

1 Kings 20

Limits of the Text

1 Kings 20 is a complete literary unit. It begins with Ben-hadad of Syria planning to attack Israel and ends with Ahab, the king of Israel, being judged for releasing him.

Plot

- Background – Ben-hadad prepared to attack Samaria (1 Ki 20:1).
- Crisis – Ben-hadad demanded tribute from Ahab (1 Ki 20:2-12).
- Resolution – God helped Ahab defeat Ben-hadad (twice) (1 Ki 20:13-30a).
- Conclusion – God judged Ahab for releasing Beh-hadad (1 Ki 20:30b-43).

Towards Authorial Intent

The **crisis** of the story is resolved when Israel with God's help twice defeated the Syrians in battle. What is interesting is that Ahab didn't ask for God's help; he didn't humble himself or repent of his sin.¹ God volunteered to give his help, and in his **dialogue** with Ahab he explained why. He said to Ahab, "You shall know that I am the Lord" (1 Ki 20:13), and "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" (1 Ki 20:28). God is concerned with his glory, his reputation among the nations. He is not a limited God, powerful only in one part of the world or the other. He is the hero of the story, Israel's deliverer, and he wanted to make sure that Ahab clearly understood this.

The **pace** of the story seems pretty even. Ben-hadad's threat, the two wars, and the prophet's judgment against Ahab all seem to occupy the same amount of space and move at an equal pace.

The events of this story provide a great opportunity for spiritual **character development** in the life of Ahab. God offered his help; Ahab took it and (initially) obeyed God perfectly. But then he released Ben-hadad and was vexed and sullen instead of repentant when reprovved. Ahab missed another chance to turn from his sin and trust God.

External Context

In Ahab's last appearance in the book (1 Ki 18), he saw fire fall from heaven and the prophets of Baal killed. The author of Kings does not say whether he was inclined to repent or not, but he does say that Jezebel was not inclined, and she so threatened

¹ As he did in the story of Naboth's vineyard; 1 Ki 21:27-29.

Elijah that he tried to quit his ministry. In Ahab's next appearance (1 Ki 21), he will again be vexed and sullen, this time when he's unable to acquire Naboth's vineyard. The current chapter (1 Ki 20) is another story in the life of King Ahab, who "did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Ki 16:33). To summarize, 1 Ki 1:17-19 was about the supremacy of God, especially over Baal; 1 Ki 1:20-22 is about the failures of Ahab, particularly to obey God's word.²

² Davis, 279-280.

Interpretation

20:1 Ben-hadad the king of Syria gathered all his army together. Thirty-two kings were with him, and horses and chariots. And he went up and closed in on Samaria and fought against it. 2 And he sent messengers into the city to Ahab king of Israel and said to him, "Thus says Ben-hadad: 3 'Your silver and your gold are mine; your best wives and children also are mine.' " 4 And the king of Israel answered, "As you say, my lord, O king, I am yours, and all that I have."³

Syria⁴ was a nation northeast of Israel generally in the area around Damascus (see map on following page) where the modern day nation of Syria is located.⁵ The king of Syria at this time was a Ben-hadad, which was a dynastic, not personal, name. This particular Ben-hadad might have been the same Ben-Hadad that Asa paid off in 1 Ki 15:18-20, but more likely it was his son, Ben-Hadad II, who ruled Syria from 860-842 BC. Vos speculates that Ben-hadad attacked Samaria pre-emptively, wanting to stop Israel before it grew too powerful. Israel, under the leadership of Ahab's father Omri, had already defeated Moab and then cemented an alliance with Phoenicia,⁶ and it appeared poised to grow even stronger. Syria and Israel were frequently trade rivals and at war during this century,⁷ so it was not particularly surprising that Ben-hadad decided to attack Israel and try and take Samaria, the capital city. This attack took place around 857 BC.⁸

Once he had the city under siege, Ben-hadad offered Ahab terms for surrender. These terms were excessive and humiliating, but Ahab apparently thought they were his best option; perhaps he was hoping for some mercy.⁹

5 The messengers came again and said, "Thus says Ben-hadad: 'I sent to you, saying, "Deliver to me your silver and your gold, your wives and your children.'" 6 Nevertheless I will send my servants to you tomorrow about this time, and they shall search your house and the houses of your servants and lay hands on whatever pleases you and take it away.' " 7 Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land and said, "Mark, now, and see how this man is seeking trouble, for he sent to me for my wives and my children, and for my silver and my gold, and I did not refuse him." 8 And all the elders and all the people said to him, "Do not listen or consent." 9 So he said to the messengers of Ben-hadad, "Tell my lord the king, 'All that you first demanded of your servant I will do, but this thing I cannot do.'" And the messengers departed and brought him word again.

³ ESV.

⁴ Sometimes called Aram in the Old Testament.

⁵ Youngblood, *Syria*.

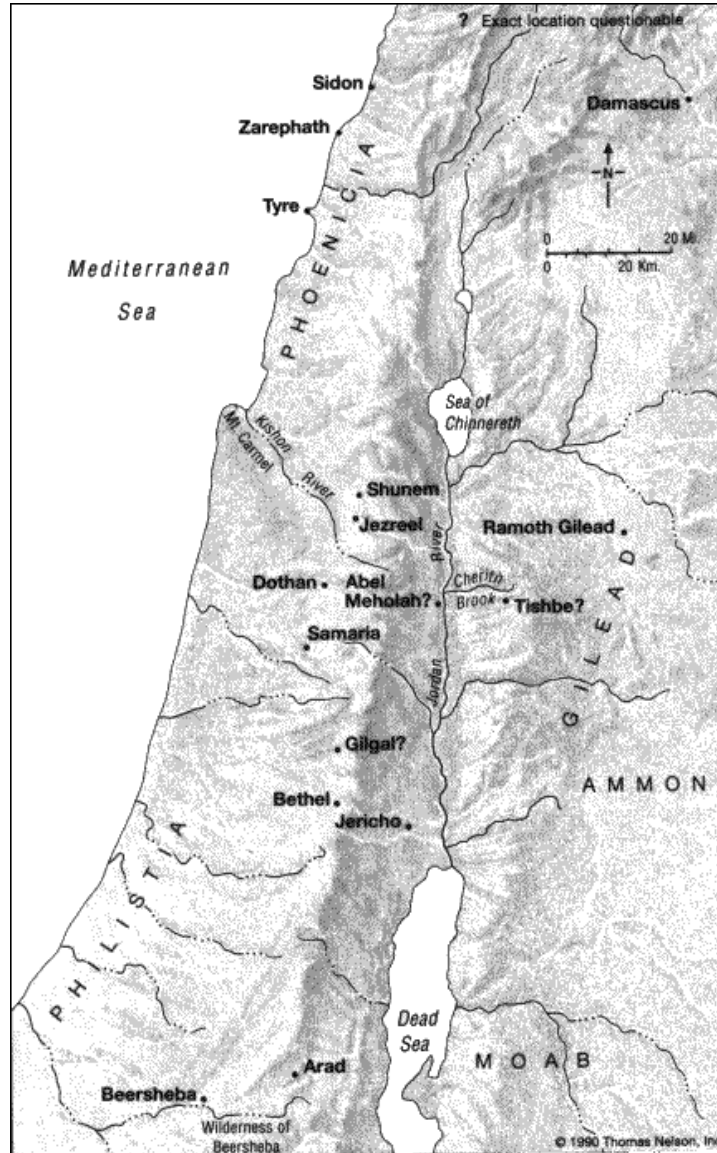
⁶ Vos, 235.

⁷ Richards, 237.

⁸ Smith, 1 Ki 20:1-22.

⁹ Smith, 1 Ki 20:1-22.

Seeing Ahab's acceptance and perhaps thinking he could get more, Ben-hadad increased his demand to allow his servants to take away whatever they wanted. This demand increased the humiliation to the point of being unbearable, so at the suggestion of the elders of the land, Ahab rejected Ben-hadad's new demand.



*Samaria and Damascus*¹⁰

10 Ben-hadad sent to him and said, "The gods do so to me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people who follow me." 11 And the king of Israel answered, "Tell him, 'Let not him who straps on his armor boast himself as he who takes it off.'" 12 When Ben-hadad heard this message as he was drinking with the kings

¹⁰ *Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, Locations in the Ministry of Elijah and Elisha.

in the booths, he said to his men, "Take your positions." And they took their positions against the city.

Ben-hadad boasted that by the time he was done Samaria would be a pile of dust from which there wouldn't be anything left for his servants to take away. Ahab replied with a short, pithy proverb that meant one should not act like the war was already won when it hadn't even started. A modern equivalent might be, "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched." Apparently Ahab had hit close to the mark, as Ben-hadad was already drinking in celebration.

At this point the crisis of the story has been reached. Will Ben-hadad raze the city of Samaria? Will God's covenant people, Israel, be destroyed?

13 And behold, a prophet came near to Ahab king of Israel and said, "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." 14 And Ahab said, "By whom?" He said, "Thus says the LORD, By the servants of the governors of the districts." Then he said, "Who shall begin the battle?" He answered, "You." 15 Then he mustered the servants of the governors of the districts, and they were 232. And after them he mustered all the people of Israel, seven thousand.

At this point in the story Ahab had done nothing to deserve God's help; he had not prayed for deliverance nor repented of his lack of trust. Yet God showed up just in the nick of time. Why did God promise to help Ahab? He wanted the king to know that he was Yahweh;¹¹ this name focused on God's sure existence and his covenantal relationship with Israel.¹² By this God revealed his character: He was faithful to his covenantal promises, even when his covenant people were not faithful to trust and obey him. Additionally, God was giving Ahab another chance to serve him.¹³

God chose the governors' servants, not military commanders, to lead the attack. It appears as if God used people who were non-combatants to make sure everyone knew the victory would be attributed to him.¹⁴

16 And they went out at noon, while Ben-hadad was drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the thirty-two kings who helped him. 17 The servants of the governors of the districts went out first. And Ben-hadad sent out scouts, and they reported to him, "Men are coming out from Samaria." 18 He said, "If they have come out for peace, take them alive. Or if they have come out for war, take them alive."

¹¹ A reoccurring theme in Scripture; see Ex 6:7 as an example.

¹² Swanson, DBLH 3378.

¹³ House, 228. This was also God's goal on Mt. Caramel in 1 King 18.

¹⁴ Smith, 1 Ki 20:13-14.

To his credit, Ahab listened to this unnamed prophet and obeyed him, sending the servants of the governors out first; perhaps things were starting to look up (spiritually-speaking) for Ahab.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary speculates that the Arameans were uncertain of the Israelis' intentions because it was midday, the hot part of the day where people often rest. Thus their actions were unexpected, and the attack a complete surprise.¹⁵

19 So these went out of the city, the servants of the governors of the districts and the army that followed them. 20 And each struck down his man. The Syrians fled, and Israel pursued them, but Ben-hadad king of Syria escaped on a horse with horsemen. 21 And the king of Israel went out and struck the horses and chariots, and struck the Syrians with a great blow.

James Smith speculates how the battle went: "The 232 'young men' may have been used as a decoy to lull the Aramean troops into a false sense of security. When the Arameans came forward to take them into custody, the seven thousand troops poured forth from the city to engage the enemy. When several Arameans fell in battle, panic seized the rest."¹⁶ However the battle happened, God's prophetic word was proven true.

22 Then the prophet came near to the king of Israel and said to him, "Come, strengthen yourself, and consider well what you have to do, for in the spring the king of Syria will come up against you."

God again showed his grace toward Ahab, warning him that another attack would come.

23 And the servants of the king of Syria said to him, "Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they. 24 And do this: remove the kings, each from his post, and put commanders in their places, 25 and muster an army like the army that you have lost, horse for horse, and chariot for chariot. Then we will fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they." And he listened to their voice and did so.

The Syrian battle plans revealed something of their theology. In their minds, gods were local or regional, powerful in a particular location; to defeat the Israeli army, one simply needed to change location. The Syrian advisors had a fully integrated worldview; their theology informed their military practice.¹⁷ So Ben-hadad's advisors gave him sound military advice. Replace the kings with military commanders, guys who actually knew something about fighting. Move the battleground from the hills to the plains, where the

¹⁵ Walvoord, 1:530.

¹⁶ Smith, 1 Ki 20:13-14.

¹⁷ Davis, 285.

God of Israel would not be powerful and the incredible fighting power of the chariot could be utilized. Unfortunately for the Syrians, they were fighting against the Creator God, whose power is not limited by time or space. They failed to grasp what the Psalmist knew:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.¹⁸

26 In the spring, Ben-hadad mustered the Syrians and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel. 27 And the people of Israel were mustered and were provisioned and went against them. The people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats, but the Syrians filled the country. 28 And a man of God came near and said to the king of Israel, "Thus says the Lord, '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.' " 29 And they encamped opposite one another seven days. Then on the seventh day the battle was joined. And the people of Israel struck down of the Syrians 100,000 foot soldiers in one day. 30 And the rest fled into the city of Aphek, and the wall fell upon 27,000 men who were left.

The name Aphek meant fortress, and several towns in Israel bore this name, so the exact location of this battle is unknown.¹⁹ Whichever Aphek it was, it was near a plain within a valley.

Israel was described as two little flocks of goats as compared to the Syrians. Much like the first attack being led by servants, this description serves to underscore the reality that Israel faced an impossible task, one that required God's help.

God's prophetic word came true twice in this paragraph. First, the Syrians had come back to fight again, and second, they were defeated again, despite the odds. The reason for God's help is re-iterated from 1 Ki 20:13, except here the "you" is plural; God wanted all Israel to know that he was God, that his power to save was unconfined and limitless. "Frequently, it is God's professed covenant people who most need [to be] convinced of Yahweh's power and omnipotence. We may stand within Israel's camp but keep lapsing into Syrian modes of thinking."²⁰ "Neighboring nations would learn of the power of the

¹⁸ Psalm 139:7-10.

¹⁹ Walvoord, 1:530. It is not, however, the Aphek mentioned in 1 Sa 4:1.

²⁰ Davis, 258.

living God through this deliverance, and wavering Israel would be provided with yet another incontrovertible proof of Yahweh's divinity."²¹

At this point the crisis of the story has been resolved; God has faithfully and powerfully preserved his covenant people.

Ben-hadad also fled and entered an inner chamber in the city. 31 And his servants said to him, "Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings. Let us put sackcloth around our waists and ropes on our heads and go out to the king of Israel. Perhaps he will spare your life." 32 So they tied sackcloth around their waists and put ropes on their heads and went to the king of Israel and said, "Your servant Ben-hadad says, 'Please, let me live.'" And he said, "Does he still live? He is my brother." 33 Now the men were watching for a sign, and they quickly took it up from him and said, "Yes, your brother Ben-hadad." Then he said, "Go and bring him." Then Ben-hadad came out to him, and he caused him to come up into the chariot. 34 And Ben-hadad said to him, "The cities that my father took from your father I will restore, and you may establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria." And Ahab said, "I will let you go on these terms." So he made a covenant with him and let him go.

In order to conclude the story there is still one little matter to wrap up: What happened to the Syrian king, Ben-hadad?

Ben-hadad fled to Aphek, but there he was cornered. His advisors knew that God's people had a reputation for mercy, so they attempted to exploit this. The sackcloths and ropes were signs of penitence and submission.²² Their attempt was successful. Ahab met with Ben-hadad, they agreed to terms for a covenant, and Ahab let Ben-hadad go.

Why did Ahab let him go? The terms given seem very small compared to the destruction that Ben-hadad (and his father, see 1 Ki 15:20) had attempted. The most likely answer is that Ahab had his eye on Assyria and hoped that a treaty with Syria would strengthen his position against this growing, larger power.²³ Indeed, within three years, these kings would fight side-by-side against Assyrian King Shalmaneser III at Qarqar, a battle not recorded in Scripture.²⁴

35 And a certain man of the sons of the prophets said to his fellow at the command of the Lord, "Strike me, please." But the man refused to strike him. 36 Then he said to him, "Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, behold, as soon as you have gone

²¹ Smith, 1Ki 20:26-29.

²² Freeman, 251.

²³ So House (229), Vos (236), and Walvoord (1:531).

²⁴ Walvoord, 1:531.

from me, a lion shall strike you down.” And as soon as he had departed from him, a lion met him and struck him down.

Walvoord describes the sons of the prophets as students who were in prophetic schools, “well-established institutions in Israel designed to perpetuate the Law of Moses and the Word of the Lord.”²⁵ One student asked another to strike him in accordance with the word of God; that student’s refusal was not judged as mercy but rebellion and cost him his life.²⁶ “It is not safe to ignore the word of Yahweh.”²⁷ The point of this mini-lesson is clear: “God’s will must be done even when it goes against the grain and seems to contradict impulses of kindness.”²⁸ If this kind of obedience is required of his prophets, it is certainly required of everyone else.

37 Then he found another man and said, “Strike me, please.” And the man struck him— struck him and wounded him. 38 So the prophet departed and waited for the king by the way, disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes. 39 And as the king passed, he cried to the king and said, “Your servant went out into the midst of the battle, and behold, a soldier turned and brought a man to me and said, ‘Guard this man; if by any means he is missing, your life shall be for his life, or else you shall pay a talent of silver.’ 40 And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone.” The king of Israel said to him, “So shall your judgment be; you yourself have decided it.” 41 Then he hurried to take the bandage away from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. 42 And he said to him, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people.’ ” 43 And the king of Israel went to his house vexed and sullen and came to Samaria.

Finding a student who was more willing, the man used the wound as a reason to disguise himself²⁹ and, like Nathan before David, went to Ahab. He pretended to be the victim of an unjust penalty and wanted the king’s judgment.³⁰ Ahab didn’t need the wisdom of Solomon to judge this case; the excuse offered by the “soldier” was weak, and so Ahab quickly pronounced judgment, though he did not know he was passing judgment on himself.

How did Ahab know he was supposed to execute Ben-hadad? Some suggest that Ahab just should have known. Perhaps he should have remembered historical precedent where other enemy kings were killed. Perhaps he should have remembered texts like Dt 10:10-18 and 1 Sa 15:17-24 and applied them to this situation. But in light of how

²⁵ Walvoord, 1:531. Some think these schools were somewhat like modern day seminaries.

²⁶ This is the second disobedient prophet to die by lion (1 Ki 13:24).

²⁷ Davis, 289.

²⁸ Smith, 1 Ki 20:35-43.

²⁹ Provan notes the irony of disguise, as Ahab would later use a disguise to avoid being killed in war, but it didn’t work. “Disguises only succeed when God ordains it so” (Provan, 154).

³⁰ Smith, 1 Ki 20:35-43.

absolute God's message to Ahab is, it seems more likely that God explicitly told him what to do, but the author of Kings merely did not record this instruction. Ahab chose to rely on an alliance with Syria instead of relying on the power of the Creator God, the one who had just won two battles for them against a superior foe! Clearly Ahab had learned nothing at all.

Why was Ahab vexed and sullen? God's prophetic word came to pass three times in this story; surely it would again. Ahab would die, and he found no joy in that.

Three Levels of History

1. Personal history – This is a story of Ahab’s double defeat of Ben-hadad.
2. National History – This is a story about Israel’s victory over their enemy, Syria.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about God demonstrating his covenantal faithfulness to Israel by defeating Syria.

Jesus and the Gospel

This story reflects mankind’s **need for redemption** through Jesus and the gospel.

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We tend to rely on ourselves, on our own ways of solving problems. We tend to forget to trust in God.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God’s grace to meet our need? God is faithful when we are forgetful. He will initiate offers of help to us, though he still requires our obedience.

Outline

This outline is based upon the plot of the story:

- Ben-hadad demanded tribute from Ahab (1 Ki 20:1-12).
- God helped Ahab defeat Ben-hadad (twice) (1 Ki 20:13-30a).
- God judged Ahab for releasing Beh-hadad (1 Ki 20:30b-43).

Central Truth of the Story

The author of Kings wrote 1 Kings 20 in order to demonstrate God’s covenantal faithfulness to Israel even when Ahab didn’t ask for it.

Teaching Outline

God helps his people, even we forget to ask for help. Today I want you to see God’s unlimited, faithful help on display and remember to go to God every time you need help. From our text in 1 Kings 20, we are going to see three aspects of God’s faithful help.

1. Because God is faithful to his covenant, he offers his assistance (1 Ki 20:1-15).
2. Because God is faithful to his covenant, he meets our needs (1 Ki 20:16-30a).
3. Because God is faithful to his covenant, he requires our obedience (1 Ki 20:30b-43).

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