



THE CHURCH OF THE  
RESURRECTION  
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## CRASH AND BURN

### The Comic End of King Whats-His-Name

2 Kings 1

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According to the Darwin Awards, natural selection deems that the deaths of certain individuals serve as a warning to others. So the Darwin Awards are given posthumously to those people who die because of their own foolishness. One recent award "winner," a 19 year old Berliner, was walking with his girlfriend beside an icy river. The couple began arguing with one another. He became so angry with her that he pushed her into the river and then jumped in himself to make sure that she drowned. She, however, could swim; he could not. She swam to shore and made a full recovery; he earned a Darwin Award in his death, for "improving the human genome by accidentally removing himself from it."<sup>1</sup>

## GOD-BLESSED MOCKERY

God in his Word condemns most forms of mockery, especially making fun of the poor. Proverbs 17:5 says that "whoever mocks the poor insults his maker." When it comes to tyrants, however, God makes an exception. The Bible not only permits the mockery of tyrants, it models it for us. Take for example the showdown between Almighty God and Baal on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18. Baal was the bloodthirsty demon god of the Canaanites. The Prophet Elijah didn't play nice with Baal's 450 prophets as they cut themselves and poured out their blood to lure Baal out of hiding. Instead, Elijah mocked them, saying, "Shout louder, for he's a god, but he's either distracted, or on the toilet, or traveling, or maybe sleeping and in need of waking" (1 Kings 18:27). Through his prophet Elijah, God was mocking the cruel tyrant Baal. "He who sits in the heavens laughs" (Psalm 2:4), and it's quite alright for us to laugh along with him.

The greatest example in the Hebrew Bible of this "God-blessed mockery" is the story of Queen Esther. In that story, Haman is a homicidal maniac who plots the genocide of the Jews. He also builds a tall tower on which to hang Esther's uncle Mordecai. But Esther is queen "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). She courageously intervenes, the Jews are saved, and in the end it is Haman who is hoisted with his own petard. The Jewish feast of Purim not only commemorates God's salvation that day, but also God's justice in Haman's ironic end. To this day, when Jews read the story of Esther on Purim, everyone joins in the fun of mocking Haman. As the story is read, whenever Haman's name is mentioned the people "erase it" with chaos and noise from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://darwinawards.com/darwin/darwin2018-03.html>

tambourines and noisemakers. Again, he who sits in the heavens laughs, and we're invited to laugh along with him at the just demise of another cruel tyrant.

Modern people can be prudes about Bible stories like these, as if there's nothing more barbaric than God choosing sides and laughing when the bad guys die. Yet every culture—including ours—has these stories, in which good triumphs over evil, and cruel tyrants are defeated. It's how we teach our children right from wrong. It's how we instill hope within them that justice will prevail.

God wants to teach us the same things. We mustn't reduce God to some kind of stuffy college professor lecturing us on theology and ethics (as important as those things are). God is more than that. He's our heavenly Father, who seeks to shape our hearts as well as our minds. He wants us to weep as he weeps for the poor and disenfranchised, for widows and orphans and refugees and immigrants. He also wants us to share his indignation for tyrants, who defy him in their brutal oppression of others. Unless they repent, they are deserving of our ridicule.

## **AHAZIAH: ANOTHER TYRANT WORTHY OF RIDICULE**

King Ahaziah's "crash and burn" story in 2 Kings 1 has all the makings of a tragedy. He crashed through his own roof, then his armies were burned with fire from heaven, and then he died. Yet the Bible tells this story as a comedy instead of a tragedy. Why? Because Ahaziah was another cruel tyrant fit to be mocked. Here's how he was introduced at the end of the previous chapter:

*[Ahaziah] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and walked in the way of his father and in the way of his mother and in the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. He served Baal and worshiped him and provoked the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger in every way that his father had done. (1 Kings 22:52–53)*

Ahaziah was the son of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who together rank among the most despicable and hated monarchs in world history. After Ahab's death, Ahaziah assumed the throne, and he provoked God in every way that his father had done. One would think that after Elijah's spectacular defeat of Baal atop Mt. Carmel, and after Ahab's gruesome end on the battlefield, that Ahaziah would have turned to the Lord. Yet he chose to walk in the ways of his parents, and that made him an enemy of the Lord suitable for mockery.

This wasn't merely a matter of Ahaziah's private religious preference for Baal instead of Yahweh. Ahaziah wasn't a private citizen, he was Israel's King. His life purpose was to lead God's people in justice and truth, so that they might be God's light to the world. Instead, as his parents had done, so also did Ahaziah lead God's people away from the Lord, away from justice, away from truth, and into all the wicked practices of the surrounding Canaanite nations. Instead of Baal-worshippers like Rahab and Ruth being drawn to the light of the Lord, Israelites under Ahaziah left the Lord for the darkness of Baal. In God's eyes, therefore, Ahaziah was a wicked tyrant in

the service of Baal. Just as God had acted decisively against Baal in the showdown up on Mt. Carmel, he did it again on the roof of Ahaziah's mountaintop palace in Samaria.

## DOWN WITH IDOLATRY

In Hebrew, *zebel* means lofty or exalted. When Solomon built the temple of the Lord on Mount Zion, it was called a *beth zebel* (1K 8:13; 2 Chron 6:2), i.e. a lofty house. No doubt Ahaziah also lived in a *beth zebel*, a lofty house atop Mount Samaria.

This word *zebel* can also describe a lofty or exalted person like a king. Ahaziah's mother, the queen, was named *Je-zebel*, which means, "Where is the lofty one?" or "Where is the king?" It's a comic name if you think about it. Jezebel completely dominated her husband Ahab, and yet she always did it on the sly. It was as if she was always mocking Ahab, saying, *Je-zebel?* "Where is the lofty one? Where is king Ahab? Who cares? I wear the pants in this family anyways."

Where was the lofty one? Well, Ahab died, but a new *zebel*, a new "lofty one" had taken his place. Ahaziah—the new lofty one—was on top of the world, up on Mount Samaria, on the roof of his lofty palace. But here's where the comedy begins, as—whoops—Ahaziah fell through the roof!

Perhaps we shouldn't laugh. At least not yet. Ahaziah was injured, and he feared for his life. As men and women made in the image of God, every crisis presents us with another opportunity to turn to the Lord. But Ahaziah persisted in apostasy: he turned to Baal instead of the Lord. He sent messengers, saying, "Go, inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness" (2 Kings 1:2).

Actually, Ahaziah didn't say "Baal-zebul." That's a deliberate misspelling on the part of the narrator in order to add to the comic effect. Ahaziah said "Baal-zebul", i.e. Baal "the lofty one." Isn't that always the way we see our idols when we turn to them? They're a way to put us on top. Whether we turn to wealth, or power, or success, or pleasure, or relationships—whatever we put our hopes in, we're believing that it's a way up. If, for example, you devote yourself to your work, never taking a break, always doing whatever it takes to keep climbing that corporate ladder, then it's because you're believing that it's a way up. That's your Baal-zebul. If only you could see where workaholism will take you, not up, but down into slavery and misery and death. Then you would know that work isn't Baal-zebul, but Baal-zebul, i.e. Baal "of the flies."

The Canaanites looked up to Baal for fertility and life, so they called him Baal-zebul, Baal "the lofty one." Faithful Israelites like Elijah, however, knew that following Baal wasn't the way up but the way down. They saw that Baal was a bloodthirsty demon, whose macabre ceremonies ended up gathering corpses and flies. So they made fun of Baal by calling him Baal-zebul, or

Baal “of the flies,” because bloodthirsty tyrants deserve our ridicule. What things in your life seem like a way up, but will only end up leading you away from the Lord? What are your Baal-zebubs? Maybe it’s time to start mocking them too?

## UP WITH YAHWEH

Meanwhile, as Ahaziah’s messengers set out to find Baal, the Lord came to Elijah with a message for the King. Note the ups and downs in God’s message and continuing throughout the chapter, because it’s all part of the comedy of this story. The Lord told Elijah:

*“Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Now therefore thus says the LORD, You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.’” So Elijah went. (2 Kings 1:3-4)*

You’ve probably heard the old expression: “You’ve made your bed, and now you’ve got to lie in it.” This is essentially God’s message for Ahaziah, but with the added twist of elevation. Ahaziah the lofty one, faithful worshiper of Baal the lofty one, fell through the roof of his lofty mountaintop palace. He landed up rather than down, on a lofty bier, a death bed, from which he could only descend through repentance. Some years earlier, when Elijah brought King Ahab a message of condemnation for murdering Naboth, Ahab had repented. As a result, God showed amazing grace and mercy to him. In the same way, God’s word of condemnation came to Ahaziah, who had elevated himself over the Lord. If Ahaziah wanted to live, he would have to humble himself and come down, placing himself under Yahweh, only truly lofty one. As long as we live, it’s never too late to humble ourselves before the Lord.

Elijah did as he was told and delivered God’s message to Ahaziah’s messengers. How did the King respond?

## SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND

Ahaziah’s envoys to Ekron returned much sooner than anticipated, so he asked them, “Why have you returned?” (1:5). They told him of the man they met along the way who sent them back to the King with this message:

*“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.” (2 Kings 1:6)*

This is the second time we hear Elijah’s message, which again can be summarized as, “You’ve made your bed, and now you’ve got to lie in it.” If there ever was a time for repentance, this

was it. Ahaziah should have humbled himself and turned to the Lord. Instead, he asked, "What did the guy look like?" (1:7). So they described him, and Ahaziah said, "Aha! I knew it! It's Elijah!" (1:8). Then Ahaziah hatched a plan to reign Elijah in.

What becomes evident at this point is that every time Ahaziah hardens his heart, the story become a little more farcical and just gets funnier and funnier. The Hebrew text in these verses is hilarious. Ahaziah literally asked, "How would you judge the man who said these things?" (1:7). Then the messengers answered, "The man was a *Baal Se'ar*, with a leather belt strapped around his waist" (1:8). *Se'ar* means hair, which was a symbol of virility and strength. To them, Elijah was a Baal of hair!

Here's what makes this so funny: Ahaziah sent messengers to inquire of Baal. They went looking for the fertility god. Along the way, guess who hopped out of the bushes to surprise them? A fertility god, or someone looking very much like him—a *Baal Se'ar*, a Baal of hair! Seek and you shall find! So the messengers thought, "We've found him." Yet when they returned with Elijah's message, Ahaziah was blind to what they had found. Instead of humbling himself beneath the man of God, Ahaziah decided to reign him in.

## **MORE FIRE FROM HEAVEN**

Ahaziah "sent to him a captain of fifty men with his fifty" (1:9), and look where they found Elijah: "sitting on the top of a hill." Of course! Where else would he go for another showdown with the servants of Baal?

The captain said to Elijah: "*Ish Ha-Elohim*," "Man of God, the king says come down!" But Elijah said, "If I am *Ish Ha-Elohim* (Man of God), then let *Esh* (fire) come down and consume you and your fifty" (1:10). It's a clever pun, merely the tweaking of a vowel. Elijah was saying, "If it's *Ish* you wanted, then it's *Esh* you shall have!" It's absolutely hilarious, but the captain and his fifty didn't appreciate Elijah's cleverness, for they were consumed by fire from heaven, just as had happened for Elijah on Mt. Carmel some years before.

Then Ahaziah hardened his heart and sent reinforcements. Adding to the comedy, the second captain said, "O *Ish* of God, this is the king's order! Come down *quickly*!" (1:11). Elijah must have thought, "Are you kidding me? Let's see if these guys like my pun any better: 'If it's *Ish* you wanted, then it's *Esh* you shall have!' And they too were consumed by fire from heaven.

Like any good joke, there has to be a third time. So another captain came up with his fifty, but this time, after he came *up*, he fell *down*:

*The third captain of fifty went up and fell down on his knees before Elijah and entreated him, "O Ish of God, please let my life, and the lives of these fifty servants of yours, be precious in your sight. Behold, Esh came*

*down from heaven and consumed the first two captains and their companies with their fifties, but now let my life be precious in your sight.” (2 Kings 1:13)*

Finally a captain with some sense! If only King Ahaziah had done in the first place what this captain did! What Ahaziah thought was expendable, God deemed precious: a leader who would humble himself before the Lord. God spared the lives of the captain and his fifty, but what about the tyrant who sent them?

Next the Lord authorized Elijah to go speak directly to Ahaziah. Even though the journey would have involved going both down the hill and then back up Mt. Samaria, the Lord said simply, “Go down with him,” because that’s truly where Ahaziah was in relation to God. He may have thought that he was up, but he was really down. So Elijah got up and went down and directly delivered the Lord’s message to the king. It’s the third time we hear Elijah’s message. Like “three strikes and you’re out,” this third time will effectively move God’s message from warning to guarantee:

*“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.’” (2 Kings 1:16)*

And that was the end of King Whats-His-Name! What a great story! Had we been counting the ups and downs throughout the story, we would have reached 21 with “the bed to which you have gone up.” Of course it would be told in this way: up and down 3 x 7 times, thus perfectly completing the comic tale of another tyrant’s downfall.

There’s a lot here for us to ponder. In closing, here are five brief reflections, chiefly on the ups and downs of this story.

**1. The word of the Lord stands forever.** God mercifully warned Ahaziah repeatedly, but Ahaziah refused to repent. So Ahaziah died “according to the word of the Lord” (1:17). Part of what makes this story funny is the “I told you so” element as God finally does what he said he would do. To this day, God continues putting the world to rights by holding leaders to account. His justice will prevail, for the word of the Lord stands forever.

**2. Israel’s Going Down.** As comic as this particular story is, it points towards a much greater tragedy. Elijah kept challenging Ahaziah, asking “Is there no God in Israel?” but Ahaziah refused to acknowledge the Lord. The death of the king prefigured the death of the entire nation. Despite the repeated warnings of the prophets, all Israel followed in Ahaziah’s footsteps, ignoring God’s word and chasing after idols. So even as the word of the Lord stands forever, kingdoms rise and fall. By the end of 2 Kings, the entire nation would be conquered and carted off into exile. For this reason, we read these stories in the weeks preceding Christmas as a way of remembering why we needed the savior who is Christ the Lord. Neither

priest nor prophet nor king could save Israel. We couldn't save ourselves either. They needed and we need the savior who is Christ the Lord.

**3. Jesus came down.** Jesus left his father's house and came down to us. He came to be our king, but not in the way of Ahab or Ahaziah, Herod or Caesar, or any of the countless other tyrants this world has known. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. They nailed him to a cross, where he died to rescue us from sin and idolatry and death. But God in his justice raised Jesus from the dead. After appearing to many witnesses Jesus ascended into heaven, where he sits at the right hand of God. Jesus is the king of kings and lord of lords. Jesus is the name above all names. But it all started when he came down to us.

**4. In Jesus' Kingdom, the way up is down.** If anyone would come after Jesus, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Jesus. For in his kingdom, the first shall be last and the last first. One way or another, we all must relinquish our lofty positions and be humbled before the Lord. Repentance is never easy, but it beats all the other alternatives. In Jesus' kingdom, the way down is up, and the way up is down.

**5. Hasn't God's kingdom come?** Elijah repeatedly asked, "is there no God in Israel?" In the same way, we should be asking, "Hasn't God's kingdom come?"

*Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Matthew 12:22-28)*

If God's kingdom hasn't come, then the Pharisees were right: Jesus cast out demons by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons. In this were true, then following Jesus would be utter foolishness.

If, however, Jesus cast out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit, as he said that he did, and it's clear that he did, then God's kingdom has come. Then we can be freed of all our idols and addictions and demons by humbling ourselves before him and making Jesus our king. That's what being a Christian is all about. Hasn't God's kingdom come? Indeed it has. It's right here among us, and that changes everything.