

1ST KINGS

Week 33, chapters 20 and 21

The king of Aram, Ben-Hadad, had been determined to attack the northern kingdom of Israel; his motives were mostly geo-political in nature as he sought to secure his southern border and to extract wealth from Israel to bolster his kingdom.

But as we saw in 1st Kings chapter 20, there was more at work here. For some inexplicable reason there was a hatred of Israel in the recesses of Ben-Hadad's soul such that he wanted not to merely conquer or pillage, but also to humiliate. King **Achav** of Israel was as weak as he was wicked, and so when Ben-Hadad marched his Syrian army to Israel's capital, Ben-Hadad sent couriers with his terms of surrender to **Achav** who was holed up in the defensive fortress that was Samaria.

Ben-Hadad was essentially correct in his assessment that King **Achav** would simply capitulate when faced with risks. The first message sent to **Achav** demanded that he and his family come under the control of Ben-Hadad and that much of Israel's national wealth be given to Syria as tribute. To this the king of Israel immediately agreed without so much as a protest or a counter-offer. But it is here that a dark place of irrational hatred for Israel, deep within Ben-Hadad, is exposed when upon hearing of **Achav's** acceptance of his terms, he replies with another message that is probably not possible to be accepted; he demands free access to all of Israel to loot as he pleases, that he plans on deposing **Achav** from the throne, and that he is going to take **Achav's** family away from him. To this Achav of course could not agree, and so he went to his elders and clan leaders and they backed him up that this could not be done.

When **Achav** sent back a reply of refusal, Ben-Hadad was furious and vowed to lay the city of Samaria waste. But the Lord God intervened and through a prophet told the king of Israel that He would assure victory over Aram, as unlikely as it might seem due to the vast army Aram had amassed. Not only that, but the Lord would have 232 young men who had no military leadership skills lead the smallish group of 7,000 Israelite soldiers who were currently inside

the walls of Samaria, to go outside the walls and attack the gargantuan Syrian forces. And what was the Lord's purpose for this (other than the obvious of rescuing His people)? Verse 13 says that it is so that King **Achav** "will know that I am Yehoveh". In other words, the Lord God is going to declare war against Aram in part for the purpose of driving the King of Israel towards Yehoveh and away from all the false gods he has been pursuing. Miraculously, the Israelites routed Ben-Hadad's army and they retreated back to Syria.

However this did not end the Syrian threat. A prophet made it clear that Ben-Hadad would come again after the turn of the year to try and alleviate his shame at being defeated by such a puny Hebrew army, led by inexperienced non-military men and a cowardly king. And come they did, and with an even larger force of 100,000 soldiers. The new army was more prepared and more determined than the previous one. But the Lord once again intervened to thwart the attack on His people, and He stated two primary reasons for His intervention. Those reasons are stated in verse 28:

CJB 1 Kings 20:28 *At this point, a man of God approached and said to the king of Isra'el, "Here is what ADONAI says: 'Because Aram said that ADONAI is a God of the hills but not a God of the valleys, I will hand over to you this entire huge army. Then you will know that I am ADONAI.'"*

So essentially, by defeating the overwhelming force of Syria's army the Lord is going to display His glory and protect His character and holiness by showing the king of Aram that He is not limited to operating in the mountains (or anywhere for that matter) and is going to show the King of Israel that Israel's god is Yehoveh and none other, and that he is a deliverer.

The army of Aram is once again miraculously defeated and crushed by the vastly outmanned Israelite army, and Ben-Hadad surrenders to King **Achav**. But in a display of foolishness that has caused many Biblical scholars to scratch their heads for an answer, King **Achav** befriended Ben-Hadad, elevated him to "brother" status, and released him to go home to Syria.

Let's pick up our story there.

RE-READ 1ST KINGS CHAPTER 20:31 – end

It numbs the senses and bewilders us to try and make sense of what **Achav** has done. Alfred Edersheim wonders: *“It could scarcely have been due to weakness of character when Achav broke into almost joyous exclamation, ‘Is he yet alive?’ Nor could it have been merely from kindness of disposition that he ostentatiously substituted, ‘he is my brother’ for the designation ‘thy slave Ben-Hadad’ as used by the Syrian envoys.”*

C.F. Keil puts this mystifying matter this way: *“ Although, therefore, this act of Achav had all the appearance of clemency, it was not an act of true clemency, which ought not to be shown towards violent aggressors, who if released will do much more injury than before, as Ben-Hadad really did. God had given the victory to Achav, and delivered the guilty king into his hands, that he might inflict punishment upon him, not that he might be treated kindly. And Achav, who had allowed so many prophets to be slain by his wife Jezebel, had no great clemency at other times.”*

The only answer to his peculiar behavior from my perspective is that **Achav** was totally sold out to evil, and so he failed to do (perhaps was incapable of doing) what was right in God's eyes and instead did something that while irrational on practically every imaginable level (from the political to the spiritual), it seemed intelligent and good to him. That is what happens when we are led by the spirit of evil instead of by a Holy Spirit. What seems to us to be light, is in fact darkness. What seems to us to be wisdom, is in fact folly. We have seen this same kind of behavior displayed by **Achav**, caused by the same kind of mindset, from an earlier Israelite king; in fact it was displayed by Israel's very first king, King Sha'ul.

Back in 1st Samuel chapter 15, we have an episode whereby God told King Saul to attack and eradicate without exception the nation of Amalek.

1Sam. 15:2-3 CJB

² *Here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: 'I remember what 'Amalek did to Isra'el, how they fought against Isra'el when they were coming up from Egypt.*

³ *Now go and attack 'Amalek, and completely destroy everything they have. Don't spare them, but kill men and women, children and babies, cows and sheep, camels and donkeys.'"*

King Saul did what the Lord told him to a degree, but then at a critical moment did what he often did: he rebelled and did what seemed right to him in his own eyes.

1Sam 15:8-11 CJB

⁸ *He took Agag the king of 'Amalek alive; but he completely destroyed the people, putting them to the sword.*

⁹ *However, Sha'ul and the people spared Agag, along with the best of the sheep and cattle, and even the second best, also the lambs, and everything that was good- they weren't inclined to destroy these things. But everything that was worthless or weak they completely destroyed.*

¹⁰ *Then the word of ADONAI came to Sh'mu'el:*

¹¹ *"I regret setting up Sha'ul as king, because he has turned back from following me and hasn't obeyed my orders." This made Sh'mu'el very sad, so that he cried to ADONAI all night.*

King Saul spared the King of Amalek, and King **Achav** spared the King of Aram. But what is all the more similar in these two incidents is the grave action that Yehoveh took against these two kings. Against King **Achav**, we hear this:

CJB **1 Kings 20:42** *Then he said to the king, "Here is what ADONAI says: 'Because you have let escape the man I had given over to be destroyed, you will pay with your life for his life and with your people for his people.'"*

And against King Saul, we are told this:

1Sam 15:10-11 CJB

¹⁰ *Then the word of ADONAI came to Sh'mu'el:*

¹¹ *"I regret setting up Sha'ul as king, because he has turned back from following me and hasn't obeyed my orders." This made Sh'mu'el very sad, so that he cried to ADONAI all night.*

And then finally this:

^{CJB} *1 Samuel 15:28 Sh'mu'el said to him, "ADONAI has torn the kingdom of Isra'el away from you today and given it to a fellow countryman of yours who is better than you.*

You see the problem was this: God had commanded King **Achav** to make war upon Aram, just as King Saul had been told to make war upon Amalek. Since God commanded the war and assured the victory, then this is the classic Biblical definition of Holy War; war that is led by Yehoveh. War that is led by Yehoveh operates under holy rules, set down by the Lord, that goes under the name of the Law of **Herem** (or in English, the law of the ban). And the principle is this: the spoils of war always go to the victor. The spoils are everything from food, to precious metals, to cities and buildings, to the defeated people themselves including their leaders. Since God is the victor when the war is a Holy War, then to God goes the spoils of war. Please note, not all war is holy war. Wars started by man, even justly inspired wars, don't make them holy wars. The Crusades, started by the Church, were called holy wars but they were not. The **ONLY** holy wars are the ones we see defined in the Bible. Having a war in God's name is not holy war. Only God specifically ordaining a war makes it a holy war.

The spoils of holy war are always put under the ban. This means that they must be given only to God. They are banned from being given to the soldiers and they are banned from being

used by anyone except God. How is a spiritual God in heaven supposed to receive physical spoils of war? The same way He receives a sacrificial offering. The spoils are to be destroyed, and in some cases burned up. The captured men of a foreign army of aggression that the Lord God has ordered a holy war against are spoils of war, and thus they too are put under the ban. They belong ONLY to the Lord. Their disposition must be according to God's laws, and unless God directly gives a different instruction these men and their leaders are to lose their lives. To do otherwise is rebellion of the worst kind because it means that humans have misappropriated and misused God's holy property.

This is a high-handed sin; an intentional sin for which there is no atonement available.

When God leads a Holy War and turns the army and their leader and/or king over to Israel's King, the purpose is NOT for Israel's King to show them mercy, kindness, or to make a peace treaty with them. The purpose is for Israel's King to administer God's prescribed and ordained justice on earth upon these enemies. The purpose is that these men and their leaders be destroyed. But in Saul's case and in **Achav's** case, they substituted their own justice for God's justice. They chose mercy, when God demanded destruction. And this is a real problem that not only the secular of the world has today, but Christians and Jews as well. We often rely on our modern sensibilities, our personal preferences, our emotions, our own sense of fairness, our 21st century political correctness and enlightened philosophies; and instead of following God's justice system we invent and implement our own because we see our choices as better. That's exactly what **Achav** and Saul did, and the Lord judged them severely for it. But even worse, we sometimes attribute our own personal sense of justice and fairness and mercy to God! We say that even though the Holy Scriptures says one thing, we're doing it differently because our hearts are telling us to do otherwise. And since Christ lives in our hearts, then it must be Christ's love overriding the Father's instructions. Nice earthly human logic, but it doesn't fly in heaven.

Thus in our time today, even though the Lord says that the blood of murder victims pollutes the ground and that the murderer must be put to death in order for divine justice to be served and to cleanse the land from the blood of innocents, we say no. We say mercy is better and so we jail murderers, and even pardon murderers to go free if we think they've been punished enough. Then we are mystified when murder and violence increases day after day and our nation keeps descending further into godlessness, immorality and chaos.

Modern Israel is fighting a God-authorized holy war; Israel's fight to stay in the land God gave to them is a God ordained fight. The battle for Canaan has never ended since the Biblical times and will not end until God appears in person at Armageddon to lead the final battle. Thus when an aggressive enemy invades and Israel confronts them, the enemy is to be killed because these enemy combatants are under the ban. When Israel captures terrorists on Israeli soil with

Israeli blood on their hands, these terrorists are **not** to be jailed and then used for prisoner exchanges: they are to be executed because these killers belong to God and Israel has no right to deal otherwise with God's spoils of holy war but to turn them over to Him by means of their destruction. But instead, Israel misappropriates God's spoils of war; Israel houses them, often apologizes to the world for holding them, and regularly releases them to show Israel's good intentions and merciful heart. And the violence against Israel simply escalates day after day without end. And this escalating violence isn't because Israel has a problem with several enemies (they've always had that), it's because they have a problem with God! They are misappropriating His holy property and not behaving accordingly with it and they are experiencing the consequences of disobedience.

Back to 1st Kings 20. Verse 35 begins an interesting narrative about how God would send the message to King **Achav** that what he did in letting Ben-Hadad live and in freeing him, was going to be more costly than he could have imagined. Essentially this is a play that symbolically demonstrates God's verdict upon **Achav's** foolish and rash action.

The prophet's guild that is spoken of is a translation of the Hebrew phrase **bene navim**. Literally this means sons of the prophets. But this is an idiom and is not meant literally. The idea is that there is a colony of prophets that the players in our play belong to. There were a number of prophet colonies in existence at that time, each loyal to a chief prophet and to a set of god beliefs. This colony was obviously one that followed Yehoveh God of Israel.

The unnamed prophet tells one of his associates to hit him. The other refused and was condemned for it because this was essentially a direct order from God. So the prophet went to another prophet from his prophet guild and said to hit him. No doubt the 2nd man knew what had happened to the 1st and was more than happy to accommodate the request. In fact he struck the prophet with such zeal it says that the prophet was wounded (which was apparently the idea in the first place). The prophet in our play now gets into costume by bandaging a large part of his face so that he couldn't be recognized, and stations himself along the road where King **Achav** is expected to pass. Sure enough here comes the king and the prophet shouts out a question that sounds to the king like a judicial case that he is supposed to decide and render a verdict.

The basis of the story is that a servant was to hold a man for trial, and if this man was released for any reason the servant would be held liable with his own life. But when the servant got distracted, the prisoner disappeared. And the prophet wants to know if he ought to be held responsible. King **Achav** replies, you have pronounced your own sentence. Then the prophet dramatically unwraps the bandage over his smitten eye, the king recognizes him as a prophet

of Yehoveh, and the prophet now gives the king the meaning of this illustration.

^{CJB} **1 Kings 20:42** *Then he said to the king, "Here is what ADONAI says: 'Because you have let escape the man I had given over to be destroyed, you will pay with your life for his life and with your people for his people.'"*

If you were a Hebrew you would immediately see that this is unmistakably about God's law of the ban because where most English language Bibles (including our CJB) say "the man I have given over to be destroyed", what it says is "the man I have given over to **herem** (the ban)". So it is clear that this is about the laws of herem and holy war. And so here is a principle of God's justice that we must never think has ended with the turn of the page in our Bibles from the Old Testament to the Book of Matthew. When a penalty is due to the Lord, it will be paid. When a life is due to God, a life will be taken; that is God's immutable justice. And although too many within modern Christianity have mistakenly come to picture Yehoveh as a kindly New Testament grandfather or an affectionate papa, as opposed to the Old Testament God of supreme holiness and justice, He is not. He is the King of the Universe, the law giver and the judge who never changes and is not a man that he should change. His justice never waivers, and all that is due to Him for violation of his commandments will be extracted. In fact it is apparent from the verdict and the sentence upon **Achav** that not only did **Achav** release Ben-Hadad ("you will pay with your life for his life"), but the king must also have released many of the Syrian soldiers ("and with your people for his people").

There is a lesson here that I fear no matter how many times I and other Bible teachers tell it, there are those who don't take it to heart. We confuse the commandment from Yeshua to love our enemies to mean that we are to love God's enemies. That is not the meaning. A typical way of speaking in the Bible era was to call someone who offended you (meaning mostly to cause you shame and thus you lose your honor) an enemy. But no matter whether this is a person who has perhaps stolen from you, or slapped you, or insulted you or whatever, the commandment is speaking about our **personal** enemies. God's enemies are a whole other issue as Kings Saul and **Achav** and so many others in Bible history learned the hard way. God's enemies are ALWAYS to be our enemies; but our enemies are only rarely God's enemies.

The King of Israel now understood what he had done and left knowing he was in big trouble. Of course what we are seeing from **Achav** is that he is pouting not repenting. He is a king and he doesn't like being called on the carpet and corrected, not even by God, so he reacts as an

impish child. We'll see more of this behavior in 1st Kings 21; let's turn there now.

READ 1ST KINGS CHAPTER 21 all

In our story some time has passed since God's pronouncement of judgment over **Achav** and he seems to have pretty well forgotten the incident. It seems that **Achav's** and Jezebel's favorite place to reside was not the capital city of Samaria but rather their alternate palace in the beautiful and serene Jezreel Valley. And it was a fellow named **Navot** whose misfortune it was that the king built his palace right next to **Navot's** thriving vineyard. And King **Achav** decided that the land **Navot's** vineyard occupied would be a great place for a garden for his personal enjoyment.

The rest of the story has a similar ring to it as when David looked down from his palace parapet upon the beautiful form of the stunning Bathsheba and decided he would try to seduce her and, no doubt, get her to leave her husband; but if she wouldn't David would simply kill him (which he did) and make the whole matter academic. So King **Achav** approaches **Navot** and offers to buy his vineyard and the land it occupied. Or, says the King, we can make a trade for other land, even better land...it's your choice.

But **Navot** replied in shock, "Heaven forbid!" Obviously the king is not used to hearing "no" when he requests something. But for **Navot** this was a very serious issue not only of pride and personal preference, but of Torah Law. **Navot's** land was in the tribal territory of Issachar, so it's safe to assume that **Navot** was of that same tribe. **Navot** refused the king because the land his vineyard grew upon was his ancestral heritage, it had belonged to his paternal fathers and to sell it would be to violate the Torah in that one does not sell land out of one's tribe.

The King was well aware of this; but the miracles of the two Syrian wars and even the pronouncement of the death sentence by the Lord upon him had apparently little to no effect on him. He was every bit as evil as he had always been. And what we are about to see is that the same king who showed such unmerited and inexplicable mercy upon God's enemy, Ben-Hadad, would show none to **Navot**, one his own people.

King **Achav**, a weak and double minded man, thought mainly of his own comfort and desires. But now he was frustrated and angry at this sharp rebuke from a commoner, **Navot**. So he goes to his palace bedroom, and lies on his bed facing the wall, and refuses to eat. Jezebel, knowing exactly how to handle this, acts like his mommy and asks him what's wrong. He responds that that nasty man **Navot** has insulted him and not given him what he asked for and now he's all depressed.

But the Queen is made of different stuff; she asks incredulously of her husband, "are you King of Israel or not?" She tells him to quit his sulking, and to get up and eat because mommy Jezebel is going to fix it for him and make it all better. Jezebel was as frustrated with **Achav** as **Achav** was with **Navot**. But now she had to figure out how to get that land from the unwilling **Navot** or when word got around that **Navot** boldly refused the king without consequence, that it would make her look weak as well. The answer is simple: condemn **Navot** to death as an enemy of the state, and then confiscate the land as being forfeit to the king for his crime. But what crime shall be trumped up against **Navot**? Queen Jezebel is a clever woman, so she writes some invitations in the Kings name that are sent to the dignitaries and leaders of the town where **Navot** lives, asking them to come to a **fast**. Notice it says fast, not feast. This is not a party; this is some kind of a serious convocation concerning a matter that is going to be brought before the Lord. The idea was to create a solemn setting that had a definite sense of piety and gravity to it. **Navot** would also be invited and seated in a place of high honor so that he was none the wiser that this was all about him.

Two worthless stooges (**ben Belial** in Hebrew) would be hired to sit across from **Navot** and then at the right moment falsely accuse him of cursing God and cursing King **Achav**. Since cursing God is blasphemy and in Torah Law brings the death penalty, then **Navot** was to be immediately taken outside and stoned to death. Problem solved.

Lev 24:15-16 CJB

¹⁵ ***Then tell the people of Isra'el, 'Whoever curses his God will bear the consequences of his sin;***

¹⁶ ***and whoever blasphemes the name of ADONAI must be put to death; the entire community must stone him. The foreigner as well as the citizen is to be put to death if he blasphemes the Name.***

The great irony of all that is that it would be funny if it weren't so tragic; here is a group of people who long ago began worshipping Ba'al and other gods and generally abandoned Yehoveh, but now they are accusing **Navot** of blaspheming God (as though even if it were true it would even matter to them). And how is it that he could be accused of cursing the king? Because according to the Torah the King of Israel is God's anointed representative on earth. So to curse the king of Israel is to curse God, and to curse God is to curse the king; it's a double whammy.

All went as planned; the two good for nothing men accused **Navot** of cursing God and king. The Law requires two witnesses at a minimum for a capital crime, and so that requirement was satisfied. The city officials and elders who could judge such matters were already present since they had been invited. God was also present since the entire gathering was couched as some type of religious affair, hence the fast. Justice was sure and swift. The convicted **Navot** was led outside the city (onto his own land actually) and with the two witnesses casting the first stones (as required by Torah Law) the others joined in and **Navot** was executed.

We'll stop here and take this up next time.