe it or not, this is exactly what Mickey Mantle did. When the Hall of Famer began chemotherapy, he telephoned his close friend and former teammate Bobby Richardson to ask for prayer. Richardson was a fine second

baseman. More importantly, as a devout Christian he had often shared the gospel with Mickey Mantle. When the cancer spread, Mickey asked Bobby to come and visit him:

After entering the hospital room, Richardson went over to Mantle's bed and took his hand. Locking his eyes on him, Bobby said, "Mickey, I love you, and I want you to spend eternity in heaven with me." Mantle smiled and said, "Bobby, I've been wanting to tell you that I have trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior." Faced with the crushing weight of his sin against a holy God and its dire consequence—eternal separation from God—Mickey had asked for and received the forgiveness he so desperately needed.⁵

In the last weeks of his life, Mickey Mantle loved to quote this verse: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). As Mickey lay on his deathbed, with no chance of recovery, his eternal prognosis looked very, very good, as it does for anyone else who trusts in Jesus Christ.

5. Ed Cheek, *Mickey Mantle: His Final Inning* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1995).