

1 Kings 19 - 20

Lesson 102

Wednesday, September 21, 2022

AHAB'S WICKED WIFE (CHAP. 19)

a. *Elijah's flight (19:1–8)*

19:1–5a. **Jezebel** had not been present on Mount Carmel; her husband reported to her what had taken place. Infuriated by Elijah's treatment of her **prophets ... Jezebel sent a** message to him. He was evidently still in the city of Jezreel as she was (cf. 18:46) when he received her warning. She threatened to take his **life** in 24 hours in retaliation for his slaughtering the 450 Baal prophets.

It is remarkable that her threat terrified **Elijah** as it did. Ironically by contrast he had told the widow in Zarephath not to be afraid (17:13). He had just demonstrated that **the gods** to whom she now appealed in her curse had no power at all. (Her statement that she was willing to be dealt with **severely** by the gods [cf. 2:23; 20:10; 2 Kings 6:31] points up the seriousness of her threat. She was so certain she would kill Elijah that she willingly put her own welfare "on the line.") Evidently Elijah's fear sprang from the power Jezebel possessed. Rather than resting in God for His protection as he had for the past three and one-half years, Elijah **ran for his life**. He ran all the way through the kingdom of Judah to the southernmost town in the land, **Beersheba**.

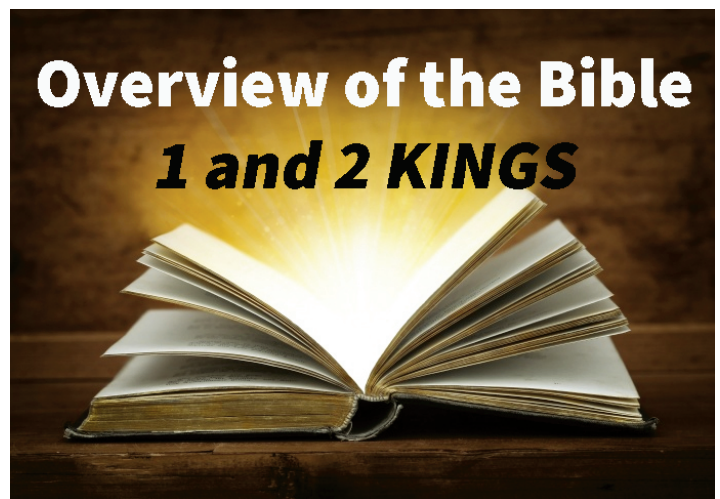
Still fearful he might be discovered by Jezebel's spies he told **his servant** to stay behind and he traveled alone one more **day's journey** (about 15 miles) **into the Negev desert**. Finally, **he sat down** under a **broom tree** (a desert bush that grows to a height of 12 feet and provides some, though not much, shade) and rested. He was so discouraged he **prayed that he might die**. Elijah had forgotten the lessons God had been teaching him at Kerith, Zarephath, and Carmel. His eyes were on his circumstances rather than on the **LORD**. His statement that he was **no better than his ancestors** (19:4) suggests that he was no more successful than his forefathers in ousting Baal-worship from Israel. Exhausted and discouraged, Elijah **lay down ... and fell asleep**.

19:5b–8. Elijah woke at the touch of a divinely sent messenger. This **angel** had prepared freshly baked **bread**, still warm, and plenty of **water**, which he invited Elijah to consume. The prophet did so and then returned to his rest. **The angel** probably appeared as a human being as was common in the Old Testament.

Again, the angel woke Elijah, perhaps after he had slept for some time, and urged him to **eat** more food since **the journey** before him would require **much** energy. Moses and the Israelites had traveled in that wilderness for 40 years, sustained by the manna God had provided for them and learned lessons of His faithful care and provision. Now Elijah would traverse the same desert for **40 days and ... nights**, sustained by the bread God provided and would learn the same lessons. A direct trip from Beersheba to Mount **Horeb** (the ancient name for Mount Sinai; cf. Ex. 3:1; 17:6; 33:6; Deut. 5:2; 1 Kings 8:9; Ps. 106:19; Mal. 4:4) would have taken Elijah only about 14 days on foot (a distance of ca. 200 miles). God was reminding him and teaching him during those 40 days and nights. Finally, he went to **the mountain of God**, the very place where God had revealed Himself to Moses and the Israelites and where He had entered into a covenant with His Chosen People.

b. *Elijah's revelation (19:9–18)*

19:9–10. Arriving at one of the mountains in the Sinai range Elijah found **a cave** and took refuge in it. There he received a revelation from God. **The LORD** began this lesson with the question, **What are you doing here, Elijah?** (cf. v. 13; Gen. 3:9) God had not sent him here as He had directed him to other places (cf. 1 Kings 17:3, 9; 18:1). Elijah had run out because of fear (19:3). Elijah's response revealed that he felt he was standing completely alone and defenseless against the ungodly forces



that threatened to overpower him (cf. v. 14). Of course, he knew that he was not **the only one left** of all the faithful remnant (cf. 18:13), but he felt all alone. Interestingly Elijah spoke only of the Lord's **prophets** being killed (cf. 18:13a); he made no mention of Baal's 450 prophets who were killed. Fear and discouragement caused him to see only the dark side. He sensed failure in spite of his being **zealous**. Mercifully God did not lecture Elijah or chasten His chafed prophet. God simply gave him a demonstration of His ways.

19:11–14. Standing on the mountainside outside his cave (cf. v. 9) Elijah witnessed what Moses had seen in those mountains centuries before (Ex. 19:16–18) and what he himself had seen on Mount Carmel only a few days earlier (1 Kings 18:38, 45), namely, a spectacular demonstration of the power of God, this time in **wind**, an **earthquake**, and **fire**. But on this occasion **the LORD was not in** any of these, that is, they were not His instruments of self-revelation.

Evidently some time later when Elijah was back in his cave (19:13) he **heard** the sound of a **gentle whisper**. Recognizing this as a revelation of God **he pulled his cloak over** part of **his face**, walked **out to the mouth of the cave**, and **stood** there waiting for God to act. God asked the same question He asked earlier (cf. v. 9): **What are you doing here, Elijah?** The prophet's response was identical to his first reply (cf. v. 10), suggesting that even though he may have understood the point of God's display of natural forces for his benefit, he still felt the same way about himself.

The message God seems to have intended for Elijah is that whereas He had revealed Himself in spectacular demonstrations of His power in the past at Kerith, Zarephath, and Carmel, He would now use Elijah in gentler, less dramatic ways. These ways God proceeded to explain to His servant (vv. 15–18). God would deal with Elijah's personal feelings about himself later in a gentle way too.

19:15–17. **The LORD** told Elijah to leave there, to **go back the way** he **came** (i.e., through Israel) to **Damascus**. (Cf. God's commands "leave" and "go" to Elijah in 17:3, 9; 18:1; 21:18; 2 Kings 1:3, 15.) The Lord then gave him three assignments: to **anoint Hazael king** of the Arameans in Damascus (see the chart "Kings of Aram in 1 and 2 Kings," near 1 Kings 11:23–25), to **anoint Jehu ... king of Israel**, and to **anoint Elisha ... from Abel-Meholah** (cf. Jud. 7:22) as his own successor. Through these three men God would complete the purge of Baal worship that Elijah had begun. Actually, Elijah did only the last of these three directly, but he did the other two indirectly through Elisha, his *protégé*. Elisha was involved, though strangely, in Hazael's becoming Aram's king (2 Kings 8:7–14) and one of Elisha's associates anointed Jehu (2 Kings 9:1–3).

19:18. God then revealed to Elijah that He had preserved **7,000** faithful followers **in Israel** who had **not bowed** before or **kissed** the emblems of idolatry in worship. Such news undoubtedly cheered Elijah. Were it not for the insight into his feelings of fear and discouragement given in this chapter, one might not believe that Elijah was indeed "a man just like us" (James 5:17).

c. Elijah's successor (19:19–21)

19:19–20. **Elijah** returned from the Sinai peninsula to find **Elisha** (whose name means "My God is salvation") near his hometown of Abel-Meholah (v. 16) in the Jordan Valley about halfway between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Kinnereth in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Elisha evidently came from a family that owned lots of land (as implied by the **12** yoke of oxen). **He** himself **was plowing** when Elijah **found** him. Throwing a prophet's **cloak around** a person symbolized the passing of the power and authority of the office to that individual. That **Elisha** realized the meaning of this act is obvious from his reaction. Immediately he started to abandon his former occupation and follow **Elijah**. **Elijah** gave him permission to say farewell to his family. The unusual reply, **What have I done to you?** is an idiom meaning, "Do as you please" or "What have I done to stop you?"

19:21. **Elisha** sealed his decision by slaughtering **his yoke of oxen** and burning his **plowing** implements. He evidently hosted a farewell banquet, serving his sacrificed animals to his guests for supper. **Then he set out to** accompany **Elijah** as **his attendant**.

4. AHAB'S ARAMEAN ADVERSARY (CHAP. 20)

In this chapter the focus is again on Ahab rather than on Elijah.

a. The battle over Samaria (20:1–25)

This was the first of three battles recorded in 1 Kings (cf. 20:26–43; 22:1–38) between Ahab and Ben-Hadad II, king of Aram, Israel's northern neighbor.

(1) Ben-Hadad's attack (20:1–12).

20:1–4. **Ben-Hadad II** was evidently the son of Ben-Hadad I whom Asa had hired to attack Baasha some years earlier (cf. 15:18, 20; 20:34). Allied with Ben-Hadad II were **32 kings**, probably rulers of neighboring city-states. Together they **went up** the hill of **Samaria and attacked it**, placing it under siege. Ben-Hadad then **sent messengers ... to Ahab** with his demands for withdrawal. He demanded Ahab's **silver ... gold ... wives, and children**. Greatly outnumbered, Ahab submitted to these terms.

20:5–9. Evidently **Ben-Hadad** regretted that he had demanded such "easy" terms after Ahab had accepted them. He felt he could get much more than that. So, he sent his **messengers** back with a new demand, namely, that Ben-Hadad's men be allowed to enter the **palace** and the officials' **houses** and plunder them. Ahab assembled **the elders of the land** and pointed out that Ben-Hadad was **looking for trouble**. **The king** had **not** refused Ben-Hadad's **demands** for his own most valued possessions, but now the Aramean enemy wanted everything of value he could lay his hands on. **The elders and the people** who had also become aware of these demands counseled resistance. Ahab sent his decision back to Ben-Hadad through the **messengers**: he would hold to his **first** promise but not to **this demand**.

20:10–12. Shortly thereafter Ahab received a third **message** from his adversary. The Arameans now threatened to destroy **Samaria** totally. Like Jezebel with Elijah, **Ben-Hadad** risked his life in an oath (cf. 19:2; also note 2:23). Ahab replied that Ben-Hadad should not **boast** of victory till he had obtained it. Ben-Hadad's greed and boasting seem to have been heightened since he and his kings were under the influence of strong drink. Since negotiations had broken down **Ben-Hadad ... prepared to attack** Samaria.

(2) Ben-Hadad's defeat (20:13–25).

20:13. **Meanwhile**, as Ben-Hadad was preparing to attack, **a prophet**, whose name is not given, went **to Ahab** with a message from **the LORD**. God, he said, was going to deliver the huge Aramean **army** into Ahab's **hand** so Ahab would **know that He is the LORD**. God's goodness on this occasion obviously was prompted not by Ahab's godliness but by God's own grace. This was another step in His seeking to get His people to acknowledge that **He is the LORD**.

20:14–16. **Ahab** asked **the prophet** what strategy should be employed. He responded that **the LORD** would use **the young officers of the provincial commanders** of the army. The king himself was to lead them into **battle**. **Ahab** prepared the troops as instructed and **at noon**, when **Ben-Hadad and his 32 kings** were resting and **getting drunk**, he launched his surprise attack. Even today little is done in the middle of the day in the Near East because the weather is usually so hot.

20:17–21. Evidently it was not clear to **Ben-Hadad** if the 232 **men** (cf. v. 15) approaching him were coming to talk **peace** or whether they were intending to fight. This probably resulted in his being unprepared for their attack. The Israelite **army** (of 7,000; cf. v. 15) followed along **behind the young officers** and proceeded to rout **the Arameans**. **Ben-Hadad** was able to escape **on horseback**, but Ahab **overpowered** his cavalry troops and the **chariots**, inflicting **heavy losses on the surprised Arameans**.

20:22–25. After Ahab had returned to Samaria **the prophet** went to him again. He warned **the king**, undoubtedly by the word of the Lord, that he should expect Ben-Hadad to **attack ... again** in the **spring**, the most popular time of the year for kings to wage war (cf. 2 Sam. 11:1). In view of this Ahab was warned to build up his defenses.

In the camp of the Arameans, Ben-Hadad was also receiving advice. His counselors concluded that they had lost the battle because Israel's **gods** were **gods of the hills**. If they would **fight** Israel **on the plains** these gods would not help them, and the Arameans would win. They also advised the king to **replace** the 32 allied kings with regular **army** commanders and to build up his forces to their former numbers. Ben-Hadad followed this advice and prepared to return to Samaria the following spring.

b. The battle of Aphek (20:26–43)

(1) Ahab's victory (20:26–34).

20:26–27. As the Lord had revealed (v. 22), **the next spring** (856 B.C.) **Ben-Hadad** assembled his troops and proceeded **to Aphek**. Several towns in **Israel** bore this name (meaning "a fortress"). This one may have been located on the tablelands east of the Sea of Kinnereth between Samaria and Damascus. Ben-Hadad chose a flat battleground this time as his counselors had advised. Ahab led the Israelite army **to meet them**. In comparison with the vast host of the Arameans the Israelite forces looked like **two small flocks of goats**. That Israel was arranged in two groups may indicate that Ahab had in mind a certain battle strategy.

20:28–30a. **The man of God**, evidently the same prophet (vv. 13, 22), informed Ahab that **Israel** would win this battle. Again, he said that the Lord's purpose was to prove to Ahab (as well as, perhaps, **the Arameans** and the Israelites) that He is **the LORD** (cf. v. 13).

Seven days passed before **the battle** began. On the very first **day** of combat **the Israelites inflicted 100,000 casualties on the ... foot soldiers** of the enemy. **The rest of** their troops took refuge within **the city walls of Aphek**. But God killed an additional **27,000** by causing **the city wall** to collapse on **them**.

20:30b–34. While **Ben-Hadad** was hiding in an **inner room** of a **city** building, his officials advised him to give himself up and plead for mercy. **The kings of ... Israel** were indeed **merciful** compared with other ancient Near Eastern kings. **Sackcloth** and **ropes** were signs of penitential submission.

Ben-Hadad's agents waited on Ahab and pleaded for Ben-Hadad's life. They called him Ahab's **servant**, indicating the position he was willing to take if he could **live**. Ahab seemed surprised that the Aramean king was **still alive**. Ahab said he was willing to receive **Ben-Hadad** as his **brother**, not as a servant. He was, of course, not his real brother; Ahab had in mind a treaty for defense against Assyria in which he and Ben-Hadad would join as brothers.

Quick to pick up this ray of hope, Ben-Hadad's ambassadors affirmed that Ahab's **brother** was alive. They escorted the defeated king to **Ahab** as they had been ordered, and as a gesture of friendship **Ahab** invited Ben-Hadad **up into his chariot**, a position of favor. Quick to placate his enemy, **Ben-Hadad** pledged to **return the cities** his **father** Ben-Hadad I had taken from Ahab's **father** (predecessor) Baasha (cf. 15:20). In addition, the Aramean king offered trade privileges to Ahab in **Damascus** which Ben-Hadad's **father** had enjoyed in **Samaria**. The two kings formalized the **treaty** and with this promise of nonaggression Ahab **let** Ben-Hadad **go** back home.

(2) Ahab's disobedience (20:35–43).

20:35–36. **The sons of the prophets** were students in the schools of the prophets, well-established institutions in Israel designed to perpetuate the Law of Moses and the Word of the Lord. **One of** these young men received an assignment from the Lord. His unusual request that **his companion** injure him with a **weapon** was **by the word of the LORD**. The friend's refusal, though understandable, was an act of disobedient rebellion against the Lord. It was for this reason and the importance of the man of God's mission that the compassionate companion suffered death. Again, **the LORD** used **a lion** to execute his will (cf. 13:24).

20:37–40a. **The prophet** then **found** a more willing accomplice who did wound **him**. Playing the part of a wounded soldier **the prophet** waited by the roadside for **King Ahab** to pass on his way back to Samaria. The prophet **disguised himself** using a **headband over his eyes**. Without this the king would have recognized him immediately as a prophet (cf. 20:41). Interestingly this is the second time in 1 Kings when a person disguised himself (cf. 14:2). Later Ahab disguised himself in battle (22:30).

Apparently, Ahab thought he had met this man before. **The prophet** told the king that he, the prophet, was told in combat to **guard** a prisoner who got away. The prophet added that either his own **life** was to have been taken **or** he had to **pay a talent** (ca. 75 pounds) **of silver**.

20:40b–43. Ahab quickly assessed the storyteller's guilt; this was an obvious case of negligence. As in Nathan's story to David (2 Sam. 12:1–7) the king responded to the prophet in words that judged himself. **The prophet**, immediately revealing his identity, told **the king** he had been negligent in his responsibility to obey the order received from God to execute Ben-Hadad. Though this order is not recorded in the biblical text it is clear that Ahab had received it. Rather than obeying the Lord which probably would have resulted in a final end of the conflict with the vexing Aramean army, Ahab chose to follow his own plan. He believed Ben-Hadad's help against Assyria would be more valuable to Israel than Ben-Hadad's death.

Therefore, Ahab would forfeit his own **life** in exchange for Ben-Hadad's (cf. 1 Kings 22:37). Also, Ahab's **people**, the Israelites, would die in place of Ben-Hadad's **people**. Ahab returned to **Samaria** sullen because of this prophecy and angry (cf. 21:4) at himself as well as at God's prophet.¹

¹ Thomas L. Constable, "1 Kings," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 527–532.