

1 Kings 20-21

Ahab's conflict with Hen-Hadad

Since the time of David the two regional powers have been Israel and Aram (Syria). David gained superiority over Aram which lasted into the reign of Solomon. However in the period of the Divided Kingdom, we have seen the Arameans rising in power. With the encouragement and gold from an alliance with Judah, Aram had moved into the northern territories of Israel, demonstrating that they were the more powerful kingdom. In this chapter, Ben-Hadad, king in Damascus of Aram, had put together a coalition of 32 kings, invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and besieged Samaria, the capital. Ahab is willing to meet the king's demands which are the customary demands a superior king would make on a vassal king. Ahab is willing to give up his sovereignty to keep his throne. This will cost him gold and silver (tribute) and sons and daughters, probably for the harem and service of the king of Aram. Ben-Hadad then seems to increase his demands and the leaders of Israel are unwilling to that level of subjugation. The situation escalates to the point that Ben-Hadad prepares to attack Samaria and destroy it.

It is at this point that a prophet approaches Ahab and tells him that the LORD will deliver the Aramean armies into his hand and then the prophet explains how that will happen. The overconfident Aramean were drinking in their tents when the 7,000 Israelite soldiers attacked their camp and defeated them. The prophet then told them that the Arameans would return the next spring so he must prepare. What is interesting about this is the insight into the pagan understanding of a god's power. They reasoned that the God of Samaria was a god of the mountains and so he would be less powerful on the plains since the gods of Damascus are gods of the flat land. So they planned their next military engagement on the plains to the east of the Sea of Galilee. The Prophet comes back and tells Ahab that the LORD will defeat the Arameans again to demonstrate that he is the God over all of the earth.

Why is the LORD fighting for Ahab, who is so wicked? Ahab represents the people of Israel and even though they are rebellious and wicked, God still loves them and wants to reveal himself to them. He is using this as a means of showing the people that He is God, and if they will follow his ways then he is powerful to protect them from their enemies. This is what God does with us. He wants us to come to know him even when we are running in the opposite direction.

When it is all over, instead of killing Ben-Hadad, as Ahab seems to have been instructed by the prophet, Ahab shows mercy and enters into an economic alliance. Through an elaborate series of prophetic acts, the prophet declares to the king that his life will be taken because he did not take the life of the Aramean king. Then Ahab returns to his palace in Samaria angry and sullen. God requires obedience of his people – his way is to obey his commands. Man's way is to make deals with the enemy for your own benefit and enrichment.

Naboth's Vineyard - Chapter 21

This little story is an illustration of the wickedness, selfishness, and weakness of king Ahab. The king had a palace in Jezreel and next to his palace was a vineyard and he wanted to buy it to plant a vegetable garden and expand his estate. The vineyard was owned by a man named Naboth and he refused to sell to the king because the land was not just his possession but it was his spiritual inheritance from the time that God distributed the promised land among the tribes. This man had the right perspective about the land – he was a righteous and God-fearing person. That stands in contrast to the king who was doing things man's way. Property was just something to be bought and sold for personal benefit. Ahab returns to his home angry and sullen. Jezebel tells him that she will get the vineyard for him. He is bound by the law of God but she is thinking even more like the people of the world. Might make right – and the king can do whatever he desires. She then writes letters and manipulates the situation so that Naboth is falsely accused of cursing the king and God. As a result he is stoned to death and Ahab is free to seize the vineyard.

Verse 17 – Elijah returns to the scene and proclaims that Ahab will be killed and the dogs will lick up his blood in the same place where Naboth was murdered. He then prophesied that Jezebel would be eaten by dogs in Jezreel. All of this is a picture of uncleanness and dishonorable death. Ahab repented for his sin and the lord told Elijah that the disaster will not come upon him but on his son and his future descendants. This sets the stage for the end of the Omri Dynasty. It comes upon them because of their evil and rebellion against God's way. Ahab insisted on following man's way and he listened to his foreign wife, who led him deeper into evil and idol worship than any other king in Israel.