

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian  
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

**DHW BIBLE CLASS  
LESSON 14  
THE FIRST BOOK OF KINGS  
CHAPTER 20**

**INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, the last scene we saw was Elisha being called by Elijah to the prophetic ministry. We also learn that Elisha would succeed Elijah as God's prophet when the latter's ministry ends. In the next three chapters 20-22, the central personality is King Ahab of Israel. The emphasis in these three chapters is to convey the importance of obeying God's Word. The observant reader will find that Ahab might have some good qualities had it not been for his wife Jezebel. God gave him many opportunities with conclusive evidences for him to turn back to the LORD God from idolatry. Of course, one of the greatest obstacles that he had to overcome was his wife Jezebel. But that could have been overcome if he had trusted the LORD. The sad thing is that Ahab failed to obey God's Word and that led to his condemnation.

In this chapter, God showed his grace and mercy towards Ahab desiring that he should repent and turn back to Him. He had witnessed the

power of God at Carmel which should have convinced him that the LORD (YAHWEH), the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the one living and true God, and that there is no one else. But Ahab was weak. When he returned to his palace, he managed only to report to Jezebel that Elijah had killed all the prophets of Baal, the god whom Jezebel worshipped and served. God had given him yet another opportunity to repent and save himself and the people of Israel.

**OUTLINE**

1. Ben-hadad, the king of Syria invaded Israel (vv.1-11);
2. God's prophets helped Ahab, the king of Israel to defeat Syria (vv.12-30);
3. Ahab spared Ben-hadad (vv.20:31- 34);
4. Ahab was condemned for disobeying God's Word (vv.35-43).

**COMMENTARY**

**Ben-Hadad Invaded Israel – 20:1-11**

The year was about 860 B.C. Syria was a major power but a super power was emerging in the north-east. It was Assyria. Ben-hadad sought to expand his territory and he laid a siege on Israel. This king of Syria was probably Ben-hadad II, the son of the Ben-Hadad who attacked Baasha of Israel at the request of Asa, king of Judah some years earlier (15:18, 20). Before laying a siege on Israel, Ben-

hadad had already gathered thirty-two kings. They were likely the tribal chieftains of the territories surrounding Damascus. They were vassals of Syria. Ben-hadad amassed a coalition army comprising these people, and with chariots and horses (the equivalent of modern tanks and armoured vehicles), put a siege on Samaria, the capital of Israel. He was the superpower of that region at that time.

He sent his messengers into Samaria to deliver a message, "Thus saith Ben-hadad" to Ahab. He demanded from Ahab **silver and gold, his wives and children**. The nature of the demand evidenced his blunt declaration that he had made Israel his vassal. **Ahab willingly conceded to the Syrian king's demands**. He even addressed Ben-hadad as "my Lord, O king" indicating that he readily submitted to Ben-hadad. He should have delayed his reply and consulted Elijah. He did not. He had no faith at all. He did not trust the God of Israel but his own flesh. When Ben-hadad realised that Ahab was weak, he demanded for more. He told Ahab through his messengers with his second "Thus saith Ben-hadad." He would send his officials the next day to **take whatever they like from his palace and the homes of all his courtiers**. In short, Ben-hadad demanded the right to loot the city as and when he liked.

This time Ahab could not take it. He called all the "elders" or leaders of Israel. He informed them that he had not denied Ben-hadad's first demand,

but now he had demanded to take everything. The "elders" counselled resistance. He then sent the message back to Ben-hadad through his messengers that he would not comply with the second demand. Ben-hadad immediately replied with the words (v.10): "The gods do so unto me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me." Ben-hadad threatened to completely raze Samaria to the ground to the extent that there would not be handfuls of dust for his men to take away. This was a show of pride and arrogance not to mention that he was presumptuous in subjecting Israel arbitrarily as his vassal. The ding-dong verbal confrontation continued. Ahab matched the Syrian king's pride and arrogance by quoting a Hebrew proverb. He told the messengers to tell their king (20:11): "Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off." A modern equivalent would be "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched." One can guess what Ben-hadad would do when he heard Ahab's reply. Ben-hadad was drinking when he received Ahab's reply. He was enraged for sure. He immediately called for his armies to prepare themselves for war.

When one succumbs to the threats of wicked men, it will not be perceived as meekness but weakness. Ahab learned the hard way! When one gives an inch to these wicked men, they will soon demand a yard. When a yard is given, they will demand a mile until all are taken and one is left with nothing! Notice what the first demands

of Benhadad were which Ahab was prepared to surrender?

**God's Prophets Helped Ahab, the  
King of Israel to Defeat Syria –  
20:12-30**

At this juncture, a prophet of God came to Ahab, king of Israel. He was not summoned by Ahab. The prophet came on his own initiative and undoubtedly by the command of the LORD. The prophet began his address before Ahab with "Thus saith the LORD." He brought a promise of victory from the LORD to Ahab. The LORD would deliver the enemy into his hand so that "thou" (Hebrew, singular), Ahab, should know that He is the LORD (YAHWEH). Ahab was interested – he should be. That was good. He asked who would do the job. The prophet replied that there were 232 young princes in the provinces, and in addition 7,000 men from the land. They swung into action straightaway. These men had arrived earlier in Samaria when Ahab consulted the leaders of the land to deal with the imminent threat. The 232 men in commando style led the 7,000.

Meanwhile, Ben-hadad and his 32 chieftains were drinking and feasting. It seemed that they were celebrating their victory even before the first arrow was fired. They were so confident of victory. When Ben-hadad's men reported that there were young men coming out of Samaria, his remark was to take the Israelites alive whether they came for peace or war. The Israeli "commandos" moved out of Samaria (which was situated on a hill) followed by the 7,000 men. They came

upon Ben-hadad's camp outside Samaria. They took the enemy by surprise. The result was a resounding victory for the Israelites. But Ben-hadad escaped in his chariot with some of his horsemen.

The prophet of God, presumably the same prophet, came to Ahab. The prophet advised Ahab to take stock of their logistics and to upgrade and strengthen the army. He warned Ahab that the king of Syria would stage another invasion the following year. Meanwhile the advisers of Ben-hadad told him that they had lost the battle because the gods of the Israelites were gods of the hill. Therefore the Israelites were stronger than they. They recommended that they should fight again but this time the battle should be fought on the plains so that they had an advantage. They also suggested reorganising their armies. The chariots and horses which they had lost to the Israelites should be replaced. And when they had done all these things, they would engage in another battle against Israel on the plains. We have here some knowledge about pagan theology. They believed that their gods had an area of jurisdiction. They concluded that the God of the Israelites had power and jurisdiction only in the hills and not in the plains. But their gods had power in the plains. Therefore, they were confident that if the next battle were fought in the plains, they would have the victory.

Just as the prophet predicted, the following year, Ben-hadad gathered his armies and marched to

Aphek to fight against Israel. There were a number of Apheks in the Old Testament. This city, which most bible scholars agree, was the one that was located east of the Sea of Galilee along a major road between Damascus and Beth-shan. The Israelites also amassed their armies in the plains. Both contending armies pitched their tents facing each other. The armies of Israel were outnumbered by the Syrians who “filled the country.” Israel’s armies were “like two little flocks of kids (goats).” The Israelites were totally outnumbered! By human estimation, Israel would be completely defeated.

Once again, a man of God came to Ahab and said to him, “Thus saith the LORD” (third time). He told Ahab that because the Syrians had said that the LORD (YAHWEH) was God of the hills and not God of the valleys, God would give him victory over this great multitude of Syrians. The prophet also added that by this victory, Ahab should know that the LORD (YAHWEH) is God indeed! For seven days, the two armies pitched before each other. Then on the seventh day, the two opposing camps engaged in battle. The children of Israel slew the Syrians and the casualty were 100,000 soldiers in one day! This number is not uncommon. The Israelites had at least 7,000 able men. It was not impossible for each Israeli soldier to kill 15 enemies. The LORD was on their side. The Syrians were demoralised and the rest of them fled into the city. While they were in the city, mysteriously a wall in the city

collapsed and killed 27,000 of the men that were left.

### **Ahab Spared Ben-hadad – 20:31-34**

Ben-hadad too fled into the city and hid in an “inner chamber” (Hebrew literally, ‘room in a room’), which was a safe hiding place. If Ben-hadad were to be found in the battle field, he would surely have been killed. Now in this hiding place, his fellowmen who fled with him suggested that they should make a desperate attempt to save their king and themselves. Their plan was to disguise themselves by wearing sackcloth and to have ropes around their head and then to approach Ahab. The sackcloth and the ropes round their head are symbols of sorrow and surrender respectively. When they approached Ahab, they would then plead for clemency for Ben-hadad. So they came to King Ahab and said to him that Ben-hadad begged Ahab to let him live. Ahab replied, “Is he yet alive? he is my brother” (v.32). We can imagine that Ahab was extremely flattered – “look! the powerful Ben-hadad, the king of Syria who wanted to destroy Samaria to dust, begged for mercy from me!” He made a grave mistake by calling Ben-hadad “my brother”.

Ben-hadad’s men were very shrewd and alert. They were watching very closely to see Ahab’s reaction. When Ahab referred to Ben-hadad as his brother, they quickly held to his word and replied, “Yes, your brother Ben-hadad lived.” Ahab summoned for Ben-hadad to be brought to him. When Ben-hadad came out of his hiding place, Ahab invited him to ride with

him in his chariot. Ben-hadad quickly said to Ahab that he would return all the cities which his father had captured from Ahab's father, Omri. Ben-hadad continued to say that "thou shalt make streets for thee in Damascus as my father made in Samaria" (v.34). In other words, he told Ahab to build the market streets in Damascus to conduct trade for Israeli merchants. Ahab was so elated that he made a treaty with Ben-hadad and sent him off. This was the man who was so proud and arrogant and who had wanted to destroy him and his city the year before.

#### **Ahab Was Condemned – 20:35-43**

Now one of the young men from the school of prophets was given an assignment by the LORD – "Thus saith the LORD" (v.42, fourth time) to pronounce judgement on Ahab. The LORD had told him how to convey the message to Ahab. It should be done in such a way so that Ahab would condemn himself. As part of his plan, the young prophet asked his companion to wound him. But he refused to do it. The young prophet then said to him that he had disobeyed the LORD. The penalty for disobedience to God is death. The young prophet predicted that as soon as his companion left the place, he would be slain by a lion. It happened as the young prophet predicted. Disobedience to God is a very serious matter.

The young prophet proceeded to ask another companion who obliged by wounding him. He then disguised himself by plastering ashes on his

face. He waited at a spot in which King Ahab would pass by. The king came by and he cried out to him. He told him a fictitious legal parable. He identified himself as a subject of the king. In the battle, he was given charge over a prisoner. He was told that if the prisoner escaped when he was in his charge, the penalty would be his life for the life of the prisoner or else he should pay a fine. He continued that in the course of his busyness here and there, his prisoner got away. Ahab thought that the man was asking him for clemency. In those days, the king was the Supreme Court of Appeal. Only he could overturn a death sentence. Ahab immediately replied the man that he deserved to die as this was the right judgement. When these words were spoken, the young prophet removed his disguise and Ahab recognised that he was a prophet of the LORD. The young prophet addressing Ahab declared (v.42): "Thus saith the LORD, Because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I have appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people." After hearing this, Ahab returned to his palace resentful and angry.

Some Bible scholars comment that Ahab should not be condemned for sparing Ben-hadad. He had been magnanimous and generous and even wise. His treaty with Ben-hadad served him well. The explanation is that Assyria was coming up as a superpower. By sparing Ben-hadad, Ahab enlisted a powerful ally to deal against any other powerful nation who

might have extra-territorial designs. At that time, the Assyrians were a rising superpower and they posed a threat to them. In addition, he had the return of the cities which once belonged to Israel. Trade was established between Damascus and Samaria, and this would be good for his country and also would enhance his standing with his merchant subjects. In turn, he would enrich his own treasury through increased taxes. So it seemed that Ahab was motivated by political reasons for sparing Ben-hadad.

However spiritually, Ahab showed a lack of understanding and appreciation of the issues that were involved. Firstly, he showed a lack of appreciation for the cost to all those who fought with him. They had been brave and loyal to him. Many had lost their lives in the two wars. Many had been wounded and maimed. Secondly, Ahab had so quickly forgotten that Ben-hadad was a proud, arrogant and wicked man. He had wanted to destroy him and Samaria. He was an avowed enemy of God and his country was a pagan nation which worshipped other gods. Ahab was guilty of being unequally yoked with unbelievers. Thirdly, Ahab's act of "mercy" may seem magnanimous but it was foolish. He was defying God's commandment. God had said that Ben-hadad was a man whom he had "appointed to utter destruction" (Hebrew, *herem*). It meant that he was marked for destruction. The LORD God knew the heart and mind of Ben-hadad as no man could ever know. He knew him from the end to the beginning. God had passed his

judgement on Ben-hadad. God meant to destroy him. Fourthly, Ahab missed the point of the two victories which he enjoyed. He was blinded by his own self-importance and confidence in the outcome of the two wars. He forgot that the victories were given to him by the LORD. The enemies had to be destroyed. He disobeyed God's Word. The penalty for disobeying God is death. Lastly and most importantly, Israel was a spiritual nation and it was not right for Ahab to rule her like a heathen nation. It was God's nation that Benhadad attacked and humiliated. It was a spiritual warfare rather than a carnal one. Benhadad was not Ahab's enemy per se but God's and it was not within Ahab's right, even as king, to forgive such a man!

### **PRACTICAL VALUE**

Sometimes we wonder why God would be merciful and kind to Ahab who was such a double-minded, wicked and idolatrous man. It was because God wanted to show him again that the LORD (YAHWEH) is God indeed, and there is no one else. God wanted him to repent and return to obedience to Him so that he could be blessed. The goodness of God should have led him to repentance. He did not repent. We can see that he was more interested in himself rather than in God. Do not think that we are better than Ahab for we are all like Ahab in our conduct in one way or another. God has been gracious and merciful, full of patience and is long-

suffering toward us so that we might repent of our sin.

God has been gracious and merciful to us all even to send His only Begotten Son the Lord Jesus Christ to die for our sins and to save us from the bondage of sin and Satan. We should never forget this great salvation so rich and free. We should always walk in His ways to glorify Him and not go back to our sinful ways. The path of disobedience to God is to incur His displeasure and anger. Ahab's failure to destroy Ben-hadad resulted in his own death. He was later killed by the Syrians (1 Kings 22:34). This serves to establish a spiritual principle. If we do not "destroy" what God hates and His enemies, including sins, sinners and satanic temptations, these will eventually destroy us. This is an important lesson.

After Ahab had won his first victory against the Syrians, he was forewarned by the prophet that a year later, the Syrians would return and invade Israel. This is a prophetic forewarning. Thus being forewarned facilitates preparation so as to avoid the consequences. Similarly, we should pay heed to the warnings in God's Word which are given to us by some God-fearing fellow Christians. We should listen and give due consideration by searching the Word of God, and if these warnings are true, we should take heed. We should not be angry and brush aside their warnings. Security comes through a word of warning.

Ahab won two victories. Victory is indeed sweet. But more important

than victory is vigilance, which is essential. Ahab serves as an example for us. Instead of honestly evaluating the reasons why he was victorious, Ahab pandered to his own self-importance and self-confidence. That led to his downfall. In life, our successes are never achieved by our own efforts but by God's grace. We should stop and think. In this way, we will have a more accurate assessment of our own abilities and at the same time be appreciative of others. It is healthy for our mind and heart. AMEN

## DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Daily Readings

**MONDAY** 1 Kings 20:1-12; 1 Peter 5:6-9.

**TUESDAY:** 1 Kings 20:13-21; Romans 8:31-39.

**WEDNESDAY;** 1 Kings 20:22-27; Isaiah 40:18-31.

**THURSDAY:** 1 Kings 20:28-34; Matthew 6:24; James 1:8.

**FRIDAY:** 1 Kings 20:35-43; Exodus 23:31-33.

### Discussion Questions

1. What was the difference between Ben-hadad's two demands that made Ahab reject the second, though he had yielded to the first? What threat did Ben-hadad then make, and what was Ahab's reply?

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2. How many times in this chapter did a prophet interrupt Ahab? What may we learn from the messages, which these prophets sent by God delivered to Ahab?

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3. After two military victories, what weakness did Ahab show? What warning is hereby given us concerning our own character and actions?

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4. What were the officials of Ben-hadad wearing when they approached Ahab to ask for mercy? Did Ahab do right by showing "love and forgiveness" to Ben-hadad?

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5. What does this chapter reveal about the character of God?

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6. Explain Ahab's initial response to the prophet of the Lord who promised deliverance from the Syrian siege force (1 King 20:13-15)?

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7. How did the prophet apply his mini-drama to King Ahab? How did Ahab react to the rebuke of the prophet of God? (20:35-43).

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8. Name one precious lesson that you have learned in this chapter that helps you in your spiritual growth.

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