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1 Kings 22:51–2 Kings 1:18

6th Message

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OUTSOURCING GOD

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

We are well aware that we live in a global economy as we watch the price of gasoline rapidly rise due to Middle-East unrest. One of the results of having a global economy in the last thirty years is the idea of outsourcing. Outsourcing refers to the contracting out of a business function, commonly one previously performed in-house, to an external provider. Some of the reasons companies outsource goods and services include cost savings, greater efficiency, improved quality, acquiring expertise not currently in house, reducing production time, and creating a better balance between work and leisure. When we call a company for service, the person we end up talking to might be anywhere in the world.

There are also things in our personal lives that we outsource to a third-party, to someone outside of our home and family – tax preparation, yard work, investments, and even our meal preparation. As I grow older, many of the things I used to do I now contract out. But we also have a tendency to outsource God. In other words, we contract with a third party to provide us with things that we should keep in-house, things for which we should look to God – love and security, contentment and assurance, hope and peace, just to name a few. When we outsource these things, the third party becomes an idol. Outsourcing might be a beneficial and productive practice in business or helpful for the care of our home, but it is very damaging to our spiritual life. What appears to be a gain becomes a loss. We are the family of God and we should look in-house to our heavenly father for the needs and desires of our heart. My metaphor might not be completely accurate, but hopefully you get the point.

For the next six weeks we return to the narratives of Elijah and Elisha, the two great prophets who called the people of the northern kingdom, Israel, to stop outsourcing God to Baal, Asherah, and other impotent gods and to turn their hearts fully to Yahweh. Last fall our studies focused on Elijah. In this series we will conclude Elijah and look at several stories in the Elisha narrative. What is so powerful and impactful for me personally is the recognition that Elijah and Elisha were men for all seasons, living counter culturally, establishing a pattern of ministry that we find in the gospel stories of John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples. And like the gospels, they provide a pattern for our own life and ministry as well.

Ahaziah Becomes King

Our text this morning unveils a rather obscure, but deeply penetrating story. We begin at the end of 1 Kings, when Ahaziah succeeds his father Ahab as king.

Ahaziah son of Ahab became king of Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel two years. 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. He served and worshiped Baal and aroused the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, just as his father had done. (1 Kings 22:51–53 TNIV)

Ahaziah was the son of Ahab and the grandson of Omri. When Ahab was killed in 853 BC by a random arrow during a battle with Aram, Ahaziah became king and thus continued the Omride dynasty, the worst dynasty in Israel's history. You might recall that the Omride dynasty occupies a third of the material in 1 and 2 Kings and this coincides with the ministry of Elijah and Elisha. When times get the darkest God sends his best people to bring light.

Ahaziah is a chip off the old block. He continued the worship established by Jeroboam, the first northern king, when he manufactured a rival cult to Yahweh and built golden calves at Bethel and Dan to keep the northern tribes from going to Jerusalem to worship. He also continued in the ways of his parents Ahab and Jezebel. Omri had arranged for his son to marry the daughter of the king of Sidon, Ethbaal. With Jezebel came the worship of Baal and his female consort Asherah. As we saw in our last series, Jezebel ran the show in Samaria and ruled over her weak husband. In any union the lower spiritual standard usually prevails. Ahaziah's actions provoked the Lord to anger and he immediately finds himself in trouble.

Ahaziah's Troubles

After Ahab's death, Moab rebelled against Israel. 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." (2 Kings 1:1–2 TNIV)

Upon ascending to the throne, Ahaziah finds himself in both political trouble and personal crisis. Moab, a land that was incorporated into Israel by David, began to rebel. This is an indication that the northern kingdom is losing control and power. Ahaziah's personal crisis was precipitated by a fall through the lattice in his upper room. Whether this lattice was a window or a balcony of some sort is not clear. But the fall rendered Ahaziah weak and immobilized, so much so that he could not get out of bed, as we shall soon see. Elijah healed the son of the widow of Zarephath in an upper chamber and thus it was a chamber of life. For Ahaziah it will be a chamber of death.

Ahaziah's response to his injury was not to send to Elijah or to seek the Lord. Rather he sent messengers to the city of Ekron, a major city in Philistia, to inquire of Baal-Zebub as to his future. Obviously this was before advent of text messaging. Baal-zebub means "lord of the flies." It is probably a deliberate corruption to mock the name Baal-zebul, "Baal the prince." When Jesus casts out a demon the Pharisees claim he has done so by Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Matt. 10:25; 12:22–28; Mark 3:23–29; Luke 11:17–20). Thus Baal-Zebub stands behind the New Testament figure of Satan.

Elijah Given a Message

Ahaziah is making a big mistake because Israel's God Yahweh doesn't take this lightly.

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?’ Therefore this is what the LORD says: ‘You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!’” So Elijah went. (2 Kings 1:3–4 TNIV)

The message given to Elijah includes a question and a prophecy. The question brings to light that, while Ahaziah has a problem with Moab and with his health, his real problem is spiritual. Ahaziah is outsourcing God, refusing to seek out the God of Israel. The prophecy informed Ahaziah that this will cost him his life, literally “dying he will die” – the same language used in the dialogue between Eve and the serpent in the garden. Elijah responds with immediate obedience, like we see so often in his narrative.

Why was God so harsh with Ahaziah? Not only does God hate to be replaced by idols, but also Ahaziah, as Israel’s king, had a spiritual responsibility and was accountable to God. He had a responsibility to lead his people in the worship of Yahweh and to destroy all pagan idols. As the king goes in Israel, so goes the nation.

Already we see two key words in our text: “send” and “consult.” The word “send” is used seven times. Often this word describes the action of God. He sends Moses, Gideon, his prophets, and his suffering servant, the Messiah. God sends messengers to mankind, hoping that they will receive his invitation. Ahaziah does not reciprocate God’s invitation but rather sends to Baal-Zebub. The other key word is “consult,” meaning, “inquire” or “seek.” God’s people were warned about seeking other gods in Deuteronomy:

The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, “How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.” (Deuteronomy 12:29–30 TNIV)

We have the same tendency as Israel. We attend church and do the expected religious things but rather than separating from our culture, we assimilate into our culture. We accept the values and lifestyles of the people around us. We outsource God to the many idols of our day. We don’t want to be different. We want to look like everyone else

The Message Is Delivered to the King

When the messengers returned to the king, he asked them, “Why have you come back?” “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!’””

The king asked them, “What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?” They replied, “He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.” The king said, “That was Elijah the Tishbite.” (2 Kings 1:5–8 TNIV)

The messengers deliver the message to the king. They repeat the question and the prophecy word for word. When Ahaziah asks about the identity of the man who met them, they describe his appearance. Immediately Ahaziah knows that it was Elijah. Ahaziah’s father had many encounters with the hairy man with a leather belt. Ahaziah

had grown up hearing the stories from his father about the “troubler of Israel” and seeing his mother’s rage after Elijah called down fire on Mt. Carmel. Now it is his turn to encounter this man of God.

Ahaziah Sends to Elijah

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!’”

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 fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men. (2 Kings 1:9–10 TNIV)

Ahaziah now knows where Elijah is located and he sends to him. It is not clear as to his motivation. Perhaps now he will seek the answer to his question from the man of God. Or perhaps he wants to rid himself of his father’s nemesis and clear the way to Baal-zebub. The fact that he sends the military indicates the latter.

Elijah is on the top of a mountain, the familiar setting for Elijah’s hermitage. The captain tells Elijah to come down. In response Elijah sends fire down from heaven. He called down the fire on Mt. Carmel and here we see it again. Fire is a symbol of God’s presence and his judgment.

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!’” “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. (2 Kings 1:11–12 TNIV)

Ahaziah doesn’t give up or give in. He sends a second captain with fifty men. The second captain is more emphatic and tells Elijah, “this is what the king says,” in contrast to “the king says,” and demands that he comes down “at once” or “quickly.” Elijah isn’t buying it, and the second captain and soldiers meet the same fate as the first. But Ahaziah is undeterred.

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! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!” The angel of the LORD said to Elijah, “Go down with him; do not be afraid of him.” So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king. (2 Kings 1:13–15 TNIV)

The third captain sees a pattern developing and acts wisely. So instead of demanding Elijah come down, he pleads for mercy and grace for himself and his men. He asks that he and his men might be precious is Elijah’s sight. At this Elijah is instructed by the angel of the Lord to go with the captain without any fear. Once again we see Elijah’s immediate obedience.

Elijah Delivers God’s Message Personally

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!” So he died, according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken. (2 Kings 1:16–17 TNIV)

Elijah doesn't exactly model a pastoral visit to the dying. This time the message is delivered in person and we hear it for the third time. The repetition of three catches our attention. Three captains, three questions, three prophecies of death. Ahaziah dies according to God's word and is succeeded by his brother.

Because Ahaziah had no son, Joram succeeded him as king in the second year of Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah. 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?" (2 Kings 1:16–18 TNIV)

We might read this entertaining and comical story in a rather detached, impersonal way. It is so far-fetched from our experience that we might find it hard to discover its relevance to our life. But let me bring it a little closer to home.

I knew Joe since I was a little kid. We went to the same school and the same church. Like me he had every opportunity to know God. But after college he got distracted with his business and became entangled in the world. He was always restless and searching for life. Women didn't seem to satisfy, nor his business success, nor his obsession with yachting. He finally got married and had a couple of children, but that did not stop the occasional affair. God kept putting up roadblocks to his efforts, trying to get his attention. Over the years I kept reminding Joe that he should look to God. But now it is too late. He died in an automobile accident last month.

Or maybe we can reframe the story even closer to home.

I guess I have known about God all my life. There was a time when I went to church and he seemed close to me, a time when I prayed. But when my father died at an early age I became angry with God. How could God do this to me, to my family? I shut God out of my life. He never seems to come through for me. I find comfort here and there from traveling and being with my family. But I can handle life on my own. I don't feel like I can give God another chance. I know he will let me down.

Israel became ensnared by the gods of their culture and we do as well. As we often sing in a familiar hymn "our hearts are prone to wander/to leave the God we love." We might view Ahaziah as foolish and stupid. We might wonder how he went so far astray. But if we look hard enough we can see him in ourselves.

Life is filled with troubles and difficulties. We have needs, concerns, desires, and worries. We live with questions in our heart. Will I ever be well and healthy? Am I loved or even lovable? Does anyone really care about me? How can any good come out of this situation? What is going to happen to my child? But rather than seek God for the answers we outsource to the trinket gods of our world, gods that we can control or think we can control. We send to the latest spiritual guru. We put our faith in people but do not seek God. We send to materialism, fame, power and pleasure to ease our troubled hearts. We immerse ourselves in addictions and pretend the pain and trouble will just go away. Many of the gods we send to are respectable and accepted, like ways for growing a church or building a business, but in reality they are nothing less than Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron, a front man for Satan himself.

One truth that the story pictures for us is our tendency to keep sending to the wrong place or person, to insist on our course of action without results. This is what we see in Ahaziah. He wants to circumvent God. He has become blind because of idolatry. When we find ourselves enmeshed in idolatry our world gets smaller and

our vision becomes narrower. Not only do we seek gods that are not gods, but we also go back again and again, refusing to submit our will to God's.

Another truth that the story pictures is that God desires to save us, but he will not force us, he will not save us against our will. The third captain got it right. When he went up on the mountain he asked for mercy and he received mercy. This is the character of God. If we but ask, then he stands ready to forgive and embrace. But we have to ask. When Ahaziah went up on his deathbed, he turned up his nose at God. David Roper writes: "God's patience endures as long as there is the slightest hope of repentance, but if people do not want God's love, then he will not force it on them. In that sense, hell, though it seems odd to say it, may be just another provision of God's love. He loves us enough to leave us alone."¹

What are the concerns of your heart today? Where or to whom are you sending or looking for answers? Is it because there is no God in Cupertino that you have shut God out of your heart? Is it because there is no God in Cupertino that you have given up on your marriage? Is it because there is no God in Cupertino that you find yourself consumed with anxiety and worry? Is it because there is no God in Cupertino that you think or say, "My needs are not getting met?" Is it because there is no God in Cupertino that you blame others for your pain and wounds? Is it because there is no God in Cupertino that you cannot lose your life, die to self, and love others?

When I graduated from college I worked as an engineer for a couple of years. But the title, "engineer," didn't quite have enough pizzazz. I wanted a title that sounded significant. I wanted to be somebody. So off I went to law school. But very quickly God made me see that I was seeking after Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron. I was doing it for all the wrong reasons. God humbled me during that time, as he has done many times in my life.

The obvious encouragement of our text is to seek the Lord. The same intensity and passion that we give to finding life from the idols of success, power, and wealth is now to be given in seeking the kingdom of God. There is an active and passive element to seeking God. We make time to be with him and talk with him and to ask him our questions. We listen to what he is speaking into our hearts. But we cannot manipulate God to do what we want. We must wait patiently for his will to unfold.

The third refrain of God's message in our text has an interesting variation that doesn't really appear in the TNIV, but does appear in the ESV: "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'" (2 Kings 1:16 ESV).

Seeking God involves seeking his word. It is wise for us to get help from counselors, therapists, pastors, and godly friends. But primarily, we are to send to God and take our questions to God. We stop outsourcing. We let go of control of our life and control of the outcome. We live in the mystery of seeking God's face and his word and trusting him as he leads and guides us through the uncertainty of life and death.

We might notice the movement in the text of going up and going down, ascending and descending. The two words for "going up" and "going down" appear twenty times in the text. Elijah is directed by an angel to go up at the beginning of the story and directed to go down at the end of the story. Peter Leithart writes so insightfully:

“Going up and going down describes the character of God. Yahweh is high and lifted up, exalted in the heavens. But he also comes down to mankind. He draws near, gets in our face, and confronts kings with his prophets. He meddles in our lives, our checkbooks, our marriages, our treatment of people. This shows his superiority to idols. No pagan god, no idol would leave the peace and comfort of his high place. But Yahweh does. Supremely, God comes down in the person of Jesus, his Son, in the man of God and the fire of God, in word and judgment, in flesh and blood, in bread and wine.”²

God humbles himself and comes down to us. This is the truth of the incarnation. When we listen to our lives and listen to our hearts we notice that God is sending us messages and messengers so that we will seek him and not Baal-zebul. Our spiritual life is that easy but that difficult. Keeping God at the center of our lives is simply a matter of seeking him. We do well to heed the words of the psalmist:

**The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. (Ps. 34:10)**
**Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always. (Ps. 105:4)**
**Hear my voice when I call, LORD;
be merciful to me and answer me.**
My heart says of you, “Seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, I will seek. (Psalms 27:7–8)

Jonathan Edwards was quite a contrast to Ahaziah. As death drew near he talked with family members and left messages for those who could not be there. At one point he said, “Now, where is Jesus of Nazareth, my true and never-failing Friend?” Then when those at his bedside believed he was unconscious and expressed grief at what his absence would mean both to the College and to the church at large, they were surprised when he suddenly uttered a final sentence, “Trust in God, and you need not fear”. The Jesuit priest Peter Claver spent the remainder of his life in Cartagena (present day Columbia) in the 17th century, teaching and ministering to the African slaves, of whom he is said to have baptized over 300,000. In his wisdom he wrote: “Seek God in all things and we shall find God by our side.”³

May God so overwhelm us with his love and grace and that we will seek him with all our hearts.

1 Roper, David, Elijah: *A Man Like Us*, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1997), p. 218.

2 Adapted from Leithart, Peter, *1 & 2 Kings*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).

3 Harter, Michael SJ, *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources (St. Louis, MO, 1993), 82.