

Lesson 7: I Kings 20

Objective:

I Kings 20 is a political story involving a siege, kingdoms, alliances, kings, soldiers, treaties. In this chapter, we can see Ahab the way his peers may have seen him - as a capable king, a shrewd politician. He has learned to live in the world well. However, he has not learned to be in the world and not of the world.

Up to this point in our study, we have seen God work in many ways: public, private, obvious, quiet. Here we will see God work in the events in history, using even another king's greed to make himself known to His people. We see God reach out to Ahab through prophets other than Elijah - possibly through some of the 100 prophets that Obadiah saved, some of the 7000 left who had not bowed to Baal. Even though Elijah seems to be the protagonist in the stories we have studied so far, they are all really a part of God's story - the story of God reaching out to His people, reminding them that He is the Lord. He is Yahweh.

We will study the story and explore reasons why Ahab is unable to understand what God wants Him to do and/or unwilling to do it. We will discuss the implications that this could mean for us.

Last week's study focused on Elisha's call and our own call to follow Jesus, so it might be wise to **Review:**

What are some ways that we have seen God work up to this point in our study?

Some ideas:

Large public ways - withholding of rain for 3 years so people would know He was God - not Baal, the "storm god"; bringing fire on the altar in front of all the people on Mount Carmel; bringing rain to the land after 3 years of drought

Miraculous ways - providing food for Elijah through the ravens; providing food for Elijah as well as the widow and her son; bringing the widow's son back to life; providing Elijah with the power to outrun Ahab's chariot; providing a messenger to provide Elijah with food in the desert

"Behind the scenes ways" - providing for 100 prophets through Obadiah during the drought; telling Elijah who to appoint next - affecting history through change

"Quiet ways" - appearing to Elijah in the "sound of fine silence" or "gentle whisper"

In chapter 19, we realize there are more people in Israel following Yahweh than just Elijah. How many does Yahweh say are still loyal to Him(have not bowed to Baal) (I Kings 19:18)? 7000

Read I Kings 10:1-3

The story begins with Ben-Hadad of Aram leading a coalition of rulers against Samaria, these rulers may have been kings within his empire (like mayors of cities) or they may have been foreign kings.

Ben-Hadad besieges Samaria and attacks it. He demands a declaration of submission from Ahab along with a personal tribute.

What does Ben-Hadad demand from Ahab?

Read I Kings 20:4-12

While Ahab says that he is willing to give Ben-Hadad a personal tribute (his silver and gold, wives and children), he is unwilling to comply with the next demand of Ben-Hadad - that his officials can plunder Ahab and his officials at will. Ahab consults with the officials around him and receives support for his willingness to stand up to Ben-Hadad.

Why do you think Ahab consults with his officials?

Ahab gathers popular support to not give in to Ben-Hadad - this is especially important if it means going to war. He needs the backing of his officials. Ben-hadad seems to want to invade Israel, and he now feels like he has a good reason.

Describe the communication between Ben-Hadad and Ahab in verses 10 & 11.

Ben-hadad is confident of his impending victory. Ahab cautions him with his way of saying, "It's not over 'til its over" or "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched."

What is Ben-Hadad doing when he gets Ahab's message?

Last week, we read about Elijah's call to Elisha to follow him - his "anointing" of Elisha. What other people had God told Elijah to anoint?

Hazael to be king of Aram

Jehu to be king of Israel

So, when we hear that Ben-Hadad of Aram is going to fight Ahab king of Israel, what might we expect to happen?

We know that both Ben-Hadad and Ahab's days are numbered because new kings are supposed to be anointed to take their places.

Read I Kings 20:13

An unnamed prophet (most likely one of the 7000 Israelites who had not bowed to Baal, possibly one of the 100 prophets saved by Obadiah) comes to Ahab with a prophecy.

Why does he say he will give the army "into [Ahab's] hand"?

("then you will know that I am the Lord")

Can you remember a different time period in the Bible when God used this phrase repeatedly?

The Exodus - when God speaks to Moses about the Exodus, he often tells Moses how what He will do will help the people (and Moses and Pharaoh) know that He is the Lord.

Exodus 6:6, 7 "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I

will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. ***Then you will know that I am the Lord your God***, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.” (NIV)

Exodus 7:17 “This is what the Lord says: ***By this you will know that I am the Lord:*** with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood.”

Exodus 10:1, 2 “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians, and how I performed my signs among them, and ***that you may know that I am the Lord.***”

Exodus 16:11, 12 “The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. ***Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.***”

What do you think this phrase “then you will know that I am the Lord” is meant to convey to Ahab?

It seems clear to us that God is at the heart of this military venture in the same way that He was at the heart of the Exodus. He is leading Ahab into battle, and He will be the one who wins the battle.

We are also reminded that God is continuing in his quest for Israel to recognize Him as Yahweh. He withheld rain, he brought rain, he brought fire to a soaked altar. He desires to be KNOWN by his people.

Do you think that Ahab is able to recognize right away that the Lord is in this battle? Why or why not?

We have seen that Elijah is able to recognize when he hears a word from the Lord.

Elijah has spent his life following Yahweh, spending a good amount of time in isolation

or even in an alien land, depending on Yahweh. Ahab has not spent his life following Yahweh only - at best, he has followed Yahweh half-heartedly while also pursuing Baal as well as pleasure and wealth. Is it possible for him to fully recognize when the Lord is speaking to him (through a prophet)?

Read I Kings 20:14-21

Ahab wants to know the strategy of the battle, and the prophet tells him.

What was Ben-Hadad doing when Ahab attacked?

It seems odd that even though Ben-Hadad had warned Ahab that he would attack, he is in his tent getting drunk with the other 32 kings who were allied with him. He doesn't seem to have a real strategy. He simply gives an order to take the Israelites alive if they come out for peace or war. (Keck, et al, 1999).

With Ben-Hadad's lack of preparedness, we are not surprised to see that the Israelites quickly overpower the Arameans. However, Ben-Hadad escapes on his horse.

Read I Kings 20:22-25

In this section, we get an idea of what is going on "behind the scenes" on both side of this conflict.

What does the prophet tell King Ahab?

Ben-Hadad's officials do not blame their loss on lack of preparedness but on something else - what do they blame their loss on? What is their solution?

The Arameans believe in a resident god concept, common at this time - that a god is "geographically defined" (Keck, et al, 1999). They do not realize that Yahweh is God over the hills, the plains, the mountains, the desert, the land of Israel, the land of Sidon - He is God everywhere.

They also make some practical suggestions - replace the kings with other officers, raise up an army like you lost...They might have wanted to say, "And, don't get drunk before the battle..."

Read I Kings 20:26-28

Which side has more people? How do we know?

How does the narrator let us know that this is no ordinary battle?

The prophet tells King Ahab that since the Arameans think He is only a god of the hills and not the valleys, He will deliver "this vast army" into Ahab's hands - again so that Ahab will know that Yahweh is the Lord. This is a holy battle.

Can you think of other times in the Old Testament when the Israelites were outnumbered and won anyway because the Lord was with them? What benefit is there in remembering the great things that God has done before?

There are many examples in the Old Testament of times when the Lord fought for the Israelites. They include: The parting of the Red Sea when the Egyptians were pursuing the Israelites as they escaped Egypt (Exodus 14), The battle of Jericho where the walls fall down (Joshua 6); Joshua fights five kings, hailstones kill many of the enemy, the sun stands still (Joshua 10); the Israelites, led by Deborah and Barak, fight Sisera and his army (Judges 4); and Gideon against the Midianites (Judges 6).

Read I Kings 20:29-30

Describe the battle that takes place. Does anything in this story remind you of another?

Not only are there many casualties during the battle, but the Aramean soldiers who escaped are killed by a collapsing wall. The wall collapsing after a 7 day waiting period, remind us of the story of Jericho when the wall around Jericho miraculously fell because the Lord was fighting for Israel.

Does this overwhelming victory seem possible without Yahweh?

The narrator has given us clue after clue that this is a holy war, a battle in which the Lord fights (Keck, et al, 1999). The clues start with the prophet going to King Ahab to help him and end with a wall falling on 27,000 soldiers and killing them. It is definitely a battle won by the Lord.

Who survives the battle?

Again, we see Ben-Hadad survive the battle.

In other situations where Yahweh has fought for the Israelites, what has He wanted them to do to the leaders of the other side?

If there is time, here are some verses from Deuteronomy with specific instructions:

Deuteronomy 7:1, 2 “When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you - the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you - and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.” (NRSV)

Deuteronomy 20:16-18 “However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them- the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites - as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.” (Deut. 20:16-18)

There are some similarities in this story and the story of another king and prophet in the Old Testament. In 1 Samuel 15, Yahweh tells Saul (through Samuel) to attack Amalek and destroy everyone and everything there. Saul defeats Amalek but spares their king as well as the best of the livestock and all that was valuable. It was because of this decision that God rejects Saul as king of Israel.

Samuel tells Saul in I Samuel 15:22, 23, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.”

In a holy war, the gains of war belong only to the Lord as sacrifice. The practical idea of turning one day's enemies into the next day's partners holds no place in a holy war.

Read I Kings 20:31-34

What do Ben-Hadad's officials advise him to do now?

His officials advise him to go to Ahab with symbols of surrender - the sackcloth around their waists would be a sign of sorrow, the rope around their heads might symbolize captivity. They have heard that the kings of Israel are "merciful."

What is Ahab's response to Ben-Hadad's plea to live?

Ahab is incredibly magnanimous - not only does he allow Ben-Hadad to live but while Ben-Hadad refers to himself as Ahab's "servant", Ahab refers to him as "my brother". (Don't miss the humor in the reading of this in verse 33, "Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad" the officials are quick to say. Can't you see them quickly nodding their heads up and down?) When Ben-Hadad comes out, Ahab is quick to put him in his chariot, again elevating his position.

The Hebrew root word for "merciful" in vs. 31 is the same word used to describe the "steadfast love" that God has for Israel and that God desires from Israel. Ahab practices this love with his enemy while he has forgotten his love for Yahweh. (Foster, et al, 2005)

What deal do Ahab and Ben-hadad strike?

Ahab recovers cities that were lost in war during King Omri's time, and he expands his trade into Damascus, which was one of the most important trading centers in the ancient Near East.

In modern political terms, would this seem like a good deal? Good foreign policy?

In political terms, discuss Ahab's handling of this crisis throughout chapter 20.

In this chapter, we see Ahab as a shrewd politician. He is willing to concede his own wealth but when his officials are threatened, he doesn't yield. Instead, he gathers people around him and gains popular backing. He listens to others to win the battle, then he does win the battle. Instead of annihilating the enemy, he strikes a great deal for his people.

In modern times, a leader would be respected for this kind of successful foreign policy. However, this was not a "typical" war. This was a holy war, a battle to be won by the Lord, who had told Ahab through a prophet, "I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the Lord."

Should the Israelites, a people who belong to Yahweh, be making a covenant with the king of Aram?

Read I Kings 20:35-43

Yet another prophet (another one of the 7000 who had not bowed to Baal) appears.

This a strange story.

Describe the scene in verses 35, 36. By whose word did the one prophet tell the other one to “strike him”? What happened to the man who did not obey?

In verse 37, the prophet finds a different man who does strike and wound him.

What does the prophet say to the king, “as the king passed by”?

We are reminded of the prophet Nathan who poses an imaginary situation to David to tell God’s truth to David after he sleeps with Bathsheba and has Uriah killed.

The prophet in this story poses as a soldier, and tells the king that he was supposed to guard a captive (mostly likely assumed to be an Aramean in the battle that had just been fought). He was told that if he lost the captive, it would be his life for the man’s life or he would have to pay a talent of silver - which would have been about 100 times the average price of a slave; for a poor soldier, this would have been impossible to pay (Keck, et al, 1999).

How does the prophet say that he loses the captive? Do you think there is any significance to this phrase?

He was busy “here and there.” Is it possible that Ahab was “too busy here and there” to pay attention to what God had been teaching him? To know what God wanted?

Is there a warning for us in the prophet's description of how he lost the man, being "busy here and there"? How do keep ourselves from getting distracted from relationship with God, from what God wants us to do? How can we be sensitive to God's voice?

Like David with Nathan, Ahab clearly gets the point of the story when he does not realize that it is about him. It seems straightforward to him - the soldier deserves the punishment because he knew exactly what he was supposed to do.

Once the prophet removes his disguise, Ahab recognizes him.

What does the prophet tell Ahab?

In chapter 18, Elijah says that Ahab is the "troubler" of Israel. Who has Ahab brought trouble on besides himself?

Discussion Questions:

Should Ahab have known that the Lord had determined the Ben-Hadad should die? Do you think that Ahab recognized that this was a holy war? Should he have? What might have kept him from recognizing it as a holy war?

Has Ahab trained himself to hear God's voice? Ahab has spent his life following pleasure and wealth, how do you think that might have impacted his ability to

hear God's voice? What connection do you think there might be between sin and the worship of other gods and hearing God? How can we train ourselves to hear God's voice?

What do you learn about God in a story that tells us that He sent more prophets Ahab's way even after Ahab had blatantly followed other gods and even allowed Yahweh's prophets to be killed by his wife?

We see a God who is willing to continue to reach out to Ahab so that Ahab can know that He is God! He could have struck Ahab dead by now, brought destruction on him, but he continues to give Ahab opportunities to turn to him. God desires to be known by His people. His love for us is immeasurable.

Conclusion:

We continue to see a merciful God who is willing to reach out to Ahab over and over again so that Ahab and the Israelites as well as others will know that He is the Lord. We see the importance of learning how to be in the world but not of the world so that we can hear and recognize God's voice. If Ahab had spent time studying the old stories of Yahweh, listening to prophets, concerning himself with the Lord, he would have known how to recognize God's voice. He would have remembered the things that God had said in the past, the ways God had worked in the past. For us, this lesson should not be about how our countries' leaders act but about how WE learn how to listen and recognize God's voice and have the courage to obey.