

# OpenTheo

## October 10th: 2 Kings 1 & 2 Peter 3

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Ahaziah confronted by Elijah. Vindicating the promise of the Lord's appearing.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

2 Kings 1. After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel. Now Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay sick. So he sent messengers, telling them, Go inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness.

But 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. The messengers returned to the king, and he said to them, Why have you returned? And they said to him, 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.

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 and a belt of leather about his waist. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite. Then the king sent to him a captain of fifty men with his fifty.

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. But 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.

Again 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. But 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.

Again the king sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty, and 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. Then 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 and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, 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. Jehoram became king in his place, in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, because Ahaziah had no son.

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? 2nd Kings chapter 1 is a chapter of ups and downs. The opening verse of the chapter concerns the rebellion of Moab against Israel, a narrative thread that is introduced at this point only to be suspended until chapter 3. The rest of the chapter compares and contrasts King Ahaziah and the prophet Elijah. Ahaziah suffers a fall from the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria.

There are other upper chambers in the books of the kings. In chapter 17 there is the upper chamber in which the son of the widow of Zarephath is raised. And in 2nd Kings chapter 4 there is another upper chamber in which a son is raised, the son of the

Shunammite woman.

In both of those cases the upper chamber is the elevated place of proximity to God, and also the place where the prophet dwells. In the case of Ahaziah however, he is cast down from the upper chamber and he lies sick. Wondering what his fate will be, he sends messengers to Beelzebub, the god of Ekron.

The name Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, is probably a twisting of the actual name of the god, which would have been Beelzebul, Lord Prince. However he is called Lord of the Flies or Beelzebub as a form of dishonour. He is the Lord of the Trash Heap.

The angel of the Lord however has other plans for Ahaziah. He sends Elijah the prophet to intercept the messengers of Ahaziah and delivers the answer to Ahaziah's question. He will not come down from the bed to which he has gone up.

He will surely die. The story begins with Ahaziah falling down. Now he is spoken of as having gone up to a sick bed and he will not come down.

We might expect it to be the other way around. The messengers return to Ahaziah with the message. The primary part of the message is a challenge to Ahaziah's idolatry and his service of foreign gods.

He has turned to the god of Ekron rather than looking to the god of Israel. Ahaziah asks his servants to describe the man that met them. The messengers literally describe him as a bale of hair.

He is a lord of hair, a hairy man. We could perhaps speculate that as part of his prophetic calling Elijah has taken a Nazirite vow and has not cut his hair and so is distinguished by the great amount of hair that he has. Whether that is the case or not, the use of the term bale in reference to Elijah contrasts him with the character of Beelzebub.

The lord of hair stands in contrast to the lord of the flies. We should also keep the hairiness of Elijah in mind because the next chapter there will be a man who is ridiculed for being bald. There is, as it were, a shaving off of the hair of the prophet.

So the hairy prophet Elijah has his successor in the hairless prophet Elisha. Ahaziah recognises Elijah from the description of his men immediately. He sends 50 soldiers with their captain to bring Elijah back.

We should note these aren't messengers, these are soldiers. There is a threatening aspect to this. Elijah is sitting on the top of a hill and he is instructed to come down.

He answers the military captain that if he is a man of God that fire should come down from heaven and consume him and his 50 men and fire comes down and consumes them. There might well be a play upon the words for fire of God and man of God here.

Having lost the first 50 men with their captain, the king sends another 50 men with their captain and he says much the same thing, delivering the order of the king to Elijah to come down from the hill.

Once again Elijah calls down fire from heaven upon him and his 50 men. We should recall the theme of the ups and downs here. Ahaziah fell down at the beginning of the story, then he went up into his sickbed and the Lord declares that he will not come down from his sickbed.

Now men of Ahaziah are telling Elijah to come down from the hill upon which he has gone up and he is not going to come down. Rather he calls down the fire of God. We should bear this all in mind as we come to the next chapter as the next chapter is a story of ascension.

Elijah will be taken up once and for all. The king having gone up on his sickbed and not coming down and Elijah going up on his hill and not coming down offers an ironic parallel between the two characters. Ahaziah who fell down from the upper room is going to die whereas Elijah is going to be taken directly up into heaven to God's very presence.

In the following chapter we will also see groups of 50 men that look for Elijah and just as there are 3 captains with their 50 in this chapter in the next chapter there will be 3 times when Elisha is told to go back and does not do so. This suggests that the themes of ascension, of going up in this chapter must be read alongside the chapter that follows. The two chapters are a natural pair.

Likewise the Lord of hair, the Bald of hair that Elijah is described as at the beginning here will naturally connect with Elisha who follows him who is a bald man and is ridiculed for that at the end of chapter 2. After two captains in their 50s have come and been destroyed by the fire of the Lord a third captain comes and this time he speaks with honour and deference to the prophet of the Lord. He goes up and falls down on his knees and pleads for his life and for the life of his men. And now the Lord instructs Elijah to go along with the men.

So he goes to meet the king and delivers the message that has already been delivered to him before. The message of judgement concerning the fact that he has gone to a foreign god rather than turning to the Lord and the message that he will die and not come down from his sickbed. The message of the Lord concerning Ahaziah comes to pass, he dies and in his place Jehoram his brother becomes king.

Jehoram becomes king in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah. These are two different Jehorams but the presence of a Jehoram in the southern kingdom of Judah and a Jehoram in the northern kingdom of Israel suggests a twinning of the two. The two nations are a lot more entwined in this period as we will see in the judgement that comes through Jehu.

A question to consider. In verse 17 we are told that Jehoram became king in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat. However in chapter 3 verse 1 we are told that Jehoram of Israel became king in the 18th year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah.

And to make matters a lot more complicated, in chapter 8 verse 16 we are told that Jehoram of Judah began to rule in the 5th year of Jehoram of Israel. How could we explain these seeming contradictions? 2 Peter chapter 3 This is now the second letter that I am writing to you beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour through your apostles.

Knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation. For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn? But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace, and count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people, and lose your own stability, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.

Amen. In 2 Peter chapter 3, the final chapter of the epistle, Peter underlines the importance of the coming of Christ in judgment. This is his second letter to the people to whom he is writing, and he wants to stir them up by way of reminder.

The earliest church's expectation of Christ's imminent return has long been a source of theological discomfort and apologetic embarrassment for many Christians. The apparent failure of New Testament prophecy throws the reliability of Christ himself as a prophet into serious question. Christ and the apostles who bore witness to him declared firmly that he was coming soon.

Yet here we are, almost 2000 years later. Passages such as 2 Peter chapter 3 seem to accentuate the problem. Peter is writing to Christians, reminding them of the prophetic witness of Christ and the apostles, against the background of disbelieving, scoffing false teachers.

Even at the time of the epistle, people are starting to ridicule or reject the prophetic testimony of Christ and the apostles. Early in the letter, Peter declared his intent to write to remind his readers of what had been promised, knowing that he was going to die soon. He assured his readers that in their testimony concerning the coming of Jesus Christ, they weren't following cunningly devised fables.

He presents what he witnessed with James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration as evidence that the word concerning Christ's coming was certain. Christ's kingly glory was a reality, and just waited to be revealed at the appropriate time. Yet Jesus had declared a period of time within which his prophecies would be fulfilled, and everyone could see that the time was swiftly running out.

In addition to saying that he was coming soon, and that the time was near, Jesus had given more specific details concerning the time within which the prophecies would be fulfilled, and he seemed to be on an increasingly tight schedule. He had assured his hearers that his promised coming would occur before they had finished going through the towns of Israel, in Matthew 10, verse 23. He had promised that it would occur while some of the apostolic witnesses were still alive, in Matthew 16, verse 28.

That generation would not pass away until all of the Olivet Discourse prophecy would come to pass, in Matthew 24, verse 34. It was this that represented the biggest challenge for the readers of 2 Peter. The apostles and the witnesses of Christ, who are described as the fathers in verse 4, were dying, and Peter, by his own admission, was near death.

But the awaited coming of Jesus still had not materialised. And at this point it might look as if he was going to be a no-show. This throws everything into question.

Against the scoffing of the false teachers, Peter reminds his readers of the example of

the flood. He also challenges some of his contemporaries' understanding of apocalyptic timetables. The Lord, Peter wants us to appreciate, never finds himself on a tight schedule.

He is the Lord of the Ages, and he is never racing against the clock. The vast scale of a millennium, a thousand years, doesn't weaken his memory of his promise, nor do the exigencies and time pressures of a day leave him in danger of overshooting his deadline. He preserved the old creation prior to the flood, a world symbolically formed by holding the chaos of the waters at bay, and then destroyed that in the flood.

And now he's holding the present order, and he can bring that down too. Peter goes on to explain that the Lord's apparent slackness concerning his promised return is not a manifestation of his failure to keep his scheduled appointments, as if Christ struggled with punctuality. No, it is his mercy and patience that leads him to tarry.

Christ's apparent delay is his gift of time to his people, enabling them to prepare themselves for his return. Peter returns to a familiar image from Christ's own teaching in the Gospels, where Christ compares his return to the coming of a thief. Peter's teaching in this passage, with its references to the flood and an unexpected thief, strongly recalls Jesus' own teaching in the Olivet Discourse, in Matthew 24, verses 27-51.

The day of the Lord is a day for which many will be unprepared. Jesus warns, both of a feverish climate of misguided predictions and excited expectations, and of the cynicism of those who dismiss his return entirely, pointing to the fact that things continue as they have always done. When the day of the Lord does arrive, it will have dramatic and devastating effect.

The heavens will pass away and be dissolved. The elements will melt with fervent heat, the elements here being the same term as Paul uses in Galatians 4, and the earth and the works within it will be exposed. Considering the coming dissolution of the present world order, Peter charges his readers to be people distinguished by their holy conduct and godliness in verse 11, rather than by the insobriety and licentiousness that marks the false teachers.

Their conduct is to be different from others, revealing the fact that they are people driven by hope in a promise concerning a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, both anticipating it and praying for its soon arrival. Stirring as Peter's message to his readers may seem when read in its original context, I'm sure that many Christians who have followed the train of his argument will find themselves disheartened by it. Peter doubled down on the promises of Jesus, and yet they still failed to come to pass.

If the reliability of Jesus as a teacher depends so much upon the accuracy of his prophetic predictions, where does that leave us? Unless, perhaps, all of these things did

come to pass. In addressing this question, it's important to pay attention to two particular things. The first thing to do is to attend to the specifics of the New Testament teaching concerning the last things.

In the Olivet Discourse and the chapter that precedes it, the last days are focused upon the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. There is a judgment on the near horizon, and it will particularly relate to the Jewish people and their city Jerusalem. I believe that the book of Revelation also most immediately refers to these events.

In the Olivet Discourse, there are several references and allusions to the prophecies of Daniel which concern the end of days of the Jewish people, during which time the Messiah will come, followed by destruction and the tearing up of the world order. We see this in chapter 9 verses 24-27. The decisive apocalyptic events there, associated with the work of the Messiah and bringing an end to sacrifice and offering, are the destruction of the city and the sanctuary.

These events, while focusing upon the Jewish people in Jerusalem, are of cosmic and epochal significance. In Matthew chapter 23 verses 35-36, Jesus speaks of all the righteous blood that's been shed on the earth, from the blood of Abel to Zechariah, coming upon the Jews of his generation. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple would mark the conclusion and the judgment of an entire era of human history, and the collapse of an entire world order.

The second thing to attend to is that the dramatic language of conflagration of the heavens and earth that Peter employs here, resembles Old Testament imagery of epochal and cosmic judgment. We find such language in Isaiah chapter 13, 34, 51 and 65. It's also like the language used by the author of Hebrews, who speaks of God currently shaking and removing certain temporary realities of the heavens and the earth, so that the enduring thing should remain.

In chapter 12 verses 26-29, this does not refer to the annihilation of the physical order, but to the destruction of the divine world order. For Peter, the destruction of the temple would have closed a window of time in which the Old Covenant and the New Covenant orders overlapped. It changes the way that God relates to humanity in general.

With the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, that route of access to God is completely closed off. It leaves nothing but judgment for those who continue to rely upon it. This is the melting of the firmament and the elements.

The temple was the model of heaven. It was the means by which you had access to God. And that has been destroyed.

It's removed a protective cover that the temple afforded the people of the land and their works, revealing their works, which are then burned up. With the decisive destruction of



Jerusalem and its temple, the entire theopolitical firmament is brought crashing down to the ground. After the destruction of the temple, the status of Israel changed.

There was no longer a nation with a special means of access to God. All the nations ordered relative to it. The rule of the Messiah, the King of Israel, has been declared, and all of the nations are now redefined relative to him.

The kingdoms of this earth belong to our Lord, and all rulers are but stewards, responsible to administer justice and submission to Him until His kingdom is consummated. After AD 70, Israel no longer enjoyed the unique status of a holy nation, and no sacred polity has taken its place. All humanity and every ruler is now called to prepare themselves for the consummation of the kingdom of the Christ, for which the Church serves as an anticipatory sign and witness.

After AD 70, a new heavens and a new earth is established. God deals with people on different terms. A world order structured around the temple in Jerusalem, marked for condemnation in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, is finally to be torn down, and a new world order structured around the New Jerusalem and the coming kingdom, where there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, is established in its place.

This is one that will eventually grow to fill the entire earth, as Daniel foretold. 2 Peter, like so much of the New Testament, is written in the shadow of the imminent day of the Lord, anticipating the near coming of Christ in judgment. Considering the imminent coming of their Lord in judgment, the recipients of the letter are charged to ensure that, when the time comes, they will be found holy, without impurity, moral spot or blemish, and at peace with God and each other.

The day of the Lord will be a day when the true character of things and persons are exposed, and we are called to live our lives as those readied for a great unveiling. As Peter declares in verse 10, the earth and the works that are done in it will be exposed. The patience of the Lord, his delay in bringing judgment upon the world, is an act of salvation.

It ensures that all of his people can be gathered in. Peter has already spoken of this patience in verse 9. God is patient towards us, he does not wish any to perish, but that all should repent. God's intent in delay is salvation.

Peter claims that his teaching on this point is also supported by the witness of Paul's writings, by the wisdom given to him by the Lord. Perhaps he has in mind passages of Paul's letters, such as Romans chapter 2, verses 3-4. Peter's concern in this passage is helping the people to whom he is writing to understand the approaching day of the Lord.

However, much of the significance of this passage is found in material that is mostly tangential to Peter's driving point here, in his remarks concerning Paul. The first thing we

ought to notice is the way that he speaks of Paul as our beloved brother. Who is the R here? Richard Borkham argues that it is very unlikely to mean my.

The most likely possibility is that the R refers to Peter's fellow apostles. The W in verses 16-18 of chapter 1 referred to the very core apostles, Peter, James and John. As James had died by that time, one could perhaps even make a case that the W refers to Peter and John.

Paul is the beloved brother and fellow witness of these apostles, presumably two of the few remaining apostles who had not yet died. Paul is the beloved brother and fellow witness of these apostles. In Galatians chapter 2, Peter and Paul had a great confrontation in Antioch.

But here, at the end of his life, Peter expresses his union with Paul and appeals to him as a fellow witness. Peter was the one entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised and Paul with the gospel to the uncircumcised. Paul presents the fact of this mutual recognition in Galatians and here Peter also expresses such a recognition of Paul.

The second thing that we ought to notice is that Paul's works seem to have been widely known to Peter. The leaders and teachers of the early church recognized and supported each other's ministries, seeing themselves as standing in unity in their presentation of the gospel. Paul's letters clearly were shared widely in the early church, beyond the churches and persons to whom they were first directly addressed.

The early church was tightly networked with lots of movement around. Paul's employment of letters was not accidental. It was a practice with much to commend it over the writing of mere abstract theological treatises.

As letters, these formed personal bonds and exchanges between churches, especially as churches were expected to pass them on to other churches. As the letters were passed around, servants of the churches would travel around with them, sharing news, encouragement, gifts and ministry, strengthening the unity of the church. Also, as the direct recipients of the letters shared them, they were ministering their particular gifts to others and presenting themselves as examples from which other Christians and churches could learn.

By this point, it is not unlikely that collections of Paul's letters may have already been circulating among churches. The third and the most startling thing here, however, is the way that Peter speaks of Paul's writings. He talks of how they are difficult to understand and how many twist them to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

The implication is that Peter considered Paul's writings to be scripture, alongside the scriptures of the Old Testament. He mentions the wisdom given to Paul. This expression is similar to that that Paul uses to refer to the ministry with which he was commissioned

and for which he was equipped in places such as Romans 12 verse 3, Romans chapter 15 verses 15 to 17, and Galatians chapter 2 verses 7 to 9, where he describes the grace given to him as something that was recognised by Peter and the other apostles.

Peter remarks on the fact that there are things in Paul's letters that are hard to understand and that these elements have been twisted by the uninstructed and unstable to their own destruction. This is most likely referring primarily not to followers of false teachers but to false teachers themselves. Theirs is a culpable lack of instruction and ignorance.

They have not desired to grow in their understanding of the truth, so have not properly instructed themselves in the faith. The condemned persons are also unstable. They are not rooted in a love for the truth, in moral integrity and consistency of life, and as a result they are unstable persons.

Their interpretation is not guided by a careful commitment to discovering the truth, but by ungoverned passions, by their desire to justify their sins, by the anger of those whose minds are not at peace, by the rebellion of those who do not want to submit to the clear instruction of the Lord, and by the sectarianism of those who wish merely to win arguments against others. It is crucial that we recognise that, for Peter, interpretation is a moral activity as much as an intellectual one. People who have not mastered their spirits, subdued their vices, learned to live at peace with their neighbour, developed a love of the truth, people whose minds are not guarded by the peace of Christ, and who are in rebellion against God, will not think clearly.

Rather, they will constantly twist the truth to their own destruction. Indeed, the cleverer they are, the better they will be at twisting the truth and rationalising their sins. There is a spirit of lawlessness and hatred for the truth that work in the world, and the recipients of Peter's epistle must be on guard against it.

They have been warned in advance so that they might be firmly grounded and secure, in contrast to the instability of the false teachers and their followers. The alternative to the instability of the false teachers and their followers and the way that Peter's recipients will be prepared for the coming day that he has described, is by growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is in looking to Him that they will put down the roots that will hold them firm and secure when all others are overthrown.

Ultimately, all of the glory belongs to Him. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which moral and spiritual instability can compound people's errors and misunderstanding of the truth?