

1 Kings 20
March 2, 2025

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: Are you facing any situation now where the odds are heavily stacked against you? Where does the "opposing army" look strongest to you? How does your faith shape your approach to the problem? [Let people engage]

Transition: In today's passage, the Syrians and their kings, led by king Ben-Hadad, besieged Samaria. They demanded that Ahab surrender the silver and gold and the choicest of the women and children. Ben-Hadad's army looked too strong to Ahab. Ahab was so weak militarily that he agreed. Let's read the text and see how Ahab approached his problem.

BOOK:

Ben-Hadad Attacks Samaria

20 Now Ben-Hadad king of Aram mustered his entire army. Accompanied by thirty-two kings with their horses and chariots, he went up and besieged Samaria and attacked it. ² He sent messengers into the city to Ahab king of Israel, saying, "This is what Ben-Hadad says: ³ 'Your silver and gold are mine, and the best of your wives and children are mine.' "

⁴ The king of Israel answered, "Just as you say, my lord the king. I and all I have are yours."

⁵ The messengers came again and said, "This is what Ben-Hadad says: 'I sent to demand your silver and gold, your wives and your children. ⁶ But about this time tomorrow I am going to send my officials to search your palace and the houses of your officials. They will seize everything you value and carry it away.' "

⁷ The king of Israel summoned all the elders of the land and said to them, "See how this man is looking for trouble! When he sent for my wives and my children, my silver and my gold, I did not refuse him."

⁸ The elders and the people all answered, "Don't listen to him or agree to his demands."

⁹ So he replied to Ben-Hadad's messengers, "Tell my lord the king, 'Your servant will do all you demanded the first time, but this demand I cannot meet.' " They left and took the answer back to Ben-Hadad.

¹⁰ Then Ben-Hadad sent another message to Ahab: "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if enough dust remains in Samaria to give each of my men a handful."

¹¹ The king of Israel answered, "Tell him: 'One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.' "

¹² Ben-Hadad heard this message while he and the kings were drinking in their tents (or in Succoth), and he ordered his men: "Prepare to attack." So they prepared to attack the city.

Ahab Defeats Ben-Hadad

¹³ Meanwhile a prophet came to Ahab king of Israel and announced, "This is what the Lord says: 'Do you see this vast army? I will give it into your hand today, and then you will know that I am the Lord.' "

¹⁴ "But who will do this?" asked Ahab.

The prophet replied, “This is what the Lord says: ‘The young officers of the provincial commanders will do it.’ ”

“And who will start the battle?” he asked.

The prophet answered, “You will.”

¹⁵ So Ahab summoned the young officers of the provincial commanders, 232 men. Then he assembled the rest of the Israelites, 7,000 in all. ¹⁶ They set out at noon while Ben-Hadad and the 32 kings allied with him were in their tents getting drunk. ¹⁷ The young officers of the provincial commanders went out first.

Now Ben-Hadad had dispatched scouts, who reported, “Men are advancing from Samaria.”

¹⁸ He said, “If they have come out for peace, take them alive; if they have come out for war, take them alive.”

¹⁹ The young officers of the provincial commanders marched out of the city with the army behind them ²⁰ and each one struck down his opponent. At that, the Arameans fled, with the Israelites in pursuit. But Ben-Hadad king of Aram escaped on horseback with some of his horsemen. ²¹ The king of Israel advanced and overpowered the horses and chariots and inflicted heavy losses on the Arameans.

²² Afterward, the prophet came to the king of Israel and said, “Strengthen your position and see what must be done, because next spring the king of Aram will attack you again.”

²³ Meanwhile, the officials of the king of Aram advised him, “Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they. ²⁴ Do this: Remove all the kings from their commands and replace them with other officers. ²⁵ You must also raise an army like the one you lost—horse for horse and chariot for chariot—so we can fight Israel on the plains. Then surely we will be stronger than they.” He agreed with them and acted accordingly.

²⁶ The next spring Ben-Hadad mustered the Arameans and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel. ²⁷ When the Israelites were also mustered and given provisions, they marched out to meet them. The Israelites camped opposite them like two small flocks of goats, while the Arameans covered the countryside.

²⁸ The man of God came up and told the king of Israel, “This is what the Lord says: ‘Because the Arameans think the Lord is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the Lord.’ ”

²⁹ For seven days they camped opposite each other, and on the seventh day the battle was joined. The Israelites inflicted a hundred thousand casualties on the Aramean foot soldiers in one day. ³⁰ The rest of them escaped to the city of Aphek, where the wall collapsed on twenty-seven thousand of them. And Ben-Hadad fled to the city and hid in an inner room.

³¹ His officials said to him, “Look, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful. Let us go to the king of Israel with sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads. Perhaps he will spare your life.”

³² Wearing sackcloth around their waists and ropes around their heads, they went to the king of Israel and said, “Your servant Ben-Hadad says: ‘Please let me live.’ ”

The king answered, “Is he still alive? He is my brother.”

³³ The men took this as a good sign and were quick to pick up his word. “Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad!” they said.

“Go and get him,” the king said. When Ben-Hadad came out, Ahab had him come up into his chariot.

³⁴ “I will return the cities my father took from your father,” Ben-Hadad offered. “You may set up your own market areas in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.” Ahab said, “On the basis of a treaty I will set you free.” So he made a treaty with him, and let him go.

A Prophet Condemns Ahab

³⁵ By the word of the Lord one of the sons of the prophets said to his companion, “Strike me with your weapon,” but the man refused.

³⁶ So the prophet said, “Because you have not obeyed the Lord, as soon as you leave me a lion will kill you.” And after the man went away, a lion found him and killed him.

³⁷ The prophet found another man and said, “Strike me, please.” So the man struck him and wounded him. ³⁸ Then the prophet went and stood by the road waiting for the king. He disguised himself with his headband down over his eyes. ³⁹ As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, “Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, ‘Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent (approx. 75 lbs) of silver.’” ⁴⁰ While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared.” “That is your sentence,” the king of Israel said. “You have pronounced it yourself.”

⁴¹ Then the prophet quickly removed the headband from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. ⁴² He said to the king, “This is what the Lord says: ‘You have set free a man I had determined should die. (The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, often by totally destroying them.) Therefore, it is your life for his life, your people for his people.’” ⁴³ Sullen and angry, the king of Israel went to his palace in Samaria.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What stood out to you? What questions do you have? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about man? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit? [Let people engage]

Q: What is your takeaway? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

We can be too busy for the main business. Verse 40 is an indictment on many a person who needs to put first things first. “And as thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone.” When Ahab let Ben-Hadad go, he sinned against God’s commandment. Ahab had been too concerned about getting back his lost territories. He wanted a place of special advantage to trade in the city of Damascus. We need a renewal of a sense of priorities. The will of God demands first place. See Matthew 6:33.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (1 Kings 20). Victor Books.

I. Ahab's Defense (20)

A. The challenge (vv. 1–12).

The king of Syria brought his vast army, assisted by thirty-two other kings, and threatened Samaria. His messengers asked for the king's wealth and family, and Ahab agreed to obey. But when they asked for the privilege of looting his palace, Ahab refused. Ahab tried to put up a brave front, but he knew the end was near. Had he been walking with the Lord, he could have turned his problem over to Him, but Baal was unable to deliver the king.

B. The conquest (vv. 13–30).

The Lord stepped in to save the king and his people, not because Ahab deserved it (for he surely did not), but because God had a cause against Syria and the time of her judgment had arrived. The anonymous prophet gave the frightened king the message (v. 13), and Ahab's immediate answer in v. 14 indicates that he believed the message. Ahab was not a man of faith but was clutching to the last hope offered him. He immediately obeyed the Word of the Lord and sent his small army out to face the vast armies of the Syrians. God gave the Israelites a great victory; then the king himself went out to take charge of the battle and finish it in great glory. The Syrians concluded that Israel's God could win victories in the hills but not in the plains and valleys, so they planned another invasion for the following year. Once again, God in His mercy sent a message of hope to the evil king, and the Lord gave Israel another tremendous victory.

C. The compromise (vv. 31–43).

What Satan could not accomplish with force, he accomplished with guile; for he led Ahab into a wicked compromise with the enemy. The enemy king and his servants pretended to repent and to humble themselves before proud Ahab, and the vain king fell for the trick. "He is my brother!" he said of Ben-hadad, his enemy. The two kings made a covenant of peace, and Ahab sent Ben-hadad away alive, in direct disobedience to the Word of God. The anonymous prophet, his face bruised by his friend, waited to see the king and to announce God's verdict of judgment. By telling the story of the escaped prisoner, the prophet was able to get King Ahab to confess his own guilt and pass his own sentence. (Nathan used this same approach with David, 2 Sam. 12). Ahab himself would die along with many of his people because he refused to follow God's directions.

Please keep in mind that God delivered Israel from her enemies wholly because of His grace; the king did not deserve it, neither did the people. God had already decreed that Ahab would be slain, not by Ben-hadad, but by Hazeal (19:15–17), so the time was not right. God will perform His Word, and He is not in a great hurry to accomplish His will, for in mercy He gives men time to repent.

Constable, C.L. (1985). 1 Kings. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 1, pp. 529-532) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

4. Ahab's aramean adversary (chap. 20)

In this chapter the focus is again on Ahab rather than on Elijah.

a. The battle over Samaria (20:1–25)

This was the first of three battles recorded in 1 Kings (cf. 20:26–43; 22:1–38) between Ahab and Ben-Hadad II, king of Aram, Israel's northern neighbor.

(1) Ben-Hadad's attack (20:1–12).

20:1–4. Ben-Hadad II was evidently the son of Ben-Hadad I whom Asa had hired to attack Baasha some years earlier (cf. 15:18, 20; 20:34). Allied with Ben-Hadad II were **32 kings**, probably rulers of neighboring city-states. Together they **went up** the hill of **Samaria and attacked it**, placing it under siege. Ben-Hadad then **sent messengers ... to Ahab** with his demands for withdrawal. He demanded Ahab's **silver ... gold ... wives, and children**. Greatly outnumbered, Ahab submitted to these terms.

20:5–9. Evidently **Ben-Hadad** regretted that he had demanded such "easy" terms after Ahab had accepted them. He felt he could get much more than that. So he sent his **messengers** back with a new demand, namely, that Ben-Hadad's men be allowed to enter the **palace** and the officials' **houses** and plunder them. Ahab assembled **the elders of the land** and pointed out that Ben-Hadad was **looking for trouble**. **The king** had **not** refused Ben-Hadad's **demands** for his own most valued possessions, but now the Aramean enemy wanted everything of value he could lay his hands on. **The elders and the people** who had also become aware of these demands counseled resistance. Ahab sent his decision back to Ben-Hadad through the **messengers**: he would hold to his **first** promise but not to **this demand**.

20:10–12. Shortly thereafter Ahab received a third **message** from his adversary. The Arameans now threatened to destroy **Samaria** totally. Like Jezebel with Elijah, **Ben-Hadad** risked his life in an oath (cf. 19:2; also note 2:23). Ahab replied that Ben-Hadad should not **boast** of victory till he had obtained it. Ben-Hadad's greed and boasting seem to have been heightened since he and his kings were under the influence of strong drink. Since negotiations had broken down **Ben-Hadad ... prepared to attack** Samaria.

(2) Ben-Hadad's defeat (20:13–25).

20:13. **Meanwhile**, as Ben-Hadad was preparing to attack, **a prophet**, whose name is not given, went **to Ahab** with a message from **the Lord**. God, he said, was going to deliver the huge Aramean **army** into Ahab's **hand** so Ahab would **know that He is the Lord**. God's goodness on this occasion obviously was prompted not by Ahab's godliness but by God's own grace. This was another step in His seeking to get His people to acknowledge that **He is the Lord**.

20:14–16. Ahab asked **the prophet** what strategy should be employed. He responded that **the Lord** would use **the young officers of the provincial commanders** of the army. The king himself was to lead them into **battle**. Ahab prepared the troops as instructed and **at noon**, when **Ben-Hadad** and his **32 kings** were resting and **getting drunk**, he launched his surprise attack. Even today little is done in the middle of the day in the Near East because the weather is usually so hot.

20:17–21. Evidently it was not clear to **Ben-Hadad** if the 232 **men** (cf. v. 15) approaching him were coming to talk **peace** or whether they were intending to fight. This probably resulted in his being unprepared for their attack. The Israelite **army** (of 7,000; cf. v. 15) followed along **behind** the **young officers** and proceeded to rout **the Arameans**. **Ben-Hadad** was able to escape **on horseback**, but Ahab **overpowered** his cavalry troops and the **chariots**, inflicting **heavy losses on the surprised Arameans**.

20:22–25. After Ahab had returned to Samaria **the prophet** went to him again. He warned **the king**, undoubtedly by the word of the Lord, that he should expect Ben-Hadad to **attack ... again** in the **spring**, the most popular time of the year for kings to wage war (cf. 2 Sam. 11:1). In view of this Ahab was warned to build up his defenses.

In the camp of the Arameans, Ben-Hadad was also receiving advice. His counselors concluded that they had lost the battle because Israel's **gods** were **gods of the hills**. **If** they would **fight** Israel **on the plains** these gods would not help them and the Arameans would win. They also advised the king to **replace** the 32 allied kings with regular **army** commanders and to build up his forces to their former numbers. Ben-Hadad followed this advice and prepared to return to Samaria the following spring.

b. The battle of Aphek (20:26–43)

(1) Ahab's victory (20:26–34).

20:26–27. As the Lord had revealed (v. 22), **the next spring** (856 b.c.) **Ben-Hadad** assembled his troops and proceeded **to Aphek**. Several towns in **Israel** bore this name (meaning “a fortress”). This one may have been located on the tablelands east of the Sea of Kinnereth between Samaria and Damascus. Ben-Hadad chose a flat battleground this time as his counselors had advised. Ahab led the Israelite army **to meet them**. In comparison with the vast host of the Arameans the Israelite forces looked like **two small flocks of goats**. That Israel was arranged in two groups may indicate that Ahab had in mind a certain battle strategy.

20:28–30a. **The man of God**, evidently the same prophet (vv. 13, 22), informed Ahab that **Israel** would win this battle. Again he said that the Lord's purpose was to prove to Ahab (as well as, perhaps, **the Arameans** and the Israelites) that He is **the Lord** (cf. v. 13).

Seven days passed before **the battle** began. On the very first **day** of combat **the Israelites** inflicted **100,000 casualties on the ... foot soldiers** of the enemy. **The rest of** their troops took refuge within **the city walls of Aphek**. But God killed an additional **27,000** by causing **the city wall** to collapse on **them**.

20:30b–34. While **Ben-Hadad** was hiding **in an inner room** of a city building, his officials advised him to give himself up and plead for mercy. **The kings of ... Israel** were indeed **merciful** compared with other ancient Near Eastern kings. **Sackcloth** and **ropes** were signs of penitential submission.

Ben-Hadad's agents waited on Ahab and pleaded for Ben-Hadad's life. They called him Ahab's **servant**, indicating the position he was willing to take if he could **live**. Ahab seemed surprised that the Aramean king was **still alive**. Ahab said he was willing to receive **Ben-Hadad** as his **brother**, not as a servant. He was, of course, not his real brother; Ahab had in mind a treaty for defense against Assyria in which he and Ben-Hadad would join as brothers.

Quick to pick up this ray of hope, Ben-Hadad's ambassadors affirmed that Ahab's **brother** was alive. They escorted the defeated king to **Ahab** as they had been ordered, and as a gesture of friendship **Ahab** invited Ben-Hadad **up into his chariot**, a position of favor. Quick to placate his enemy, **Ben-Hadad** pledged to **return the cities** his **father** Ben-Hadad I had taken from Ahab's **father** (predecessor) Baasha (cf. 15:20). In addition, the Aramean king offered trade privileges to Ahab **in Damascus** which Ben-Hadad's **father** had enjoyed **in Samaria**. The two kings formalized the **treaty** and with this promise of nonaggression Ahab **let** Ben-Hadad **go** back home.

(2) Ahab's disobedience (20:35–43).

20:35–36. **The sons of the prophets** were students in the schools of the prophets, well-established institutions in Israel designed to perpetuate the Law of Moses and the Word of the Lord. **One of** these young men received an assignment from the Lord. His unusual request that **his companion** injure him with a **weapon** was **by the word of the Lord**. The friend's refusal, though understandable, was an act of disobedient rebellion against the Lord. It was for this reason and the importance of the man of God's mission that the compassionate companion suffered death. Again, **the Lord** used a **lion** to execute his will (cf. 13:24).

20:37–40a. **The prophet** then **found** a more willing accomplice who did wound **him**. Playing the part of a wounded soldier **the prophet** waited by the roadside for **King** Ahab to pass on his way back to Samaria. The prophet **disguised himself** using a **headband over his eyes**. Without this the king would have recognized him immediately as a prophet (cf. 20:41). Interestingly this is the second time in 1 Kings when a person disguised himself (cf. 14:2). Later Ahab disguised himself in battle (22:30).

Apparently, Ahab thought he had met this man before. **The prophet** told the king that he, the prophet, was told in combat to **guard** a prisoner who got away. The prophet added that either his own **life** was to have been taken **or** he had to **pay a talent** (about 75 pounds) **of silver**.

20:40b–43. Ahab quickly assessed the storyteller's guilt; this was an obvious case of negligence. As in Nathan's story to David (2 Sam. 12:1–7) the king responded to the prophet in words that judged himself. **The prophet**, immediately revealing his identity, told **the king** he had been negligent in his responsibility to obey the order received from God to execute Ben-Hadad. Though this order is not recorded in the biblical text it is clear that Ahab had received it. Rather than obeying the Lord which probably would have resulted in a final end of the conflict with the

vexing Aramean army, Ahab chose to follow his own plan. He believed Ben-Hadad's help against Assyria would be more valuable to Israel than Ben-Hadad's death. Therefore, Ahab would forfeit his own **life** in exchange for Ben-Hadad's (cf. 1 Kings 22:37). Also Ahab's **people**, the Israelites, would die in place of Ben-Hadad's **people**. Ahab returned to **Samaria** sullen because of this prophecy and angry (cf. 21:4) at himself as well as at God's prophet.

Mathews, K. A. (1998). *The Historical Books. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 143). Broadman & Holman Publishers.*

Ahab's Victory (20:1–43). The Aramean king, Ben-Hadad, forged a coalition of thirty-two kings who besieged Samaria and held it hostage. Ahab, at the bidding of an unnamed prophet, secretly attacked the drunken Arameans, and the Lord granted Ahab's weaker armies a surprising victory. By this God demonstrated to Ahab that He was the true Lord of Israel. The next year the Arameans, believing that the Lord was a god only of the hills, attacked the city of Aphek located in a valley. God again granted victory to show that He ruled over hill and valley. In spite of God's grace, evil Ahab violated the rules of holy war and spared the life of Ben-Hadad. The Lord sent another prophet to the king to condemn Ahab for his neglect of the Lord's word. Ahab confirmed the truth of the message by announcing his own judgment.

Tatum, S. L. (1972). *1 Kings. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible Commentary (p. 205). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.*

The passage—The Syrians and their kings, led by king Ben-Hadad, besieged Samaria. They demanded that Ahab surrender the silver and gold and the choicest of the women and children. Ahab was so weak militarily that he agreed. When he told the leaders of Israel what he had done they advised resistance. Ben-Hadad was so overconfident that he was drinking himself drunk in his tent. Acting on the advice of a prophet of God, Israel attacked Ben-Hadad's armies. The Israelites slaughtered the Syrians, but Ben-Hadad escaped.

Ben-Hadad regrouped his forces and came against Israel again. Israel defeated them again, and Ben-Hadad fled. Realizing his peril, he appealed to Ahab for mercy. He promised to restore the territory Syria had taken from Israel. He agreed to give Ahab favorable trade advantage in Damascus. On those terms Ahab let him go.

God sent a prophet to Ahab to show him the folly of letting Ben-Hadad go. The prophet had made a fellow strike him and wound him in the face so he would appear to have been in battle. With bandages and wounds as his disguise, he went before Ahab. He said that in battle he had been entrusted with a prisoner, but that he had let him escape. The penalty for letting a prisoner escape was death. By his very admission he pronounced the death penalty on himself. Ahab pointed out this truth. Then the prophet removed the bandages and revealed his identity. He told Ahab he had let Ben-Hadad go when he should have destroyed him as the enemy of God's people. Ahab was angry over this revelation and went to his home nursing his resentment.

Special points—The military weakness of Israel was apparently not as bad as Ahab thought. He seemed all too willing to surrender to Ben-Hadad's demands. In his moral depravity he was

willing to make peace at any price. Verse 30 tells of the destruction of twenty-seven thousand men. Some have suggested that in the battle involving the storming of the city that large numbers of men were killed. Most interpreters regard it as a miracle.

Truth for today—We can be too busy for the main business. Verse 40 is an indictment on many a person who needs to put first things first. “And as thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone.” When Ahab let Ben-Hadad go, he sinned against God’s commandment. Ahab had been too concerned about getting back his lost territories. He wanted a place of special advantage to trade in the city of Damascus. We need a renewal of a sense of priorities. The will of God demands first place. Read Matthew 6:33.

Activism is sometimes used as an excuse for not doing the will of God. Dr. W. T. Conner used to say, “Activity around the church house is not necessarily religion.” We can multiply our programs and our activities without deepening the spiritual lives of our people. We can join in every worthwhile endeavor in the community and “be busy here and there” and still not do the will of God.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (1 Kings 20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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