

1 KINGS 20

DISOBEDIENCE; FALLING SHORT OF GOD'S GOAL

If you are a student of history, you already know that boundaries of empires are always subject to change. Just look at a map of Europe before and after WWI. If you want, you can just look at any map and see how it has changed over time. There is a constant ebb and flow to these things.

That is no different from where we are in our Biblical studies. At this time in ANE history, the kingdom of Syria, not to be confused with Assyria, which is farther to the East, is growing quickly. The smaller states to the West and South of Syria are nervous and we will begin to see them making treaties with each other in order to protect themselves from Syrian expansion.

Syria is nearly due North of Israel. Ben-hadad, King of Syria, has grown his kingdom, in large part, by absorbing vassals. In this case, he has absorbed at least 32 of them. With more territory, fighting men and other resources, he is now wanting to expand into Israel, most likely in order to control more of the trade routes and possible ports on the Mediterranean. It is in this political situation that we find ourselves in chapter 20. Please remember that in chapter 19, Elijah was to anoint a new Syrian king, as well as a new Israelite king. He has yet to do that. However, this allows us to see how God works.

God knows, in His omniscience, that Ahab and Ben-hadad are rotten to the core, but He still allows them time to make things right. God is always seeking our repentance and reconciliation. God always wants to restore a relationship with us. And therefore, though He knows what they will do, He still allows them the time and opportunity to repent. We refer to this as grace. We are seeing God's grace operate in the OT.

Let's look at chapter 20.

1Kings 20:1 ^aBen-hadad the king of Syria gathered all his army together. ^bThirty-two kings were with him, and horses and chariots. And he went up and closed in on ^cSamaria and fought against it. ^dAnd he sent messengers into the city to Ahab king of Israel and said to him, “Thus says Ben-hadad: ^e‘Your silver and your gold are mine; your best wives and children also are mine.’” ^fAnd the king of Israel answered, “As you say, my lord, O king, I am yours, and all that I have.” ^gThe messengers came again and said, “Thus says Ben-hadad: ‘I sent to you, saying, “Deliver to me your silver and your gold, your wives and your children.” ^hNevertheless I will send my servants to you tomorrow about this time, and they shall search your house and the houses of your servants and lay hands on whatever pleases you and take it away.’” **1Kings 20:7** Then the king of Israel called all the ⁱelders of the land and said, ^j“Mark, now, and see how this man is seeking trouble, for he sent to me for my wives and my children, and for my silver and my gold, and I did not refuse him.” ^kAnd all the elders and all the people said to him, “Do not listen or consent.” ^lSo he said to the messengers of Ben-hadad, “Tell my lord the king, ‘All that you first demanded of your servant I will do, but this thing I cannot do.’” And the messengers departed and brought him word again. ^mBen-hadad sent to him and said, ⁿ“The gods do so to me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people ^owho follow me.” ^pAnd the king of Israel answered, “Tell him, ‘Let not him who straps on his armor boast himself as he who takes it off.’” ^qWhen Ben-hadad heard this message as ^rhe was drinking with the kings in the booths, he said to his men, “Take your positions.” And they took their positions against the city.

- Ben-hadad has gathered an army of 32 vassal states and has laid siege to Israel – the land of Samaria.
- Ben-hadad stops short of taking Samaria/ Israel by force. He gives Ahab an ultimatum. He wants to absorb Israel into his empire. And he wants to do it without fighting, if possible.
- He gives Ahab an ultimatum, stating that Ahab’s gold and silver, his wives and children now belong to Ben-hadad. Ahab acquiesces, at first, but Ben-hadad comes back the next day with more urgency, saying that he will also go through Ahab’s house and plunder his palace, as well as anything else he desires.
- Ahab sought counsel and his advisors tell him not to give in to Ben-hadad.

- Ben-hadad responded with a familiar phrase, “The gods do so to me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people who follow me.” ‘The gods do so to me...’
- Translation of the threat, “I will overwhelm you with a swarm of soldiers.”
- Ahab responds with his own expression. ‘Let not him who straps on his armor boast himself as he who takes it off.’ Translation: **‘It is unwise to boast about one’s exploits before the battle has begun; there is time enough for boasting when the battle is won.’**
- Ben-hadad is drunk and takes offense to this, so he stages his men for battle.

1Kings 20:13 And behold, a prophet came near to Ahab king of Israel and said, “Thus says the LORD, Have you seen all this great multitude? Behold, ¹I will give it into your hand this day, ²and you shall know that I am the LORD.” ¹⁴ And Ahab said, “By whom?” He said, “Thus says the LORD, By the servants of the governors of the districts.” Then he said, “Who shall begin the battle?” He answered, “You.” ¹⁵ Then he mustered the servants of the governors of the districts, and they were 232. And after them he mustered all the people of Israel, seven thousand.

- Enter the prophet. Remember what that means. Despite what he said in the last chapter, Elijah is not the last prophet in Israel. The prophet tells Ahab that God will give him victory over this numerically superior force.
- By whom? Ahab wants to know who will fight against this large force.
- The servants of the governors: servants - na’ar, untrained youth, (232 of them). David was a na’ar, as compared to Goliath. This sounds crazy. Young, untrained men are to lead the battle, along with 7,000 other men of Israel. (Does this hearken back to the 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal?) Any way you slice it, Israel is still grossly outnumbered. But that is the way God likes to work. This way, no one else can take the glory. This will be a supernatural victory.
- Ahab is to initiate the battle.
- Remember, God is allowing Ahab to come out of this. God is going to GIVE him the victory. All he has to do is obey.
- God wants a new king over Syria. We read that in the last chapter.

1Kings 20:16 *And they went out at noon, while Ben-hadad ^xwas drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the thirty-two kings who helped him. ¹⁷ The servants of the governors of the districts went out first. And Ben-hadad sent out scouts, and they reported to him, “Men are coming out from Samaria.” ¹⁸ He said, “If they have come out for peace, take them alive. Or if they have come out for war, take them alive.”*

1Kings 20:19 *So these went out of the city, the servants of the governors of the districts and the army that followed them. ²⁰ And each struck down his man. The Syrians fled, and Israel pursued them, but Ben-hadad king of Syria escaped on a horse with horsemen. ²¹ And the king of Israel went out and struck the horses and chariots, and struck the Syrians with a great blow.*

1Kings 20:22 *Then ^athe prophet came near to the king of Israel and said to him, “Come, strengthen yourself, and consider well what you have to do, for ^bin the spring the king of Syria will come up against you.”*

- Ahab initiates the battle and routs the Syrians, who flee back home.
- The prophet then tells Ahab that he must prepare for another battle in the spring, when most kings went to battle.

1Kings 20:23 *And the servants of the king of Syria said to him, “Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they. ²⁴ And do this: remove the kings, each from his post, and put commanders in their places, ²⁵ and muster an army like the army that you have lost, horse for horse, and chariot for chariot. Then we will fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.” And he listened to their voice and did so.*

- The Syrian brain-trust believes they lost the battle because the Israelite “gods” are located in the hill country. Remember, in the pagan worldview, gods are territorial and localized. But the point to this, like the one involving Elijah and Baal, is that YHWH is God of all.
- Therefore, the Syrians want to fight on the plains, where, with their cavalry, they will have an advantage. You can’t run cavalry in the hills.
- The brain-trust also want to restructure the army, putting commanders in the place of the vassal kings.

1Kings 20:26 ^bIn the spring, Ben-hadad mustered the Syrians and went up to ^cAphek to fight against Israel. ²⁷ And the people of Israel were mustered and were provisioned and went against them. The people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats, but the Syrians filled the country. ²⁸ And a ^dman of God came near and said to the king of Israel, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because the Syrians have said, ^e"The LORD is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys," therefore ^fI will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD.'" ²⁹ And they encamped opposite one another seven days. Then on the seventh day the battle was joined. And the people of Israel struck down of the Syrians 100,000 foot soldiers in one day. ³⁰ And the rest fled into the city of ^cAphek, and the wall fell upon 27,000 men who were left.

Ben-hadad also fled and entered ^gan inner chamber in the city. ³¹ And his servants said to him, "Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings. Let us ^hput sackcloth around our waists and ropes on our heads and go out to the king of Israel. Perhaps he will spare your life." ³² So they ^htied sackcloth around their waists and put ropes on their heads and went to the king of Israel and said, "Your servant Ben-hadad says, 'Please, let me live.'" And he said, "Does he still live? He is my brother."³³ Now the men were watching for a sign, and they quickly took it up from him and said, "Yes, your brother Ben-hadad." Then he said, "Go and bring him." Then Ben-hadad came out to him, and he caused him to come up into the chariot. ³⁴ And Ben-hadad said to him, ⁱ"The cities that my father took from your father I will restore, and you may establish bazaars for yourself in ^jDamascus, as my father did in Samaria." And Ahab said, "I will let you go on these terms." So he made a covenant with him and let him go.

- Israel looked like two small flocks of goats compared the vast Syrian army. But God has got this.
- ²⁸ And a ^dman of God came near and said to the king of Israel, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because the Syrians have said, ^e"The LORD is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys," therefore ^fI will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD.'" "

- God will once again prove that the pagan worldview is wrong. He is the only God in Israel and the gods of the pagans are powerless, regardless of where the battle takes place.
- Remember, God wants to give this victory to Ahab. And we know that God already wants to replace the king of Syria.
- Israel is victorious, but Ben-hadad and some of his men flee into the city of Aphek. They decide to attempt a surrender, clothing themselves in sackcloth and putting ropes on their heads, (the sign of a slave - slaves were transported in this way). These are signs of humility and surrender.
- Beh-hadad offers to restore the cities taken from Israel in previous battles. Ahab accepts the deal and they make a covenant.

Now, we will change scenes. Another prophet enters the picture. What he does may seem strange, but it is done for a reason. If it's weird, it's probably important.

1Kings 20:35 And a certain man of^kthe sons of the prophets said to his fellow^lat the command of the LORD, "Strike me, please." But the man refused to strike him.³⁶ Then he said to him, "Because you have not obeyed the voice of the LORD, behold, as soon as you have gone from me, a lion shall strike you down." And as soon as he had departed from him, "a lion met him and struck him down.³⁷ Then he found another man and said, "Strike me, please." And the man struck him—struck him and wounded him.

- A son of the prophets – a reference to a member of a prophetic community. Something like a prophet in training. Once again, Elijah is not alone.
- This guy tells another son of the prophets to hit him. He needed an injury in order to carry out the ruse of being injured. The guy won't do it and is told that because he was disobedient to what God had said to do, he will be eaten by a lion.
- Does that sound familiar? Remember how we read about another disobedient prophet who was eaten by a lion in chapter 13? There is a pattern, and therefore a purpose to this. If disobedient prophets aren't immune to the judgement of God, then disobedient kings aren't either.

- The next guy who was asked to strike the prophet obeyed. He lived. This is in the narrative to set up what is about to happen, as well as to give us an object lesson from which to build our theology. Let's see how it goes.

38 So the prophet departed and waited for the king by the way, "disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes. 39 And as the king passed, he cried to the king and said, "Your servant went out into the midst of the battle, and behold, a soldier turned and brought a man to me and said, 'Guard this man; if by any means he is missing, °your life shall be for his life, or else you shall pay a talent¹ of silver.' 40 And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone." The king of Israel said to him, "So shall your judgment be; you yourself have decided it." 41 Then he hurried to take the bandage away from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. 42 And he said to him, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction,² therefore °your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people.'" 43 And the king of Israel ^pwent to his house vexed and sullen and came to Samaria.

- The prophet waited by the road for Ahab. He was disguised. He sets Ahab up with a story. Does this remind you of King David (2 Samuel 12), when Nathan sets David up with the story regarding the man whose lamb was stolen? David was livid when he heard what the guy in the story had done, but Nathan responded that David was that man when he took Bathsheba from her husband. That is what is happening here.
- The prophet tells the king that during the battle, he was tasked with guarding a prisoner, which he lost while doing something else in the battle. The penalty for losing the prisoner was a fine in the amount of one talent of silver – an impossible amount for any soldier to pay. If he couldn't pay the fine, then the penalty was death.
- Ahab answers that he must die, according to what he said.

The prophet then took off his bandages, (his disguise) and responds to Ahab: ***42 And he said to him, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction,² therefore °your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people.'" 43 And the king of Israel ^pwent to his house vexed and sullen and came to Samaria.***

- Once again, remember that God wanted a new king in Syria. Ahab had him but let him go. Ben-hadad was "herem" – devoted to destruction. This

means that he was unclean and unfit to be in the presence of God. Think back to the Torah.

- God wanted Ben-hadad gone, but Ahab stopped short of the goal in order to gain territory.
- Ahab took it upon himself to let the king go, thinking he had accomplished everything. But he made this decision in his own 'wisdom' and lust for territory. All he had to do was be obedient to God's plan, but he took it upon himself to change God's plan in mid-flight. Remember what we saw with the old prophet/ young prophet, (chapter 13)? The young prophet was killed by a lion because he was disobedient and did not follow through with what God had told him to do. Ahab has now done the same thing. And because of it, he will now die.
- Now remember how God told Elijah that he would anoint a new king over not only Syria but also Israel? This will now happen.
- But we still have to see how God was willing to continue working with and through Ahab – all he had to do was be obedient. He failed.
- Ahab went away sullen and vexed, but he wasn't repentant.

So, what are we to make of this? What is the application?

- Basically, this is the recurring theme of obedience vs. disobedience.
- We don't need to be worried about being killed for disobedience. Different place, different time? What is the narrative trying to get across?
- Not carrying out what God has required of us?
- Coming up short when we are satisfied with our results?
- Just as He wants Ahab and everyone else in Israel to know that He, YHWH, is God – God also wants to continually bolster this in our minds and lives. Even though Ahab didn't learn this lesson from the showdown on Mt. Carmel, he was being given another chance here. God is a God of second chances!
- Do we approach God as Ben-hadad approached Ahab? With outward signs of humility, but with our own ideas about how to get out of our situation?
- Are we like Ahab? Willing to make friends with what God has devoted to destruction?
- Do we go away after a failure of disobedience sullen and vexed, or are we repentant?