

Dr. John Oswalt, Kings, Session 15, Part 2, 1 Kings 19-20, Part 2

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We turn now to chapter 20. This chapter I find very interesting because, in so many ways, it is unexpected. We have seen God's judgment upon Ahab and Jezebel.

We have seen the clear statements. Ahab did more evil than any king before him. And yet in this chapter, we see God on two different occasions, completely, undeservedly, unexpectedly delivering Ahab from his enemies in Syria.

If we look again at the map, you'll notice way up at the top, Aram with under it in parentheses the word Syria. Aram is the ancient name for this territory. Syria is the modern name.

The capital, again, right at the top of the map, is Damascus. Syria was, in many ways, the natural enemy of Israel because the great highway ran from the Euphrates River through Damascus, down along the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee, down to Megiddo, and down to Egypt. So if Syria could control Israel, they would have a big chunk of the international highway in their control.

Also, the other major highway came up from the Gulf of Aqaba along the edge of the desert up to Damascus. Israel, remember, Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh had taken this territory. So again, they control that section of the road.

Again, Syria is contesting that. Syria wants to get control of this whole Transjordanian plateau, and that's where the struggle occurs.

When we begin the chapter, we see that the king of Syria shows up, and he simply informs Ahab, all your silver and gold are mine, and the best of your wives and children are mine. And Ahab does not contest that. I suspect, as we talked last time, that three years of famine had really brought Israel down to her knees.

And Syria is taking advantage of this. And physically, materially, militarily, Ahab can't do anything about it. And so, he simply responds, just as you say, my Lord, the king, I and all I have are yours.

Now, we notice the thing that Ahab does not do. He does not go to God. He does not ask God for protection.

He does not ask God what he should do. He simply bows down to the superior force that is in front of him. One of the things that I have tried to learn in my life and am embarrassed to say I have not learned it well enough yet is that in a crisis, the first

thing to do is to ask God, what is it that you want me to do? What is it that I should do? What's your will? What's your plan? How easily, in a moment of crisis, we simply say, well, OK, looks like I probably better do.

No, I can't. All right, I'll do this. Oh, by the way, God, would you please bless what I've chosen to do? But Ahab doesn't even do that.

Well, his supine response seems to encourage Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria. And he says, oh, all right. Not only am I going to take your silver and gold and the best of your wives and your children, I'm going to send my people through your kingdom to pick out all the stuff you like best and take it.

And the king, this time, summoned his advisors. And they said, don't do it. And Ben-Hadad takes an oath in the name of his gods and says, tomorrow, tomorrow, there won't be enough dust of Samaria left for each of my men to have a handful.

And I do like Ahab's response. He says, in verse 11, that the one who puts on his armor should not boast like the one who's taking it off. Don't say in advance what you're going to do before you've done it.

But look what happens. A prophet. Now, remember, I hope, from what I said last time, that Elijah, throughout this narrative, Elisha, is referred to as the man of God.

So, this one is called a prophet. Now, possibly this is Elijah. But I suspect not.

A prophet came to Ahab, king of Israel, and announced, this is what Yahweh says. Do you see this vast army? I will give it to your hand today. Wait a minute.

Wait a minute. Ahab doesn't deserve this. Ahab hasn't earned the right to have God take action on his behalf.

But God simply doesn't. Oh, how many times in our lives has God taken action, an action that was undeserved, an action that is simply an expression of his grace? Gratitude ought to be part of our daily life. How easily we look at tragedies that have occurred to us, difficulties, problems, and we say, God, I didn't deserve that.

What did you do that for? How many times has God delivered us from tragedy? How many times has he delivered us from difficulty? How many times has he done good and gracious things in our lives that we weren't even aware of? Why is he doing this? Look at the statement there, verse 13. Then you will know that I am Yahweh. Yes, when the fire falls upon the altar and burns it up, that's evidence, but maybe even stronger evidence, and I'll take the maybe out of it, stronger evidence is his grace toward us, undeserved, gladly given.

Then you will know. I've given you one chance, Ahab, to know that I'm God. I've demonstrated that Baal is nothing, and I'm everything.

Now I'm going to give you another opportunity, Ahab, to know that I'm Yahweh when I graciously deliver you. So, who's going to do it, says Ahab? And God says, let the young guys do it. Let the lieutenants do it.

Now remember, Ben-Hadad has 32 kings who are serving him. This is so typical of God. The lieutenants, the sergeants, no, no, no, no.

The generals should lead this very, very risky attack. When we are largely militarily helpless, no, that is so like God. As Paul says to us, the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of men.

Then you will know that I am the Lord. And so, of course, that's precisely what happens. Ahab summoned 232, as the NIV has it, junior officers and lieutenants under the provincial commanders.

He assembled the rest of the Israelites, 7,000 in all. Well, when you look at the overall numbers that are typically used in the Bible, you know that's a small group. And they set out at noon while Ben-Hadad and the 32 kings allied with him were in their tents getting drunk.

So much for false confidence, it wasn't in the morning, having a little drink to pick you up. It wasn't at night.

It's in the middle of the day. And again, as I've said to you several times, you just have to love the Bible. It's such a wonderful, wonderful narrative.

Verse 17, Ben-Hadad had dispatched scouts. And they reported that men are advancing from Samaria. And he said, if they've come out for peace, take them alive.

If they've come out for war, take them alive. No problem. Everything's fine.

The junior officers under the provincial commanders marched out of the city with the army behind them. Each one struck down his opponent. And at that, the Arameans fled with the Israelites in pursuit.

Ben-Hadad escaped on horseback with some of his horsemen. The king of Israel advanced and overpowered the horses and chariots and inflicted heavy losses on the Aramean. Yes, this is God.

Using the unexpected, using what appears to be the weakest, the most helpless, and God graciously gives Ahab this great victory. This is God. God who builds a nation from three childless mothers of Israel.

Have you noticed that? The first three mothers of Israel are all, humanly speaking, childless. It's no accident, then, that, once again, the son of God is born of a woman who has never had sex. And his predecessor, his herald, is born of an old woman well beyond childbearing age.

That's God. That's God. It is God who uses not firstborn sons, the gifted ones, the strong ones, the powerful ones, but second born sons.

Why did God choose Jacob? Because he was second born. Because he's the one that the world says is essentially useless. That's our God.

Why did Jesus choose the people he chose? Fishermen, revolutionaries, tax collectors. Why does he choose you and me? Not because we are so gifted. Not because we are so able.

Not because the world sees such wonderful possibilities in us. He chooses, may I say it, the offscourings of the earth to demonstrate who he is and what he can do. And now you will know.

So, what was Ahab's response? Zero. Did he fall on his knees and repent of his idolatry? No. Did he utter one word of thanks to Yahweh for this great victory? No.

No. And friends, let me say, it's very easy for us to do that. To do what Moses did in Numbers chapter 20, to take credit for God's power.

God has done some good thing in our lives. God has done some great, has given us some great gift. And we say, well, you just have to do your best.

I didn't believe that those lieutenants could really lead us into a battle like that. But you know what? That was obviously a wise decision on my part. The prophet says verse 22, again, the prophet came to the king of Israel and said, strengthen your position, see what must be done because next spring, the king of Aram will attack you again.

It's not over. It's not over. You think you've won a great victory, but in fact, this was only the beginning.