

1ST KINGS

Week 32, chapter 20

Last week we encountered some wonderful spiritual and practical truths as we witnessed the great Elijah pull himself off of the mission field and essentially resign his calling as a prophet of Yehoveh to the people of Israel. The Lord tried to teach him on Mt. Horeb that it was Elijah's bad attitude and carnal expectations for the results of the miracles that the Lord had done through Elijah that was the problem. However ***Eliyahu*** insisted that the Lord ought to be harsh upon Israel (meaning the northern kingdom) because he had done everything the Lord told him to do and the Queen of Israel had threatened him with his life, and the bulk of the people still preferred idolatry to the pure worship of Yehoveh.

This week, as we begin chapter 20, we will find that Elijah is not even mentioned as the Book of 1st Kings takes a detour into an important history lesson. However do not take that to mean that the Lord was through with Elijah because as we'll find in chapters 21 and 22, and then at the start of 2nd Kings, apparently after some unknown amount of time ***Eliyahu*** repented and came to his senses and the Lord began to use him again.

As we left chapter 19, Elijah had essentially appointed his replacement, ***Elisha***, who was plowing his father's field using a team of oxen. To express his fullest commitment to his new calling, ***Elisha*** hosted a feast that used his two oxen as the main dish and used their plow yokes as the wood for the roasting fire. As we open chapter 20 the scene shifts and we find that Israel is about to be attacked by an army from Aram, a region that is roughly synonymous with Syria.

READ 1ST KINGS CHAPTER 20 all

Let's try to get the time frame set for what is happening here. Remember that the 2 Books of the Kings tends to use synchronization between the reigns of Judah's kings and Israel's kings as the way it expresses time and sequence of events. And although we're not given the number of the years of his reign as a milestone, we know that we're well into King Achav's reign in Israel, and that King Asa has continued ruling for many years in the south, in Judah. Using modern calendar terms we are probably around 860 B.C., so it's only been about 60 years since King Solomon's death and in that short time the glorious unified Kingdom of Israel was torn apart by civil war and split into two separate Kingdoms of Judah and Israel (now starting to be known as Ephraim-Israel) in the north. The northern kingdom under Jeroboam (first king after the split) set up calf worship (essentially using the golden calves as representations of Yehoveh) and also began honoring pagan idols. Upon setting up 2 calf worshipping centers, one in Beit-El and the other in Dan, King Jeroboam also barred his subjects from going to Jerusalem to worship at Solomon's Temple because he feared that if his citizens remained loyal to the Temple in Judah, they would eventually rebel against him and try to reunite the two kingdoms under one king; a Judean king.

After going through a half-dozen more kings following Jeroboam, each worse than the previous and most ruling for only a short time, Ephraim-Israel is currently being ruled by **Achav** and his wicked gentile wife Jezebel. This co-regency has taken the drastic step of virtually renouncing Yehoveh as the national God of Israel and replacing Him with Ba'al, mostly at Jezebel's insistence. And this was because Jezebel was from Sidon where Ba'al was the chief deity.

King **Achav** was as much a weak king as he was a wicked king. It was Jezebel who was the real force behind the throne. Such projected weakness of course became apparent to Israel's enemies and it invited the neighboring kingdoms to do what came natural to them: expand their kingdom by invading and conquering another's, and that's what we see happening in this chapter.

Aram, what we could for convenience sake call Syria (although Aram included a larger area than only Syria), was being ruled by a fellow named Ben-Hadad. The word Hadad was actually more of the title of the office rather than a person's formal name. In other words, when we say Prime Minister so and so, or President such and such, Prime Minister and President are titles that those who came before them and those who come after them will usually inherit as the national leader. Ben means "son", so this Hadad of our story was the son of the previous Hadad, therefore here he is called Ben-Hadad. And Hadad is the name of the Syrian Sun-God, which was the chief deity of that kingdom.

As I will repeat to you many times in our study of the Old Testament, events in the Bible didn't

happen in a vacuum. Even though the circumstances and context are often not included in the Scriptures, these invasions and killings and decisions happened for a reason. So the first question we must ask ourselves upon reading the 1st verse of chapter 20 is, why did Ben-Hadad decide to attack Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom? The short answer is that it had become the national policy of Syria (Aram) to weaken its neighbor Israel. Again, the question is why and to what end?

Some years earlier Ben-Hadad's father had made Syria an ally with Judah. The King of Judah at that time was Asa (who is still king at the time of our story), but a few years later Asa decided he didn't need or want Syria as an ally any longer and pulled away from them. During that time **Ba'sha** had become the King of Israel and he saw an opening to strengthen himself by making a treaty with Syria (whom Asa had just broken alliance with). With this treaty in his pocket, and his northern border now secure, **Ba'sha** felt free to pursue his goal of attacking and conquering Judah without interference from Syria. So he began by marching on Jerusalem. But when King Asa of Judah saw this, he panicked and immediately went to Hadad and offered him huge sums of gold and silver if he would once again become Judah's ally (but it would be more in the sense of a vassal relationship with Asa subservient to Hadad). But a condition of this renewed relationship was that Hadad must disavow his peace treaty with **Ba'sha** and Israel. Hadad accepted these terms and **Ba'sha** was suddenly hung out to dry.

So as we open our story in chapter 20, Syria (Aram) is an enemy of Israel but has a good relationship with Judah. Yet Syria finds itself with a pressing problem; it is that Assyria is on its northern and eastern border. Assyria was by now a growing and aggressive power and so Syria found itself caught between two enemies: Assyria to the north and Israel to the south. In geopolitical terms of that era, it made them ripe as a target for territorial expansion by either Israel or (more likely) Assyria.

So the new king of Aram (Ben-Hadad) decided to make a pre-emptive strike at the heart of Israel: their relatively new capital city of Samaria. This would essentially neuter Israel and make them no longer a threat.

Ben-Hadad's invasion force, however, was suspect because it consisted of 32 petty potentates each supplying their own contingency of fighting men who were primarily loyal to them. These potentates were unruly barbarians with but one thing in mind: spoils of war. And those spoils of war would be either precious metals and valuable gems, or kidnapped Hebrews that would be used for slave labor, or both if all went well. They had no grand geopolitical strategy in mind, as did Ben-Hadad. They merely wanted to loot, pillage, grab all they could and go home. Apparently Ben-Hadad was persuasive in convincing these leaders that they

had nothing to fear and would have an easy time of it if they agreed to help him invade Israel.

That attack caught **Achav** completely by surprise and he was unprepared. When he faced this overpowering army from Aram he and his men ran into the fortress walls of Samaria and hunkered down. Before beginning the siege, Ben-Hadad sent a message to King **Achav** and offered his terms for surrender. King **Achav** who no longer even remotely resembled the character and pattern of a king that the Lord demanded that kings over His chosen people and land were to be, was weak and frightened for his life. He heard the message from Ben-Hadad and essentially saw the demand of “your silver and gold and your best women and children” as meaning that what the Syrian king was after in his invasion was tribute and wealth (a customary practice in that era). In other words, **Achav** saw Ben-Hadad’s terms as Israel agreeing to become a vassal state controlled by Syria; and if accepted **Achav** and his family would not be killed, Israel would not be destroyed, and very likely **Achav** would remain in power although subservient to Ben-Hadad. Of course much of Israel’s wealth would be transferred on a regular basis to Ben-Hadad, but **Achav** saw that as an acceptable outcome.

Achav’s answer is in verse 4, as he enthusiastically accepts the terms of surrender. But as happens so often in the world, past or present, appeasing an aggressive dictator merely leads to greater demands and more loss of freedom. So after **Achav** quickly agreed without reservation to the demands, Ben-Hadad became emboldened and upped the ante. He sends his envoys back to Achav with a message that essentially says, I think you misunderstood me: I don’t merely want tribute, I intend on looting your kingdom of anything I choose, taking you out of power, and taking everything that is dear to you away from you. The new demand is all about humiliation; it is personal and insulting and it also involves the many tribal and clan leaders who stand to have their wealth and families taken from them, too.

It is interesting that we see this same pattern of events happening in Israel in our time. Israel’s enemies, the Palestinians, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and others not only want Israel’s land they want to humiliate Israel. Yet, whose fault is that? It is Israel’s because too often they have chosen to appease demands that are unreasonable if not irrational. And each time a demand is met, the enemy refuses to accept unless they receive even more. And every demand involves more and more humiliation. And now that Israel has reached the end of what it can possibly give and still survive as a sovereign Jewish nation, various world governments are putting pressure on Israel to accept demands that no other nation in the world would ever accept for peace terms. And although few will ever remember, this process started in its current form in 1967 when the Israelis recaptured their holy city Jerusalem and the Temple Mount from Jordan, and of their own accord (in an attempt to appease Islam and the West) actually agreed to give control over the Temple Mount back to Jordan for them to operate as an Islamic holy place. How has that worked out? It is an error that haunts them to this day.

Achav knew the demands would not stop coming, because part of Hadad's goal was apparently to punish and denigrate Israel for some reason. So **Achav** knew he had little choice but to go to Israel's elders and leaders and present them with the proposition. They agreed that Ben-Hadad's intent was not tribute but destruction and servitude, and so they told **Achav** not to give in to it.

Achav told the messengers that he remained committed to Hadad's first demand, but not the second. When Hadad heard the message (verse 10) he was furious over the reply and swore an oath to his gods that he was going to rain down terrible destruction on Samaria. He even boasted that his army is so numerous that there won't be enough dust in Samaria for each soldier to return home with a bagful as a souvenir of their exploit. The King of Israel replies to Hadad's boast with the Middle Eastern equivalent of: Don't be counting your chickens before they hatch!

But verse 12 explains that part of the reason for this over-the-top offensive language by Ben-Hadad was that he was drunk. He was in the middle of a drunken party with his 32 potentates, and as males of our species generally have a bad habit of doing, needed to thump his chest and show off a little bit to his drinking buddies. It says that this drinking bout was taking place in huts, **sukkot**. And despite what some rabbis have tried to make of this remark, the use of the term **sukkot** had no religious connotation to it at all. It merely meant that while the soldiers were probably in tents, the leaders had temporary huts made for them that were more comfortable and to their liking. Remember, they had set up a camp that they likely felt they would be in for anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. That is the nature of siege warfare such that it is usually a waiting game for the trapped and besieged city to run out of food and water and have little choice but to surrender. Alternatively, the purpose of the high defensive walls around the city is to hold off an attacking enemy until the weather eventually drives them out, they tire of the siege, or help comes and the city is rescued.

Suddenly a prophet of YHWH comes to **Achav**. Verse 13 ought to read, "Behold!", because the Hebrew word is **hinneh**; and when we see this word it is for the purpose of saying, "heads up", and "pay attention". What's coming is important. This anonymous **navi**, prophet, tells the king that the Lord is going to deliver outmanned Israel from what can only be certain annihilation at the hands of the enormous army of Aram. **Achav's** only question was, "through whom?" And the rabbis say that this wasn't that Achav instantly accepted on faith that God would deliver them, but rather it was an expression of skepticism and despair that meant something like, "right, how exactly are we going to be delivered from that huge unstoppable force and who is going to lead such an effort?" And the **navi** responded that it would be through the youthful sons of the officers of the provinces. And when Achav asked who it is that

would lead the battle the prophet said, "You!"

One must know who these youthful sons of the provincial governors were to understand **Achav's** shock at the suggestion of using them as military leaders. It is nearly unanimous among the ancient Hebrew sages and later rabbis that the provincial governors were government officials over taxation districts set up within the northern kingdom (a system borrowed from the gentile nations and first implemented in Israel by King Solomon). Their sons were essentially involuntary "guests of the king" who were being held more or less hostage in Samaria to guarantee that King **Achav** wouldn't be deserted by these well to do men when Aram's army showed up. But the spiritual point is that these youthful men were in no way qualified to act as soldiers, let alone to lead units of the army. And as to the prophet instructing **Achav** that he would lead the battle, hopefully we're all getting the picture that King Achav was no David. Most kings, decent kings, even gentile kings would never think to ask such a question of "who is to lead?" It was expected that a king lead his men into critical battles. But Achav is a type of Middle Eastern monarch who was only in it for the comfort, wealth, and prestige. He had no interest in getting his hands dirty, taking personal risks, and was no leader of men.

So the idea is that it is humanly impossible that Israel could be rescued by a weakling of king and a bunch of youth trying to lead soldiers into battle against impossible odds. Any victory for Israel could only come miraculously from Israel's God.

Inside the walls of Samaria were 232 of these young sons and 7,000 men capable of fighting. These are not the 7,000 people who had not bowed down to Ba'al as spoken of when Elijah was at Horeb. This 7,000 is a round number and so it is symbolic of a force that is being divinely led.

Around noontime the 232 young men led a contingency of Hebrew soldiers out the city gates and marched towards where the Syrians were encamped. The move startled the Syrian scouts who were watching the Israelites' movements in and around Samaria and they immediately went to Ben-Hadad with the news. The inebriated and over confident king of Aram not only didn't sense any danger, his only thought was whether to take these men alive or to kill them outright. And his decision was to capture them all, no doubt to use as slaves and to further heap humiliation upon Israel since the leaders were the sons of government officials. But the results were not quite what Ben-Hadad had envisioned.

Israel's army simply mowed down the Syrian troops that were really just a rabble of men who came to steal and pillage, not die for Ben-Hadad. They panicked and fled and Ben-Hadad did the same. In verse 21 we find out that **Achav** continued to behave in his usual character; he disobeyed the oracle from God and did NOT lead his men into battle. Only after the battle was won and Aram was in flight did he come out to participate and take credit. But immediately after the stunning victory the anonymous prophet returned to **Achav** not with a reproof for his disobedience and cowardice but with a warning: this isn't over yet. The king of Aram is going to regroup and return at the turn of the year.

The "turn of the year" from a Hebrew perspective is either in the fall after the 7th month (which is the change of the civil calendar) or it might be in the spring according the agricultural and religious calendar. Nisan is the 1st month of the year and this is springtime. And springtime was the traditional time when most armies marched out to lay siege and do battle because the weather allowed for chariot movement and easier passage of the army through mountain passes. However the early fall was also conducive for battle because it was after the scorching hot summer months, but before the winter rains and snow began. It is hard to know which is being referred to here. But the prophet's advice was to strengthen defenses and prepare because the battle is absolutely coming.

After arriving back home in Syria, the king of Aram got together with his royal court to ponder such an improbable loss to such a weak and undermanned enemy. The intent to humiliate Israel had backfired and no doubt the Middle East was abuzz with the embarrassing defeat of Ben-Hadad at the hands of such a small force of Hebrews. Ben-Hadad had no choice but to try again or live with the shame for the rest of his reign. The only answer for such an unlikely defeat must lie in the power of Israel's God, reasons Ben-Hadad's advisors. But there is a clever solution. "Their God is the God of mountains", they say, and that why in the mountains the Israelites are strong. So, let's fight them in the plains the next time because then their mountain god can't help them!

First, isn't it usual that we'll look at anything and anyone else to find explanation for our problems and failures, rather than looking in the mirror? Second, don't we tend rationalize about our misfortune such that if only this or that had been different all would have turned out as we hoped? It is ironic that the leaders of Aram were on to the truth when they suspected that Israel's God had to be the answer, but they also allowed their pagan beliefs to lead them to conclude that Israel's God had boundaries and limitations so it was possible to outfox Him.

But let's not let a something else fly by us: it was reasonable in ancient thinking that gods were territorial and had geographical limits to where they operated. But why would they

conceive of Israel's God as being a "God of the Mountains"? For one thing, at this time especially, Israel had altars scattered everywhere; and it had always been Hebrew custom to put their altars on a **bamah**, a high place. So when the Israelites of the northern kingdom performed their sacrifices and religious rites, they invariably did it on hilltops and on mountain slopes indicating that this is where their god lives.

But there is also that matter of God's most ancient name: **El Shaddai**. As we have discussed on a few occasions, **Shaddai** is now known to probably mean "mountain". God's first known name to the Hebrews was God of the Mountain. So it all made perfect sense and the logical conclusion for Ben-Hadad is to fight in the plains and avoid the mountains where that God was living.

But there was another issue: those 32 potentates whose men turned and ran when facing forces consisting of only a fraction of their own. These 32 potentates had no interest in doing anything except collecting spoils of war, and no doubt had been sold the story that the battle was going to be minor, or more likely, no battle at all would happen because King **Achav's** reputation was that he'd simply cave in at the first sign of trouble. So Ben-Hadad's solution was to, this next time, appoint seasoned soldiers to lead the other men and to create an army not from the personal armies of those 32 petty kings, but handpicked fighters. He would also rearm with horses and chariots before they went to back to fight Israel. The time came and after doing a census of his army, Ben-Hadad led his soldiers to Israel in the plain of Jezreel. He took his men to the city of Aphek. When word came to Israel's military commanders that the armies of Aram were coming, they mobilized to go and meet them. But when Israel came they were again so few in number as compared to Ben Hadad's forces that verse 27 says their encampment looked like two little herds of goats.

Verse 28 says that a man of God (an **ish elohim**) showed up and spoke to the king of Israel. It is likely that this **ish elohim** is the same as the anonymous **navi** (prophet) who had been bringing God's oracle to **Achav** and so he serves the same function here of bringing Yehoveh's message to the king. And the message is this: Yehoveh says that because Aram believes that God is only capable of defending Israel in the mountains, they will soon find out that He is God of Israel's plains as well. He is going to defeat Ben-Hadad's forces and then King Achav will understand that Yehoveh is Israel's God.

It is instructional to me that just as the Lord had tried to teach Elijah at Mt. Horeb that He will continue to try to bring His chosen people to repentance in gentle ways rather than raining down wrath upon them, so here we see that Yehoveh is going to use this demonstration of destructive power on the army of Syria so that King Achav would see it and realize God's

mercy for him; then hopefully he would repent and be turned from his wickedness and idolatry.

After a 7 day stare-down, the battle began and the results were essentially the same as the first time. Most Bibles say that Israel killed 100,000 Syrian soldiers in one day; that's not a good translation. What it says is that they **nacah** 100,000 soldiers. **Nacah** doesn't mean to kill, it means to smite. In other words, some were killed, some were wounded, some were captured and others fled. They routed 100,000 men in battle. Therefore, of that 100,000 man army 27,000 escaped and fled to the walled city of Aphek. We're not told if the collapse of the Aphek's walls was a direct intervention by God, or that it was in consequence of the battle. However the wall fell and either killed or injured many of the remaining 27,000 thus bringing the battle to an end.

In the interior of the city, Ben-Hadad was trying to avoid capture and so moved from house to house. But as the inevitable neared, Ben-Hadad's personal guard suggested that they plead for mercy on his behalf and maybe the king will survive. The idea was that they had heard that Israel's kings showed mercy that most other nations' kings did not. The word usually translated as mercy is in Hebrew **chesed**, which is usually better rendered as deeds of loving kindness. But to put their theory to a test, they volunteered to don sackcloth and put ropes around their necks and then go to the King of Israel and ask for mercy. Sackcloth was symbolic of mourning, and the ropes around their necks signaled that they had already accepted a status as slaves if the king would allow them to live.

But they could hardly have hoped for the reception that they received from King **Achav**. When they gave to Achav the content of Ben-Hadad's message begging to be pardoned, the King responds by referring to Ben-Hadad as "my brother", and instructed the men to bring the King of Aram to him. The men assumed that this was the best of omens and so brought Ben-Hadad to King Achav's chariot, and King **Achav** himself reached out a friendly hand to help Ben-Hadad board the royal chariot.

King Achav proved himself to be a rash fool, utterly unworthy of being king over God's people. This man he was warming to was an arch-enemy of Israel who sought nothing but to humiliate and annihilate. But when **Achav** captures him, his only thought is make him a friend and even an equal (that is the meaning behind calling him "brother" and having Ben-Hadad stand alongside of him on his royal chariot).

My head reels as I think back to the many times that Israel's modern-day Prime Ministers have

shaken the hand of their sworn enemies in supposed friendship, only to turn and in no time be stabbed in the back. Over and over it happens, even with that murdering and unrepentant terrorist Yasser Arafat. It boggles the mind how anyone can be so blind. Yet, all nations seem to occasionally suffer under poor national leaders who think that capitulation, appeasement, and intentional weakness in the face of brutal and evil enemies will lead to peace and harmony. **Achav** must be one of the best Biblical examples of such childish but dangerous naivety, and nothing about it mirrors godliness.

A covenant of peace was sealed between Ben-Hadad and King Achav, and part of the bargain was that several cities that Ben-Hadad's father had captured up in the Galilee region of Israel would be returned and Israel would be given markets for their goods in Damascus. Upon that, King Achav released Ben-Hadad.

We'll continue with this chapter next time.