

“Ahab’s Worst Sin”
1 Kings 20
May 21, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Ahab was something of a poster boy for Israel’s evil kings. If there had been a gold medal given for the best idolater, Ahab would have won because of his devoted worship of Baal. For much of his reign, he sought to kill God’s prophet, Elijah. As we are going to see in this passage, he refused to kill a man he should have killed, a committed enemy of Israel, Ben-hadad. And in the next chapter, we find him arranging for the killing of an innocent Israelite simply because of his greedy desire for the vineyard owned by this man.

In light of Ahab’s great sins, the events of this chapter are somewhat surprising. God fights for Israel in a manner similar to the way he fought against the enemies of the righteous kings of Judah. Jehoshaphat was the righteous king of the southern kingdom of Judah at the same time Ahab was king of the northern kingdom. God fought against the enemies of Jehoshaphat in a way very similar to his fighting for Ahab here. This was an example of God’s grace even to the very wicked. It was another opportunity for Ahab to humble himself and repent. The power of God that was on display at Mt. Carmel proved insufficient to humble Ahab. Would the combination of God’s power and grace be enough? As we are going to see, it wasn’t, and this paves the way for Ahab’s greatest sin. He hardened his heart against the grace of God. At the end of the day, this is the worst sin because it is the one that cuts us off from the good things God would do in our lives.

To refuse the grace of God is a spiritual form of a heart attack. When the heart stops beating, the blood that gives life to the cells no longer circulates. As long as the heart keeps beating, many harmful infections can be fought as the blood delivers the infection-fighting white blood cells to the invaders of the body. Similarly, when we receive the grace of God, the harmful sins that still plague us can be successfully fought. But when the grace of God is rejected, it is as catastrophic as the stopping of the heart. So let’s look more carefully at this spiritual heart attack of refusing the grace of God.

I. The Surprising Grace of God

The exhibition of God’s grace in Ahab’s life starts with a threat that came from the Syrian king, Ben-hadad. He was leading an alliance of 32 kings, and he approached Ahab in an attempt to make Israel a vassal state of Syria’s. A vassal state is one that becomes subservient to a more powerful nation, agreeing to provide tax money and military support to the more powerful

nation. These 32 kings were all likely vassal states of Syria, and Ben-hadad wanted to make Israel number 33. He sought to do so with a show of force in hopes that Israel would quickly capitulate, without the need for a costly war. So he sends messengers to Ahab saying, **“Thus says Ben-hadad: ‘Your silver and your gold are mine; your best wives and children also are mine’”** (v. 2-3). Ahab should have responded in faith by seeking out a word from one of the prophets. Had he done so, he could have responded to Ben-hadad’s messengers with something like, “Thus says the Lord, ‘I am Israel’s helper and when you attack her you attack me. Withdraw immediately or perish.’” But his faith had been put in Baal, not Jehovah. So he quickly agrees to their terms. Upon hearing of this, and full of confidence in the power of his army, Ben-hadad changes his mind and seeks harsher terms that will thoroughly humiliate Ahab. He demands that his servants be allowed to come the very next day to Ahab’s palace and any other house they want to enter and seize whatever they want that is of value. This demand, though arising from the wicked heart of Ben-hadad, was undoubtedly from God. He was seeking to force Ahab into taking a stand so that God could fight on Israel’s behalf. That’s exactly what happened. Ahab refused these harsher terms, followed by an oath from Ben-hadad to utterly obliterate Israel, to the point that not even much dust would be left of them.

For the first time in Ahab’s life, a true prophet of the Lord came to him with a positive message. **“Thus says the Lord, Have you seen all this great multitude? Behold, I will give it into your hand this day, and you shall know that I am the Lord”** (v. 13). In a sign that this would be a holy war, one fought by God on behalf of his people, God directs that the front lines of Israel army would consist of those called **“the servants of the governors of the districts”** (v. 14). These would be something like interns, young assistants rather than seasoned fighters. God further directed that Israel would start the fight rather than wait on Syria to do so. It so happened that they attacked at the precise time that Ben-hadad and the 32 kings allied with him were busy getting drunk. As a result, Ben-hadad’s orders didn’t make much sense. He directed that if Israel came in peace that they should be taken alive, and if they came to fight, that they should also be taken alive. It’s not an easy thing to capture alive someone who is determined to fight you. So the fight began with Israel killing the first Syrian troops they encountered. God continued to help Israel, with the result that they were able to rout their enemies and even destroy their horses and chariots, thus diminishing their ability to muster a counter-attack.

After this great victory, God sent his prophet with another message. God would win a second victory when Syria would muster a second attack the next spring. In the meantime, Ben-hadad and his allies agreed that they needed to make some changes. Some of these were military changes and represented sound military tactics. They would remove the 32 kings as military leaders and replace them with more experienced military leaders. And they would change

the battlefield from the hills to the plains, where their greater numbers and their horses and chariots would be more effective. But then they made a theological error that doomed their whole enterprise. They blasphemed the name of Israel's God by saying that he was a God of the hills but not the plains.

So the next spring, just as God's prophet had said, Ben-hadad renewed his attack on Israel. He had used the months since the previous failed campaign to muster a new and large army. Israel's army was like **"two little flocks of goats"** in comparison to the Syrian army, who **"filled the country"** (v. 27). God's prophet came a third time to Ahab and once again gave a positive message. **"Because the Syrians have said, 'The Lord is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys,' therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord"** (v. 28). And it happened exactly like that. This vast Syrian army was defeated by the "two little flocks of goats" because the God of all the earth fought for Israel. And when they fled for refuge to the town of Aphek, in a manner reminiscent of the falling of the walls of Jericho, God brought walls down on 27,000 fleeing Syrian soldiers. Ben-hadad was left with no army.

People often talk about the problem of evil. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? What people don't often talk about is the problem of good. Why does God bring good things into the lives of evil people? The Bible says that all of us are born with the same nature as Ahab, with a strong desire to run our own lives instead of submitting to God. Yet God has been gracious to us. We are all very much like Ahab in the fact that he had done nothing to deserve God's gracious intervention in his life. God simply shows up and announces and brings about this great deliverance from Israel's enemies. The Bible says that God has acted to defeat our enemies too. And he has done so when we were still his enemies. God shows his love for us by sending Jesus to die for us when we were still sinners. More than that, we were his enemies (Rom. 5:8-10). What will we do with that grace? That brings us to our next point.

II. The Demanding Grace of God

God's grace is not only surprising and amazing, it is also demanding. If we are not to harden our hearts against his grace, there are two demands of his grace that we must accept. The first one is to rest in it completely, believing in the sufficiency of God's grace for everything in our lives. Twice in this passage God says that he has fought for Israel that **"you shall know that I am the Lord"** (v. 13, 28). We must know that and rest in it. We fail to do that when we limit God's grace or power by believing that he is a god of the hills but not a god of the valleys. When we think God can help others but not me, we are saying that he is a god of the hills but not the valleys. Perhaps you think that

God is a god of little sinners and not a god for big sinners. You are limiting the grace of God when you do so, just like the Syrians were doing. Or maybe you think that God is in control of big things in life but not the little things. He is god of major life events, but not of the little things. Still others limit God's grace by seeing him as a god of prosperity but not of suffering. Did you notice that things got worse for Ahab before they got better? Things were bad when Ben-hadad made his first demand of Ahab, but then they got worse with his second demand. Many people have a god they can rely upon when things are going well but who is quickly abandoned when things are falling apart. Still others have a god of Sunday but restrict that god from any input Monday through Friday, and especially on the leisure of a Saturday. Or there are those who believe that God is sufficient to help the marriage of another, but not one's own marriage.

Do you believe in the sufficiency of God's grace and power for you? Are you resting in that grace? That is the response to God's grace that is required for us. We don't attempt to pay him back or in any way help him out, but simply receive his grace and trust it. What is the most difficult area for you right now to rest in and trust the grace of God? Is it your work? Your marriage? Your loneliness? Your ill-health? Remember that God is a God of the valleys as well as the hills. Trust his grace and power no matter what your need.

The second demand of God's grace is to fight evil. The chapter closes with a story of Ahab's failure to do that, showing that he remained unaffected by the grace of God in his life. After Ben-hadad's second defeat by God's holy war, he was in Ahab's power. Since it was a holy war, fought and won by God, it should have been clear to Ahab that God in judgment had devoted to destruction these enemies of his people. But when Ahab meets Ben-hadad and finds that he can profit by an ongoing relationship with him, he lets him return to Damascus. Ben-hadad agreed to open up the markets of Damascus to Ahab, and in his greed, Ahab lets him go.

Following Ahab's actions, God sends a prophet once more to Ahab, the fourth time in this chapter he receives such a prophetic word. Where the first three prophetic messages to Ahab were positive, this one was not. Like many prophecies during this time, it was acted out and not just verbal. It is as if God is accommodating himself to the dullness of Israel's kings and drawing a picture for them. His picture in this case required the prophet to ask another prophet to strike him. It was a prophetic word from the Lord for this other prophet to strike the first prophet. The other prophet refuses to do so even though it was a word from the Lord. So a word of judgment comes to that refusing prophet, saying that he would be killed by a lion, which happened as soon as he left the prophet. The next man responded more obediently and struck the prophet in accordance with God's word. This injured prophet then approached Ahab in disguise, posing as a returning soldier. His story to Ahab is that he had been entrusted with the guarding of an enemy soldier but had

let him escape, though he was warned that if he let him escape, his own life would be taken. Ahab responds that his judgment would be as he said and that his life would be taken. This prophet was using the same approach Nathan had used with King David, getting him to see his sin in the life of another. The prophet then reveals himself and says that Ahab has pronounced his own judgment. Because he has let go a prisoner God had determined to devote to destruction, his life would be lost.

On this side of the cross, we no longer fight evil by putting evil people to death. Rather, we are told to fight evil by putting to death the evil within our own hearts. The demand God's grace puts upon us is to fight this evil. In the words of Paul in Romans 8:13, we are to put to death the deeds of the body, by which he means the deeds that arise from our sinful nature. Like Israel of old, we do this by the power of God's Spirit. Our enemy is too strong for us without the Spirit's help. We are not to make treaties with sin like Ahab did with Ben-hadad, but to deal with it in a decisive and radical way.

What does this putting of evil to death in our own hearts look like in a practical way? Let me give an example from my own life that I hope will help you. I found myself the other day being critical of a fellow pastor. I spoke critical words to someone about this pastor. The first thing to do in putting sin to death, in the words of the Puritan pastor John Owen, who wrote extensively on this topic, is to "get a clear and abiding sense upon your mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin within you." This is the opposite of our natural tendency, which is to minimize or explain away our sin. I was criticizing one whom God had appointed and ordained to be a pastor. And if the truth be told, part of my motivation was some pastoral jealousy. It was no small sin and my guilt no small guilt. Furthermore, this sin is dangerous. If left unchecked, it will grow and transform me into a critical and harsh person.

If we start the process of fighting evil by going deeper into our own guilt and danger, we dare not end there. Remember that this is a response to the grace of God at work in our lives. We have been let go, just like Ben-hadad was by Ahab. But someone has died, and it is the sinless Jesus. It is a more extravagant grace even than God's grace to Ahab here. And it is for you, for any who will receive it.

CONCLUSION:

So don't harden your heart against God's grace. Be so bold as to receive it, rest in it, and apply to your life as you continue in the fight against the sin of your heart.