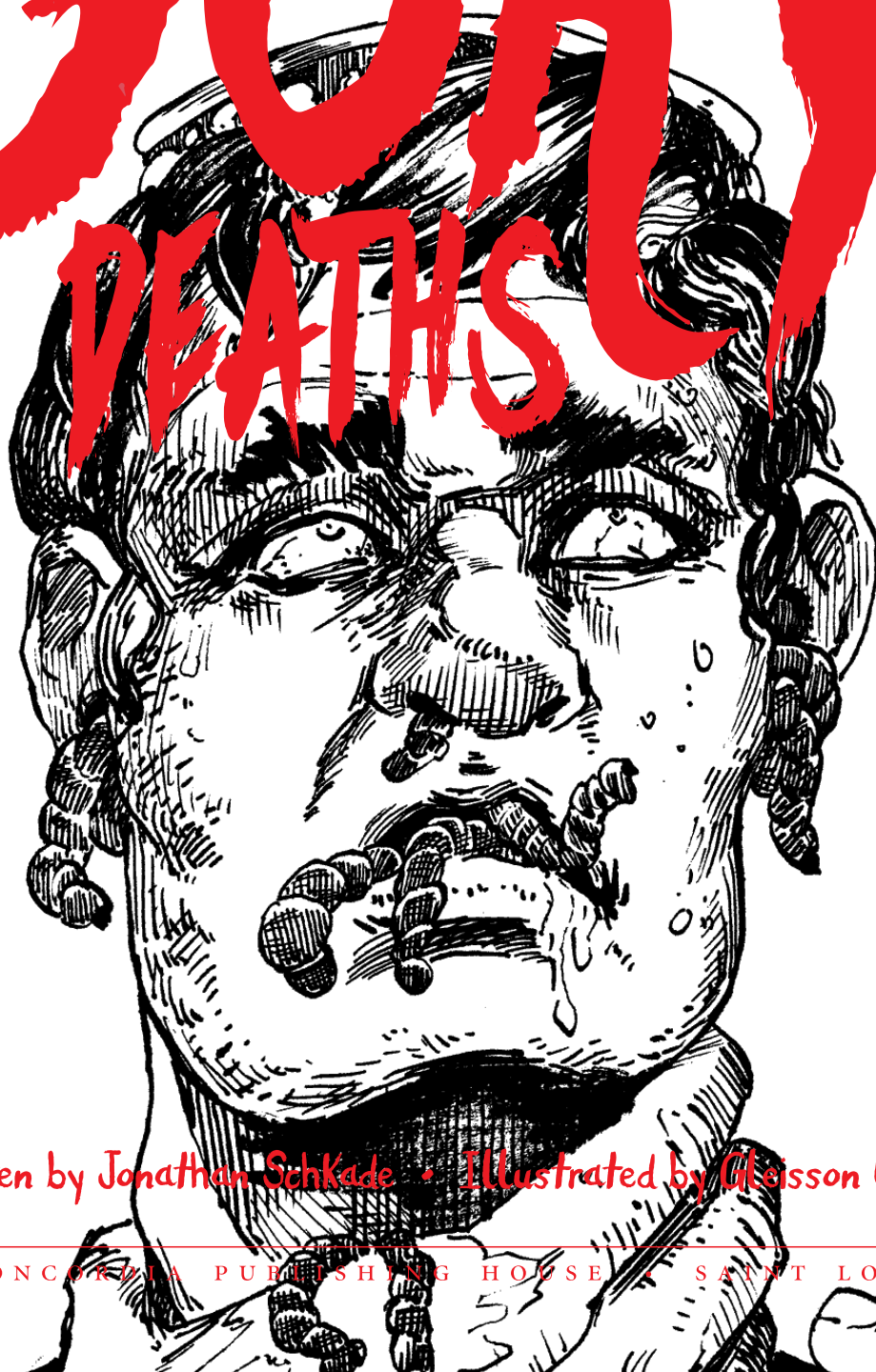


NOT-SO-NICE BIBLE STORIES

GORY DEATHS!



Written by Jonathan Schkade • Illustrated by Gleisson Cipriano

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This book was written in remembrance of all the faithful
who endured suffering for the sake of the cross. As they now
see God face-to-face, so, too, may we.



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A black and white photograph of a landscape. In the foreground, there is a fence made of vertical posts and horizontal rails. Behind the fence, there are several trees, some with bare branches and some with leaves. The background shows a hilly or mountainous area under a bright sky. The overall scene is somewhat desolate and quiet.

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HEAVEN'S FLAMETHROWER

Who died: Two captains and their groups of fifty men each / King Ahaziah

How they died: Burned / sickness

Why they died: Disrespecting God and trusting another god for help

When: Circa 852 BC, during the reign of King Shalmaneser III of Assyria

Where in Scripture: 2 Kings 1

Questions. We usually think of the Bible as a book of answers. And that it is. But it's also a book full of questions. From the serpent's "Did God really say . . . ?" to Jesus' "Who do you say that I am?" questions lead the narrative of the Bible forward.

Questions are tools for teaching, but they are so often packed with emotions and, sometimes, they lack in right thinking. That's what happened with King Ahaziah. He had the right question, but he went to the wrong place for answers.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

It's not like God's power should have been a mystery to him. Elijah alone was well enough known at this time for his dramatic confrontations, such as with the prophets of Baal, that Ahaziah should have known right off the bat

exactly where to turn for help. Unfortunately, Ahaziah followed in the ways of his mother, Jezebel—who likely still whispered in his ear—and thought only of pagan gods when the going got rough.

That's too bad, because things turned downright rotten for Ahaziah shortly into his reign as king of Israel. Sensing weakness, Moab successfully rebelled against Israel, leaving the nation short the generous tribute Moab had been paying each year. Then Ahaziah fell through a window lattice in his house and injured himself very badly. He became so ill as a result that his survival was far from certain.

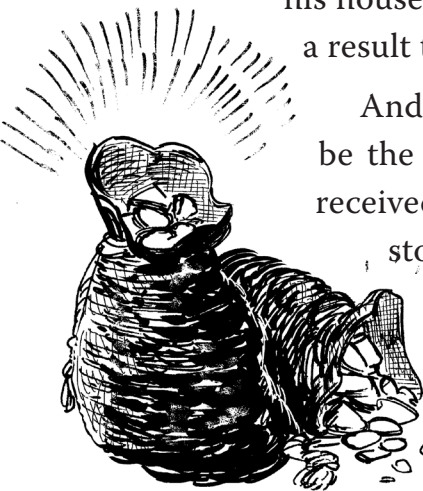
And if this were a happy story of repentance, that would be the point where the king prayed to God for help and received healing and forgiveness. However, that is not this story. Instead, Ahaziah sent messengers to the god of the Philistine city of Ekron: Baal-zebub.

That wasn't going to fly with God, so the angel of the Lord came to Elijah and told him to intercept the messengers and give them a new message for the king. So Elijah found the messengers and gave them God's words for the king. Wisely, the messengers turned around and went back to Ahaziah, forgetting their foolish mission to go to Ekron. Knowing the king wouldn't be happy to see them back so soon, they told him right away about the strange man they met on their way. His message, they said, was

this: "Thus says the LORD, Is it because there is no God in Israel

THAT REMINDS ME: THE NAME *BAAL-ZEBUB* SHOULD LOOK FAMILIAR. THE *BAAL* PART WAS USED TO REFER TO SEVERAL DIFFERENT DEITIES AND SIMPLY MEANT "LORD." PUT TOGETHER HERE, IT FORMS A TERM MEANING "LORD OF THE FLIES," A BITING INSULT FOR THE DEITY COMMONLY CALLED *BAAL-ZEBUL* OR "BAAL IS PRINCE."

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).



Cause and effect are laid out right there, clear as day. The message should have been enough to turn the king to repentance on the spot or, at least, to make him curl up in the fetal position in fear. Rather, he focused on the wrong thing and asked for a description of the man. They told him, and the hairy clothes and leather belt gave Elijah away. It's easy to imagine Ahaziah snarling, "Elijah. It had to be Elijah." His parents' struggles with Elijah were no mystery to him, and he'd surely heard that Elijah wasn't one for empty threats. Again, this should have caused only fear and immediate repentance. Again, though, it did not.

Ahaziah wasn't about to let Elijah feel like the boss. It was time to turn the tables, so Ahaziah sent a captain with fifty soldiers to wrangle Elijah and, perhaps, even kill him. When the soldiers arrived, Elijah was sitting on top of a hill. With little respect, the captain demanded that Elijah come down. But Elijah wasn't having it. He said, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty" (v. 10). And just like the altar on Mount Carmel, the soldiers were devoured by fire from heaven.

JUST WONDERING: IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, ELIJAH WAS ON MOUNT CARMEL CONTESTING THE PROPHETS OF BAAL. ONCE AGAIN, HERE, HE'S UP HIGH, AND THIS ISN'T THE LAST TIME ELIJAH SHOWS UP ON TOP OF A HILL. BOTH ELIJAH AND MOSES LATER APPEARED WITH JESUS ON THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION. WHY DOES A HILLTOP SEEM LIKE A GOOD PLACE FOR A PROPHET TO BE? WHY DO YOU THINK SO MANY KEY BIBLE EVENTS HAPPENED ON HILLS OR MOUNTAINS?

Was this going to stop the king from getting what he wanted? No way! He sent another captain with fifty more men. This captain apparently didn't get the message about what happened to the previous crew because he was even ruder than the first captain, saying, "O man of God, this is the king's order, 'Come down quickly!'" (v. 11). Who knows why, after decades of doing otherwise, he thought Elijah would be inclined to obey a command from a wicked king. Just like the time before, Elijah called for fire, and fire from heaven incinerated the bones, flesh, and clothes of the captain and the fifty

men. Mercifully, at least from the sound of it, the fire was so strong and fast that death was immediate.

The message should have gotten through to Ahaziah by now to try something else, but the king was nothing if not consistent—consistently foolish. Besides, he had plenty of men in his army. What were a hundred soldiers to a king, especially when his own death was on the line? By now, you can probably guess what happened next. The king sent another captain and another fifty soldiers to Elijah.

While we don't know if this captain served the true God before this day, he almost certainly did afterward. At the least, he was a wise man who had heard what had happened to the others. Rather than shouting demands at Elijah, he knelt at Elijah's feet and begged Elijah to spare his life and the lives of his men.



Hearing the captain and having mercy on him, the angel of the Lord told Elijah to go with the captain and to have no fear. So, at last, Elijah went to King Ahaziah. The king did not make any last effort to apologize or seek God's forgiveness from His representative, so Elijah repeated God's message from earlier: because the king sought help from a false god, he would soon die.

That is exactly what happened, and the two-year reign of Ahaziah ended, with no children to succeed him. Instead, another brother of their wicked parents, Ahab and Jezebel, took the throne.

WHY IS THIS IN THE BIBLE?

When your sink leaks, you call a plumber. When a kangaroo wanders into your yard, a zoo keeper might help. When your jump shot is way off, you ask your coach for help. And when your world is falling apart and you don't know what the future holds, there's only one place to go for help: Mom.

Just kidding. While, your mom might actually help, the best answer is God, because not only can He reassure you about the past and present, but He also knows exactly what is coming in the future. That's something no one else can do, and it was true in Ahaziah's day too. If only Ahaziah had remembered that.

While we might not call on pagan deities, we are just as guilty as Ahaziah of looking in the wrong places for help. Money, self-help books, and celebrities might seem to provide answers, but they're never the first place we should go. Although many of the solutions God provides for our troubles involve people throughout our world, we are to always go to Him first, praying for help, for comfort, and for guidance. Only then can we know that He is leading us rather than us leading us.

And that right there is the biggest danger. We live in a culture of pride and self-

THAT REMINDS ME: MANY OTHERS IN BIBLE TIMES BESIDES AHAZIAH WENT LOOKING FOR ANSWERS IN THE WRONG PLACES. NOTABLY, THE WISE MEN FIRST WENT TO JERUSALEM, BECAUSE THAT'S WHERE THEY THOUGHT A NEW KING WOULD BE BORN. WHILE THEY WERE WRONG, THEY DID AT LEAST GET THE CLUE THEY NEEDED FROM GOD'S WORD. THUS, THEY WENT TO BETHLEHEM TO WORSHIP THE ONE WHO ANSWERS EVERY NEED WE HAVE.

sufficiency. Admitting that anyone, even God, knows more than we do about what's best for us is difficult. Pride, which turns us into our own gods, pulls us just as far from God's will as Ahaziah ever was. That's why constant connection with God, praying at all times for all needs both large and small, is essential. It keeps us dependent on the only One who is eternally dependable.

Also, like that final captain, we are to humble ourselves before God and honor those who bring His Word. Our pastors, teachers, and parents are in our lives to guide us along God's righteous path to heaven. Showing respect for them is never an option but is always essential.

B O N U S F E A T U R E S

Miracle man: Keeping in mind that every miracle credited to Elijah is really a miracle done by God, Elijah built an amazing résumé of miraculous moments, unmatched by anyone in the Old Testament since the time of Moses.

Elijah's Top-Ten List of Miraculous Moments

1. Initiated a three-year drought
2. Was fed bread and meat twice a day by ravens for a time
3. Enjoyed a bottomless jar of flour and jug of oil while staying with a widow
4. Raised the widow's son from the dead
5. Won a contest against 450 prophets of Baal
6. Ran faster than Ahab's chariot over a long distance
7. After witnessing a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a fire, he heard the Lord speak in a whisper
8. Witnessed the frying of one hundred of Ahaziah's soldiers
9. Parted the Jordan River with his cloak
10. Went up to heaven in a fiery chariot

Starting a fire: Never start a fire without your parents' permission, so get that first. That said, once you've gathered together your wood, bark, paper, coals, or whatever you're planning to burn, you're going to need something to light them with. So the next time you're stuck on an island or in the woods and need a way to keep warm, boil water, cook food, or frighten animals, try one or more of these tools to get the fire started:

- Waterproof matches
- A lighter
- A pop can and toothpaste or chocolate (for polishing the can)
- Steel wool and a 9-volt battery
- A magnifying lens or glasses
- A shoelace and flexible branch
- A flint and steel
- A round balloon filled with water
- Something that's already on fire