

1 Kings 20

Tonight we are going to take a look at one of the strangest stories in the Bible. In this particular tale, God uses a wall to defeat the enemies of one of the most wicked kings of Israel. In this chapter God does some very unexpected things and He teaches us an important lesson. Let's take a look and see if we can figure out what is going on.

This particular story takes place during the reign of Ahab, king of Israel. Ahab is one of the most wicked and notorious kings in the Old Testament. Ahab was the one who introduced Israel to the worship of Baal:

1 Kings 16:30: "And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him.

31 And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

32 And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.

33 And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him."

Ahab didn't stop at leading Israel into idolatry. He also hunted down and killed the prophets of God, and spent years trying to get his hands on Elijah. He was the one who desired Naboth's vineyard and who took possession of it after his wife Jezebel had Naboth stoned. God was so angry with Ahab that in 1 Kings 21:21-24 God said that He was going to bring His judgment upon him and his entire house. This judgment would be so complete and so severe that there would be no survivors.

This is how God summed up the life of Ahab:

1 Kings 21:25: "But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up."

Was Ahab wicked? Absolutely. He was so incredibly wicked that he set himself apart from all the other wicked kings of Israel. Ahab was an evil, evil king – and it's important to keep that in mind as we study this chapter.

There came a time in Ahab's reign when trouble came his way. God sent a three-year drought upon the entire country, but the nation did not repent. Even though Elijah confronted the false prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel and showed the Israelites that the Lord was God (in a spectacular, fiery display), nothing changed. Ahab continued in his wickedness, the people continued to serve Baal, and the idolatry remained. It should therefore come as no surprise that Ahab found himself in a lot of trouble with a ruler named Benhadad:

1 Kings 20:20: "And Benhadad the king of Syria gathered all his host together: and there were thirty and two kings with him, and horses, and chariots; and he went up and besieged Samaria, and warred against it."

Ahab was attacked by a very powerful coalition of kings. Not only did Benhadad come against

him, but he had 32 other kings at his side! Ahab did not stand a chance. He was tremendously outnumbered. Benhadad knew this and presented Ahab with his series of demands:

1 Kings 20:2: “And he sent messengers to Ahab king of Israel into the city, and said unto him, Thus saith Benhadad,
3 Thy silver and thy gold is mine; thy wives also and thy children, even the goodliest, are mine.”

What Benhadad is doing is demanding that Ahab surrender. He wanted a legal title over everything that Ahab possessed. If Ahab agreed to this he would become Benhadad's servant and rule over Israel in Benhadad's name. Now, Ahab knew that he was outnumbered and that he had no hope of defeating the enormous army that was arrayed against him, so he did the only thing he could do. He surrendered:

1 Kings 20:4: “And the king of Israel answered and said, My lord, O king, according to thy saying, I am thine, and all that I have.”

Now, let's be honest: none of us are rooting for King Ahab. He was a wicked king who introduced horrific idolatry to Israel and who hunted down and killed the prophets of God. He was definitely a villain – in fact, even among wicked kings he was notorious. To us this looks like Ahab is finally getting the justice that he so richly deserves.

In fact, the situation is about to get even worse. Benhadad was not content with just the title to Ahab's property. He actually wanted to show up at Ahab's house *and the house of the people* and haul everything away:

1 Kings 20:5: “And the messengers came again, and said, Thus speaketh Benhadad, saying, Although I have sent unto thee, saying, Thou shalt deliver me thy silver, and thy gold, and thy wives, and thy children;
6 Yet I will send my servants unto thee to morrow about this time, and they shall search thine house, and the houses of thy servants; and it shall be, that whatsoever is pleasant in thine eyes, they shall put it in their hand, and take it away.”

In other words, Benhadad wanted to send his servants to Israel to loot everything they found. His servants were going to come and take everything they wanted, no matter what it was or who it belonged to. This included both goods *and* people. Benhadad was not content with just a legal title; he wanted to take possession of everything – including people's wives and children.

Needless to say, Ahab was not very happy about this development. He immediately complained to his counsel that Benhadad was being mean and unfair:

1 Kings 20:7: “Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land, and said, Mark, I pray you, and see how this man seeketh mischief: for he sent unto me for my wives, and for my children, and for my silver, and for my gold; and I denied him not.”

It's true that Benhadad was being awful to Ahab, but let's not forget that Ahab had done everything in his power to persecute the prophets of God and remove all opposition to Baal worship. He was a wicked man – and if another wicked man showed up at his doorstep and took away his

property, it's kind of hard to feel very sorry about it. After all, if anyone deserved this fate it would be Ahab. (Note that while the king was very upset when people tried to take *his* possessions, he somehow wasn't nearly as concerned when *he* was the one who took things that belonged to others. Somehow Ahab was only outraged when he was the victim.)

The elders of Israel agreed that Benhadad's latest demand was completely unreasonable:

1 Kings 20:8: "And all the elders and all the people said unto him, Hearken not unto him, nor consent."

The people were not happy to hear that Benhadad wanted to take the riches of the king *and* the property of the people as well. It turns out that the Israelites did not want Benhadad to take their wives, children, and goods. Therefore, with the support of the nation, Ahab told Benhadad that he would not agree to his latest demand:

1 Kings 20:9: "Wherefore he said unto the messengers of Benhadad, Tell my lord the king, All that thou didst send for to thy servant at the first I will do: but this thing I may not do. And the messengers departed, and brought him word again."

Ahab was willing to give Benhadad a legal title over Israel, but he was *not* willing to give him physical possession of Israel's property. That was where Ahab drew the line.

So how did Benhadad respond to this? Not very well:

1 Kings 20:10: "And Benhadad sent unto him, and said, The gods do so unto me, and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me."

Benhadad told Ahab that not only was he going to invade Israel, but his army was so incredibly large that it outnumbered even *the dust of the ground*. Since Ahab refused to surrender unconditionally, Benhadad was going to use his army to crush Israel – and then the Syrians would take whatever they wanted.

When Ahab heard this he sent back an insult of his own:

1 Kings 20:11: "And the king of Israel answered and said, Tell him, Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off."

This is basically an ancient version of the proverb "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." How did Benhadad respond to this? Once again, cooler heads did not prevail:

1 Kings 20:12: "And it came to pass, when Ben-hadad heard this message, as he was drinking, he and the kings in the pavilions, that he said unto his servants, Set yourselves in array. And they set themselves in array against the city."

As we are about to see, Benhadad decided to wage this war while drunk. He gave the command to go to battle while he was drinking, and when Ahab sent his force out to meet him he was still getting drunk in his pavilion:

1 Kings 20:16: “And they went out at noon. But Benhadad was drinking himself drunk in the pavilions, he and the kings, the thirty and two kings that helped him.”

Yes, Benhadad had an enormous army. Yes, he had a coalition of 32 other kings with him. But when the time came for battle, what were they doing? They were drinking themselves drunk. In other words, they were completely plastered. They were in no condition to go anywhere or do anything. Ahab was ready for war, but Benhadad was not.

This looks like it was shaping up to be an epic disaster. On the one hand you have a wicked king who led Israel to new heights of depravity and rebellion. On the other hand you have a coalition of kings that had an enormous army but who were completely drunk. There were no winners on either side. Yet, astonishingly, this is when God intervened. He decided to save King Ahab:

1 Kings 20:13: “And, behold, there came a prophet unto Ahab king of Israel, saying, Thus saith the Lord, Hast thou seen all this great multitude? behold, I will deliver it into thine hand this day; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord.”

We don't know who this prophet is, but it probably wasn't Elijah. Believe it or not there are actually many prophets in the Bible who show up and do things, and yet are never named. This was another servant of the Lord – and he couldn't have been very happy about what God called him to do. After all, Ahab went out of his way to kill the prophets of God. He was an *enemy* of the Lord, and yet it was this prophet's job to go to Ahab and talk to him. That in itself was an incredibly dangerous thing to do, and yet that is what this unnamed prophet did.

I'm sure it was frustrating to him that he actually brought Ahab *good news*. Ahab, the killer of the prophets of God and the lead idolater in the nation, was going to be spared. God was not going to kill him in battle that day. Instead God was going to give him a glorious, amazing victory. In this particular battle God was going to fight against Ahab's enemies – even though Ahab didn't ask for God's help!

God did exactly what He said He was going to do. When Ahab sent his troops out into battle, Benhadad responded by sending out a party of soldiers to arrest Ahab's men:

1 Kings 20:17: “And the young men of the princes of the provinces went out first; and Benhadad sent out, and they told him, saying, There are men come out of Samaria.

18 And he said, Whether they be come out for peace, take them alive; or whether they be come out for war, take them alive.”

Benhadad was drunk and decided the best thing to do was just arrest this opposing force. He didn't send his troops out to fight; instead he essentially sent them out to engage in some police work. What happened? His men was slaughtered:

1 Kings 20:20: “And they slew every one his man; and the Syrians fled; and Israel pursued them: and Benhadad the king of Syria escaped on an horse with the horsemen.

21 And the king of Israel went out, and smote the horses and chariots, and slew the Syrians with a great slaughter.”

Benhadad did not just lose; he lost *badly*. He had to flee for his life while Israel vanquished the Syrian troops. God gave Israel a tremendous victory. All Israel had to fight with was a very tiny and insignificant army, but God used it to win the battle – and in doing so He got the glory, for it was obvious that the victory was the Lord's doing.

But why would God intervene on Ahab's behalf? After all, Ahab was an incredibly wicked king. The answer can be found later in the chapter. After Benhadad went home in defeat, he decided that the real reason he lost was because the Lord was the God of the hills:

1 Kings 20:23: “And the servants of the king of Syria said unto him, Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.”

Here we find the key to everything that is going on. If Benhadad had defeated Ahab, he would not have considered that a victory over a foolish and wicked king. No, Benhadad would have seen that as proof that *his idols were stronger than the God of Israel*. Benhadad did not see this as a clash of armies; he saw it as a clash of religions. He wasn't fighting against Israel's soldiers; he was fighting against Israel's God. That is why God intervened – to show Benhadad that He was the God of the hills *and* the God of the valleys. When Benhadad came against Israel a second time, this is what the Lord had to say about it:

1 Kings 20:28: “And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, The Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord.”

God did not intervene for Ahab's benefit; He intervened for His own glory. He wanted to show the Syrians that He was Lord over all creation. God was not on Ahab's side; instead He was on His own side! God is very passionate about defending His glory. He is not willing to share His glory with another:

Isaiah 42:8: “I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.”

The Lord was unwilling to allow the Syrians to think that their idols were stronger and mightier than Him. He refused to allow them to believe that their false gods were greater than the Most High God, so the Lord intervened – twice! – in order to show them who the *real* God truly was. The second time Benhadad came against Israel, the Syrian's defeat was so great that he lost *a hundred thousand men*:

1 Kings 20:29: “And they pitched one over against the other seven days. And so it was, that in the seventh day the battle was joined: and the children of Israel slew of the Syrians an hundred thousand footmen in one day.”

Why did the Israelites win? Because the Syrians claimed that the Lord was the God of the hills but *not* of the valleys. But God wasn't done. When the remaining survivors fled for their lives, God actually used *a wall* to kill them:

1 Kings 20:30: “But the rest fled to Aphek, into the city; and there a wall fell upon twenty and seven thousand of the men that were left. And Benhadad fled, and came into the city, into an inner chamber.”

God was teaching the Syrians a painful lesson: He was Lord over all. It didn't matter if the Syrians fought in the hills, the valleys, or the cities; the Lord's power extended over all of creation. There was nowhere that His arm did not reach.

This was not the only time that the Lord did this. In the days of Hezekiah, King of Judah, the Assyrian king came against Jerusalem and boasted that he was more powerful than the Most High God. When the Lord heard this man say that even God Himself could not save the Jews, the Lord responded in a very graphic manner:

2 Kings 19:33: “By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord.

34 For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.

35 And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.”

Since this Assyrian king was convinced that he was stronger than God, the Lord sent His angel into their camp *and killed them all*. This time the Lord didn't even use an army to do it. He did it Himself.

Our God is not a God to be trifled with. There is a reason we are told to fear the Lord. The Bible says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of both wisdom (Proverbs 9:10) and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). We tend to think of God as a God of love, and that is absolutely true. But we need to remember that there is more to God than just a big fuzzy ball of love. God is also a God of justice and a God of wrath. God wiped out the entire old world because of the wickedness of man. He destroyed the world with water, and He said that the day is coming when He will destroy the world again, but this time with fire (2 Peter 3:10-12).

God is a serious God. He means business. We tend to think that in the Old Testament God was full of wrath and in the New Testament God was full of love, but some of the most frightening verses in the entire Bible – verses of judgment and death and everlasting vengeance – are found in the New Testament. For example, take this verse from the book of Revelation:

Revelation 9:6: “And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.”

During one of God's judgments during the Tribulation, things will become so bad that people will desperately seek death – but *God will not allow them to die*. Instead the Lord will force them to stay alive so that He can torment them with unbearable pain. Why is God doing this? Because He sent His servants over all the world to preach the gospel, but instead of repenting the world put His servants to death. Since mankind refused the mercy of God, they are forced to face God's wrath.

The truth is that God does not change. The Assyrians mocked God and His power, so He killed their entire army. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit, so God struck them both dead. God

offers mercy and forgiveness, but if that offer is rejected there is nothing left but wrath and judgment.

In this chapter God did not save King Ahab; what He did was defend His glory. When we trifle with God – when we mock Him, and take His name in vain, and slander Him, and lie to Him – we are taking our life in our hands. Entire nations have fallen because of this; the Syrians are just one example.

God requires that each of us give Him the glory and respect that He is due. This brings up a question: do we actually do that? Do we even care about God's glory? I can tell you this: *God cares*. He cares about it *tremendously*. Do not make the mistake of taking God lightly.

It's true that the world is filled with people who mock God. The Lord is often patient and withholds His wrath to give people a chance to repent. But the Lord's patience does not last forever.

Incidentally, this story does not have a happy ending for King Ahab. God wanted Ahab to kill Benhadad and put an end to the wickedness of the Syrians, but Ahab didn't do that. Instead he made peace with Benhadad and sent him home. God told Ahab that because of his disobedience, his fate was sealed: God would kill him in Benhadad's place. Although Ahab did not die immediately, the Lord did indeed lure Ahab into battle and kill him.

In the end Benhadad lost his army, Ahab lost his life, and God was glorified. That is how the story always ends. In our time wickedness is everywhere – but the Lord is coming. When He comes He will pour out His wrath upon this wicked world – and when that day comes you do not want to be on the side of wickedness. Give God the glory He is due today, while there is still time. The wrath of man may be great, but the wrath of God is infinitely greater. When the story is over and God brings this world to its end, wickedness will be crushed and the Lord will be glorified. Men may scoff and rage for a time, but the Lord always wins.