

# I Kings – Part 11

God of Hills and Valleys – I Kings 20-21

The kings of Israel never seem to learn that God is in control, and He will punish them for their disobedience. Elijah showed God's power in Baal's defeat through the sacrifice competition, the death of Baal's prophets, and the end of the 3½-year drought. But only part of the evil in Israel has been dealt with. Much evil still needs to be removed, including Ahab, the king of Israel, and his wicked wife, Jezebel.

Although King Ahab witnessed everything that happened at Mount Carmel, his heart hadn't changed, nor had he grown a backbone! Ahab was a pretty wishy-washy king; Jezebel definitely wore the pants in that family! She was enough to send the prophet Elijah scurrying out of her reach and running all the way to Mount Sinai. But God brought him back into action by giving him a new ministry. He was to anoint Hazael to be king over Syria/Aram; anoint Jehu to be king of Israel; and pass the mantle to Elisha as the next prophet in his place. (I Ki. 19:16).

I Kings 20 begins with a huge army from Syria being mustered by Ben-Hadad, their king, to take over Israel. Israel is no match for this powerful nation. He "went up," not because he was going north to Samaria, but because it was on a hill. Three key players are involved in this confrontation—God, Ben-Hadad, and Ahab—all under God's control. But will it bring Israel back to God?

## ***I. Under Siege***

We've met a Ben-Hadad before. Ben-Hadad is a title similar to Pharaoh and is given to several kings of Aram-Damascus in Scripture. The name means "son of Hadad," the storm and rain god that Aram/Syria worshiped. In I Kings 15:17-21, Baasha, King of Israel, plotted against Judah, the land where King Asa ruled, to build Ramah as a deterrent to keep the people of Israel from crossing into Judah. King Asa took all the silver and gold from the treasuries of the Temple and the king's house to make a treaty with Ben-Hadad I to protect Judah and counteract Baasha's aggression.

Now, Ben-Hadad II, possibly a son or grandson of Ben-Hadad I, has gathered a formidable army. Thirty-two kings, about 130,000 men, with their horses and chariots, the latest and greatest technology of the day, have allied with him to besiege Samaria, cutting off essential supplies to those within. Ben-Hadad sent harsh demands for Israel's surrender. He wanted all their silver and gold, plus all the best of their wives and children. That booty would, obviously, have included Jezebel!

Imagine the thoughts of Jezebel! Where was Baal? Wasn't he going to save her? She was the daughter of the priest of Astarte! Shouldn't Astarte protect her after taking care of her priests? Then there was Ahab, the second part of the equation. Her own husband was willing to hand her over to the enemy. He hadn't even gone into battle before bowing to the terms of surrender! Unfortunately, neither Ben-Hadad nor Ahab considered the third part of the equation: the Power of God.

The length of time Samaria had been under siege is unknown, but there is no doubt that Ben-Hadad was intimidating. Everything seemed to be against Ahab! The odds were so substantial that Ahab agreed to Ben-Hadad's demands with little protest. But then, Ben-Hadad changed his mind. He determined that his demand wasn't enough to

satisfy his greed, so he changed the terms of surrender. He wanted to search through the king's house and the houses of his servants and take everything he found that caught his eye and was valuable.

Ahab was willing to give up the things he should have cared about—his wife and children. He was even willing to give up his gold and silver because he may have figured there was more where that came from. But he was unwilling to give up his “toys,” the things that he cared about, that Ben-Hadad might find in his search. He needed support in refusing the Syrians, so he called his elders and people and told them Ben-Hadad's new demands—and the elders and the people protested. The original demand was enough...and that's all they were willing to forfeit.

With the people's encouragement, Ahab finally gained some confidence. The enemy was intimidating, but the people seemed confident they could withstand him. He didn't feel so alone in his decision. After all, he could blame it on his people's demands! He sent his servant to tell Ben-Hadad that they would give him no more than what his original demand required. Obviously, that message didn't sit well with Ben-Hadad, and he threatened that there wouldn't be enough left of the city to furnish his soldiers with a handful of dust by the time he was finished with it! He was willing to walk away with nothing!

Ahab answers back with a barb of his own. Ahab responded, “Just because you put on your weapons and go into battle doesn't mean you can boast like one who conquers and returns from it!” As some say, “It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings.”

## **II.     *The Battle***

“And *behold*, there came a prophet unto Ahab king of Israel, saying, ‘Thus saith the LORD...’ (I Ki. 20:13). The danger Ben-Hadad posed, even as his demands escalated, made the Israelite king more receptive to God's unnamed prophet, who promised to “deliver the multitude into Ahab's hand that day. They would know that I AM the LORD,” not Baal!

Deliverance would not come because Ahab had witnessed the miracles of the sacrifice and drought, or because he had stopped Jezebel from killing Elijah, or because he abandoned his worship of Baal, because he had done none of these things! Ahab deserved to die, but instead of judging him, God, in His mercy and grace, sent an unnamed prophet to warn him of the Syrian attack and what Ahab needed to do to survive. All Ahab needed to do was to obey.

But how? The young men of the princes of the provinces would fight with Ahab leading them. What else could Ahab do but obey? There was no other hope! There were only 232 princes and 7,000 people of Israel. (7,000 was the number who had not bowed to Baal. I Ki. 19:18). God said they would win this battle against Ben-Hadad's 130,000?! He wanted them to understand that He was the One who would bring the victory; they could do nothing but obey. This made no sense! How would this work?

Of course, God had His own battle plan! He was prepared not only to start the war, but to finish it as well! He knew Ben-Hadad and the 32 kings with him were celebrating and getting drunk. They felt this battle was no more strenuous than a walk in the park and began celebrating the victory early. At noon, Ben-Hadad was told that some men from Samaria had come out to do battle. They had only seen the 232 princes; he thought they were ambassadors coming to plead their case. With slurred

speech, Ben-Hadad said, “Whether they be come out for peace, take them alive: or whether they be come out for war, take them alive” (I Ki. 20:18).

What a surprise the Syrians had when they came out to the battlefield! Ahab’s men began killing them. Since Ben-Hadad had forbidden them to kill anyone, they could do nothing but turn and flee, with Israel in hot pursuit. While Ben-Hadad escaped on a horse, Israel slaughtered the Syrians with a great slaughter and captured their horses and chariots, defeating the multitude as God had said.

Although Israel won this battle, it would not be the last one. The prophet returned to Ahab with further instructions. “Go, strengthen thyself, and mark, and see what thou doest: for at the return of the year, the king of Syria will come up against thee.” As bad as Ahab was, the Lord was unwilling to see His nation destroyed. Late spring and early summer were seasons for military expeditions because grass was readily available for the horses, so they returned to Samaria and prepared for war.

Syria believed that Israel may have won Round 1, but they couldn’t possibly win a second time. “Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore, they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.” (I Ki. 20:23). Samaria and Jerusalem were both on hills, so this made sense to them because they didn’t know God or His power. The gods they believed in had limited power and abilities only in specific areas; they believed Israel’s God was like this as well. But God is sovereign over *all* the earth; He has no limitations. God is the same whether He is fighting for us on a mountain or in a valley. He is always in control.

The Syrians began to replace the army that they had lost to Israel and prepare for a victory in the spring. The Jews only had to raise an army the same size and strength as before...and then submit in faith to God’s instructions.

### **III.     *God of the Valley***

While it’s militarily true that it’s easier to fight from the high ground and easier to resist from the mountaintop, we must never underestimate the strength it takes to go through a valley. “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help” (Ps. 121). When life is good, it’s easy to praise God. But... if life gets tough... it’s even easier to blame God and become angry with Him. But, in reality, when you’re the underdog, you can see God better. Ben-Hadad had never lived by faith; he had it wrong.

Faith doesn’t come from a place we consider “normal.” In fact, it comes from just the opposite. When we are in a valley, a low spot in our lives, when we need someone with more strength than we possess, we rely on God in a greater way. It will, however, be where we are tested the most. There, the enemy will try to beat us down, discourage us, intimidate us, and hope to defeat us. While our inclination may be to avoid the valleys at all costs, embracing these times will allow us to deepen our connection with God, to find out if our faith is real. The valley can become a place for reflection and renewal, where we realize our dependence on His grace and guidance.

When Spring arrived, the armies were prepared for battle. Both armies came out in full force just as God had said. The Syrians saw Israel’s puny numbers and thought they looked like “two little flocks of kids; but the Syrians filled the country!”

But the prophet of the LORD told Ahab, “The Syrians have said, ‘The LORD is God of the hills, but He is not God of the valleys,’ therefore, will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord” (I Ki. 20:28). For six days, the two armies stared at each other. Even though Syria severely outnumbered Israel, they didn’t run. They were in the valley, surrounded by Syrians. Six days they waited. Their anticipation mounted, their anxiety heightened with the agony of knowing that the battle was real and they were outnumbered. Yet, they didn’t retreat.

On the seventh day, the battle began, a full-on attack from the enemy, surrounding them, coming from every direction... But “the children of Israel slew of the Syrians an 100,000 footmen in one day. But the rest fled to Aphek, into the city...” Aphek was a fortress east of the Sea of Galilee. And God still wasn’t finished. He brought down a wall on top of 27,000 of the remaining Syrians. “Brave” Ben-Hadad fled into an inner chamber to hide. Unfortunately for him, his hiding place was useless; he was in God’s hands.

God showed Israel and Syria that He was God in the hills and in the valley. Because of their challenge to God, He had resoundingly responded, beating the Syrians even more severely during their second battle than they had during their first. God had given Israel the power to defeat Ben-Hadad; it was God’s victory. This victory was necessary for God to preserve His covenant; it also gave the people and Ahab more evidence of the reality of the True God. But remember: God said, “I will deliver *ALL*!” (I Ki. 20:28), and Ben-Hadad had survived.

Though Israel’s enemies had been utterly defeated, it didn’t bring sound judgment to Ahab. Following his defeat, Ben-Hadad told his servants to put on sackcloth and tie ropes around their heads, symbols of submission and repentance, to seek mercy for Ben-Hadad. God was using them to bring Ben-Hadad to Ahab so he could be put to death and bring complete victory to Israel. Instead, Ahab calls Ben-Hadad “my brother,” although the only thing they had in common was their worship of Baal, and made a treaty with him, allowing Ben-Hadad to return to his throne. (I Ki. 20:34).

Ahab did not consult God or His prophets about this treaty; he agreed for his own political reasons. Although it is not stated in this passage, Shalmaneser III, the king of Assyria, was building his own empire in a different part of Syria. He was pressing toward the Mediterranean and would soon pose a threat to part of the border of Northern Israel and Lebanon.

Ahab repeatedly demonstrated how spiritually blind he was. No matter how many times God intervened, he still couldn’t bring himself to trust God; he couldn’t see Him or touch him like he did the idols, and he didn’t think He would intervene again. So, instead of God, Ahab thought it would be expedient to have Ben-Hadad as a buffer that would keep Shalmaneser III distracted and unable to invade Israel. While this treaty may have looked to be politically beneficial, this was *not* what God intended!

Mercy is not always shown to those who deliberately disobey Him; when God’s honor is involved; when it could be considered a curse; or when it would be purely used for self-will. There are also times when showing mercy to the enemy of the Lord would entirely fail to do the Lord’s will or attempt to take away His glory. This was the problem when Ahab showed mercy to Ben-Hadad. He needed to stand firm in following the will of God, even though it may have appeared to be unkind. His failure was taking away the glory due to the Lord.

To help Ahab understand the nature of his sins, God sent the prophet to Ahab again. He disguised himself as a soldier with ashes on his face who had failed to guard a prisoner entrusted to him and used a parable to help him understand what he had done wrong. The judgment for losing this prisoner was that his life would be given in exchange for the prisoner's life. Ahab pronounced judgment on him, "So shall thy judgment be." But then, the prophet wiped the ashes from his face, and said, "Thus saith the LORD, 'Because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore, thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people'" (1 Ki. 20:42).

Ahab did nothing to repent. He also did not break his treaty. He was simply sad to hear his punishment (1 Kgs. 20:43). For his disobedience, God judged him.

### **Conclusion:**

God is not to be toyed with. When God commands us to do something, we must obey. When we have things that we've done wrong, we must repent, genuinely and truly. God's justice will come, whether quickly or delayed. Naboth may have been quickly forgotten by those on earth who knew him, but he was relishing his new home in heaven. On the other hand, Ahab had a terrible end to look forward to. We can take comfort in God's promises. He will bring justice just as He says. When God promises to deliver, He does!

Nothing escapes God's all-seeing eye, whether it is your own disobedience, the sins of your enemies, or an incomplete, half-hearted repentance. When you engage in a battle against sin, you must be obedient and destroy *all* the enemy, because if you fail to do so, your enemy will come back. That is perhaps one of our greatest weaknesses. A battle may be won here or there, but if we never eliminate the source, the sin will come back to haunt us.

If you don't let God destroy, annihilate, and eliminate those things in your life that try to destroy you, they will keep coming back, and you will have to keep fighting them. They will show up in the valley of discouragement, despair, and depression, and even try to place doubt in our minds. Things like: "God is only good when things are good, but where is God when things are not so good?" Or the enemy says, "You can lean on me. Trust me, I won't kill you." Lies – lies – lies!

Both mountains and valleys remind us of God's promises and our assurance of hope. Even in our darkest times, when we feel overwhelmed by the valleys of life, we can cling to the hope we have through Christ. This hope encourages us to reach for the mountains again, believing that God is ever-present and working for our good. Let us embrace the vibrant life we can live based on this assurance, moving forward with faith as we encounter new challenges and experiences.

"But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).



## And It Came to Pass (I Kings Part 12)

**1)** Read I Kings 22. Make note of fulfilled prophecies. Fill in the charts concerning the kings of Israel and Judah. Highlight and reflect on instances using “Behold” and “the word of the Lord” as you have previously done.

**2)** Since this is a short reading assignment, I’d like us to take time to reflect on our relationship with God and what He does for us and is to us. Read each of the following passages and list what they mean to you. When you have completed the 3 passages of reading under the Roman numeral, title it with the overall thought.

I. God is...

a) Matthew 6:26

b) Judges 15

c) I Kings 20:28-29

II. God...

a) I Peter 5:7

b) Hebrews 4:15

c) Exodus 1:14

III. God is...

a) Malachi 3:10; II Kings 7

b) Psalm 23:5; 78:19

c) I Corinthians 15:58; II Timothy 4:6-8

**3)** What brought Israel and Judah together? How did they determine the Lord’s will in this?

**4) How could Ahab**

the kings tell the difference between a prophecy from the Lord and a prophecy of man? Which was correct?

**5) How did God direct the events? How did the king of Israel try to veto the prophecy?**

**6) What events fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah in I Kings 21:20-24?**

**Conclusion:**

What do you do when you want your own way? Our children whine and throw tantrums, maybe even cry, scream, and yell to get their parents' attention until they finally give in or they pronounce judgment on the child. But what do you do? (Hopefully, not act like this!)

Ahab sulked and refused to eat, threw himself on his bed, and refused to acknowledge anyone. This sounds pretty childish too, but we may all show some signs of this "adult tantrum" when things don't go our way. We may pay someone back for cutting us off on the road by doing the same thing or laying on our horn. Our husband may get a "burnt offering" for supper or the silent treatment. But what do these things show about us as a person, as a believer in Christ? Do they reflect His image or that of a spoiled brat? OOO, ouch!

God wants us to reflect Him, not ourselves and our petty wants. There are a number of verses in Scripture that tell us how to respond when things don't go the way we want. Which one of these do you need today?

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (James 1:9-20).

"Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly" (Proverbs 14:29).

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

"But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips" (Colossians 3:8).

Let's pray for each other that God will use our lives to honor and glorify Him in ALL we say and do.