

Our lessons are taking us deeper and deeper into the good, the bad and the ugly – characters in the Divided Kingdom that is. The colorful events recorded in the Old Testament may be foreign to some of us – even a bit daunting. I mean, trying to pronounce the words and the towns – oy vey! When the author of Romans declared, everything written in the past was written to teach us so that we might have hope, he was referring to the Hebrew Bible – what we call the Old Testament – and when we study it, we learn about God's character and His attributes. And, it shows us how God moved among His people to bring forth the Messiah.

Aren't you more than a little fascinated hearing about notorious people? Bad decisions make good stories, right? Bible stories about notorious people often teach us how and when God will deal with sin. They illustrate our need for God's Perfect Sacrifice - Jesus - Who paid for the sin we commit.

Although wickedness abounded in these two chapters, God revealed His grace and mercy. God revealed His power, and God revealed His justice. He revealed Himself so that all would know He is the Lord!

King Ahab was supposed to lead Israel as an unwavering follower of Jehovah, the one true God. God commanded the kings of Israel to study His Law so they would know how to rule and live righteously. However, Ahab earned the worst king of Israel award. In fact, no king before him was more evil or provoked God's anger *more* than Ahab.

It was bad enough he followed sinful examples of former kings, but then he married Jezebel, a princess from a pagan people. Israelites were not to intermarry with nations who worshipped idols because they would "Turn their hearts after their gods." (1 Kings 11:2) Jezebel brought her monstrous religion of idol worship and pagan rituals into Israel and she influenced Ahab to be an idol worshipper.

About 400 years earlier, Joshua, Israel's great leader, told the Israelites, "If you break the covenant of the LORD your God by worshiping and serving other gods, His anger will burn against you, and you will quickly vanish from the good land He has given you." (Joshua 23:16) Ahab abandoned the Lord's commands and promoted idolatry which ultimately ruined Israel.

Yet, as evil and disobedient as Ahab was, God used an enemy of Israel, to give Ahab opportunities to experience God's grace and mercy. The pagan nation of Aram, also known as Syria, were the Arameans, whose king was Ben-Hadad – Israel's bitter enemy. Ben-Hadad ruled over thirty-two smaller kingdoms. He wanted Israel's capital of Samaria to be number thirty-three.

Ben-Hadad's army surrounded Samaria to either force those inside to starve or force Ahab to surrender. Initially, Ben-Hadad demanded Ahab to turn over his silver and gold, and the best of his wives and children. I'm not sure what the "best" meant. Maybe only the prettiest wives; or only the best-behaved children?

If Ahab agreed, Samaria could still exist, but it would be controlled by a pagan nation. God's Law stated, "Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite." (Deuteronomy 17:15) But, Ahab surrendered and told Ben-Hadad, "It's all yours." He would have been smart if he offered up Jezebel, but what kind of king agrees to give away the best of his family, especially if he then would be left with only the *second-best*!

But Ben-Hadad wasn't done intimidating. His second demand was to allow his men to enter the homes of Ahab and his officials and take everything of value. Ahab had given in to Ben-Hadad's *first* demand, and it's likely he would have done so again, but *all* of Samaria advised against giving into the menacing bully-king. So, Ahab refused - and that meant war. Pre-war trash-talk followed. Ben-Hadad swore upon his gods he would grind Samaria into dust. Ahab responded with, "Brag after the battle, not before" - a macho version of, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch."

This story is a bit of a puzzler. Ahab was a very wicked king – like I said, award-winning wicked. He had little regard for the God of Israel, yet God intervened in his life and spoke to him through a prophet. The prophet's message was that the Lord God would defeat Ben-Hadad. Why? So Ahab would know that God is the one and only God.

To demonstrate His power, God wanted only a small force - a couple hundred inexperienced young men - to lead the battle. Ahab had only a meager army of 7,000 men to follow the young soldiers into battle - a very small army against the enemy's nearly 130,000. Yet, as Martin Luther once wrote, "One with God is a majority."

Confident in their victory, Ben-Hadad and his kings sat in their tents outside Samaria getting drunk, as the Israelites marched towards them.

Ben-Hadad wasn't sober enough to drive a chariot, let alone drive a battle. With a bottle of Aramaean beer in his hand (no, that's not in the Bible!), Ben-Hadad ordered his army that whether the Israelites attacked or not – take them alive. Ben-Hadad's drunken and foolish order tied his warrior's hands behind their backs - they couldn't capture the Israelites without lethal force, hence, the Israelites totally defeated them. Instead of Ben-Hadad grabbing the dust he thought would be left of Samaria, he grabbed a horse - and escaped.

We're not told if the great victory convinced Ahab that God is the only God of Israel, but once again, God sent a prophet with a message. Ahab was to prepare for another battle against Ben-Hadad in the spring.

Interesting, that not that long before, Ahab permitted Jezebel to slaughter many of God's prophets, but for a second time, Ahab listened to one. Maybe Jezebel wasn't in the palace that day to interfere. The second battle would be another opportunity for Ahab to acknowledge God is the Lord.

While Ahab listened to God's prophet, Ben-Hadad listened to his idol-worshipping advisors explain it wasn't his fault he lost the first battle – it was because of the *terrain*. The battle had been fought in the hills and the Arameans believed their gods weren't as powerful in the hills as Israel's God. But, if they fought the next battle in the valleys where the land is flatter, they believed their flatland gods would overpower Israel's God.

Spring came, and with it, Ben-Hadad's huge army. They marched to flat ground in a valley. The Aramean army filled the countryside with their numbers, their noise, horses and chariots. The Israelites looked like two little flocks of harmless goats! Picture a tee ball team playing against the Angels. No, make that the Red Sox. No contest, right? The Israelites were vastly outnumbered – just how God wanted it. There is truth in the Scripture, "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." (1 Corinthians 1:27)

The prophet told Ahab because the Arameans believed God's power was limited, God would deliver them into Ahab's hands. So that, God said, "You will know that I am the Lord." (1 Kings 20:28) The word "you" in *this* verse is plural, meaning that everyone, all of Israel, not just

Ahab, would know God is the Lord. That reminded me of David and Goliath. David told Goliath, "God will conquer you. Then the whole world will know there is a God in Israel." (1 Samuel 17:46)

The second battle ended with 100,000 Aramean soldiers lying dead. Survivors ran to a nearby city and God completed His destruction when the city walls fell and buried 27,000 more. I guess the flatland gods - flatlined.

The victory wasn't for Ahab. The Arameans had blasphemed God. They didn't believe Almighty God is - *All Mighty*. God defeated them to preserve the honor of His Name; of Who He is. His being and His power are everywhere. The Psalmist knew that. About the Lord he wrote, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I go up to the heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there." (Psalms 139:7,8)

Ben-Hadad escaped the battlefield and hid in the city, probably pondering why his gods failed – *again*. But, as the defeated king, he needed to worry about his life. His advisors heard Israel's kings were merciful, so wearing symbols of submission, they went to Ahab and sought leniency. Unfortunately, Ahab's next actions would cost him his life.

Ahab magnanimously told Ben-Hadad's advisors, "Wow, Ben-Hadad is alive? He's my brother. Bring him to me." Captured kings were supposed to put their shoulders on the wheel of the victor's chariot to symbolize they had been defeated, but Ahab honored Ben-Hadad and invited him into his chariot. He treated Ben-Hadad as his ally - not his enemy.

The king of Israel and the king of Israel's enemy hung out in Ahab's chariot conversing like – ole' bros. Ahab made a trade agreement with Ben-Hadad who in turn offered to return towns taken from Israel. The two kings also made a treaty, known as a covenant. Ahab disobeyed God – again. God had commanded Israelites, "You are not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land." (Judges 2:2)

Ahab saw what he did as a win-win for himself. He would have more wealth in Israel and he would have a pagan king on his side to protect him against enemies. With a treaty in place, Ahab sent Ben-Hadad home.

Ahab's treatment of Ben-Hadad was spiritual rebellion. Ben-Hadad's life was not Ahab's to deal with as he chose, and God used another prophet to reveal the consequences.

Students of great prophets like Samuel and Elijah were used by God to deliver messages and prophecies. God sent one of these student-prophets to confront Ahab for his sin of pardoning Ben-Hadad. The prophet wanted to grab Ahab's attention, so he delivered God's message in an unusual but effective manner.

Disguised as a wounded soldier, the prophet waited on the road Ahab would travel on. Ahab passed by, saw the wounded "soldier", and stopped. Kings were often asked to rule on legal matters and the prophet-soldier presented his case for Ahab's ruling. He told Ahab he had carelessly allowed a prisoner of war to escape. He knew his punishment would be to pay with his life or pay a fine he could not afford. He wanted a pardon, but instead, to paraphrase Ahab's merciless response, "Guess that means you die." The prophet then revealed himself to Ahab and declared that just as he, the fictional soldier, allowed his prisoner to escape, so had Ahab given freedom to his prisoner. Ahab had given the negligent soldier a death sentence. So too would Ahab's future be death.

Why was it a sin for Ahab to let Ben-Hadad go? Although God's order to destroy Ben-Hadad isn't recorded, He had given Israelite kings laws to govern His people, including the responsibility to dispense punishment upon idolatrous and blasphemous nations who brought

physical and spiritual destruction to God's people. Ben-Hadad was the king of such a nation. Ahab chose to ignore God's law, but he could not have forgotten a significant event in Israel's history. Centuries earlier, Israel's first king, King Saul, defeated the pagan Amalekites. God commanded Saul to destroy all the Amalekites because of what they had done to God's people. Saul disobeyed God and spared the king for his own purposes. It cost Saul his kingdom and his life. Ahab disobeyed God and spared Ben-Hadad for *his* own purposes. He too would die for his disobedience and the suffering it would bring to Israel. With the ominous prophesy hanging over his head, Ahab returned to his palace sullen and angry.

That brings us to Chapter 21. In it we learned that: Ahab pouted, Jezebel plotted, Naboth perished, Elijah prophesied, and God punished.

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel embodied everything that needed to be eliminated from Israel - mostly because of Jezebel. The author of 1 Kings wrote, "There was never anyone 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." (1 Kings 21:25-26)

Jezebel was known for her idolatry and witchcraft. In the book of Revelation, Jezebel's name was used for the false prophetess who lured the church to commit spiritual immorality. No woman in the Bible is identified more with evil and treachery than Jezebel. She earned that reputation in Chapter 21.

Ahab wanted a vegetable garden next to his summer palace. I guess Sprouts was just too far away for a chariot ride. Ahab's next-door neighbor, Naboth, had just the land Ahab wanted, and he offered to buy it or trade for it. Naboth's reply was, "The Lord forbids." Why was that?

In ancient Israel, a career in real estate wasn't a profitable one. Land was rarely bought or sold because God had given the land to His people as their permanent possession. It was their "Promised Land" and God forbid selling or giving it away. Ahab was asking Naboth, one of the few Israelites still faithful to God, to forsake his inheritance.

Denied what wasn't his, Ahab returned home a pouting potentate. He jumped into bed, refused to eat, and sulked. Ahab coveted what wasn't his – Naboth's land. That was disobedience of God's law which says, "You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:17)

To covet is to yearn for what one does not, or cannot, have. It is a consuming desire, that often like with Ahab, harms others to get what's wanted.

The Apostle Paul taught covetousness is idolatry. "Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." (Colossians 3:5) Have you heard the commercial, "What's in YOUR wallet? Well, what is YOUR idol? We may not shop at "Idols 'R Us" to pick up a couple idols but coveting and idolatry exist in all different forms these days - anything followed so passionately or wanted so badly, one's mind and heart are diverted away from the relationship and the time God wants to spend with us. My prayer is for the Holy Spirit to, "Turn my eyes away from worthless things." (Psalm 119:37)

To combat this sin of the heart, Scripture tells us:

Seek the kingdom of God. Followers of Jesus are to, "Set your mind on things of heaven, not on earthly things." (Colossians 3:2) God's rule over our hearts and lives should be greater than all the world offers. When we love the Lord and others, there won't be room in our hearts for all-consuming desires to have what isn't in God's will for us.

Live in contentment. Paul wrote, “I have learned in whatever situation to be content.” (Philippians 4:11) I love that word: contentment. To me it means peace, satisfaction, serenity, happiness. Oh, that we would mean it when we say, “The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing.”

Be thankful. “Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18) In all situations, we're to thank God for what we've received and what He gives.

As Ahab pouted and complained that he couldn't have what he wanted, Jezebel told him *she* would get the land for him. She would show him how to govern like a pagan king - take what you want and destroy anyone who stands in your way. Guess we know who wore the tunic in the palace.

Do you remember the TV series, “Murder, She Wrote”? Well, “Murder, She Wrote” describes Jezebel's plot to kill Naboth to get his land, and Ahab allowed her to do it.

She wrote letters to the city leaders using Ahab's seal to signify the letters were under his authority. She told them to gather all the citizens together and have two false witnesses testify they heard Naboth blaspheme God and the king. Jezebel knew punishment for such a crime was for Naboth to be stoned to death. 2 Kings 9:26 states that Naboth's sons were also put to death. That eliminated any heirs from inheriting the vineyard.

As Ahab strolled through the vineyard planning where to plant legumes and cucumbers, there stood Elijah. Ahab knew he would show up. “So, you found me. What do you want now?”, Ahab grumbled. Ahab knew Elijah wasn't there to compliment his real estate.

God sent Elijah to confront Ahab about his and Jezebel's wickedness and to prophesy consequences they would suffer. Elijah told Ahab he sold himself to do evil. Ahab knew of Jezebel's murderous plot to kill an innocent man yet did nothing to stop her. Elijah prophesied Ahab's death would be violent and after Ahab died, dogs would lick up his blood. And Ahab's lineage would cease. All his sons would be killed, and their dead bodies would be decimated by dogs and vultures. What a terrifying prophecy. Ahab's legacy would be a shameful one.

Last but not least was Elijah's prophecy of God's punishment that would be Jezebel's. It would be both horrible and disgraceful. She too would be food for wild dogs with nothing left of her corpse to bury. Ahab and Jezebel's years of sin would end in violent, dishonorable deaths.

I was totally surprised by what happened next! When Ahab heard God's judgment against him, instead of pouting, Ahab humbled himself! Really?! God showed Ahab mercy by delaying the destruction of his family until *after* Ahab's death, sparing him the pain of witnessing God's judgment upon them.

In Joel Chapter 2, the Lord said one can fast and weep and mourn in regret but there's no point in tearing one's clothes if the heart is not torn away from sin. Ahab tore his garments, but was his heart torn from sinning against the Lord? However, I stopped questioning Ahab's heart because, “God knows our hearts” (Luke 16:15). Instead, I focused on why God would show mercy to *me* – or to *any* of us.

God's Word says, “Even though God has the right to show His anger and His power, He is very patient with those on whom His anger falls, who are destined for destruction. He does this to make the riches of His glory shine even brighter on those to whom He shows mercy.” (Romans 9:22-23) And the Apostle Paul wrote, “I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in

Him and receive eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:16) God shows mercy so that the lost will come to know Him. Father God forgive me for ever questioning Your acts of mercy.

I want to believe Ahab lived for the Lord the rest of his life and he and Elijah are hanging out in heaven, but, well, we'll just have to see the rest of Ahab's story in next week's lesson.

What about Jezebel? Well, surprise, surprise! There's no record of her humility or repentance. God's judgment would come upon her exactly as He announced. I wondered though, if every time Jezebel heard a dog bark, it would make her jump!

In these remarkable chapters, we witnessed an awesome display of God's grace and mercy, God's power and God's justice. Ahab and the Israelites should have been defeated by an overwhelming enemy, but because of God's love for them, His grace and mercy were poured upon them when He defeated their enemy.

God's grace and mercy and love are poured upon us too. Everyone is under God's wrath because of sin. Being under God's wrath is terrifying! However, "Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in sins – it is by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:4,5) Aren't you thankful for God's amazing grace? Someone once said that to put the word "amazing" with "grace" seems redundant. There is no "un-amazing" grace, right? I like what Max Lucado wrote: "I've never been surprised by God's judgment, but I'm still stunned by His grace."

God displayed His matchless power when He brought victories to pitifully outnumbered Israel - victories where the enemy believed the Lord had no power. Yet, the Lord is the God of hills and valleys – of all the earth. He is also the God of hills and valleys in our lives. It's easy to thank God for happy hilltop experiences, but what about ones in the valley? In the 23rd Psalm, David wrote to the Lord, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me." Is there anything darker or scarier than the looming shadow of death? Let's bring God into every situation, because He is the God of the hills, the valleys and everything in between.

God delights in showing mercy, yet, His indisputable law and His unchanging character is that: "The Lord is a God of justice." (Isaiah 30:18). The temporary reprieve He gave Ahab didn't change God's promise to *judge* Ahab. As with Ahab and Jezebel, because He is a God of justice, He must judge sin. That includes *our* sin because, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) We too deserve to be separated from God: "For the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23a) But God's Son paid the price for our sin and we can live eternally through Him. "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23b). "Our God is not just powerful. He is not simply a God of uncompromising justice. He is the mercy-giving God." David Mathis, desiringGod.org.

In this lesson, we read about the good: Naboth; the bad: Ahab; and the ugly: Jezebel. Although the events that occurred did not have a happy ending, as God's children we should be reassured that God is completely in control – of everything. And He alone is God.

In last week's lesson, after God performed a dramatic miracle on Mt. Carmel, His people acknowledged Him. Let us all together, proclaim the same words God's people cried out: "The LORD--He is God! The LORD--He is God!"