

Standing in Humility

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Date: 03 April 2022

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[0 : 00] So growing up, I used to use a set of Bible notes for kids that helped me understand the Bible as I read it each night before bed. Many of you will be very familiar with this sort of thing.

These notes would look at a Bible passage and have some explanation of it and some questions to answer about it. And many of them were incredibly helpful. But, there's always a but, one installment sticks out in my memory because of a question that it got so wrong.

It showed four pictures of different human individuals. And it asked the question, which picture do you think is most like God?

As a kid, I remember feeling that there was something wrong about this question. That feeling's only grown with time. The picture that I inferred that I was supposed to choose, the kindly old man with his hands open and a big long white beard, does not and could not adequately represent God. That's the God who appears in Renaissance frescoes, Baroque altarpieces, and Monty Python sketches. And that God is only a shade away from the answer that Graham Linehan, the writer of Father Ted and the IT Crowd, gave when asked what God meant to him.

[1 : 22] Man in a beard, white hair, sits on a throne on a cloud, tells people whether they've been naughty or nice, doesn't like women. So, this prompts the question, how well do we know God?

For the culture around us, if you asked who God is, or perhaps more interestingly, what does God mean to you? You probably receive a vast multiplicity of answers.

In this age we live in, we live under a tyranny of choice. We're bombarded by choice, and we think it gives us freedom, but it is in fact a tyranny. Not least in the fact that we think we can conceive of God however we like.

So, people feel able to say, when we talk about God, that for them God is this or God is that. Usually something vaguely spiritual, a non-committal kind of spirituality that acknowledges there is a God, or there might be a God, but doesn't want to really know him.

And this is one of the effects, not just of the tyranny of choice, but the tyranny of sin. And it is a tyranny because there is in fact one true God who has revealed himself to the world.

[2 : 38] And he is not like the gods that we might imagine for ourselves. There isn't a God for me and a God for you. There is just one God, the God of the Bible.

So, in this tyranny of choice, how well do you know the real revealed God? This is the penultimate Elijah story, and it teaches us about God in, I think, fascinating ways.

So, we're going to approach 2 Kings chapter 1 with three questions. Those are our headings for this afternoon. Firstly, who is God? Secondly, how should God be approached?

And lastly, who is in control? So, who is God? That's our first question. And the question is prompted by the actions of a dying king. Last week, Ahab was king in the northern kingdom of Israel, but this week he's now dead.

And his son Ahaziah is on the throne. Ahab had rejected God time and time again. And so, God, despite the many, many shows of mercy that he showed to Ahab, has given Ahab into the hands of his enemies.

[3 : 46] And he died in war against the Arameans. But unfortunately, the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree. Ahaziah makes all his father's mistakes. We're told at the end of 1 Kings all about Ahaziah.

Ahaziah, 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 worshipped Baal and aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, just as his father had done.

So, it's perhaps no surprise then that Israel is undergoing severe decline because Ahaziah has continued to wander away from God.

So, we're told at the start of this chapter that after Ahab's death, Moab rebelled against Israel. This isn't a random detail. This is a sign that God is tearing the kingdom from the hands of this dynasty just as he had promised.

And Ahaziah himself had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. Surrounded by enemies and knocking on death's door, Ahaziah represents a dire decline from the days of the kingdom under David and Solomon.

[5 : 01] And it's a well-trodden trope that when death comes calling, people want to make their peace with God. It's true that when death is at hand, people are perhaps more likely to consider whether they need to make things right with a higher power.

Ahaziah isn't just this boat. But here's the problem. He goes to the wrong God. He sent messengers saying to them, go and consult Baalzebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury. So, what does the one true God do? He intervenes. 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 Baalzebub, 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. Elijah goes. He meets the messengers on the road.

He gives them the message and leaves them to return and tell it to the dying king. They never even reached Baalzebub of Ekron. The king asks them, naturally, what kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?

[6 : 17] The servants say he had a garment of hair or was a hairy man and had a leather belt around his waist. That, he says, was Elijah the Tishbite. And if the king's memory serves him well, he'll have remembered that when Elijah has brought messages from the Lord, they always represent the truth.

Ahaziah will not leave the bed that he's lying on. Now, Elijah's question to the messengers of Ahaziah gets to the heart of this story.

This is why we get this section repeated three times. The question is, is there no God in Israel? Why Ahaziah goes to the Baal in Ekron, a Philistine city, is uncertain.

After all, his father had established Baal temples in Israel and Samaria. But the point is that Ahaziah shouldn't have even entertained the idea. The God of Israel is Yahweh.

He delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He established them as a people. He gave them victories over the kings who sought to stop them in their tracks. God has always been on Israel's side.

[7 : 27] And the Bible story so far has been one of God calling a people to himself, to be his, and to proclaim his goodness and glory to the world around them.

But Ahaziah has succumbed to the tyranny of choice. He doesn't want the God of Israel. He wants to choose his own God. And he chooses the Canaanite Baalzebub of Ekron.

Baalzebub translates literally as the Lord of the Flies. It's maybe worth explaining that term. There's two main possibilities behind it. The first, the Lord of the Flies or the Baal of the Flies is a term that reflects that deity's supposed ability to heal.

That is to hold back the flies that would swarm around a corpse. So I guess in that context, the title of the Lord of the Flies might be seen as a good thing. It reflects the belief that this Baal could hold back sickness and death.

That's one possibility. The other one, alternatively, is that this deity's name might actually be Baalzebul, the Lord of the Heavens. One of the rhetorical devices that Old Testament writers sometimes employed when talking about false gods was to modify their names and engage in a bit of wordplay.

[8 : 43] So Baalzebul becomes Baalzebub, no longer Lord of the Heavens, but Lord of the Flies, using wordplay to turn his name into a derogatory term.

But whichever option is correct, the point is clear. Why would you go to the Lord of the Flies when you can go to the Lord who created heaven and earth?

The covenant God of Israel who chose Israel to be his special possession. And so it is today. The tyranny of choice means people may recognize their need of God, but then conclude that if there is a God, he's to be found in themselves.

And that kind of God that we invent, the God we think we want, is nothing but a Lord of Flies, a Lord of pestilence and death.

Because behind this false deity, Baalzebub, and indeed behind every false god and every false deity that we might imagine, is a spiritual power whose desire is to see people reject the one true God.

[9 : 51] Jesus in the Gospels links Baalzebul with the devil. And the devil wants people to miss the real God and follow a false one of man's imagining.

Doesn't matter which one, as long as they're not following the true God. This even happens when the religious leaders of Jesus' day accused him of being in league with Baalzebul. They said Jesus was driving out demons by the power of the prince of demons.

But what had actually happened was that the devil had misled them. They wanted a God in their image and rejected the true God, Jesus, even accusing him of being in league with the devil.

In all things, our culture would rather choose the Lord of the Flies. The tyranny of choice leads them headlong into death. Instead of recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord, we want to be Lord and Master of our fate.

Instead of recognizing the Bible as the revealed word of God, we want to write our own story instead of morals. Instead of recognizing God as creator, we want to exist in a world where we are the center of the universe.

[11 : 03] Man wants life, but ends up choosing death. Man needs God, but ends up choosing flies. The solution is to come to the one true God.

But how should he be approached? That's our second question. Ahaziah sends a troop of 50 men to Elijah. Elijah's sitting waiting for them at the top of a hill. It's worth recapping, who is Elijah? Well, he's God's prophet. He's an ambassador and spokesperson for the Almighty God. He's only a man himself, but he has a special representative role on God's behalf.

So when we hear the captain of the guard say, man of God, the king says, come down. Well, we should recognize that this is maybe not a wise thing to say. Notice what's happening here.

Elijah has given the king a message of God's judgment because he's gone after a false god in his hour of need and healing. And the king has responded in retaliation.

[12 : 05] He's not sending 50 men to kindly escort Elijah. He's probably sending them to kill him. If 50 armed men turned up in this hole right now, you'd be pretty certain they hadn't come just for a cup of tea.

This is not a friendly request. This is a command to surrender and accept the inevitable. This is defiance in the face of God. Which is why this happens.

Elijah answered the captain, if I'm a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your 50 men. Then the fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.

And then this happened a second time. Another troop is sent to deal with Elijah. They do it in the same way. They face the same fate. This aspect of the story can unsettle people.

This looks potentially like the contemporary caricature of God in the Old Testament. Cruel and capricious. But consider the context. Elijah's life is in danger.

[13 : 12] And Elijah, probably more than the rest of the prophets who were around at the same time, stands uniquely for God. And the king wants him got rid of.

So, God sends fire to protect his prophet against a group of armed men who, the context heavily suggests, want him dead. But we can say more.

Fire reveals that this is the true God. If you can remember and cast your mind back to when we looked at the contest between Baal and God on Mount Carmel, you'll recall that the God who sent fire was the true God.

These men come all guns blazing with no expectation of the power of God, confident in their own strength. God reveals to them that he is God in devastating power.

And we can say even more. In fire, God judges. God judges these men for blindly following an evil king.

[14 : 16] For coming with arrogance and a hard heart to Elijah, God's ambassador. Because the problem is not, ultimately, how they intended to treat Elijah.

The deeper problem is how they saw God. The way you treat the ambassador reflects how you treat the king. If you intend to harm the king's messenger, you're declaring war against the king. In this case, the king happens to be the God who created the universe. Like Ahaziah, they just did not want to acknowledge the lordship, authority, and power of the one true God.

If they had, they would have come in a very different manner. The right sort of manner is what we see in the third group of soldiers sent to take Elijah.

We read in verse 13, The third captain here is shaking his boots.

[15 : 31] He knows what God can do. Because it's God who sends the fire, not Elijah. He knows what it means for Elijah to be a man of God. So he comes in humility and fear.

And so the angel of the Lord said to Elijah, Go down with him and do not be afraid of him. So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king. Elijah doesn't have to be afraid of this captain.

His life is not in danger and he will be brought before the king. Because the way God sends fire in this story parallels so closely the sending of fire that proved he was God in Mount Carmel, we can infer that the heart of this story, as with the Mount Carmel story, is the need to recognize who the true God is.

There's a God in Israel and his name is Yahweh. But more than that, it reveals something of his power and his nature. It tells us that God should be approached with humility and fear.

Fear of the Lord sounds dreadfully solemn and is perhaps an aspect of Christian worship that contemporary Christianity often veers slightly away from.

[16 : 45] We prefer to major on his accessibility in Christ or his steadfast love or his endless stores of goodness. Now, don't get me wrong. These are all wonderfully and beautifully true things about God, which we rightly should emphasize in our worship and in our teaching.

But we understand God further when we understand that he is also worthy of our fear, of our reverence and our humility.

For the Bible is continually calling God's people to fear him. In Proverbs, we're told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

In the law, in Deuteronomy, Israel was instructed to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

The Psalms constantly come back to this theme. We had it in the Psalm we started our time with in our preparation for worship. We see it in Psalm 103 is another. Psalm 103 says, As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

[17 : 57] And Proverbs again teaches that the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death. And even in the New Testament, we see in Acts that the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened.

Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. What does it mean for us to fear the Lord?

Well, I think C.S. Lewis gives us a helpful illustration in the character of Aslan from his Chronicles of Narnia. Aslan, the Lion King of Narnia, is designed to reflect Jesus.

And one character memorably says about him, He's not a tame lion. In the first book, Lucy asks, Is he safe? Who said anything about safe is the answer.

Of course he ain't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you. We could say much the same about Jesus. If you've ever watched a lightning storm shatter the sky over a lake, or if you ever watched the high mountains emerge from out of a deep mist, or if you've ever caught the sun setting over the glacial sea, well, then you've seen but a reflection of a minuscule fraction of God's power and glory.

[19 : 25] To fear God is to recognize with clear eyes who he is, how holy he is, and how powerful and majestic he is.

Indeed, Christ can't ever be adequately known without this understanding that he is God Almighty. And we're called to rejoice in him and tremble before him concurrently.

Is he safe? No. Is he good? Yes. He's the king. And if this God is the kind of God we've been speaking about, it follows naturally that he is the one who is the Lord of history.

The one who in his providence guides and shapes all things to the ultimate end of glorifying Jesus. He is the one who is in control of all things.

The story ends with Elijah, finally face to face with King Ahaziah. Elijah tells the king the same message he told the messengers. In that regard, things are very simple.

[20 : 36] 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 Baalzebub, 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. Who is in control? It's our third question.

God is. The god that Ahaziah thought he could ignore and fight against. He is the one who is driving history. And because God says so, Ahaziah doesn't recover.

The story then ends with a note that as he had no heir, his brother becomes king. Ahaziah becomes barely a footnote in history. As we read the story, we're left in no doubt as to who is in control, who is truly the king, who is truly God.

And in many ways, this is an uncomfortable story. It really forces us to come to terms with the fact that God is not tame.

[21 : 48] And this shouldn't lead us to awkwardness. Rather, it should generate a feeling of thankfulness. Remember, the world is trapped under the tyranny of choice.

The world in search for a God in the image of personal contemporary culture and the morality of 2022 will find nothing other than the Lord of the flies, the Lord of the dunghill.

Of course, God doesn't always act in a way that our culture thinks is appropriate of God. God is not limited by time, place, and culture.

If God did perfectly reflect the culture and morality of Glasgow in 2022, well, he wouldn't be real.

God exists beyond culture, beyond time, and beyond this world.

Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? The point is, you see, we need to be humble before God because he is not a God made in our image.

[22 : 50] We are made in his. And more than that, this is a good thing. The true God may at times confuse us and confound us, but that's okay.

How could we fully fathom the mind of God if God exists? The very fact that he is so beyond us is a testament to his existence.

We cannot tame the Lord of history. We cannot control the God who made the universe. We cannot contain the King of the ages. But we can know him as he has revealed himself to us.

We can know him in his word and we can know him in his son, Jesus. Or we can come to him in total humility, in a posture of reverent fear.

We are called, because of God's very nature, to stand in humility. And we ought to allow this stance of humility and fear to shape our prayer, to shape our worship, to shape our posture when we come to hear from God's word, and to shape our desire, to see sin put to death in our lives and growing in holiness.

[24 : 09] And this call to stand in humility, well, it becomes even more urgent when we remember that Jesus is coming back. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, God is just, God is just.

He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. The fire that we see on Elijah's hill is but a minor foretaste of what the resurrected Christ will do when he returns.

Consistent rejection of God and a yearning after our own gods will reap the fire and rejection of Christ. That's the future and it's fixed.

But this same Jesus also died so that the dead could live, so that sinners under judgment could be counted as righteous, and so that those who wander after false gods could know and love the true God.

[25 : 26] If you don't know Jesus, I really encourage you, get to know him because he is coming back and he is coming back in fire and he longs, he longs for his lost sheep to listen to him and to know him and to be united to him for all eternity.

If you are trusting in Christ, be encouraged. Be encouraged that you are in the hands of the living God and can call him Father, the Lord who made the universe and is beyond the limitations of time and space.

the Lord of glory knows you. Keep coming back to him and fear and faith, standing in humility for the simple, salient reason that he is God.

Come before him in awe and wonder that the God who made the heavens and blessed you more than you could ever ask or imagine knows you. stand amazed in his presence, fear him and love him.

Rejoice and tremble. He is the Lord, the Lord of glory.