

Introduction: As we begin 2 Kings 1, we see the self-deception which the idolatry of the Philistines produced in Ahab's son, Ahaziah. When Ahaziah fell through the typical lattice barrier which walled in upper courts in many Middle Eastern homes of that time (2 Kings 1:2), he made no effort to seek the LORD or the LORD's prophet, Elijah – even though it is recorded clearly in 1 Kings that Ahaziah's father Ahab knew much of the power and faith of the prophet. After all, hadn't the royal family witnessed the fire from heaven that fell on Elijah's altar and the rain which returned after three years because of Elijah's prayer? No wonder Elijah rebukes the king with the words, "Is there no God in Israel that you send to a foreign god?" (2 Kings 1:3)

But instead of humbling himself before the one true God, and pleading for healing mercy from Him, Ahaziah sent messengers from his court to inquire of the fortune-telling idol of the Philistines, named Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron. He wanted to ask this Philistine god to predict the future: "Will I recover from my fall?" (2 Kings 1:2) The king wanted his fortune read, and really made no inquiry from the God of Israel. In this week's notes, we will especially focus on the identity of this Philistine idol. He is called in 2 Kings 1:2: "Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron." May God give us a healthy fear of all idolatry, and at the same time a great confidence in our Savior Jesus Christ. We begin our notes with the Gospel reference to this satanic false god Baal-zebub – on the lips of our Savior's accusers.

Mon/Tues: read Matthew 5:18-20; Matthew 12:9-24 and Matthew 12:34-37. The glorious good news is that in Jesus Christ, God makes available to us a saving righteousness far beyond the legalistic righteousness of religious hypocrites. This was the Gospel which Jesus Christ came to announce to all men – that through His life offered in their place, they could enter the *kingdom of God* with a righteousness which exceeded the self-righteous good works of the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20).

His foes did not take kindly to Christ's words. Such a condemning of their self-righteousness enraged these teachers of the law. Out of a heart-hatred towards our Lord, they began to spew forth all kinds of ungodly accusations against Him – especially on the Sabbath day. Time and again, they accuse Christ of breaking the Sabbath because on that holy day He had mercy on the helpless – like the man with the withered hand in Matthew 12:9-14. Despite this, Jesus remains in control, as the One who would one day judge these men's wicked words, (Matt. 12:36-37).

But the most serious accusation which Christ's foes levelled against Him was that He cast out demons and did His other miracles – not by the power of God – but by the power of "Baal-zebub, the prince of demons." (Matthew 12:24) We will see in future notes where they got this terrible name for Satan and how they had the gall to label Jesus with it.

Meditate and Pray: Thank God for the patience of the Lord Jesus, in His willingness to endure so much opposition and blasphemy! As Matthew 12:19-21 says of Christ, He would not quarrel or cry aloud ... (but in gentle lowly ministry) would make sure bruised reeds were not broken and smoldering wicks not snuffed out. Let us thank Him that, despite the vile things which His foes said about Him, He was able to offer perfect worship every time He stepped into Israel's houses of worship – even though they were often little more than “synagogues of Satan.” He was also able to save many souls, driven to hope in Him because of the harsh treatment they received from these false religious leaders.

Wednesday: read Matthew 12:9-14 and Mark 3:1-6. Today we see why the righteousness of our Lord Jesus exceeded the superficial self-righteousness of the Pharisees. While they spied on Him to criticize His healings (which they wrongly thought to be breaking the Sabbath) Christ's righteousness showed itself to the man with the withered hand by healing him on the Sabbath day, thereby bringing glory to God by healing the body (and we trust the soul) of this invalid, and in this way fulfilling the great command:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:37-40

But we notice once again the anger of Christ's enemies against Him on this occasion. They went out of our Lord's presence full of seething resentment, determined to plot Jesus' death, while Jesus' godly anger at their hardness of heart prompted Him to boldly rescue the suffering invalid body and soul. We see Christ's holy anger and their murderous plots in the parallel passage in Mark 3:2-5. Godly anger is productive and saving! Ungodly rage produces nothing except murderous rage.

Meditate and Pray: Let us thank Jesus for His Sabbath day courage in rescuing sinners from the physical misery of their bodily afflictions and the spiritual bondage of their oppressors.

Thursday: read Matthew 12:9-14 & Matthew 16:21. To rescue us in a timely way from our sin, we need a Savior capable of the same righteous indignation which He showed in rescuing the man with the withered hand! How brave of Jesus to decisively command this man to “stretch forth his hand” in Matthew 12:13 for healing, knowing that doing so would ensure the murderous rage of His foes as well as ultimately His own death! How easily we would have found an excuse for avoiding this deadly confrontation were we in Jesus' place! But Jesus' holy anger makes Him determined to go to the Cross, just as He begins to clearly teach His disciples in Matthew 16:21. That is the difference between our selfish indulgence of an angry spirit and Christ's selfless, saving rage against sin.

*Jesus determined to heal the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath and not wait a day to do so. He did this even though the man's hand had been withered for some time and the Savior waiting only one more day to heal that hand would have avoided provoking the Pharisees' murderous rage. Yet our Lord had many reasons for such swift action on the Sabbath, not least of which was to have that miracle serve as a sign that whereas our God is slow to anger, **He is swift to bring upon us His compassionate mercy.** William Harrell*

Fri/Sat/Sun: read Matthew 12:22-32 & 2 Kings 1:1-4. Christ's foes in their anger become so desperate that they finally begin to accuse Him of doing His miracles by the power of the prince of demons himself – whom they call “Beelzebul, the prince of demons” in Matthew 12:24. This sounds familiar, doesn't it? The idol of the Philistines, to whom the dying king Ahaziah sent messengers to find out if he would recover from his fall, was named “Baal-zebub.”

In the Hebrew language of 2 Kings 1:2, “Baal-zebub” means “Lord of the flies.” It may be that this false god was believed to provide relief from contagions of flies that could invade a place like Ekron. Just as Egypt needed relief from the plague of flies which the LORD sent through Moses, so the Philistines may have hoped this god would provide a similar relief. Another way this ancient idol's name was spelled is “Baal Zebul”, meaning “Baal is prince.” Either way, the Philistines god, scholars tell us, had a reputation through the “wise men” of Ekron of being able to tell the future – which is what Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1 wanted this god to do. Would he survive his injury or not? No thought of seeking the God of Israel – just selfish concern to find out his future as king – that is the lowly motive which prompted Ahaziah to seek the help of this idol.

But the interesting thing in the Jewish Scriptures is that God's people had a habit of making minor changes to the names of idols in order to mock them as “non-gods.” They would change their names to mean something pejorative. For example, “Bethel” or “house of God” that holy place which Jacob the patriarch named, became known as “Beth-aven -- house of iniquity,” because of the sin and idol-worship which corrupted that place in the days of Hosea the prophet. (Hosea 10:5) In the same way, the Philistine idol “Baal-Zebul,” meaning Baal is prince, was changed by the Jews to “Baal-Zebel,” meaning “Baal is Lord of the manure pile.” Just a subtle change in one or two letters enabled the Jews to pour contempt on these idols. So when Jesus' foes called Him (in the Greek) one possessed by “Beelzebul”, they may well have been pouring scorn on Jesus, as if to say, “You are no more one sent from God than is Baal-zebel the Lord of the dung-hill.” This is a serious blasphemy – no wonder Jesus warns these blasphemers of the danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit in Matthew 12:31.

Meditate and Pray: Let us ask the LORD to give us a holy reverence and awe of His holy name so that we never keep company with those who take His Name lightly or blasphemously. Sing about the holy (and saving) Name of God which Jesus Christ rightly wears as His own:

1 How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
in a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
and drives away his fear.

3 Dear Name! the rock on which I build,
my shield and hiding place,
my never-failing treas'ry filled
with boundless stores of grace;

5 Weak is the effort of my heart,
and cold my warmest thought;
but when I see thee as thou art,
I'll praise thee as I ought.

6 Till then I would thy love proclaim
with every fleeting breath;
and may the music of thy name
refresh my soul in death.

2 It makes the wounded spirit whole,
and calms the troubled breast;
'tis manna to the hungry soul,
and to the weary rest.

4 Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
my Prophet, Priest, and King,
my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
accept the praise I bring.