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Of Grace and Truth

I Kings 20:1-43

Intro: We have come to the last 3 chapters of I Kings and as we will discover, the author has presented them as a 3 volume set, a literary triad in which each section emphasizes a particular failure on the part of King Ahab on the one hand and reveals how the Word of God stands in opposition to him. In **ch20** we'll see Ahab's weak and unwelcomed restraint, ultimately resulting in both his and Israel's destruction. In **ch21** we'll see his heartless oppression which will lead to his entire household being exterminated. In **ch22** we'll witness his hard-headed stupidity by which he will forfeit his life. No other king of Israel takes such a literary beating from the author but that's because there was no other king as wicked and as ignorantly self-determined as Ahab. These last 3 chapters will display Ahab's repeated and fatal opposition to the Word of Yahweh.

1-22 – After 3.5 years of drought, the nation of Israel was in a severely weakened state. But a bad situation in Israel was a good opportunity for Syria to move in and try to bring a little more hurt down upon them. What are they going to do? They don't have the capacity to resist! Old Ben-hadad of Syria gather 32 of his cronies (or lackey kings) and a rather formidable force under his command. They cruised into Israel and laid siege to old Ahab's place. Ben-hadad knew he had Ahab over a barrel so he imposed terms of surrender (vassal king) and Ahab folds like a cheap suit.

Of course, that was too easy! Maybe he hoped Ahab would have put up more of a fight; maybe he feared he'd been too reasonable. Maybe old Bennie decided he'd rather have Ahab's humiliation instead of just his surrender. Whatever the reason, he sends back his herald with another message – more like an insult (**5-6**). This proved to Ahab that Ben-hadad had more than just mere formalities in mind for him. Against his character, Ahab seeks counsel and after his conference, decides it's time to draw the line with the Syrian's new demand. "I'll do almost anything to save my skin; but I won't do that." This brief flash of Israelite spunk produces a nasty Syrian oath (**10**) that Ahab is powerless to resist. All he's able to offer is a pithy wisecrack (**11**). It's a bleak day for a helpless people.

Suddenly, hope shines bright into this helpless situation by way of a word of promise (13). Out of nowhere, a prophet approaches the king with a word from the Lord. Ahab had nothing to stand on but Yahweh in His grace sent him a message of hope. Ahab must have been grasping at anything because notice how he doesn't balk at this word or reject it. He seems to accept it whole-heartedly, although he does have a couple of questions: "Who's going to be the boots on the ground?" Yahweh said the young provincial leaders will carry the fight to the Syrians. "Ok, who's going to tie together or wrap up the battle?" You are! Ahab himself will coordinate the battle plan.

Let's stop and make a few observations here. 1) The prophet arrived unexpected and unasked for. Ahab didn't send anyone to ask for Yahweh's help or advice. This unnamed prophet took the initiative to bring Ahab this word of hope, even at the peril of his own life. 2) The prophet throws Ben-hadad's arrogance back in his face. Twice, when the Syrian king announced his demands upon Ahab, he prefaced them with "Thus says Ben-hadad..." (2,5). But this prophet uses a double formula as well, that more than counters Syrian's statement, "Thus says the Lord..." (13,14). Old Bennie says one thing and Yahweh says another – we'll see who's word carries the day. It won't be the cocky claim of a strutting Syrian; the word of Yahweh determines history. 3) The promise is announced beforehand. This is a predictive promise for good reason – so that when Israel's unlikely victory occurs, there will be no spiritual guesswork as to Who accomplished it or why it happened.

True to Yahweh's word, Israel experiences a smashing victory! I'm sure Syrian wine contributed to their success. Ben-hada and his cronies were too busy drinking themselves under the table to take the Israelite attack seriously. When the Syrian lookouts spotted the Israelite attack forming, Ben-hadad issues an order that is as inane as it is incomprehensible (18). An order like that could only come from someone with suds on the brain. It will take a panicky ride on a horse, escaping from the Israelite army, to properly sober him up. The real reason Israel won the day is because Ahab, contrary to his normal modus operandi, actually believed God's word enough to act upon it.

If hope came to Ahab by a word of promise, then v22 shows us that security came to him too by a word of warning. The same prophet came to Ahab

again, giving him a vital piece of intelligence: this same Syrian king is going to come against you again next year. Victory is sweet but vigilance is essential! Ben-hadad will be back so prepare yourself and your army to meet him. This is nothing but grace – Yahweh’s protective revelation to shield His people.

That’s what so strange about this passage. All of this help (the promise, direction & warning) is entirely God’s gift. Ahab doesn’t seek or ask for a bit of it – it’s is Yahweh initiated and prophet imposed; and utterly confusing! This is the same Ahab we saw in [ch17-19](#) – imposing and enforcing Baal worship in Israel, destroying Yahweh’s worship sites and worshippers. He was an eye-witness of Yahweh’s mighty power but it wasn’t enough to convince him to stand up to his wicked wife. Why does this black-hearted pagan receive any goodness from the Lord? It’s not enough to say that it is amazing grace because that would be redundant. Grace, by its very definition, is nothing but amazing and yet; here it is in possibly it’s most offensive form – being poured out on a scoundrel like Ahab.

We’re correct to think that this grace is both amazing and marvelous but we would be wrong to think it was only that. All grace is amazing and marvelous but what most people often fail to recognize is that grace is also demanding. This grace was not offered to Ahab and Israel so that they could remain unfazed. They’ll be held accountable for responding to this grace ([13b](#)). The you is singular, speaking of Ahab. Later ([v28](#)) the you is plural, referring to Israel.

The idea is not that Ahab and Israel will know that Yahweh is the true God. That was settled on Mt. Carmel. What it means here: when God does what He has said He would do then they’ll have clear evidence that Yahweh (& no other) has acted in grace or judgment, as the case may be, and you are accountable for responding appropriately.

In these improbable victories over Syria, Ahab and Israel are to see that Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, is there in saving help, unasked for and undeserved. Both king and people should acknowledge His presence and adore His person. If the Lord has graciously inserted Himself into your impossible situation, how dare you just yawn and continue on living as you were before! Was Ahab impressed? Did grace leave its mark on his life? as far as we can tell, Yahweh’s grace towards Ahab was unasked for, undeserved and unacknowledged.

23-30 – The Syrians were sober now and in their after-battle debrief they began making plans for the next campaign against Israel, which they would also lose – because of bad theology. Actually, they include both religion and politics into their next season’s battle plan. Ben-hadad’s advisers exhort him to shake up the military structure by releasing the 32 kings and replacing them with real military officers to lead the army. Of course, total mobilization was required to replace all the men and materials lost in the last campaign.

But, these same advisors claimed to possess spiritual insight to go along with their military training (**23**). You have to admire their open-minded world view. These Syrian weren’t crass secularists, jaded by the propaganda of their Ivy League degrees. They had no qualms combining military strategy with theological insight. I have no doubt that they were sincere in their beliefs but unfortunately for them, they were sincerely wrong. False theology will only replay the previous disaster.

The prophet had clearly provided Ahab with reliable intel because when spring eventually arrived, so did the Syrian army. Once again, the Israelite army looks severely out-classed and undersized – 2 little flocks of goats vs. an army covering the whole countryside. Human weakness rides again. But it was precisely at this point that Ahab received another divine promise and a fresh assurance of Yahweh’s presence (**28**). For the 3rd time in our text, a man of God draws near to Ahab to provide him with an encouraging promise or a protective warning. These gracious intrusions constitute God’s goodness to Ahab.

Consider the implications of **v28**. By the coming victory, Yahweh will both show goodness to Israel and gain glory for Himself. The 2nd one is the primary concern of **v28** because Syrian stupidity has distorted the truth about Yahweh, casting Him in the image of some run-of-the-mill pagan deity. Not only were the Syrian challenging God’s people, they were challenging God Himself – questioning His sovereignty, slandering His character. But, when Israel is able to whip them on level ground, Yahweh will have exposed their theological nonsense for what it is. After disaster #2, what an opportunity the Syrians will have to see the truth about God, if they only will.

But, Yahweh’s primary concern wasn’t to teach Syria a lesson in theology, but Israel – His own people! The prophet even stresses the importance of

the impact the prophecy and the victory should have on Israel: and you shall know that I am the Lord. (28b). Too often it is God's own professed covenant people who most need convincing of power and omnipotence. Metaphorically, we as God's people stand in Israel's camp but how often do we allow our minds to drift over into Syrian ways of thinking?

It's easy to chuckle at these pagan punks from Syria who think God's power is limited to the hills but our paganism is much more refined than theirs so it is much harder to recognize, though it is no different from theirs. Syrian theology merely claims that there some areas of life that exist beyond the reach of God's power. Despite our confessions to the contrary, it's so easy for us to slip into this erroneous mentality. We may assume that God is at work in spiritual matters but not in the routine matters of life. You may accept that God can forgive and transform kosher people but your past is too wretched, too wasted for Him to clean up, let alone use. If so, you're holding Syrian theology.

You may accept that God can move and do great things in large churches who have all the resources and facilities to accommodate and accomplish those things but you wouldn't expect Him to do anything in and through a small church: we don't have the resources, the personnel, the facilities, the stamina! We can never hope to muster up a decent revival like the big churches can. If that's your back-of –the-mind thought process then you don't believe our God is the God of the valleys. Instead of focusing on what we don't have, let's focus on what we do have – God's Word to instruct and guide; His presence to comfort and heal, His Spirit to enable and equip us to serve. With just a handful of believers, God turned the world upside down. Our God is the God of both the hills and the valley. There is no area of our existence that His grace cannot touch or His power transform.

31-34 – Now the shoe's on the other foot. Here in the rubble of what was Aphek, you no longer here the confident, "Thus says Ben-hadad..." He's no longer the bully and Ahab is no longer his favorite punching bag. On the contrary, he sends out his minions to work out the details of his surrender and calls himself Ahab's servant. He does this in hopes that his life would be spared. His reps are quite willing to eat crow, while presenting themselves as the picture of humility: sporting the latest designs in sackcloth (penitence) and rope for head gear (servitude). Ahab was pleased to learn Ben-hada had survived and immediately (& stupidly) calls him his

brother. They weren't blood relatives but apparently, their pension for paganism put them in the same doomed family.

Well, that's all it took! When the lackey heard that word brother, they jumped on the possibility of surviving this 2nd southern soiree. Ben-hadad came out of hiding and was invited up into Ahab's chariot and instead of demanding terms for his surrender, Ahab enters into an economic treaty with Syria. Apparently, Ahab was more interested in boosting the current economy of Israel than he was in ensuring her future safety. Ahab had expanded his territorial sovereignty and secured some economic concessions and Ben-hadad was able to go home. So, all's well that ends well, right? Not so fast; not everyone is pleased with the Pollyanna outcome of this war. Cue the prophet once again!

35-43 – This is the climax of the whole story and what do we find here – another prophet! Try as he might to ignore it, Ahab just can't get free of the Word of Yahweh. That is also God's grace. But, what we learn in the introduction of this prophet is a harsh lesson concerning the seriousness of Yahweh's word.

Before this unnamed prophet approaches King Ahab, he orders a companion (another prophet) to strike him. The text clearly states that this order was given by the word of the Lord. This wasn't some crazy scenario the prophet dreamed up one night after ingesting too much pepperoni. As strange as it sounded, this demand was authorized and ordered by Yahweh. His friend refused to hurt him. The prophet didn't thank him for his kindness; he condemned him for his disobedience. He announced God's judgment on him and it happened just as he said. Understandably, the next guy showed no qualms and proceeded to bash the prophet with the desired severity (37).

You can complain about how weird and strange this whole scene is if you want to. That would be true but it would also be beside the point. Instead, we should acknowledge that the lesson of the story is both clear and frightening – it's not safe to ignore the word of God. That's the point! The disobedient companion serves as an example, a preview of the disobedient king. If disobedient prophets can't escape God's judgment then disobedient kings will certainly not.

Notice the manner in which the word of Yahweh comes to Ahab. The prophet disguises himself and presents a battle field story so as to capture the king's attention. "I was given the responsibility of keeping a prisoner but, while I was busy here and there, he escaped." Ahab must have been shocked by the audacity of this soldier in bringing such a flimsy case. This was a no-brainer! In fact, by his own confession he convicted himself. But little did Ahab know, he had just walked into the prophet's trap – let the judge judge the matter and so judge himself!

Off comes the disguise and out comes the judgment against Ahab (41)! In v42, Yahweh labels Ben-hadad as the man He has appointed to utter destruction – that means Ahab spared the man Yahweh meant to destroy. Ahab had been busy here and there boosting his image as a moderate, temperate, reasonable victor and he had let Yahweh's prisoner escape. Thus, the destruction meant for Ben-hadad would fall upon Ahab and his people. This reveals the importance of God's word. Ahab begins by sparing his enemy and will end by destroying his people. The prophet's wound was a sign indicating to Ahab what he could expect to receive from Ben-hadad, the man he just released.

Some may wonder if Yahweh was being fair with Ahab since the text doesn't specifically state that Ben-hadad was to be eliminated and you would be partially correct. There isn't a decree as such but after 2 improbable defeats on the battlefield and when the Syrian stragglers seek refuge inside the walls of Aphek, a divine earthquake takes the rest of old Bennie's protecting army out, even a blind man could see that Yahweh had it out for him. Ben-hadad wasn't Ahab's prisoner; he was Yahweh's. Ahab had no right to let him go free and unpunished. In doing so, he haplessly interfered with the righteous decision of God, effectively substituting himself in place of Ben-hadad.

It wasn't as if spiritual guidance was unavailable. It seems a prophet of God was always close by but Ahab wasn't interested in hearing or knowing God's word unless it could get him out of a bind. Ahab was supposed to destroy evil not make treaties with it. Sadly, there are many Christians in western society who are more inclined to pamper evil rather than purge it from their lives. The disarmament of sin must be a total affair. We cannot surrender some pieces of our old lives while still clinging to others and hope to come out of this unscathed.

Ch20 teaches us that we must be clear about God: clear about his grace, even if it surprises us or even shocks us that it can be offered to the likes of Ahab; clear about His power – it is futile to try and limit it's scope in my life; clear about His judgment, it should sober us. Yes, we are under His saving grace but that doesn't mean we are free to dismiss or ignore the claim His Word has over our Christian lives. The sad reality of our text is that the word of God has stirred Ahab's heart but it has not tamed it. However, this is not the failure of the word of God – it's the failure of Ahab to recognize and acknowledge both the work and the claim of God's Word over his life. 😊