

**1st Kings 20: 1-30; “God Striving with Ahab” Message # 13 in the series –
“Lessons from the Life of Elijah”, A Bible Study conducted
by Pastor Paul Rendall on October 18th, 2017,
for those gathered at his home.**

This evening I would like to attempt to show you how the gospel was preached to Ahab at this critical time in his life. There is no doubt that Ahab was under the wrath of God. But God would have other prophets than Elijah speak to him when Ben-Hadad decided to come down and invade the land. Elijah the prophet is not mentioned at all in this chapter and he is only mentioned briefly at the end of the 21st chapter. But even though Elijah and Elisha are the main focus of our study in these chapters of 1st and 2nd Kings, we can also learn from the sons of the prophets who were no doubt a part of the school of the prophets which Elijah and Elisha were probably leaders among them, and they were probably the most eminent teachers among them. We need to see that all of God’s prophets were called to awaken, instruct, reprove, encourage when they could, and pronounce either good news to the kings of the nation of Israel, or the Lord’s judgments which would come upon them and the nation, if they did not respond in repentance and obedience in relation to the word of God which was spoken and preached to them.

Here in the first 30 verses of this chapter we find a prophet speaking many encouraging words to Ahab, words which proclaim to him that mercy, truth, and hope are all found when we look to God in faith. At this particular time in Israel’s history, God would strive with king Ahab through his prophet, strive with him to see whether he would believe in Him or not, and strive with him so that he would think about repenting of all of his sins when he saw the Lord’s goodness and mercy to him in this great deliverance that God would bring about. We will see that Ahab would not change, but still, God would have his prophet speak to him and to declare God’s promises of help and deliverance to him. This has implications for us today in our preaching and sharing of the gospel and the word of God in our day. 1st of all – I want you to see that it was the right thing to do, for this prophet to declare to this sinful man, the mercy of the Lord. (verses 1-21) And 2nd – It was the right thing to do to attempt to bring real hope to him and all of God’s people, at this time. May our study help us to understand better how we might help sinful men and women around us to see the truth.

1st of all – I want you to see that it was the right thing to do, for this prophet to declare to this sinful man, the mercy of the Lord. (verses 1-21)

In this chapter none of the prophets of the sons of the prophets are mentioned by name. I believe that this was done for a reason, and that reason is so that we will look more closely at the office of the prophet itself and not be distracted by the personalities of particular men. We will only be looking at the first of these unnamed prophets this evening, the one who spoke to Ahab about God’s giving Him help in defeating the king of Syria. This man had a difficult job because Ahab was a very wicked king, but God would have him preach the gospel to him in terms of his and Israel’s being delivered from the king of Syria. In connection with this, we have here a very amazing story of how God humbled a very proud, selfish, covetous, and violent man, the king of Syria, Ben-Hadad. He did not save Ben-Hadad but He humbled him for His own purposes. God’s purpose in his humbling of this wicked king Ben-Hadad was in order that He might show His mercy to Ahab and Israel, so that they might trust in the Lord.

We need to see that even though Ahab was such a wicked king, that God still had a love for him as someone whom He had created; someone who had received much common grace. God had this general love for Israel, and a particular love for all of His elect people in Israel, and that is why He displayed His mercy in this way and at this time. Ben-Hadad had this great perverted

lust to be a conquering king, enjoying all the spoils of his unrighteous war against Ahab; taking away his silver and gold, and the loveliest of his wives and children. What a wicked man he was. Ahab, king of Israel, acted as quite a wimp in this whole interchange; he did not immediately seek the Lord, but he did immediately capitulate (he agreed) to this wicked man's sinful way of thinking. O.K. – If you ask for my finest possessions and my wives and my children, I will agree to it. That is what Ahab said in verse 4. “Just as you say, I and all that I have are yours.” Now, he really did not need to say this all if he was a believer in God. But he was not a believer in God and therefore he had no moral courage. This should show us Ahab's lack of moral character and backbone; his not being able to refuse this man, even if he thought that Syria's army was stronger than his, which we shall see, was obviously the case, humanly speaking. The proud Ben-Hadad, trusting in the strength of his superior numbers, insists on his sending his servants to Ahab the next day, to search his house and whatever is pleasant in Ahab's eyes, he would take it away.

In verse 7 we find that Ahab called all the elders of the land and said – Notice how this man seeks trouble, and the elders wisely tell him not to take all of these bullying threats from Ben-Hadad. They say to Ahab – Do not listen or consent. The king refuses them and Ben-Hadad tells him that he is coming with all of his forces to attack Israel. What was the gospel that this prophet preached to Ahab? Verse 13 – “Suddenly a prophet approached king Ahab and said to him – “Have you seen all this great multitude?” “Behold, I will deliver it into your hand today, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” What a gospel of mercy is preached to Ahab here in a moment's notice. But instead of Ahab shouting, “Hallelujah”, we find him immediately questioning the statement. He says – “By whom?”, as though some other national power will come to His rescue, or some persons that he had not known about would suddenly appear on the scene. But the prophet patiently explains it to him in this very reasonable way – “Thus says the Lord: ‘By the young leaders of the provinces.’” God was going to deliver Ahab and all Israel in this wonderful way, God was going to reveal His power and ability to deliver from a multitude of enemies and Ahab should have been able to reason from the lesser to the greater. If God can deliver me from all of my earthly enemies, then He can also deliver me from the multitude of my sins. But he did not see the connection.

Ahab hadn't even considered this possibility, that he could somehow deliver this great army of people coming against him. He did not even know the state of his own army. He says – “And who will set the battle in order?” And the prophet tells him – “You.” And so he did so. And the young leaders of the provinces went out at noon, and Ben-Hadad and the 32 kings helping him, it says in verse 16, were getting drunk at the command post.” The young leaders of the provinces went out of the city with the army following them, and each one killed his man; so the Syrians fled, and Israel pursued them, and Ben-Hadad escaped on a horse with the cavalry. And the king of Israel went out and attacked the horses and chariots, and killed the Syrians with a great slaughter.” And the prophet came to him and said – “Go strengthen yourself; take note, and see what you should do, for in the spring of the year the king of Syria will come up against you.” Ahab did not pray or praise God in thanksgiving. There is nothing said here that makes us believe that he was thankful.

What then was the purpose of all this mercy shown to Ahab by God? Why didn't God simply allow Ben-Hadad to come in and wipe out Ahab and Israel at this point? It was because God was taking the time to strive with Ahab, and show him that he really ought to be believing in Him. But ultimately, it was so that God would show Himself to be perfect in His goodness and just in His dealings with Ahab and all Israel. God is good even to unrighteous and evil men. He would mercifully give the gospel in a pictorial form to Ahab and all Israel, even in their sinful state; even in their helpless state, against such a great foe. The gospel to them was this. Ahab and many in Israel were great sinners against the Lord; being idolaters and sinners in many ways

against Him. God's righteous wrath was upon Ahab and all the nation. He had raised up this evil man Ben-Hadad of Syria to strike terror into the hearts of the wicked in Israel. This is what they deserved. The king deserved to have everything good taken away from him. He and Jezebel had set up the worship of false gods in the place of the worship of the true and living God, and they had not repented of it when Elijah had called down fire from heaven on the altar of sacrifice that he had dedicated to the Lord. They had not repented when Elijah slew the prophets of Baal at the Brook Kishon. They had not repented when God lifted the judgment of having no rain for 3 years and brought a plentiful rain. It was only right that he would permit Ben-Hadad to act out his wickedness in relation to all that Ahab held dear.

The prophet would rebuke the unbelief of Ahab by this promise of mercy in his deliverance from Ben-Hadad. Turn with me over to Psalm 33, verses 10-22. "The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect." "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations." "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, The people He has chosen as His own inheritance." "The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men." "From the place of His dwelling He looks on all the inhabitants of the earth; He fashions their hearts individually; He considers all their works." "No king is saved by the multitude of an army; a mighty man is not delivered by great strength." "A horse is a vain hope for safety; neither shall it deliver any by its great strength." "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, And to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield." "For our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in His holy name." "Let Your mercy, O LORD, be upon us, Just as we hope in You."

You see, this is what God was doing to strive with Ahab in his unbelief. He gave his prophet a word to give to him, and this word would do him good if he would believe it. He would give him this precious and powerful promise, and see what He will do with it. Doesn't God know what Ahab will do with it? Yes, he does, but this was a real promise of good, that Ahab should respond to. Why does God even bother to strive with men if He knows that they will not respond in the way that would please Him, or save them? We always need to remember something about God's striving with sinful men. In all of His striving with them, God is perfect in everything that He says and does. This will leave men without excuse on the Day of Judgment. His promises are none-the-less very real, intended to do men good in every sense of that word. In the promise that Ahab was given, that this great multitude would be delivered into his hand that day, God would give him and the people of Israel hope. He was going to bring the counsel of a nation to nothing that day. He was going to make the plans of Ben-Hadad of no effect. He was saying to Ahab – Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; the people whom He has chosen for his own inheritance. Will you not believe this Ahab? He was saying to him – Ahab, I look out from heaven and I see all the sons of men. I fashion their hearts individually and I consider all their works. Ahab, you will not today be saved by the multitude of an army or by your own great strength. No, my eye is on you to see if you will fear in Me, to see whether you will hope in My mercy, or whether You want Me to deliver your soul from death. It is me who kept you alive in the recent famine, and I am the One who is your help and shield against this vast army coming against you. Your heart would rejoice in Me if only you would trust in Me.

This the everlasting gospel. It is when a prophet or preacher or any Christian filled with the spirit speaks to you and tells you of God's love and mercy in Christ. Titus 3: 3 – "For we ourselves were once disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another, but when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by

His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Even though Ahab had never heard of the gospel as we have heard it and understand it in New Testament times, yet he had the gospel preached to him, in that God had great mercy upon him as king and he delivered him from all of his fears and all of his earthly troubles at that time. This was meant to lead him to repentance and to trust in God. He was disobedient, he was deceived, he was serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy. He was hateful and hating other, but He had now been shown great mercy and great kindness.

2nd – It was the right thing to do to attempt to bring real hope to him and all of God’s people, at this time. (verses 22-28)

But Ahab did not receive all of this perfect help the gospel of God’s mercy to his poor heart. He did not fear the Lord. To fear the Lord is to reverence Him. And it is to have regard to His word to do it. Not out of craven fear or begrudgingly. And so the prophet said to him in verse 22 – “Go strengthen yourself; take note, and see what you should do, for in the spring of the year the king of Syria will come up against you.” Syria was going to regroup and come up against them again. His servants came to him and said that the gods of Israel were the gods of the hills, and therefore they were stronger than them. But in the spring, they counseled him, if they fought with Israel on the plain, they would defeat them. So they did come up against Israel once again in the spring, and it says in verse 27 – “And the children of Israel were mustered and given provisions, and they went against them.” “Now the children of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats, while the Syrians filled the country side.” Then a man of God came, and he said in verse 28 – “Thus says the Lord: Because the Syrians have said the Lord is the God of the hills, but He is not God of valleys, therefore I will deliver all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

Once again, the Lord intended to show great mercy in this situation and to show Ahab and Israel, their great need to hope in the Lord. The Lord certainly helped them, and gave them the victory in this battle. It says in verse 29 – “And they encamped opposite each other for seven days.” “So it was that on the seventh day the battle was joined; and the children of Israel killed one hundred thousand foot soldiers of the Syrians in one day.” “But the rest fled to Aphek, into the city; then a wall fell on twenty-seven thousand men who were left.” “And Ben Hadad fled and went into the city, into an inner chamber.” It is good for every minister of the gospel and every Christian who shares the gospel to remember this, that God is a God who would have all men and women, no matter how sinful, to repent and hope in Him for help to be delivered from all their enemies. The greatest enemy that we have is our own sinful heart that will not trust in the Lord. But listen to Psalm 130, verses 7 and 8. “O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption.” “And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities. This is what God can do for the vilest of sinners if they will hope in the Lord.

What Ahab should have remembered is this truth from Lamentations 3: 21-32. “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.” “Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.” “They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I hope in Him.” “The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him.” “It is good that one should hope and wait quietly For the salvation of the LORD.” “It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.” “Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him; let him put his mouth in the dust – there may yet be hope.” “Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach.” “For the Lord will not cast off forever. Though He causes grief, Yet He will show compassion According to the multitude of His mercies.” If we will remember this and hope in Him, we shall be eternally safe.