

# When God Rescued Ahab

In this lesson we're going to study a very strange Bible story. In this story God did some unexpected things, and in the process teaches us an important lesson. Let's take a look and see if we can figure out what's going on.

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

**1 Kings 16:30-33:** “And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. 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. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. 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 did more than lead Israel into idolatry. He also hunted down and killed the prophets of God, and spent years trying to arrest Elijah. He was the one who desired Naboth's vineyard and took possession of it after his wife Jezebel had Naboth put to death. God was so angry with Ahab that in 1 Kings 21:21-24 He said that He was going to bring His judgment upon him and his entire house. This judgment would be so complete and 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 wicked that he set himself apart from all the other wicked kings of Israel. Ahab was an evil king – and it's important to keep that in mind as we continue.

As Ahab's reigned over Israel he began to have problems. God sent a three-year drought upon the entire country but the nation didn't repent of its idolatry. Even when Elijah confronted the false prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel and showed the Israelites that the Lord was God (in a spectacular and fiery display), nothing changed. Ahab continued to be wicked and the people continued to serve Baal<sup>1</sup>. Since the people didn't repent, it's not surprising that Ahab found himself in 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 powerful coalition of kings. Not only did Benhadad come against him, but he had 32 other kings on his side! Ahab didn't stand a chance. He was massively outnumbered. Benhadad knew this and presented Ahab with his series of demands:

**1 Kings 20:2-3:** “And he sent messengers to Ahab king of Israel into the city, and said unto him, Thus saith Benhadad, Thy silver and thy

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1 If they hadn't then there would have been no Baal worship for Jehu to stamp out after he killed Jezebel.

gold is mine; thy wives also and thy children, even the goodliest, are mine.”

Benhadad was demanding that Ahab surrender. He wanted a legal title over everything Ahab possessed. If Ahab agreed to this then he would become Benhadad's servant and rule over Israel in his name.

Ahab knew that he was outnumbered and had no hope of defeating the enormous army which was arrayed against him. Since Ahab didn't see any other options, 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.”

At this point in the story there probably aren't many people who are on Ahab's side. He was a wicked king who introduced 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! This looks a lot like Ahab was finally getting the justice that he so richly deserved.

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

**1 Kings 20:5-6:** “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; 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.”

Benhadad wanted to send his servants into Israel so they could take everything they found, no matter what it was or who it belonged to. This included both goods *and* people. Benhadad wasn't content with just a legal title. He wanted to take actual possession of everything – including people's wives and children.

Ahab wasn't 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 God's prophets and teach the nation to worship Baal. He was a wicked man – and if another wicked man showed up at his doorstep and took away his property then it's kind of hard to feel sorry about it. If anyone deserved this fate it would be Ahab. (Although the king was upset when people tried to take *his* possessions, he wasn't nearly as concerned when *he* was the one who was doing the taking – such as when he took Naboth's vineyard. 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 weren't happy to hear that Benhadad wanted to

take the riches of both the king *and* the people as well. It turns out that the Israelites didn't want Benhadad to take away their wives, their children, and their goods. Therefore, with the support of the nation, Ahab told Benhadad that he wouldn't 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 wasn't willing to give him physical possession of everything that Israel owned. That was where Ahab drew the line.

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 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 didn't prevail:

**1 Kings 20:12:** “And it came to pass, when Benhadad 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're 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 Benhadad 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. He also had a coalition of 32 other kings with him. But when the time came for battle, what were they doing? They were getting drunk. This army was in no condition to go anywhere or do anything. Ahab was ready for war but Benhadad was not.

This was shaping up to be an epic disaster. On the one hand you had a wicked king who led Israel to new depths of idolatry. On the other hand you had a coalition of kings with an enormous army that was also 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 doesn't seem to have been Elijah. There are actually a number of prophets in the Bible who did things and yet are never named. This was another servant of the Lord – and it's possible he wasn't 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 was an incredibly dangerous thing to do, and yet that's what this prophet did.

It may have been frustrating to him that he had to bring Ahab *good news*. Ahab, the killer of God's prophets and the one who introduced Baal worship to Israel, was going to be rescued. God wasn't going to kill him in battle that day. Instead He was going to give him an amazing and glorious victory. In this battle God was going to fight against Ahab's enemies – even though Ahab didn't ask for God's help!

The Lord 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 20:17-18:** “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. 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 police work. What happened? His men was slaughtered:

**1 Kings 20:20-21:** “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. And the king of Israel went out, and smote the horses and chariots, and slew the Syrians with a great slaughter.”

Benhadad didn't just lose; he lost *badly*. He had to flee for his life while Israel vanquished the Syrian troops. God gave Israel a tremendous victory! Israel's army was very small, but God used it to win the battle. In doing so He got all the glory because it was obvious the victory was His 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 God of Israel 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 was going on. If Benhadad had defeated Ahab then he wouldn't have considered that to be 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 didn't view this as a clash of armies; he saw it as a clash of religions. He was fighting against Israel's God, not Israel's soldiers. That's why God intervened. He wanted to prove to Benhadad that He was stronger than his idols – and He did.

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 didn't intervene for Ahab's benefit! Instead He intervened for His own glory. He wanted to show the Syrians that He was Lord over all creation. God wasn't on Ahab's side; instead He was on His own side! God is very passionate about defending His glory. He's 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 He intervened – twice! – 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 God give the victory to Ahab? 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 didn't reach.

This wasn't the only time 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 couldn't save the Jews, He responded in a very graphic manner:

**2 Kings 19:33-35:** “By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord. For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake. 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's a reason we're commanded 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). Many people think of God as a God of love, and that's absolutely true. But we need to remember that there's more to God than just a big fuzzy ball of love. God is also a God of justice and wrath. The Lord once wiped out the entire world because of the wickedness of mankind. He destroyed the old world with water, and 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. Some people think that in the Old Testament the Lord was full of wrath and in the New Testament He's full of love. However, some of the most frightening verses of vengeance and death in the entire Bible 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 seven-year tribulation, things will become so bad that people will desperately seek death – but *God won't allow them to die*. Instead He will force them to stay alive so He can torment them with unbearable pain. Why was 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 people rejected God's mercy they were forced to endure His wrath.

The truth is that God doesn't change. The Assyrians mocked God and His power so He slaughtered their entire army. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit so God struck them dead. The Lord offers us His mercy and forgiveness, but if that offer is rejected there's nothing left but His wrath and judgment.

In this chapter God defend His glory. When people trifle with God – when they mock Him, or take His name in vain, or slander Him, or lie to Him – they're risking their very life. Entire nations have fallen for doing things like that! The Syrians are just one example.

God requires each of us to give Him the glory and respect that He's due. This brings up a question: do we actually do that? Do we care about God's glory? I can tell you this: *God cares!* He cares about it *tremendously*. Don't 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 in order to give people a chance to repent. But the Lord's patience doesn't last forever. One day all those who reject God's mercy will face His wrath – which is why it's so important to repent now, while there's still time.

This story doesn't 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 didn't 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's how the story of the wicked always ends (even though it may not seem like it sometimes). In day 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 don't want to be on the side of evil! Give God the glory He is due today. The wrath of man may be great, but the wrath of God is infinitely greater. When God brings this world to its end, all wickedness will be crushed and the Lord alone will be glorified. People may scoff and rage for a time, but the Lord always wins.