

Obeying God When It Hurts

1 Kings 20:22-43; Lamentations 3:22

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Our obedience is tried when doing God's will hurts. As long as obedience to God does not demand too much sacrifice or pain on our parts, walking the paths of truth and righteousness is pleasant. As long as obedience fits in with our plans, our desires, our comforts, obedience is just wonderful.

But dear ones, obedience to the revealed will of God does not promise you the easy or comfortable road. Many times there is pain in traveling the road of obedience. Obedience to Jesus Christ is so hard because we do not like to hurt or to suffer, and obedience to the truth of God's Word often brings pain and suffering. The temptation to disobey our Savior is so powerful at times because we want our own pleasures more than we want to please our merciful and holy Redeemer who bore all of our disobedience upon the cross and suffered the wrath of God to deliver us from the guilt, penalty, and bondage of our disobedience.

Let us consider the cost of obedience to the commandments of God from our text today. The main points from our text are these: (1) When the Mercy of Man Is Disobedience to the Will of God (1 Kings 20:22-34); (2) When Obedience to God's Will Brings Pain (1 Kings 20:35-43).

I. When the Mercy of Man Is Disobedience to the Will of God (1 Kings 20:22-34).

A. As we open our text this Lord's Day, the Lord has just given a decisive victory to Israel over a great multitude of the Syrians through unexpected means: young untrained attendants to the princes of Israel (1 Kings 20:1-21). Almighty God delights to show His infinite power through the weakest of means so that He receives the glory rather than man.

B. This single defeat of the enemy does not stop King Ben-hadad and the Syrians in plotting another attack against Israel (so we cannot rest in a victory over sin yesterday thinking that victory must carry over unto today; for the world, the flesh, and the devil will continue in evil. Therefore, the Lord warns Ahab to make ready (a lesson to us all).

1. God sends an unidentified prophet to King Ahab to prepare him for the next attack (1 Kings 20:22).

2. While God's Word comes to Ahab through the prophet, the enemy is preparing for the next attack (1 Kings 20:23-25). They blame their defeat on not having attacked Israel at their weakest point (gods of the plains) and not having had war-trained captains leading them. And so they change their strategy and raise another huge force. They raise a force that makes Israel appear as defenseless as two little flocks of goats against wolves that filled the whole country (1 Kings 20:26-27).

a. The enemy (spiritual and physical) always underestimates us in our weakness because it underestimates our infinite, almighty God (whether it be to underestimate a David against a Goliath, Gideon's 300 against 120,000 Midianite, or Daniel against a den of lions). If the enemy recognized the infinite power of our God that created them and all things, they would immediately surrender. But they hate the Lord and His truth so much that no matter how much they lose, they will not give up until God casts them into the Lake of Fire.

b. Just as the Syrians thought they could win a battle by simply changing the playing field from the hills to the plains because Israel's God could only give them victory in the hills, so has Satan always underestimated the power of God to deliver His people. He has thought he could crush us by superior numbers, by vastness of wealth, by military might, by great persecution, and by death itself, but at every point the Lord reveals the foolishness of the enemy (if the devil could not keep Jesus Christ in the grave,

he cannot destroy Christ's faithful Church—the Lord's victory is your victory).

c. My greater concern, however, is how we (as the redeemed) underestimate the power of our infinite God and cower in fear, or overestimate our own power and exalt ourselves in pride. Let the enemy lie to itself about the Lord, however, let us not lie to ourselves about the power of our God or the weakness of our flesh.

3. Another man of God (a prophet) then comes to Ahab and reveals to him that because the Syrians have so limited, despised, and underestimated the one true living God, He will for His own name's sake utterly defeat and destroy Ben-hadad and his superior forces. The Lord crushes the Syrian forces once again, and Ben-hadad hides himself in an inner room within the city of Aphek (1 Kings 20:28-30).

a. Consider how longsuffering the Lord is here with Ahab and Israel in giving them amazing victories. The longsuffering of the Lord with us who profess the name of Jesus Christ should lead us to repentance not to pride in continuing in our sin, in excusing our sin, in justifying our sin, or in blaming others for our sin (Romans 2:4).

b. The Lord declares it was not for the sake of Israel (a covenant-breaking people) that He would fight for them and would win for them, but was to uphold His own mighty name and character (Psalm 115:1-3). This is an example to us as to how we also ought to pray against God's enemies ("See how they act as though Thou does not exist, does not rule over all, are not holy and just, cannot see or hear, cannot stop their wicked plans and schemes against the righteous"). God does what He does for us never because we are deserving, but for His name's sake.

C. The proud and boastful Ben-hadad is now trapped inside a room within the city of Aphek. It is just a matter of time before he is found. He meets with his officers to arrange a strategy to escape the sword of Ahab. They devise a plan to appeal to the mercy of Ahab by way of coming out to him with ropes around their necks (indicating they deserve death) and sackcloth around their loins (indicating their humiliation). The officers of Ben-hadad first go out to meet Ahab to look for any mercy that might be forthcoming from him and to cunningly build upon it (1 Kings 20:31-32).

1. This is the way of those who come to Christ thinking they can bargain with Him. All they care about is that they may live (or some loved one might live who is in danger); and so they go through the outward motions of some form of repentance, pretending that God will not know the difference between their phony repentance and a true repentance that expresses shame and humiliation before the Lord in having neglected, compromised, and despised His holy commandments. It would be better not to pretend at all than to add to the aggravation of their sin by acting as though they could deceive the one, true living God.

2. Dear ones, biblical repentance is not mere regret over the fact that you were caught. True repentance is more concerned with how you have dragged God's holy name through the mud than with you extending your life a little longer here on earth. A genuine faith in Jesus Christ as your righteousness, life, and eternal salvation will issue forth in genuine repentance and sorrow over your sin against the Lord. And a genuine repentance in looking to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus will bring God's comfort and peace that you are forgiven (Matthew 5:4).

D. The servants of Ben-hadad pick up on the word "brother" that is uttered by Ahab in reference to Ben-hadad. And they are quick to note that Ahab's so-called brother (Ben-hadad), that very "brother" who had proudly sought to take all that belonged to Ahab and had sought twice to destroy Israel, is yet alive. Ahab not only grants Ben-hadad his life, but even seems to reward him by taking him up into his chariot, and making a covenant of peace with him (1 Kings 20:33-34). Without there being any evidence over time to confirm Ben-hadad's outward acts of repentance, Ahab treats his enemy, that should have been destroyed along with his army, as if he was a trusted friend. After three years, Ben-hadad still had not returned the cities of Israel taken

by Syria as he said he would (1 Kings 22:1-3). And then a few years after that, Ben-hadad is once again invading Israel (2 Kings 6:8).

1. You see, the question here is, should such so-called mercy and even honor be extended to a murderer or one who plots and attempts murder (Proverbs 12:10—think of Pilate who found Jesus innocent and yet turned him over to be crucified)? For that is what Ben-hadad was—a murderer.

2. If one attempts to steal from his neighbor or if one plots with others to murder his neighbor, should mercy be shown to him and should he be rewarded by showing him honor? To escape all just consequences for such crimes is not to show mercy, but is to feign mercy instead of upholding justice (Exodus 21:12). What about the lives of those Israelites that were lost in these battles? It is not for the king to pardon a murderer. Ahab (as we shall soon see) should not have pardoned and honored Ben-hadad, but should have brought God's judgment upon him. God called for Ben-hadad to be shown justice, but Ahab preferred to show him a pretended mercy, and this disobedience led to Ahab's death by these very Syrians (1 Kings 22).

II. When Obedience to God's Will Brings Pain (1 Kings 20:35-43).

A. The Lord was greatly displeased with Ahab in setting Ben-hadad free; for the Lord had devoted Ben-hadad to destruction. The Lord God illustrates this point unto Ahab by way of a parable or an object lesson through one of His prophets (1 Kings 20:35-43).

1. The prophet (by the word of the Lord) first commands a neighbor to bruise and bloody him by punching him in the face, but the neighbor refuses to do so (1 Kings 20:35). This neighbor would not obey God's word through His prophet and is slain by a lion (1 Kings 20:36).

a. What is God saying through this incident? The neighbor simply refused to punch the prophet in the face. Is that worthy of death? He did not want to hurt the prophet. The problem is that the neighbor disobeyed a direct command from the Lord. Remember it was simply Adam eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in disobedience to the Lord's command that brought death and destruction upon all his posterity by ordinary generation. Remember it was simply Moses striking the rock twice to bring forth water rather than speaking to it that kept Moses from entering into the Promise Land. Remember it was simply Uzzah reaching forth to steady the Ark of the Covenant upon the wagon that led to His immediate death. Remember it was simply a lie that Ananias and Sapphira told about how much they gave to the Lord from the sale of their land that brought sudden death upon them both.

b. What do all these have in common? They all disobeyed the commandment of the Lord. You see, it is not how serious we judge our disobedience to be that matters to the Lord, but that we have disobeyed His commandment. We must learn from this true account how serious the Lord takes our obedience and disobedience. Let us not undermine the holiness of our God by taking His commandments lightly. It is not our right to determine which commandments we should or should not obey. It is His right alone. And it His right to show mercy to whom He will show mercy and to harden those who are vessels of His wrath and condemnation. Rejoice in the mercy of God, in the infinite love of God, but rejoice as well in the holiness of God. One caveat: let us not accept whatever someone claims to be God's will for us (unless it is agreeable to the Scriptures).

c. Even as Christians, how we have tempted the Lord so many times by putting ourselves into places of temptation and calling upon Him to deliver us (Lamentations 3:22). Let us, therefore, not belittle or minimize or excuse our sin before the Lord. Let us own it and cast it all upon the Lord Jesus and look to His mercy and His covenant with us.

2. The prophet went to another neighbor with the same command of the Lord, who did in fact obey the Lord and punch him in the face so that he was bruised and bloodied (1 Kings 20:37).

a. Dear ones, loving obedience is doing the will of God even when it hurts yourself or hurts others. Which neighbor was obedient? The one who obeyed the command of the Lord (like Abraham).

b. Standing for Christ and His truth is not painless, but painful at times. It means that you will be bruised and incur the anger of family, friends, fellow Christians, fellow workers, and perhaps leaders in the Church or leaders in the nation. But the pain you suffer from doing the will of God will bring with it the joy and assurance that you are united to Christ and that you belong to Him (1 Peter 4:16; 2 Timothy 2:12).

B. The prophet now having been bloodied by his neighbor gains access to King Ahab disguised as a soldier who lays out for King Ahab this parable. There was entrusted to him the life of a prisoner of war, but he allowed him to escape. Just as Ahab declared that the life of this soldier should be forfeited for allowing his prisoner to escape, so the prophet reveals himself to Ahab and says the same shall God bring upon him for allowing Ben-hadad to escape (1 Kings 20:39-42).

1. Is Ahab shaken to repentance or simply displeased? These are hard truths that God has communicated in His Word today. Will it shake your confidence in Him or rather your confidence in yourself? Will the truth of God's Word drive you to plead for His mercy, or will you continue in your state of self-righteousness, acting as if you are more merciful than God or more fair than the Lord? Your response to this sermon will demonstrate whether you are like Ahab (self-righteous) or like the publican ("God be merciful to me a sinner").

2. I urge you, fall upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, children, young people, singles, parents. He will save you. He will help you. He will encourage you. He will sanctify you. He will glorify you with Him in heaven forever. The eternal reward of obedience is so much greater than the temporal pain of obedience. Look to the reward. Look to what Jesus endured for you.

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