YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD

1 Kings 20:1-22:53

Key Verse: 20:13

“Meanwhile a prophet came to Ahab king of Israel and announced, ‘This is what the Lord says: “Do you see this vast army? I will give it into your hand today, and then you will know that I am the Lord.”’”

Today’s passage contains several stories. In chapter 20 Israel fights against the Arameans two times. In chapter 21 King Ahab takes the vineyard of Naboth through violent means, urged on by his wife Jezebel. In chapter 22 King Ahab allies with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to fight the Arameans, and Ahab is killed in battle. Underlying all of these events is the Lord’s sovereign rule. The Lord said, “You will know that I am the Lord.” The Lord reveals his mercy upon his people and at the same time, the Lord reveals his judgment. God wanted his people to know who he is. The problem of the Israelites in those days was that they did not know who God is. It is essential to know who God is. Many young people know Derek Rose, or Hugh Jackman, or Kate Hudson, or they want to meet President Obama. To know such people is not essential to us. But to know the Lord is very essential. To know the Lord is not just a matter of interest, but a matter of life and death. Through today’s passage, we must know that God is the Lord. If we accept God as our Lord, then our lives will be blessed continually, as will our families and our nation. Let’s learn that God is the Lord and accept his reign over us today.

I.  The Lord reveals his mercy (20:1-34)

Look at verse 1. “Now Ben-Hadad king of Aram mustered his entire army. Accompanied by thirty-two kings with their horses and chariots, he went up and besieged Samaria and attacked it.” Who was Ben-Hadad? He was the king of Aram, a powerful kingdom to the northeast of Northern Israel. Most likely, “Ben-Hadad” was a title given to successive rulers in an Aramaic dynasty. Some forty years earlier, as 15:18-20 tells, Ben-Hadad I was involved in the conflict between Asa king of Judah and Baasha king of Israel. 20:1 most likely refers to Ben-Hadad II. He was a powerful ruler who could muster 32 kings and a vast army. He was confident about his victory over Northern Israel. So he sent messengers to Ahab, king of Israel, saying, “Your silver and gold are mine, and the best of your wives and children are mine.” It was a great insult to Ahab. But he was fearful, so he surrendered, saying, “Just as you say, my lord the king. I and all I have are yours” (3). Then Ben-Hadad became more greedy and confident and sent a second message, “I sent to demand your silver and gold, your wives and your children. But about this time tomorrow I am going to send my officials to search your palace and the houses of your officials. They will seize everything you value and carry it away” (5-6). Ahab summoned all the elders of the land and consulted them. They told him, “Don’t listen to him or agree to his demands.” They may not have minded if Ben-Hadad took Ahab’s wives, especially Jezebel, but they were not willing to give up their own wives. They would rather fight. Ahab must have gained some fighting spirit from them. Ahab sent a message back to Ben-Hadad that he could not meet the second demand. Ben-Hadad cursed Ahab, saying, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if enough dust remains in Samaria to give each of my men a handful” (10). Ahab, now growing in spirit, responded, “One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off” (11). It was similar to the saying, “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” Ben-Hadad was extremely overconfident. He underestimated Northern Israel. It was true that he had a vast number of soldiers and superior weapons. But his spirit was like that of a spectator at a sporting event. He and his allied kings drank a lot, getting drunk as early as noon. There is a saying that overconfidence precedes failure; this was Ben-Hadad’s weak point. A lion does his best, even in catching a rabbit. When Ben-Hadad heard Ahab’s message, he confidently ordered, “Prepare to attack.” It seemed that the Israelites were on the verge of destruction.

What happened? At this critical moment God intervened. Look at verse 13. “Meanwhile a prophet came to Ahab king of Israel and announced, ‘This is what the Lord says: “Do you see this vast army? I will give it into your hand today, and then you will know that I am the Lord.”’” The Lord knew that Ahab was fearful of the vast army of the Arameans. But the Lord wanted Ahab to turn his eyes upon him, the God of Israel, who is the Almighty God and the Sovereign Ruler of history. God promised to give the Aramean army into Ahab’s hand through divine intervention. God wanted Ahab to know that the God of Israel is the Lord who ruled Aram and the world. God hoped that Ahab would recognize him as the Lord and turn to him and follow him. Although Ahab had done evil in the eyes of the Lord, the Lord did not allow him to be punished. Rather, the Lord poured out his mercy on Ahab. Why did God bless Ahab in such a way? It came from God’s great shepherd heart for his people Israel. Though they had rebelled against God, God loved them and wanted to save them. God did not want any of them to perish, but, instead, to turn to the Lord. So at this critical moment, God decided to intervene in their crisis. Sometimes God pours out his blessing by his one-sided grace to those who do not deserve it. Why does God bless us in such a way? God wants us to recognize that he is the Lord, and to turn our hearts to him.

This was good news to Ahab. He asked humbly, “Who will do this?” The prophet replied, “This is what the Lord says: ‘The young officers of the provincial commanders will do it.’” These young men were pure and energetic. They were willing to fight. Their number was only 232. The rest of the Israelite army was 7,000 in all. On the other hand, Ben-Hadad and his 32 allied kings had a vast army of more than 127,000 men (29,30), plus horses and chariots. It was a great mismatch in terms of size and weapons. But the battle belongs to the Lord. The number of soldiers and the power of weapons do not matter when the Lord intervenes. When the Lord was with Gideon, he and his 300 men defeated the Midianites, who were like swarms of locusts. When Ahab obeyed God’s direction, there was a great victory. Led by the young officers, the king of Israel advanced and overpowered the enemy army and inflicted heavy losses (19-21).

God continued to bless the king of Israel by giving him a word through his prophet, saying, “Strengthen your position and see what must be done, because next spring the king of Aram will attack you again” (22). God wanted Ahab to experience complete victory over his enemy, not partial victory, so that he might understand that God is the Lord. Verses 23-25 show how the Arameans prepared for the next battle. They knew that some divine power had helped the people of Israel win the first battle. But they understood God in terms of their polytheistic idols. They thought God was just the god of the hills. They thought that if they fought on the plains they would defeat the Israelites. They decided to appoint new army commanders in the place of the kings who had been defeated the first time. They also decided to raise up an army like the one which was lost—horse for horse and chariot for chariot. When the spring came, Ben-Hadad mustered the Arameans and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel. The Israelites also mustered their army and camped opposite the Arameans. The Israelites were like two small flocks of goats, while the Arameans covered the countryside. This time also, the Arameans had a huge advantage in numbers of soldiers and weaponry.

However, another miracle was on the way. Look at verse 28. “The man of God came up and told the king of Israel, ‘This is what the Lord says: “Because the Arameans think the Lord is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the Lord.”’” Here we find repeated the phrase, “…and you will know that I am the Lord.” The Lord was not happy that the Arameans explained away his intervention in the war by localizing him to the hills. God wanted to make it clear that he, the Lord God of Israel, had given victory to his people. So he promised to deliver the Arameans into Israel’s hands for a second time, even though they fought in the valley. God wanted both the Israelites and the Arameans to know that he is the Lord; the Lord of lords and the Most High God. The Israelites had lost the knowledge of the one true God due to the influence of Baal worship. God wanted to restore the knowledge of the one true God so that he might reign over them and reveal himself to people of all nations through them. God is the only true God because he is the Creator God. God is the only true God because he is the only Savior for mankind. Isaiah 42:8 says, “I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.” And Isaiah 43:11 says, “I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior.”

Here we remember Proverbs 19:21, which says, “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.” Although a man plans something and prepares thoroughly, his plan will not succeed if it is against the Lord’s purpose. This principle applies to every aspect of our lives, such as our jobs, school study, family life, and ministry. It applies personally and on a national level. Although we prepare thoroughly, unless our purpose is in line with the Lord’s purpose, we will not prevail in the end. However, if we work with the Lord’s purpose, we will succeed no matter what obstacle stands in the way. Therefore, whatever we do, it is most important for us to work with the Lord’s purpose and pray for his help.

So what happened? The Israelites inflicted 100,000 casualities on the Aramean foot soldiers in one day. The rest of them escaped to the city of Aphek, where the wall collapsed on 27,000 of them. And Ben-Hadad fled to the city and hid in an inner room. Ben-Hadad’s officials thought that Ahab would forgive them if they humbled themselves by wearing sackcloth around their waists and rope around their heads. They knew Ahab’s weakness and took advantage of it. It worked. When they approached in that way, Ahab’s pride was boosted. So he welcomed Ben-Hadad into his chariot and made a treaty with him and let him go. However, Ben-Hadad was actually God’s prisoner. The Lord had determined to kill Ben-Hadad (42). Ahab had no right to release him. By doing so, Ahab worked against God’s purpose.

II.  The Lord reveals his judgment (20:35-22:53)

God had given Ahab great victory by his one-sided grace. Ahab should have realized that God is the Lord. He should have thanked God and glorified God and obeyed God’s commands without compromise. But Ahab did not thank or glorify God. Then, God pronounced judgment against him.

First, God sentences Ahab; Ahab is sullen and angry (20:35-43). Look at verse 35. “By the word of the Lord one of the sons of the prophets said to his companion, ‘Strike me with your weapon,’ but the man refused.” It must have seemed hard for the man to strike his fellow prophet. But in fact, he revealed a humanistic tendency. When the Lord gives his word, prophets must obey as a matter of life or death. “So the prophet said, ‘Because you have not obeyed the Lord, as soon as you leave me a lion will kill you.’ And after the man went away, a lion found him and killed him” (36). The lion did not like the disobedient prophet and willingly killed him. This leads us to think that if disobedient prophets cannot escape God’s judgment, neither will disobedient kings. To be worthy of delivering God’s message of judgment to the king, a prophet’s attitude must be right. God’s messenger must overcome humanistic ideas and be ready to deliver any message—not only the words of God’s blessing, but also the words of God’s judgment.

“The prophet found another man and said, ‘Strike me, please’” (37a). This time he asked more kindly and did not specify the use of a weapon. So the man struck him by faith and wounded him (37b). Now the prophet was qualified to deliver God’s message of judgment to the king. He went and stood by the road waiting for the king, disguised as a wounded soldier with his headband pulled over his eyes (38). Then he called to the king, asking to clarify a judgment against him for letting his prisoner escape during battle. He had been told, “Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent of silver.” But while he was busy here and there, the man disappeared (39-40a). [By the way, a talent of silver in today’s market is equivalent to about $15,600—an impossible amount for an ordinary solider to pay.] The king of Israel said, “You have pronounced it yourself.” It means that the soldier deserved the death sentence. Then the prophet quickly removed the headband from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. The prophet delivered the message of judgment to the king, “This is what the Lord says: ‘You have set free a man I had determined should die. Therefore it is your life for his life, your people for his people’” (41-42). When Ahab heard this message of judgment, he should have repented and hunted down Ben-Hadad and killed him. However, the Bible says he was sullen and angry and went to his palace in Samaria. Ben-Hadad was the enemy of Israel and at the same time an enemy of God. God wanted to put him to death as judgment for his sin. He had humiliated the people of Israel and especially Ahab. If Ahab had a little discernment, he would not have allowed Ben-Hadad to live. But in the time of God’s great victory, Ahab became conceited. He did not thank and glorify God. Rather, he made a treaty with God’s enemy and set free one whom God wanted to destroy. When Ahab was rebuked, he became sullen and angry like a child. Here we learn that in the time of God’s great victory we must honor God as God. We should not become proud, but humble ourselves, thinking about why God gave us victory and remember God’s purpose. We must render glory to God. Furthermore, when God’s word rebukes us, we should not be sullen and angry, but humble and obedient.

Second, God’s judgment tempered by mercy (21:1-28). When Ahab responded by being sullen and angry, he did not get better; instead, he got worse, as the incident of Naboth’s vineyard reveals. Ahab wanted a vineyard which was next to his palace to use as a vegetable garden. The king lacked nothing. But still he wanted the pleasure of having a vegetable garden next to his palace. He was greedy. James 1:15 says, “Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” This vineyard belonged to a man named Naboth. Ahab offered to give Naboth a better vineyard or pay a good price. But Naboth refused, saying, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.” Naboth stood on the word of the Lord which governed the transfer of property in Israel (Num 36:7; Eze 46:18). Based on the word of God, he refused even the king’s command. Naboth must have known the danger of refusing the king. But he refused the king’s offer courageously in order to obey the Lord’s command. To him, to obey the Lord’s command was more important than saving his life. He feared the Lord, so he did not fear the king. Naboth had to choose whether to obey God or the king. He chose to obey God at the risk of his life. Finally, he was indeed murdered. But his death was the death of a righteous man. Obviously, he was one of the 7,000 who did not kneel down before Baal.

When Naboth refused his offer, based on the Lord’s command, Ahab should have recognized his sin of greed and repented. Instead, his pride was hurt, so he lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. When Jezebel heard about this, she devised an evil plan to put Naboth to death and take his vineyard by means of two scoundrels and false charges. In this way she took Naboth’s inheritance by force. She became a robber and a murderer. Ahab took possession of the vineyard without any sense of shame. He might have said thank you to his wife and began to do a celebration dance. Then, was that all? No. Look at verses 17-24. God judged Ahab and Jezebel. The Lord sent Elijah to tell them, “Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!” When Elijah approached, Ahab said, “So you have found me, my enemy!” Elijah answered, “I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord.” Ahab’s sin was not only against Naboth, it was sin against the Lord. When we sin against others, it is sin against the Lord. That is why, in the parable of the prodigal son, the second son said, “I have sinned against heaven and against you” (Lk 15:21). Also, when David committed adultery and murder, he confessed, “Against you, you only have I sinned, and done what is evil your sight” (Ps 51:4). God pronounced judgment against Ahab: “I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free. I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. And concerning Jezebel: Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel” (21-24). The author commented on Ahab’s evilness as follows: “There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel” (25-26).

When Ahab heard the words of judgment, an amazing thing happened. He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly (27). The Lord noticed Ahab’s repentant attitude and tempered his judgment with mercy. The Lord decided not to bring the disaster in Ahab’s day, but in the days of his son (28). Here we learn that God is merciful to those who repent, even if they are very evil. God wants us to realize our sins and repent sincerely. Then we can receive God’s mercy. Ezekiel 33:11 says, “Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’” This is God’s heart. Ahab’s repentance and God’s display of mercy teach us not to be fatalistic about God’s prophetic judgments. Some people, when they hear such judgments, give up and live in fatalism. But God is always willing to show mercy to those who repent.

Third, God’s judgment was fulfilled (22:1-53). Although Ahab repented at the critical time, he did not change the fundamental direction of his life. In order to be saved from the Lord’s judgment, we must bear the fruit of repentance and live for God’s purpose. Ahab escaped disaster in his lifetime. But he could not avoid the Lord’s inevitable judgment because he did not really change. He died in the war when he wanted to take Ramoth Gilead from the king of Aram. His death was ordered by Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, whom Ahab had released against the Lord’s will. Ahab’s death fulfilled the prophetic judgment spoken against him, “It is your life for his life” (20:42).

When Ahab and Jehoshaphat collaborated to fight against Aram, they consulted the prophets in order to know the will of God. Among the prophets there were four hundred false prophets and one true prophet, Micaiah. All four hundred prophets gave optimistic predictions in order to please Ahab. They had no truth in their hearts. Only Micaiah spoke the words of truth without compromise. This angered Ahab. So Micaiah was put in prison. The problem of the Israelites was the lack of a true shepherd who spoke the word of truth without compromise. There were four hundred prophets, but they all lied to save their skin and to deceive the people. Micaiah stood on the side of God and spoke the truth. So he was abandoned by all the other prophets. Ahab also hated him. Democracy, the rule of the majority, may be the best form of government in this world. However, in the spiritual world, this principle does not apply. Even one spiritual person who can speak the truth is more important than all other people who tell lies. Verses 30-36 show that Ahab died when someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armor. Although Ahab disguised himself, he could not escape God’s judgment. It was a random arrow, but it was the arrow of God’s judgment. No one can escape the arrow of God’s judgment. When Ahab died, people washed his chariot at a pool in Samaria and the dogs licked up his blood, as the word of the Lord had declared (38). God’s word was fulfilled thoroughly and in detail.

Verses 41-50 tell us about the reign of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. Verse 43 says, “In everything he walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.” Generally, he was a good and God-fearing king. However, he collaborated with King Ahab, thinking that Judah and Northern Israel might be unified peacefully. So his son Jehoram married Ahab’s daughter, Athaliah. It was a big mistake. But it seems that Jehoshaphat later repented. When he tried to send trading ships to Ophir for gold, Ahaziah, son of Ahab, wanted to join together with him. But Jehoshaphat refused. He must have realized that God was not pleased with Northern Israel through the death of Ahab.

After Ahab died, his son Ahaziah became king of Northern Israel. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, because he walked in the ways of his father and mother and in the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. He served the Baals and provoked the Lord, the God of Israel to anger, just as his father had done (51-53).

Let’s think about the words, “You will know that I am the Lord.” This phrase is stated twice in this passage (20:13,28), and repeated often in the Bible (Exodus, Ezekiel, Isaiah, etc.). What does it mean? It means that the Lord is the Creator God and the Sovereign Ruler of the world. The Lord is the only Savior, and he is the Judge of all mankind. To those who humble themselves and obey him, he shows mercy. But on those who are proud and disobedient, he carries out judgment. For example, when the Israelites took possession of the promised land, it fulfilled God’s promise of blessing to Abraham. At the same time, it was God’s judgment against the Canaanites for their sins of idolatry and moral corruption. The Lord wants all peoples on earth to know who the Lord is. The problem is that they do not know the Lord. People do evil because they do not know the Lord. Even many Christians doubt God’s love, complain, and abandon the Lord if they do not get what they want. They do not know who the Lord is. If we know who the Lord is, we fear him and have awesome respect for him. Though we sin in our weakness, we do not need to be fatalistic. Rather, we must come to the Lord as we are, depending on his mercy. The purpose of Bible study is to know the Lord. God pours out his blessing on us one-sidedly. God gives us good grades, promotions in our jobs, the best husband or wife, and the best children. God blesses our ministries by making them fruitful. Why does God bless us like this? It is so that we may recognize him as the Lord, thank him, honor him, obey him, follow his direction, and serve him wholeheartedly. It is not just for us to enjoy the benefit of the blessing. God wants us to know him as the Lord and to honor him, in both the time of blessing and the time of adversity. When we do so, God blesses and uses us all the more. However, if we misuse God’s blessing, and do not thank God, and honor him as God, the Lord will reveal wrath and judgment.

Let’s pray that to honor the Lord as God in our personal lives, our families, our community, and our nation.