



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.

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."

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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? (1 Kings 22:51–2 Kings 1:1–18).

The apple didn't fall far from the tree. After the death of Ahab, Ahaziah, Ahab's son, became king over Israel and reigned for two short years. Like his father and mother, Ahaziah, *"Did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He served and worshipped Baal."* But maybe we shouldn't be so hard on the new king. After all, he was facing a serious pressure on several fronts. There were political tensions with the kingdom of Moab who used the death of King Ahab to rebel against Israel. Economically, Ahaziah attempted to go into the shipping business with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, but God intervened and stopped the alliance by wrecking the ships. And now, personally, Ahaziah has suffered a tragic fall from his upper room. We don't know how badly Ahaziah was injured, but it was enough for him to question if he would recover or not.

Out of fear for his own life, taking a page out of his parent's play-book, he sent messengers to consult with the god of Ekron, Baal-Zebub. Ekron was a major city of the Philistines along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The city's god, Baal-Zebub, literally means, "Lord of the Flies" and was known for its power to tell the future. Some believed it had the power to heal as well. If Ahaziah were alive today, he'd visit the local psychic on El Camino and ask if he would live or die.

At this point in the story, you may be wondering to yourself, "What's the big deal? If Ahaziah wants to consult an object made of stone, who are we to judge him? We all know that there is nothing behind this silly image. People back then were primitive and didn't know any better either, right?" Wrong. This was a disastrous decision to consult Baal-Zebub. By the time of Jesus' ministry this name, this god, would evolve to Beelzebub and be synonymous with Satan himself. In the Gospel of Matthew the Pharisees accuse Jesus of using demonic power to heal people. They said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." Jesus denied their false claim and said, **"But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"** (Matthew 12:24, 28).

As you can see, there was more to this idol made of stone than meets the eye. Behind Baal-Zebub was the satanic influence of the demonic world. This is why God despised acts of witchcraft and sorcery because they were fronts for demonic activity. Unfortunately these practices were all too common in the kingdom of Israel. That's why God gave several stern warnings to his people: **"Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritist, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God"** (Leviticus 19:31). **"I will set my face against anyone who turns to mediums and spiritist to prostitute themselves by following them, and I will cut them off from their people"** (Leviticus 20:6).

When you were a kid, did you like playing with fire? I did. I'll never forget the time I took hundreds of firecrackers, emptied the powder onto my driveway and lit them on fire. The explosion almost seared my eyebrow hairs off! Ahaziah, by consulting Baal-Zebub, is playing with spiritual fire. He doesn't care nor does he understand how dangerous and foolish his decision would be.

It's here in our passage today where we get to take a good hard look at ourselves. We are just like Ahaziah. We play with fire all the time, believing we won't get burned. We often play with fire during those times of trials, testing, or when things in our life just aren't working toward our advantage. When the pressure is turned up in your life, when everything seems to be going wrong, where do you turn first? What do you run to when all else fails? Who do you go to when nothing seems to be working out? How we answer those questions reveal who we trust and who we ultimately serve. Playing with fire usually comes in the form of idolatry. The problem in Israel is the people wanted to serve both Yahweh and Baal. We too want to serve both God and our idols. Elijah will demand an either/or decision.

Like Ahaziah, we may not worship Baal-Zebub, but we all have rival gods, hidden idols, in the hearts of every single one of us. It should be no surprise the first of the Ten Commandments is, **"You shall have no other gods before me"** (Exodus 20:3). Reformer Martin Luther famously said we never break any of the other commandments without breaking the first one. Because at the

core of all sin is idolatry. It's always the reason we do anything wrong. Whatever you feel you must have to make you happy is usually more important to your heart than God himself.

For example, we lie because something else is more important than God's grace. We don't take a Sabbath rest because something else is more valuable to our hearts than God's favor. Pastor Tim Keller wrote, "Idolatry is not just a failure to obey God, it is a setting of the whole heart on something besides God." For Ahaziah, he wanted the security of knowing the future, whether he would live or die. That was his idol. It came in the form of Baal-Zebub. And so he began playing with the fire of idol worship and consulting mediums. God responds by lovingly stopping him dead in his tracks. Let's look again at the story.

### **God's Judgement on Ahaziah**

Instead of trusting God with his injury, instead of asking God for healing, King Ahaziah ignores God's warnings and sends messengers to consult Baal-Zebub. When the Lord saw what the ruler of his people was about to do, he commands Elijah to confront the king's messengers. When they meet, Elijah asks a rhetorical question, one that is repeated for emphasis three times throughout the story, **"Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?"** Think about that question for a moment. The answer, especially for Ahaziah, should have been crystal clear. Yes, there is a God in Israel. He is the same God who confronted his father Ahab on Mt. Carmel in an amazing display of power. Remember that? The priests of Baal were proved powerless frauds. God sent down fire to consume the water-drenched offering and Elijah killed every priest of Baal. Elijah then prayed and rain poured down from heaven ending years of drought. Yes, there is a God in Israel and this God revealed himself to Ahab and to all Israel. Unfortunately, Ahab's faith floundered and his son Ahaziah continued in his family's evil practices.

Ahaziah wanted to know if he would live or die, but instead of consulting Baal-Zebub, God himself, through Elijah, gave Ahaziah the answer to his question, **"You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!"** The messengers were no dummies. Instead of continuing on their journey to Ekron, they return immediately to tell Ahaziah the news. Ahaziah isn't very thrilled about the oracle of his death. He demands to know who they met with and who told them the bad news. The messengers, not knowing it was Elijah, said, "Some hairy man who was really intense and serious!" The king immediately knew it was Elijah the Tishbite, the same man of God who confronted his dear old dad.

In anger, Ahaziah sends 50 of his fighting men to intimidate Elijah. The men find Elijah sitting on top of a hill and the captain asks the man of God to come down. Elijah responds by calling on fire to come down from heaven and destroy the men. The

king isn't impressed and sends another 50 men. Once again, fire from heaven and the death of 50 men. The hairy man on the mountain was not someone to take lightly! It's tempting to look at this entire scene and wonder why God would be so harsh and ambivalent with the lives of 100 men. But remember what is at stake here. The king of God's people is a card-carrying idolater and toying around with the realm of demonic powers. God alone deserves worship. Like his father, Ahaziah must be stopped.

The third captain was the wisest of the three. In humility and reverence, he begs Elijah to come down from the mountain and meet with the king. Elijah finally agrees and meets face to face with Ahab. Picture the drama unfolding. Elijah is escorted down the hill with 50 well armed men. He is brought into the presence of the young but powerful king. Elijah stands face to face, alone with a man who wants nothing more than to kill him. There is no doubt Ahaziah could have killed him with one thrust of the spear. But that's not what happens. Without any fear, without any worry of the risk he was taking, with unwavering faith, Elijah confronts Ahaziah and for the third time tells 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!"* Elijah was so committed to the Lord and so convinced of what he had to do that he risked his own life to obey God. Ahaziah had three chances to repent, to confess his wicked sin and lead Israel back to the worship of the one true God. Sadly, Ahaziah's heart was hardened beyond repair and he died according to the Word of the Lord. Story over, fade to black.

Eight years ago when my family moved from Las Vegas to Pasadena to finish my graduate work at Fuller Seminary, we decided to keep the house we own and rent it out to my wife's parents. We thought it was a great decision until the housing market tanked but thankfully we have been able to keep the house and bless my in-laws. They in turn keep the house in great shape and are ideal tenants. A few weeks ago, I got a call from my mother-in-law who wanted to check the AC unit before summer where it averages 100 degrees. Unfortunately, the first technician told her that we needed to replace the entire outside unit. I called another company for a second opinion and they said the same thing but added that we also needed to replace the furnace inside the house, in total about \$8000. I was stunned. I'm not sharing this story for sympathy but to show you how idolatry works in my life.

An interesting thing took place within my own spirit that I am sure you can appreciate. Everything inside of me wanted to get on the phone, call other companies, get competing offers and get this thing figured out for cheaper. Anxiety also began to creep in as I kissed our summer vacation plans good bye. But, there was another part of me that wanted to go to God first, pray about

what to do and trust him with this issue. On that Monday, the two desires were in a dog fight within my own heart.

I was able to pray about it and I did trust God. I had a peace about the whole thing. I also made a few phone calls and thankfully the work was done by a Christian friend of a friend for \$2600, not \$8000. We could afford that and it ended up not being a huge deal for us financially. The thing I am constantly learning is the very same thing that has plagued Christian leaders for centuries. When the pressure is turned up in your life, when everything seems to be going wrong, where do you turn first? What do you run to when all else fails? Who do you go to when nothing seems to be working out? Again, how we answer those questions reveal who we trust and who we ultimately serve. This passage teaches us one very important truth—go to God first. Trust and obey him only.

While the story is over for Ahaziah, the pull of idolatry is very real in the lives of Christians today. Like Israel, we try to serve both God and our hidden idols. The idol that I was struggling with last week was the idol of security and comfort. I didn't like having to deal with an AC unit problem. I wanted the security of having enough disposable income in the bank to draw from and fix the problem. If I did have \$8000 laying around, I would have never prayed about the decision and would have sent the first company a check so I could get back to my life. Instead I was forced to look at my own heart and pinpoint why I felt unhappy and anxious about the situation.

Tim Keller wrote a wonderful book about modern day idols called, *Counterfeit Gods*. Allow me to borrow liberally from his thoughts on the issue. He writes, "It is impossible to understand your own heart or your culture if you do not discern the counterfeit gods that influence them... The secret to change is always to identify and dismantle the basic idols of the heart." In the notes section of *Counterfeit Gods*, Keller includes a helpful list of 10 idol categories:

**Theological idols** – Doctrinal errors that produce such distorted views of God that we end up worshipping a false god.

**Sexual idols** – Addictions such as pornography that promise but don't deliver a sense of intimacy and acceptance; ideals of physical beauty in yourself and/or your partner; romantic idealism.

**Magic/ritual idols** – Witchcraft and the occult. All idolatry is in the end a form of magic that seeks to rebel against the order of transcendent reality rather than submitting to it in love and wisdom.

**Political/economic idols** – Ideologies of the left, right, and libertarian that absolutize some aspect of political order and make it the solution.

**Racial/national idols** – Racism, militarism, nationalism, or ethnic pride that turns bitter or oppressive.

**Relational idols** – Dysfunctional family systems of codependency; “fatal attraction”; living your life through your children.

**Religious idols** – Moralism and legalism; idolatry of success and gifts; religion as a pretext for abuse of power.

**Philosophical idols** – Systems of thought that make some created thing the problem with life (instead of sin) and some human product or enterprise the solution to our problems (instead of God’s grace).

**Cultural idols** – Radical individualism, as in the West, that makes an idol out of individual happiness at the expense of community; shame cultures that make an idol out of family and clan at the expense of individual rights.

**Deep idols** – Motivational drives and temperaments made into absolutes:

- Power idolatry: “Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I have power and influence over others.”
- Approval idolatry: “Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I am loved and respected by \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Comfort idolatry: “Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life.”
- Control idolatry: “Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of \_\_\_\_\_.”

If idols are hidden in the hearts of every one of us, which they are, the question becomes, What do we do about them? Keller encourages us to do two things. First **identify your idols**. Which category and which idols are hidden in your heart? To identify our idols ask yourself these questions: What do you think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your own heart? What do you daydream about? Another way to identify your idols is to look at how you spend your money. Your money flows easily towards your heart’s greatest love. You can also pinpoint an idol by looking at how you respond to unanswered prayers and

frustrated hopes. If God doesn’t answer your prayer do you get upset? Finally, look at your most uncontrolled emotions. If you are angry, ask, “Is there something here too important to me, something I am telling myself I have to have at all costs?” Do the same thing with fear, anxiety and guilt. If you are a workaholic, ask yourself, “Why do I work so hard? What am I really trying to get?”

After identifying your idols, Keller encourages us next to **replace** them. Anyone who has ever tried to stop a bad habit knows that one of the best ways to do that is to replace it with a good habit. Instead of eating ice cream at night, which I love to do, you’ll often find me chewing on sunflower seeds. I’ve replaced a bad habit with a decent one.

How do we replace these idols? Apostle Paul tells us in Colossians 3 to **“put to death”** the evil desires of the heart which includes **“sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”** Sheer will power and even repentance will not replace your idols. Apostle Paul tells us to set our hearts and minds on things above where our life is **“hidden with Christ in God.”** That means we appreciate, rejoice and rest in what Jesus has done for us. We worship joyfully because we want more of Jesus. We pray eagerly because Jesus has become more beautiful to our imagination and more attractive to our heart than our idols. We must not only uproot the idols of our hearts, but we need to replace them with more of Jesus. If we don’t plant the love, grace and truth of Jesus, the idol will grow back.

The reality is this process takes a lifetime. We identify an idol. By God’s grace, we replace it by knowing Jesus more deeply and walking with him more closely. This process happens over and over again for a lifetime. So we need to be patient. For today, go to God first, trust him and obey him only. There is a God in Israel and he loves you.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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