

Israel's Troubler vs. The Inescapable Word

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading for this evening, and we have plenty of visitor Bibles at the sides, at the back. So do please grab a Bible if you don't have one with you.

And Phil Copeland is picking up his series in 1 Kings, and we're in chapter 20 this evening. So please turn, 1 Kings, chapter 20, and I'll read this chapter for us.

1 Kings 20, and beginning at verse 1. Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, gathered all his army together.

Thirty-two kings were with him, and horses and chariots. And he went up and closed in on Samaria and fought against it. And he sent messengers into the city to Ahab, king of Israel, and said to him, Thus says Ben-Hadad, Your silver and your gold are mine.

Your best wives and children also are mine. And the king of Israel answers, As you say, my lord, O king, I am yours and all that I have.

[1 : 23] The 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.

Nevertheless, I will send my servants to you tomorrow about this time. And they shall search your house and the house of your servants, and lay hands on whatever pleases you, and take it away.

Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land and said, 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.

And all the elders and all the people said to him, Do not listen or consent. So 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. Ben-Hadad sent to him and said, 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.

[2 : 38] And the king of Israel answered, Tell him, Let not him who straps on his armor boast himself as he who takes it off. When Ben-Hadad heard this message, as he was drinking with the kings in the booths, he said to his men, Take your positions.

And they took their positions against the city. 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, I will give it into your hand this day, and you shall know that I am the Lord. 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.

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, 7,000. And they went out at noon, while Ben-Hadad was drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the 32 kings who helped him.

[3 : 52] 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. He said, If they have come out for peace, take them alive.

Or if they come out for war, take them alive. So these went out of the city, the servants of the governors of the districts, and the army that followed them. 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. And the king of Israel went out and struck the horses and chariots, and struck the Syrians with a great blow.

Then the prophet came near to the king of Israel and said to him, Come, strengthen yourself, and consider well what you have to do. For in the spring, the king of Syria will come up against you.

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.

[5 : 03] And do this, remove the kings, each from his post, and put commanders in their places, and muster an army like the army that you've 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. In the spring, Ben-Hadad mustered the Syrians, and went up to Afek to fight against Israel.

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.

And a man of God came near, and said to the king of Israel, Thus says the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, The Lord is a God of the hills, but he is not a God of the valleys, therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

And they encamped opposite one another seven days. Then on the seventh day, the battle was joined. And the people of Israel struck down the Syrians, 100,000 foot soldiers in one day.

[6 : 17] And the rest fled into the city of Afek. And the wall fell upon 27,000 men who were left. Ben-Hadad also fled, and entered an inner chamber in the city.

And a servant said to him, Behold, now we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings. Let us put sackcloth around our waists, and ropes on our heads, and go out to the king of Israel.

Perhaps he will spare your life. So they tied 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. 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. And Ben-Hadad said to him, The cities that my father took from your father I will restore, and you may establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.

[7 : 26] And Ahab said, I will let you go on these terms. So he made a covenant with him, and let him go. And a certain man of the sons of the prophets said to his fellow at the command of the Lord, Strike me, please.

But the man refused to strike him. Then he said to him, Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, behold, as soon as you have gone down from me, a lion shall strike you down.

And as soon as he departed from him, a lion met him, and struck him down. Then he found another man and said, Strike me, please. And the man struck him, struck him and wounded him.

So the prophet departed and waited for the king by the way, disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes. 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 talent of silver. And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone.

[8 : 44] The king of Israel said to him, So shall your judgment be. You yourself have decided it. Then he hurried to take the bandage away from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets.

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, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people.

And the king of Israel went to his house, vexed and sullen, and came to Samaria. Amen. Amen.

May God bless to us his word this evening. Well, please do have your Bibles open to 1 Kings chapter 20, that we read earlier together.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[10 : 24] Amen. regard for the Lord God. And instead of promoting justice, they promote evil. And on a wider scale on the international scene, the surrounding nations are full of turmoil and political uncertainty everywhere. There are many wars and yet more rumors of wars.

And friends, that is how things looked at the time of 1 Kings chapter 20. That's how things looked in the world. And yet as we shall see, this chapter tells us that the inescapable and all-powerful word of the Lord is always at work in everything, even in all the darkness and all the mess, to bring about his just judgments and to advance his plans and to graciously make the Lord known to people. And friends, this chapter also teaches us how all of us, every single one of us, is to respond rightly to that all-powerful and inescapable word.

But before we launch into the chapter together, let me just say that we are now entering into what is really the final section of the book of 1 Kings. When we looked at this last time, we looked at chapters 17 to 19, and we saw there three episodes placed together that centered on a God war that took place in the northern kingdom of Israel, where the Lord God sought to fight and publicly and publicly and publicly ridiculed Baal, one of the pagan gods of the day. At the end of the war, there was no confusion as to who was the winner. The Lord was seen to be the true God, and Baal was nothing but a dead idol. And in chapters 20 to 22 of this book, we find another three episodes that have been placed alongside each other. And in each of these three episodes, we see the inescapable word of the Lord coming up against the man responsible for establishing Baal worship in Israel, King Ahab.

The man whom Elijah rightly labeled a troubler of Israel. And over these next three Sundays, we'll see, God willing, who comes out on top. With that in mind, let's look at chapter 20 under three headings.

Firstly, let's notice the wonder of the Lord's grace. The wonder of the Lord's grace. As the Lord is so patient and slow to anger, he shows great kindness to those who do not deserve it.

[13:19] In verse 1, we're introduced to a crackpot tyrant, Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria. And what he does, Ben-Hadad, he gathers up this intimidating army made up of his own troops, and he gets troops of these 32 other kings. And together, they join forces, their chariots and their weapons, and they lay siege against Samaria, the capital of Israel. And having surrounded the city, Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, he sends messengers into the city to offer terms to Ahab, king of Israel. In verse 3, they say, thus says Ben-Hadad. It's very pompous. Thus says Ben-Hadad, your silver and your gold are mine.

Your best wives and children also are mine. In other words, Ben-Hadad is declaring that Israel is now a vassal state under Syria. Israel has a new master. The riches, the wives, and the children of Samaria, they are all to be offered up as payments of tribute to this new master. And in verse 4, Ahab offers no resistance at all. He hears this and he goes, okay, of course. Ben-Hadad, I pledge allegiance to you, and I publicly announce that all our riches, our best wives, children, are they're all yours. And when Ben-Hadad hears this reply, he decides to make more demands of God's people. Verse 5, his messengers come again to Ahab and they say, thus says Ben-Hadad, I sent to you saying, deliver to me your silver and your gold, your wives and your children.

Nevertheless, I will send my servants to you tomorrow about this time, and they shall search your houses and the houses of your servants and lay hands on whatever pleases you and will take them away. Now, upon hearing that the Syrian raiders are coming tomorrow in order to ransack the kingdom, because that's what Ben-Hadad is saying, Ahab finally seems to get some spine. And in verse 7, he gathers the elders of the land together. He fills them in on what is happening. And in verse 8, they say to him, Ahab, do not listen to this Syrian thug. Reject him, reject these terms. And that is what Ahab does in verse 9, sort of. Ahab sends messengers to Ben-Hadad saying, oh, you know, I'm still willing to give some of our riches, our wives and children to you, but you really just can't swagger into Samaria and help yourself to whatever you like. That is not happening. And when Ben-Hadad hears this, he is raging. It's like a red rag to a bull. In verse 10, he sends Ahab this two-fold, two-pronged threat.

Boasting about the size of his army, he says it's as vast as the amount of dust in Samaria. And at the same time, he's also saying, and by the way, that is what Samaria will end up if I come up against you.

I will trash you and reduce you to dust. And it's all very playground, this. It's all very back and forth. In verse 11, Ahab fires back his own taunt. And let me paraphrase. Verse 11, he says, oh, you think so? Really? Don't count your chickens before they've hatched Ben-Hadad.

[16:59] Who do you think you are, talking like you've already beaten us and yet you're not even strapped on your armor? Come on then. If you think you're hard enough, come on. Let's see who wins.

And in verse 12, Ben-Hadad, he is sitting in his tent, drinking himself under the table with his 32 king mates that he's got. And a servant comes in and passes on the taunt that we've just heard in verse 11 from Ahab. And again, it is another red rag to a bull. And he immediately, you can just imagine him slapping the desk, and he orders his massive army to ready themselves for war.

The fight is on. And friends, humanly speaking, things do not look good for Israel. They are vastly outnumbered here. And King Ahab, it does not look good for him. It is hopeless, in fact.

But look at verse 13. Suddenly, out of the blue, out of nowhere, a prophet of the Lord draws near to Ahab. Now, this prophet is not Elijah. Remember, Elijah is out of the country at this time. We'll hear about him in the weeks ahead. This is a different prophet. The word of the Lord is never bound to one individual servant. It is all-powerful in and of itself. And so the Lord uses this other prophet, and for the first time, he comes to this king, King Ahab, with a word of support from the Lord.

Please look at verse 13. Thus says the Lord, have you seen all this great multitude, that is this great army surrounding Samaria? Behold, I will give it into your hand this day, and you shall know that I am the Lord. And suddenly hope comes flooding into this helpless situation by the gracious promise of the Lord. Now, verse 14, not unnaturally, Ahab has some questions in response. He asks, whom will the Lord use to do this, humanly speaking? And the prophet answers, thus says the Lord, by the servants of the governors of the district. That's whom the Lord's going to use to defeat this massive army. And if you knew, we know from the history books that this group of servants, they were really young boys, probably, very weak looking, probably didn't have much military training and skill. And yet this is who the Lord is going to use. And Ahab then asks, well, who will kick off the battle? Us or them? Who will strike first? You will, said the prophet. And we will see what happens next in just a second. But let's just pause and make a couple of observations about this prophet. Firstly, this prophet's appearing, it has come about completely by the Lord's doing. In no way, shape, perform was Ahab looking for the Lord's help. This coming of the prophet was 100% the grace of God.

[20 : 07] Secondly, notice that through this prophet, the Lord is actually smashing back Ben-Hadad's arrogance into his mouth. Twice, remember when Ben-Hadad's messengers came, they started their messages by saying, well, thus says Ben-Hadad in verse 2 and verse 5, full of pomp and arrogance, as though their king was the ultimate voice of authority to be obeyed and followed. Well, the Lord deliberately mirrors and counters that when he sends his prophet. In verse 13 and verse 14, the prophet always begins by saying, thus says the Lord, thus says the Lord. It is as though the Lord has said to Ahab, I'll show you whose word is greater than this, Syrian. I'll show you whose word actually forms history. And finally, notice why the Lord sends this word of promise to Ahab. At the end of verse 13, he's sending this word of promise so that Ahab will be in no confusion as to the source of his victory over Syria. The Lord alone is the one who saves. We'll think a bit more about that in a minute. But back to the narrative. In verse 16 to 21, the events unfold exactly as the Lord said they would.

Ahab makes the first move, sending up this puny little group of servants to attack the enemy line. And when these servants get close to the Syrian enemy line, the guards spot these guys approaching.

And they run to Ben-Hadad, who is, surprise, surprise, still drinking with his buddies. And this time he seems to be very drunk at this point because he gives the most confusing message in verse 18.

He says, if these Israelite troops come for peace, take them alive. If they come for war, take them alive, take them alive. So we've got to take them alive, whatever. Right. Okay.

Well, the Lord really seems to use this confused, drunken message to unsettle the Syrian soldiers because they are all struck down by these young Israelite servants. And the rest of the Syrian army see this and they flee for their lives. And so Ahab sends more of his troops and they chase after them and strike more Syrians down. Ben-Hadad, he manages to get away though. And one can picture him sobering up rather quickly on the back of his galloping horse. But friends, the Lord is true to his word.

[22 : 51] The Lord's word is all powerful. The Lord graciously gifts his people this victory over the enemy. There's such grace and kindness. And in verse 22, the Lord's prophet comes and says to Ahab, by the way, they will be back for more. In the springtime, which was a common time for kings to go out to war, Ben-Hadad will be back for round two. And he's given this gracious warning, this heads up to Ahab to be ready for that time. Again, yet more grace. It is marvelous grace. That's a bit of a daft thing to say because friends, there is no other type of grace. All of God's grace that he shows to people, it is marvelous.

He's been so kind. Remember verse 12, Ahab was not for one second seeking the Lord at all. He is a godless man. He was not looking for any aid. The Lord comes of his own initiative with his powerful word. And that the Lord would do this is even more remarkable when you consider who King Ahab is. Remember, this was Israel's troubler. Chapter 16 says this, Ahab, son of Omri, did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings who were before him in history. The most evil man up to that point in history. This is who Ahab is. And yet here, the Lord sends his word to him and promises a great victory so that Ahab might see and might know the true God.

And so that Ahab might repent, might turn. It's the wonderful grace of God. And friends, that is what our God is like. But just notice, please, God's grace, it is not cheap grace.

One writer puts it like this, God's grace here is not just marvelous, it is also demanding. It does not mean for Ahab and Israel to remain untouched, to see this beautiful grace and then yawn and walk away unchanged. They are held accountable for responding to God's grace.

And that's clear from what the prophet says back in verse 13. Just look at that again. Thus says the Lord, have you seen all this great multitude? Behold, I will give it into your hand this day. I will show you this grace and you shall know that I am the Lord. In other words, the Lord is saying, when I do what I have predicted, you will have clear evidence that I, the Lord, and no other have acted in grace towards you and in judgment to your enemies.

[25 : 48] And when you see that evidence, you, Ahab and Israel, you will be accountable for responding rightly to me, which is to acknowledge the Lord, to worship, to adore him, to submit to his word.

And friends, God's grace towards sinners, as I said, it's always marvelous, but it always demands that we respond rightly to him. And of course, for us today, living in these last days, we enjoy a great privilege, the greatest privilege of all, of having a full Bible so that we today can look back in time to when the grace of God appeared fully and wondrously in the greatest prophet, the word of God incarnate. And in him, we have received grace upon grace, says the apostle John.

And through him, the Lord has carried out the greatest victory over our greatest enemies, sin, and death. It is marvelous grace, but it is also not cheap grace. It never is. The grace the Lord has shown us in Christ, it demands we respond rightly to him, that we turn away from sin, we repent.

We are a repenting people. And we acknowledge him, worship him, and adore him. Well, in 1 Kings 20, verse 23, having seen and experienced the Lord's grace, the question we're supposed to be asking is, how will Ahab respond? Will he respond in the way he should?

We'll find out at the end of the chapter. But before we look at that, here is our second point this evening. It's this, the scope of the Lord's power. The scope of the Lord's power. In verse 23 to 25, the Syrians are sober now. They're back in their homeland. And then Hadad, he loves his servants, he gets them around him, and they're trying to figure out what went wrong. They're doing a kind of post-match analysis. What went wrong? We need to be ready for the next springtime assault on Samaria. And various things are suggested. The servants say, oh, get rid of those 32 kings.

[28 : 13] They were no help to us at all. And they also say, let's beef up our troops again. Let's beef up our weaponry so that we will go back with another big army. That's what we need. None of the servants dare point out the finger of blame to their dear leader and his drunken stupidity. They don't dare speak against their king. But instead, look where they lay the blame for their loss. Verse 23, they are gods. That's Israel's gods, are gods of the hills. That's where they were fighting, up on the hill. And so they were stronger than we. But let us fight then in the plain, in the valley, in the flat. And surely then we will be stronger than they. These Syrians are setting themselves up for yet another crushing defeat. Why? Bad theology. Like so many people back in those days, they believed in polytheism, that there were loads of different gods who ruled in specific areas and over little places. And that is how they think of the God of Israel. They do not see him as the king of the universe, who rules over all things and all places at all times. No, they just see him as the

God of the hills. He's just the God of the hills. So what we'll do is we'll fight in the plains, in the valleys, and we'll take out the power of the gods of Israel. And we will win in the plains. You'll see, come springtime, you'll see how wrong they are, how wrong they are. Their bad theology leads to disaster.

And in verse 26, springtime arrives, and Ben-Hadad and his massive replenished army come up to fight against Israel once again. This time they gather at a place called Afeq, which was obviously in the plains. And there was also a city nearby. And in verse 27, notice that once again, Israel is vastly outnumbered, very outnumbered and outgunned. Verse 27, the people of Israel, they're like two flocks, of goats, sitting there. And if you were to look out at these two flocks of goats behind them, you would see a sea, an ocean of Syrian soldiers that filled the countryside. Massive numbers of Syrian soldiers.

But once again, in verse 28, a prophet of the Lord comes, graciously sent to draw near to King Ahab. And look at what he says, verse 28, Thus says the Lord, because the Syrians have said the Lord is a God of the hills, but he's not a God of the valleys. Therefore, I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

So by the coming victory, the Lord will both show goodness and grace to Israel yet again, but he will also get glory for himself by revealing the true scope of his power.

[31 : 23] Syrian stupidity has distorted the truth about the Lord. They've belittled the king of the universe, and you just can't do that. Speaking about him like he was just another pagan god of the day.

Well, when Israel levels Syria to the ground, the Lord will expose their theological nonsense for what it is. And whilst this coming defeat will be humiliating for Syria, friends, it will also be a gracious thing for them.

For they will have a chance to see, even in their defeat, the truth, if they will, of course. But just notice, please, in verse 28, that the man of God actually says that the impact of this coming victory, this second victory, it will, yet again, be primarily for Ahab's benefit and Israel's benefit too.

The word used there, the Hebrew word there in verse 28 is plural. You see, the Lord wants the whole of the northern kingdom, all of his people and their king, to know that he is both the Lord of the hills and the Lord of the plains.

In other words, it seems that it wasn't the pagan Gentiles outside of the church who were guilty of limiting the scope of God's power. Even God's people needed to have a lesson in who the Lord is and in the scope of his power.

[32 : 51] And friends, that has so often been the case throughout church history. So often it is the professing people of God who most need convincing of the Lord's power and omnipotence.

It doesn't take much to cause us to start belittling the Lord in our minds and in our hearts. One writer puts it like this, We may stand within the Lord's people today, but actually keep lapsing into Syrian ways of thinking.

Our paganism may be more refined and hence less obvious, yet no different in principle. Friends, it's a sobering question for us to ask ourselves as a church and as individuals.

Is our Jesus too small? The Jesus that we believe and trust in? Is he the almighty, eternal God, risen and ascended? There is no higher power than him.

There is no end to his power. Is that the Jesus that you believe in? Is that the Jesus that I believe in? The real Jesus? When the church belittles the Lord today, when our Jesus is too small, We will be more than likely to shrink away from living for him and witnessing for his glory to the world around us.

[34 : 09] When your Jesus is too small, you cease to fear him as the all-powerful Lord of the hills, of the plains, the Lord of the cities, the Lord of the staff room, the Lord of the classroom, the Lord of the offices, the Lord of the common room, the Lord of the nations, the Lord of the parliament, the Lord of the cosmos.

Instead of fearing the Lord, you will start to fear other people. And you will start to become less confident about reaching out with this Lord's gospel.

Because if he's not all-powerful, then we have no assurance that he will work through his gospel and no assurance that he will work among us. If your Jesus is too small, you will be scared to invite people to come and hear his word at church on a Sunday.

Syrian theology, which we can so easily slip into, friends, it is poison for us as Christians. So let's be sure that we always let God's word shape our minds and correct us and teach us the reality of the scope of the Lord's power.

Let's just do that now. Please look at what happened next. Look at what the word of the Lord does. Verse 29. And they, Israel and Syria, encamped opposite one another for seven days.

[35 : 32] 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.

That could be a literal number or it could be a Hebrew figurative way of talking about just an enormous amount of Syrians. Enormous. And the rest of the Syrians, what happened to them?

Well, they fled into the city of Afeq nearby. And the wall fell upon 27,000 men who were left. There's lots of things in there, by the way, that if you know your Bible, it sounds a lot like Jericho.

A battle that takes place after seven days of waiting. A wall falling on the enemies of the Lord's people. It's very, very like the victory the Lord gave his people at Jericho.

Here is history repeating himself. Here is again the Lord showing off his power. He is the God who is king of the universe. So yet again what the Lord promises his people comes to pass.

[36 : 42] And he reveals the true extent of his power. The king of the universe, he is our God. He is your God. So friends, let's remember such passages as these, especially when we feel intimidated by the world.

Especially when we realized, actually, we are thinking in the same way the Syrians thought all those years ago. Let's safeguard our hearts and minds from belittling the Lord and his power.

Well, thirdly, let's notice the announcement of the Lord's judgment. And in verse 31, the tables have now turned since the start of the chapter.

King Ahab, he is no longer the spineless, shivering servant of Syria. And now he is seen as the top dog. He is the king. And Ben-Hadad, he is no longer talking as though he is king of kings.

Thus says Ben-Hadad, none of that anymore. Where is he? He is now cowering away in fear, hiding in the ruins of the city of Athek.

[37 : 49] And in his desperation, he asks his servants once more for advice. And they say, don't worry, my king, don't worry. We will go out to Ahab and beg him to spare your life.

That's what they do. In verse 32, they dress up in sackcloth and put on ropes around their heads, which seems very odd to us, but it was a sign of servitude.

It was basically saying, I'm dressing as I'm going to be in the future, your servant. And they approach Ahab and they say that Ben-Hadad is now Ahab's servant.

And they beg Ahab to spare his life. And when Ahab hears this, he's initially a bit surprised. He thought Ben-Hadad was dead. But when he hears that he's alive, without even thinking for it for a second, doesn't even give it a second thought.

He goes just like that. He says, ha, he is my brother. This man who threatened Israel, who threatened to come and ransack the people of God, Ahab doesn't give it a second thought.

[38 : 58] He says, oh, he is my brother. He's okay. I will not put him to death. He's safe. And upon hearing this, Ben-Hadad comes out of hiding. And Ahab actually, he welcomes him up publicly into his royal chariot.

That was a big deal. And some royal negotiations ensue where territorial and economic matters are agreed upon for Israel's benefit.

The two kings, we're told, even end up making a covenant together with each other. And once that is done, Ben-Hadad skips off home in peace.

Ahab may well have been feeling very pleased for himself. He worked his charm. He showed everyone what a reasonable king he was.

And he got some very good political gains out of this whole situation for his kingdom. Well, just imagine the shock of what happened next in verses 35 to 43.

[39 : 55] Who do we encounter again in this section? Yet another prophet of the Lord. It seems, friends, that wherever Ahab turns, he cannot escape the word of God.

The word of the Lord is inescapable. But before the prophet draws near to Ahab, he carries out an active parable. Which at first reading, and maybe you're here tonight and this is the first time you've encountered this passage.

If you thought this incident coming up was strange, I have to say, I think it is strange. It is very strange. It's even shocking. But let's not get distracted by that because it depicts a vital truth.

The fact that the word of the Lord, it is serious. And it must be obeyed. Let's just unpack the active parable. In verse 35. The prophet, who's unnamed, he asks one of his companions, Strike me, please.

That is, hit me, wound me with a weapon. And the text is clear. This command to strike the prophet has actually come from the Lord himself. Well, the companion refuses to strike the prophet.

[41 : 14] And the prophet does not thank his companion for refusing to strike him. But instead condemns him for not obeying the word of the Lord.

Look at what he says. Verse 36 to his companion. Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord. Behold, as soon as you've gone from me, a lion shall strike you down.

And friends, that is what happens. That is what happens. The judgment announced is the judgment that comes upon the man who disobeyed the Lord's word. And in verse 37, the unnamed prophet then turns and he asks another companion to obey the Lord's word.

He says, please strike me. And this time, this new companion obeys the Lord's word. He strikes and wounds the prophet.

Again, it's very strange. It's very shocking even. It really is. But to focus on the strangeness of it, friends, is to miss the point.

[42 : 20] The real lesson is this. It is not safe to ignore or disregard the word of God. It is safer to face a lion than it is to disregard the word of the Lord.

That's what's being taught here. It is very sobering. It's very sobering for us all. The disobedient companion of this story, he is actually a little preview, a picture of Ahab.

Ian Proven says this, If disobedient prophets can't escape God's judgment, then disobedient kings certainly will not. And in the next scene, verse 38 to 40, the prophet who was struck, what he does is he bandages up his face.

It's probably where he was wounded. And he goes and disguises himself as a wounded soldier. And he finds out where King Ahab is going to be. He's going to be coming down this road.

And this prophet incognito hides himself by the side of the road. He plants himself there. And as King Ahab comes past, he calls out in disguise.

[43 : 30] And he says this, Oh king, listen to what happened to me, please. I need your help to get me out of trouble. I was fighting on the front line against the Syrians.

And a fellow soldier came up to me and brought a prisoner to me. And told me to guard this prisoner. Don't let the prisoner escape. Guard the prisoner.

To face justice after the battle. And don't you just love the lame excuse that the prophet uses in verse 40. The prophet goes, he says to Ahab, and you know, I was busy here.

I was busy there. And the next thing, the prisoner had just slipped away. The prisoner I was supposed to guard, he just slipped away. And upon hearing this, Ahab says to the prophet in disguise, So shall your judgment be.

You yourself have decided it. In other words, he says, there is your verdict. You yourself have just confessed in this story that you were at fault, wounded soldier.

[44 : 36] You are guilty of letting that prisoner go when you should have kept him and guarded him to face justice. And in saying this, King Ahab has walked straight into the prophet's plan.

By condemning the disguised prophet in this made-up parable, Ahab is actually condemning himself. In verse 40, the prophet reveals his identity.

The bandages come off. In verse 42, he says to Ahab, Ahab, thus says the Lord, Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people.

Ahab spared the man that the Lord meant to destroy. He had been busy here and busy there, making a name for himself as a king who was moderate and reasonable, making plans with this Ben-Hadad.

And whilst he was distracted by all of that, he let the Lord's prisoner go. And so the Lord announces judgment. He says that destruction designed for Ben-Hadad will actually fall upon Ahab and upon Ahab's people.

[46 : 00] And you might think to yourself, well, where does the Lord say to devote Ben-Hadad to destruction? And the answer is, in the Lord's law. Read Deuteronomy 20.

Later on, you will see that the Lord spells it out clearly for his people in his rules for holy war. Ahab should have known and obeyed this. And when we look back at verse 32, as I said, when Ahab hears that Ben-Hadad is still alive, and when he hears Ben-Hadad's pleas for keeping him alive, it is crystal clear that Ahab has absolutely no interest in turning to the Lord.

It's just the way Ahab is. All the way, the stories you read about him, he never seems to have any desire to even think about acknowledging the Lord and finding out what the Lord wanted done with the Assyrian king the Lord had delivered to him.

But he really should have. For victory over Syria was not Ahab's.

Remember, friends? Victory over Syria belonged to the Lord alone. And so Ben-Hadad was the Lord's prisoner, not Ahab's.

[47 : 17] Instead of doing what was right, turning to consult the word of the Lord, Ahab ignores the word of the Lord. He just did what he wanted to do. He just did what he thought was right.

And behaving this way, he really showed what was in his heart. He is a man who couldn't care less about the Lord, who walks by cheap grace.

If he did care about the Lord and his grace, he would have walked by the obedience of faith in the Lord's word. And look at verse 43.

Having heard the announcement of the Lord's judgment, the king of Israel repented, put on sackcloth and ashes, begged the Lord for forgiveness, confessed his no.

He says he went vexed and sullen and came to his house in Samaria. Actually, a better translation is this. And the king of Israel went to his house rebellious and furious with the Lord's verdict over his life.

[48 : 21] In other words, here is a man who is now more hard-hearted than ever before. As Matthew Henry says, the great Puritan, Ahab was not truly penitent or seeking to undo what he had done amiss, but enraged at the prophet and exasperated against God, he went home.

The gracious word of the Lord had stirred him up, but it had not tamed him. However, this was not a failure of the word of the Lord, but a failure of Ahab.

And so friends, as we draw this to a close, this is where chapter 20 has been going. This is the challenge to us all. It pleads with us all. Do not follow the ways of Ahab.

Do not despise and reject the marvelous grace of God. Do not shun and disregard the Lord's word, for it controls history. And everyone who does that, everyone who shuns the Lord, they will face his just judgments.

Instead, 1 Kings 20 pleads with us to respond rightly to the Lord's grace, to do what Ahab refused to do, to repent, to submit to this life-giving and history-controlling word of power.

[49 : 41] Walk by the obedience of faith, letting it transform and tame our hearts. For friends, that is the way of life.

Don't go the way of Ahab. Well, amen. Let's bow our heads and pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Heavenly Father, may you give us the power that we need to shun the ways of Ahab, to turn away from our sin, and to instead love you, love your word, to respond rightly to your grace, to take you seriously, to let your word tame and master our lives.

please, almighty and omnipotent Lord, give us hearts that truly praise you. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

[50 : 51] Amen. Amen.