



First Kings - Chapter Twenty

V 1 Kings 17:1-22:40 - Elijah and Ahab (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty

After Elijah's recruitment of Elisha, one expects to read of his anointing of Hazael as king over Syria and of Jehu as king over Israel. Instead, one finds a story in which a different prophet appears and in which probably a different king of Syria, Ben-hadad, loses a war with Ahab. The message of Chapter 19 is thus underlined: Elijah is not the only servant of God left, in spite of what he has claimed; and the quiet ways of God must take their course for a while before the events spoken of in 1 Kings 19:17 come to pass.

Ahab's reign was marked by repeated conflict with Ben-hadad of Syria. Ben-hadad's poor military organisation accounted for his failed siege of Samaria, and Ahab defeated him again the next spring at Aphek. Ahab lost his life, however, attempting to retake Ramoth-gilead from Ben-hadad at the eastern edge of his kingdom.

V.d 1 Kings 20:1-43 - Ahab's War Against Syria

Refer to the chapter summary above and the map on page 2 below.

V.d.i 1 Kings 20:1-12 - Ahab's Wars with the Aramæans

King Ben-hadad of Aram was prepared to go to war against Samaria unless Ahab gave him the choicest of his wives, children and treasure. Ahab initially agree but when Ben-hadad stated he would send his servants to take all that they wanted from Ahab he sought counsel from the elders of Israel who advised him not to agree. Hence, Ben-hadad prepared his men to attack the northern kingdom's capital and their king.



Ahab's Wars with Syria

¹ King Ben-hadad of Aram gathered all his army together; thirty-two kings were with him, along with horses and chariots. He marched against Samaria, laid siege to it, and attacked it. ² Then he sent

messengers into the city to King Ahab of Israel, and said to him: ‘Thus says Ben-hadad: ³ Your silver and gold are mine; your fairest wives and children also are mine.’ ⁴ The king of Israel answered, ‘As you say, my lord, O king, I am yours, and all that I have.’ ⁵ The messengers came again and said: ‘Thus says Ben-hadad: I sent to you, saying, “Deliver to me your silver and gold, your wives and children”; ⁶ nevertheless, I will send my servants to you tomorrow about this time, and they shall search your house and the houses of your servants, and lay hands on whatever pleases them, and take it away.’

1 Kings 20:1-6

King Ben-hadad of Aram gathered all his army together, thirty-two kings were with him. This was a formidable military attack against Israel. Although they were outwardly strong politically and militarily during the reign of Ahab, they were not strong enough to discourage such an attack. It is possible that the national and military might of Israel was greatly weakened by the three and a half year drought and famine that had just ended. Ben-hadad may be the same king Asa enlisted against Baasha in 1 Kings 15:18; but more likely he may be that king’s son or grandson by the same name. The thirty-two kings would include minor tribal chiefs or kings of other cities.

Your silver and gold are mine. The king of Syria seeks to reduce Israel to vassal status. His terms are at first accepted by Ahab, only to be later rejected after a revision in v.6 that apparently makes them more extensive (whatever pleases them), intrusive (search your house), and immediate (tomorrow).

As you say, my lord, O king, I am yours, and all that I have. Ahab’s response to Ben-hadad fits his general personality. He was a man concerned with the luxuries and comforts of living, and so he did not have the character to stand in the face of such a threat. Ahab surrendered unconditionally to Ben-hadad believing he was in no position to resist him.

They shall search your house and the houses of your servants. This was a greater demand than that Ben-hadad had made at first. When Ahab agreed to his terms readily, Ben-hadad demanded the additional right to unlimited search of the palace and the houses of Ahab’s officials so as to carry away anything of value.

⁷ Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land, and said, ‘Look now! See how this man is seeking trouble; for he sent to me for my wives, my children, my silver, and my gold; and I did not refuse him.’ ⁸ Then all the elders and all the people said to him, ‘Do not listen or consent.’ ⁹ So he said to the messengers of Ben-hadad, ‘Tell

my lord the king: All that you first demanded of your servant I will do; but this thing I cannot do.’ The messengers left and brought him word again.

1 Kings 20:7-9

Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land. It was wiser for Ahab to seek the counsel of the elders of the land before he surrendered to the Syrians. Now, in the brief time between the message of surrender and the actual abduction of his women and the plundering of his goods he sought counsel. Despite the miraculous work of the Lord on Mount Carmel he did not seek the counsel of God!

Look now! See how this man is seeking trouble. This may seem an obvious statement but it implies that Ahab sees Ben-hadad as spoiling for a fight no matter what concessions the king may have made to him. Later, King Joram thought that another Aramæan leader Naaman was also seeking trouble but in his case he had heard that he could be healed of leprosy in Israel: <<*When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, ‘Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me’*>> (2 Kings 5:7).

Do not listen or consent. The elders of Israel rightly saw that such surrender to Ben-hadad and the Syrians was the first step to a total loss of sovereignty for Israel. If they wanted to remain a kingdom at all, they had to resist this threat.

But this thing I cannot do. Ahab told Ben-hadad that he would do most of what he requested, but not all. However, to deny a tyrant on one point is to deny him on every point. Ahab could expect a harsh reaction.

¹⁰ Ben-hadad sent to him and said, ‘The gods do so to me, and more also, if the dust of Samaria will provide a handful for each of the people who follow me.’ ¹¹ The king of Israel answered, ‘Tell him: One who puts on armour should not brag like one who takes it off.’ ¹² When Ben-hadad heard this message – now he had been drinking with the kings in the booths – he said to his men, ‘Take your positions!’ And they took their positions against the city.

1 Kings 20:10-12

The gods do so to me, and more also. Jezebel swore a similar oath of vengeance against Elijah: <<*Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow’*>> (1 Kings 19:2). It was a meaningless oath for imaginary gods can do nothing.

One who puts on armour should not brag like one who takes it off. Although it was uncharacteristically bold speech from Ahab, it was also a wonderful piece of wisdom. It is unwise to boast about one's exploits before the battle has even begun; there is time enough for boasting when the battle is won: <<**May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts**>> (Psalm 12:3), <<**Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring**>> (Proverbs 27:1), <<**Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth**>> (Jeremiah 9:23), and: <<**Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain their strength, nor shall the mighty save their lives**>> (Amos 2:14). The advice of Paul is: <<**May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world**>> (Galatians 6:14).

V.d.ii 1 Kings 20:13-22 - Prophetic Opposition to Ahab

A prophet advised Ahab that the Lord had given the Aramæans into his hand and gave him instructions how the battle should commence. So Ahab went up against Ben-hadad and defeated him. However, the prophet warned that Ben-hadad would return the following spring.

¹³ Then a certain prophet came up to King Ahab of Israel and said, 'Thus says the Lord, Have you seen all this great multitude? Look, I will give it into your hand today; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

¹⁴ Ahab said, 'By whom?' He said, 'Thus says the Lord, By the young men who serve the district governors.' Then he said, 'Who shall begin the battle?' He answered, 'You.'¹⁵ Then he mustered the young men who served the district governors, two hundred and thirty-two; after them he mustered all the people of Israel, seven thousand.

1 Kings 20:13-15

Then a certain prophet came up to King Ahab of Israel. This nameless prophet does not seem to be either Elijah or Elisha. He was one of the 7,000 in Israel that were quietly faithful to Yahweh.

Thus says the Lord, Have you seen all this great multitude? Look, I will give it into your hand today; and you shall know that I am the Lord. This was a generous promise of God towards Ahab and Israel. Their hardened idolatry and rejection of God deserved divine abandonment. God had every right to just leave them alone and let them perish without his help. Yet God is rich in mercy, and he showed that mercy to Ahab and to Israel. There is a small irony in the statement, 'and you shall know that I am the Lord'. Ahab saw the victory of Yahweh over the

pagan god Baal on Mount Carmel, yet he was not completely convinced. Graciously, God would give him even more evidence.

Ahab said, 'By whom?' Ahab looked around at his army and military leaders and naturally wondered how God could bring a victory against a mighty enemy with them. Ahab wondered who would lead the battle and God told him, 'You'. God wanted to win this victory by working through the unlikely people Ahab already had. Israel is to fight according to a divine battle plan that does not make much human sense, as perfectly illustrated in the case of Gideon in Judges Chapter 7. The young men, plural of Hebrew *na'ar*, are to initiate the battle – young men unschooled in military matters, like the young and untrained David, who is also called a *na'ar* in 1 Samuel 17:33, a youth, in contrast to the warrior Goliath. The plan benefits from the fact that Ben-hadad is drunk as the Israelites approach (v.12 and v.16), and seemingly incapable of uttering coherent or sensible instructions (v.18).

Whenever a work for God is to be done, people often ask Ahab's question: "By whom?" When many Christian leaders ask God that question, they expect God will answer by bringing someone new to them, a leader or champion that can do the work or at least help with it. However, God's normal way of working is to use the people already with the Christian leader, even if they seem to be a very unlikely army.

God would do this work against Syria and Ben-hadad with an army of only seven thousand. Undoubtedly, these were not the same seven thousand that remained faithful to God in Israel, but there was a correspondence between their numbers to show that God could and would work through each group.

¹⁶ They went out at noon, while Ben-hadad was drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the thirty-two kings allied with him. ¹⁷ The young men who served the district governors went out first. Ben-hadad had sent out scouts, and they reported to him, 'Men have come out from Samaria.' ¹⁸ He said, 'If they have come out for peace, take them alive; if they have come out for war, take them alive.'

1 Kings 20:16-18

They went out at noon, while Ben-hadad was drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the thirty-two kings allied with him. The same sinful heart that made Ben-hadad attack Israel also made him get drunk at this important time before battle. In part, his own weak character defeated him. Getting drunk proved the downfall of King Elah: *<<But his servant Zimri, commander of half his chariots, conspired against him. When he was at Tirzah, drinking himself drunk in the house of Arza, who was in charge of the palace at Tirzah, Zimri*

came in and struck him down and killed him, in the twenty-seventh year of King Asa of Judah, and succeeded him>> (1 Kings 16:9-10).

If they have come out for peace, take them alive; if they have come out for war, take them alive. It may be that Ben-hadad intended to say that if the men from Israel had come for war, they should be attacked and killed. Perhaps he spoke in a drunken confusion, giving foolish orders to his soldiers. It seems unlikely that this was an act of compassion on his part.

¹⁹ But these had already come out of the city: the young men who served the district governors, and the army that followed them. ²⁰ Each killed his man; the Aramæans fled and Israel pursued them, but King Ben-hadad of Aram escaped on a horse with the cavalry. ²¹ The king of Israel went out, attacked the horses and chariots, and defeated the Aramæans with a great slaughter.

1 Kings 20:19-21

Each killed his man; the Aramæans fled and Israel pursued them. God blessed the army of Israel and the leaders that Ahab had, even blessing Ahab's own leadership of the army. Despite great odds, they won the battle.

The battle strategy appears to have been to send out the small but well trained advance party who could perhaps draw near to the Syrians without arousing too much alarm and then, at a given signal, initiate a charge that, joined by Ahab's main strike force, would both catch the drunken Aramæans off guard and throw them into confusion. The plan was more successful than Ahab dared to imagine - it was, after all, God's plan.

²² Then the prophet approached the king of Israel and said to him, 'Come, strengthen yourself, and consider well what you have to do; for in the spring the king of Aram will come up against you.'

1 Kings 20:22

Then the prophet approached the king of Israel. This nameless prophet again advised Ahab. The victory over Ben-hadad did not end the conflict between Israel and Syria.

Come, strengthen yourself. Both sides prepare for a continuation of warfare the following spring, a characteristic time for kings to go to war as stated in 2 Samuel 11:1. The Syrian preparations involve a reorganisation of the empire (v.24), the replacement of the vassal kings with commanders directly accountable to Ben-hadad. The royal advisers seek greater military cohesion through a greater degree of political control. The Syrians also raise a new army to replace the one destroyed

in v.21, planning next time to fight the Israelites in the plain (v.23), where horse and chariot will give them an advantage that is all too easily lost in the hills: <<*The Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain, because they had chariots of iron*>> (Judges 1:19). However, the theological reasoning that underlies their military strategy is faulty. The Lord is the only real God there is, and he is active both in the hills (Chapter 18), and anywhere else he chooses (Chapter 17).

V.d.iii 1 Kings 20:23-34 - The Aramæans Are Defeated

The following spring the Aramæans again brought their armies to face King Ahab but they chose to do so on the plains as they believed that Israel's God was only strong in the hill country. Therefore, to prove them wrong, the Lord sent a prophet to Ahab to tell him that he would win this battle against overwhelming odds. And it was so. King Ben-hadad then sought peace terms with Ahab and a treaty was signed between the two although Ahab was expected to destroy all the Aramæans.

²³ The servants of the king of Aram said to him, 'Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.' ²⁴ Also do this: remove the kings, each from his post, and put commanders in place of them; ²⁵ and muster an army like the army that you have lost, horse for horse, and chariot for chariot; then we will fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.' He heeded their voice, and did so.

1 Kings 20:23-25

Their gods are gods of the hills. The idea of the localised deity was prominent in the ancient world. They felt that particular gods had authority over particular areas. Because the recent victory was won by Israel on hilly terrain, the servants of the king of Syria believed that the God of Israel was a localised deity with power over the hills, not the plains. The Assyrian King Sennacherib made a similar error when he brought his army up against Jerusalem: <<*Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should save Jerusalem out of my hand?*>> (Isaiah 36:20).

Charles Spurgeon commented, "Here they imagined that God could be moulded into an image that they wanted or could relate to. The art of god-making is very common among men. Instead of going to revelation to see what God is, and humbly believing in him as he reveals himself, men sit down and consider what sort of God he ought to be, and in so doing they are no wiser than the man who makes a god of mud or wood or stone."

Then we will fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they. The action they recommended was logical, given their theology. They had cavalry and chariots. Open flat ground would give them a significant military advantage. Their theological belief directed their advice and action for they did not know the Lord and the strength he can give to mortals in battles where the odds against them are overwhelming.

²⁶ In the spring Ben-hadad mustered the Aramæans and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel. ²⁷ After the Israelites had been mustered and provisioned, they went out to engage them; the people of Israel encamped opposite them like two little flocks of goats, while the Aramæans filled the country. ²⁸ A man of God approached and said to the king of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord: Because the Aramæans have said, “The Lord is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys”, therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord.’

1 Kings 20:26-28

Aphek. The second battle is considerably farther north than the first, which took place near Samaria (v.1). In another incident, Ahab and Ben-hadad II conspired together against the Assyrian threat from the east. A text from the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, who ruled from 859 to 824 BC, describes a battle he fought at Qarqar on the Orontes River in 853 BC. A coalition was apparently able to halt any Assyrian advance. According to the text, ‘Ahab the Israelite’ provided ‘2,000 chariots and 10,000 men’ to the coalition, which included Ben-hadad II and others. The authors of Kings have not even mentioned this battle, however, because it is not relevant to their theme.

The people of Israel encamped opposite them like two little flocks of goats, while the Aramæans filled the country. When Ben-hadad came to avenge their previous loss, he came with overwhelming force. Ben-hadad did not want to risk another humiliation.

The Lord is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys. God intends to refute the Syrians’ false notions about him. God took the bad theology of the Syrians as a personal insult. Bad and wrong ideas about God always take away from his glory and majesty, never adding to them.

God resents their blasphemy, and is determined to punish it. They shall now be defeated in such a way as to show that God’s power is everywhere, and that a great army is nothing against him.

²⁹ They encamped opposite one another for seven days. Then on the seventh day the battle began; the Israelites killed one hundred thousand Aramæan foot-soldiers in one day. ^{30a} The rest fled into the city of Aphek; and the wall fell on twenty-seven thousand men that were left.

1 Kings 20:29-30a

The Israelites killed one hundred thousand Aramæan foot-soldiers in one day. After the great victory on the battlefield, God moved in other extraordinary ways to defeat the Syrians, who had defamed his character through their false understanding of him. The twenty-seven thousand in Aphek would include everyone in the city when the walls fell, ending the siege: <<*Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel: Because you reject this word, and put your trust in oppression and deceit, and rely on them; therefore this iniquity shall become for you like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant*>> (Isaiah 30:12-13).

^{30b} Ben-hadad also fled, and entered the city to hide. ³¹ His servants said to him, ‘Look, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings; let us put sackcloth around our waists and ropes on our heads, and go out to the king of Israel; perhaps he will spare your life.’ ³² So they tied sackcloth around their waists, put ropes on their heads, went to the king of Israel, and said, ‘Your servant Ben-hadad says, “Please let me live.”’ And he said, ‘Is he still alive? He is my brother.’ ³³ Now the men were watching for an omen; they quickly took it up from him and said, ‘Yes, Ben-hadad is your brother.’ Then he said, ‘Go and bring him.’ So Ben-hadad came out to him; and he had him come up into the chariot. ³⁴ Ben-hadad said to him, ‘I will restore the towns that my father took from your father; and you may establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.’ The king of Israel responded, ‘I will let you go on those terms.’ So he made a treaty with him and let him go.

1 Kings 20:30b-34

Let us put sackcloth around our waists and ropes on our heads, and go out to the king of Israel. Not long before this Ben-hadad spoke severe threats against Ahab and the Kingdom of Israel (vv.1-6). Now he humbled himself as much as he could to win mercy and favour from the unexpectedly triumphant King of Israel. Sackcloth signifies penitence: <<*When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth,*

and went about dejectedly>> (1 Kings 21:27), <<The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground>> (Lamentations 2:10), and: <<Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Grain-offering and drink-offering are withheld from the house of your God>> (Joel 1:13), and ropes signify submissiveness since prisoners may be led by them.

The image, part of reliefs found in Nineveh from the time of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, depicts prisoners being led along by rope. Although they depict scenes some 150 years after the death of King Ahab, they portray something similar to that intended by the text here.



Sinners should come to God with the same manner as Ben-hadad. They should come with sincerity, with humility, with surrender, with earnestness, and with close watching to see whether any sign of mercy would come to them.

Is he still alive? He is my brother. Ahab felt a kinship towards this pagan king with exceedingly pagan ideas of God. Perhaps Ahab wanted Ben-hadad and Syria's friendship as protection against the powerful and threatening Assyrian Empire. If so, he looked for friends in the wrong places.

I will restore the towns; you may establish bazaars. The Israelite cities taken by the Syrians in an earlier period are returned, and Ahab is given trading privileges in Damascus.

I will let you go on those terms. Ahab had no business making this treaty. The victory was the Lord's and did not belong to Ahab; he had no right to negotiate away the victory.

V.d.iv 1 Kings 20:35-43 - A Prophet Condemns Ahab

Another prophet then met Ahab on the road disguised as one who had just come from battle. He told the king that he had been commanded to look after a prisoner but had become distracted and had lost him. As a result he was condemned to death. Ahab agreed that the sentence was just. The prophet then stated that this is precisely what Ahab had done in signing a treaty with Ben-hadad instead of killing him and thus Ahab had pronounced a just sentence on his own life.

³⁵ At the command of the Lord a certain member of a company of prophets said to another, 'Strike me!' But the man refused to strike him. ³⁶ Then he said to him, 'Because you have not obeyed the voice of

the Lord, as soon as you have left me, a lion will kill you.’ And when he had left him, a lion met him and killed him. ³⁷ Then he found another man and said, ‘Strike me!’ So the man hit him, striking and wounding him. ³⁸ Then the prophet departed, and waited for the king along the road, disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes.

1 Kings 20:35-38

A certain member of a company of prophets. This seems to be a different prophet from the man mentioned earlier in the chapter. This is another reminder that the 7,000 faithful followers of Yahweh were active in Israel. Although he is not named, Josephus believed the anonymous man of God introduced here was Micaiah who figures so prominently in the next story. He suggested it was in retaliation for Micaiah’s prophetic condemnation that the king put him in prison.

A company of prophets is a reference to members of prophetic communities. Although their prophecies are mostly omitted from Scripture they were clearly servants of God, often operating under the guidance of one of the more gifted and prominent prophets such as Samuel or Elijah. They were above all else faithful servants of God who faithfully spoke his word most frequently to the rich and powerful rulers who were leading the people away from God. This is the first reference to these special bands of prophets who appear during the critical period of the Omride dynasty but are otherwise not well attested to.

Strike me! Directed by God, the prophet needed an injury to display to King Ahab. When his colleague refused, the prophet announced coming judgement on him through the unusual method of a lion attack.

This unnamed recipient of the judgement was not just another man in the kingdom of Israel. The implication was that he was a fellow member of the company of prophets. He himself was a man given to following God and sensitive to God’s work through his prophets. He should have known better than to refuse to do as his fellow prophet requested, and thereby he was actually failing to obey a command from the Lord.

A lion will kill you. The scene is reminiscent of Chapter 13, where the same point is made that even prophets must obey the divine word and the same punishment is pronounced. The implication is also clear in both passages: if disobedient prophets cannot escape God’s judgement, then disobedient kings certainly will not.

Then the prophet departed, and waited for the king along the road, disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes. Ready with his injury, the prophet waited for the arrival of King Ahab so that he could deliver his message from God to the king. A tough message to deliver and an even tougher one to receive!

³⁹ As the king passed by, he cried to the king and said, ‘Your servant went out into the thick of the battle; then a soldier turned and brought a man to me, and said, “Guard this man; if he is missing, your life shall be given for his life, or else you shall pay a talent of silver.”

⁴⁰ While your servant was busy here and there, he was gone.’ The king of Israel said to him, ‘So shall your judgement be; you yourself have decided it.’

1 Kings 20:39-40

Your servant went out into the thick of the battle. After the pattern of other prophets, this anonymous prophet brought a message to King Ahab through a fictitious account. In a scene reminiscent of 2 Samuel 12:1-4, the prophet tricks the king into pronouncing judgement on himself, albeit with a disguise whose purpose is obscure at this time. Did Ahab know this man, or did prophets have distinctive facial garb? Did he hope that the king would simply take him as a servant who had been involved in a battle? Anyway, he tells a story that implies that because he failed in his guard duties, he is liable to pay a fine of a talent of silver, an impossible amount for an ordinary soldier or citizen to raise, or he would suffer death. In fact, the prophet removes his disguise in v.41 and Ahab immediately recognises him as one of the prophets. Without the disguise he would never have been able to tell his tale and have Ahab confirm the judgement.

While your servant was busy here and there, he was gone. The prophet’s story told of a man who was responsible to guard the life of another, and proved himself unfaithful. In the story, the guilty man’s excuse was that he was distracted, which was no excuse at all. He should have paid attention to the job he had to do even in the midst of battle.

The prophet’s story with the fictional excuse becomes real in the life of many, especially many ministers of the Gospel. If a man is called to preach the Word, and becomes busy over a hundred things other than that of his central work, and so loses the opportunity to preach, his failure is complete. That which is a person’s God-appointed work, they must do. If they fail in that, the fact that they have been busy here and there, doing all sorts of other things, is of no avail. Spurgeon comments, “He was gone. Even as the fictional prisoner escaped, so many opportunities escape us in the Christian life. I want you all to remember this morning that if any portion of life has not been spent in God’s service it is gone. Time past is gone. You can never have it back again, not even the last moment which just now glided by.”

So shall your judgement be; you yourself have decided it. In the prophet’s story, he was unfaithful in guarding something that was entrusted to him. Ahab agrees on the justice of the impossible fine or death sentence and thus provides the prophet

with the opportunity to declare Ahab's life forfeit because Ahab has released an enemy king whom God had devoted to destruction (v.42); refer also to 1 Samuel 15:17-24, where Samuel instructs Saul for the reasons why he has lost the kingship of Israel.

Ahab's death is in fact strangely prefigured in the very manner in which God's word about it comes to him. A prophet has disguised himself as a soldier fresh from fighting the Syrians, in order to catch the king. In 1 Kings 22:29-40 Ahab will disguise himself as a soldier when going out to fight the Syrians, in order to trap a prophet and his God. His strategy will fail as spectacularly as this prophet's has succeeded.

⁴¹ Then he quickly took the bandage away from his eyes. The king of Israel recognised him as one of the prophets. ⁴² Then he said to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Because you have let the man go whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people."' ⁴³ The king of Israel set out towards home, resentful and sullen, and came to Samaria.

1 Kings 20:41-43

The king of Israel recognised him as one of the prophets. This showed why the prophet found it wise to disguise himself as a soldier recently returned from battle, and why the wound was necessary. Ahab consciously shielded himself from the prophets.

Because you have let the man go whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people. God intended that Ben-hadad should be utterly destroyed, but he also intended that this happen by the hand of the army of Israel. God was interested in more than the mere death of Ben-hadad, but also in the way that death came about.

The king of Israel set out towards home, resentful and sullen, and came to Samaria. Ahab was sullen and displeased, but he was not repentant. He had the sorrow of being a sinner and knowing the consequences of sin, without having the sorrow for the sin itself. It seems that Ahab had a tendency to sulk as he also did so when he was unable to secure the land purchase from Naboth: <<*Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, 'I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.'* He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat>> (1 Kings 21:4).