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Ahab's failure against Ben-hadad and the Syrians. Living in the light of the last days.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Kings 20. Ben-Hadad the king of Syria gathered all his army together. Thirty-two kings were with him, and horses and chariots.

And he went up and closed in on Samaria and fought against it. And he sent messengers into the city to Ahab king of Israel, and said to him, Thus says Ben-Hadad, Your silver and your gold are mine, your best wives and children also are mine. And the king of Israel answered, As you say, my lord, O king, I am yours and all that I have.

The messengers came again and said, Thus says Ben-Hadad, I sent to you, saying, Deliver to me your silver and your gold, your wives and your children. 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 you, and take it away. Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land and said, Mark now and see how this man is seeking trouble, for he sent to me for my wives and my children, and for my

silver and my gold, and I did not refuse him.

And all the elders and all the people said to him, Do not listen or consent. 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. And the messengers departed and brought him word again.

Ben-Hadad sent to him and said, The gods do so to me and more also if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people who follow me. And the king of Israel answered, Tell him, let not him who straps on his armour boast himself as he who takes it off. When Ben-Hadad heard this message, as he was drinking with the kings in the booths, he said to his men, Take your positions.

And they took their positions against the city. And behold, a prophet came near to Ahab king of Israel and said, Thus says the LORD, Have you seen all this great multitude? Behold, I will give it into your hand this day, and you shall know that I am the LORD. And Ahab said, By whom? He said, Thus says the LORD, By the servants of the governors of the districts.

Then he said, Who shall begin the battle? He answered, You. Then he mustered the servants of the governors of the districts, and there were two hundred and thirty-two. And after them he mustered all the people of Israel, seven thousand.

And they went out at noon, while Ben-Hadad was drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the thirty-two kings who helped him. The servants of the governors of the districts went out first. And Ben-Hadad sent out scouts, and they reported to him, Men are coming out from Samaria.

He said, If they have come out for peace, take them alive, or if they have come out for war, take them alive. So these went out of the city, the servants of the governors of the districts, and the army that followed them. And each struck down his man.

The Syrians fled, and Israel pursued them. But Ben-Hadad, king of Syria, escaped on a horse with horsemen. And the king of Israel went out and struck the horses and chariots, and struck the Syrians with a great blow.

Then the prophet came near to 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 Syria will come up against you. And the servants of the king of Syria 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 will be stronger than they.

And do this, remove the kings, each from his post, and put commanders in their places, 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. And he listened to their voice and did so.

In the spring Ben-Hadad mustered the Syrians and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel. And the people of Israel were mustered and were provisioned, and went against them. The people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats.

But the Syrians filled the country. And a man of God came near and said to the king of Israel, Thus says the Lord, because the Syrians 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.

And they encamped opposite one another seven days. Then on the seventh day the battle was joined, and the people of Israel struck down of the Syrians one hundred thousand foot soldiers in one day, and the rest fled into the city of Aphek, and the wall fell upon twenty-seven thousand men who were left. Ben-Hadad also fled and entered an inner chamber in the city.

And his servants said to him, Behold now, 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.

So they tied sackcloth around their waists and put ropes on their heads, and went out to the king of Israel and said, Your servant Ben-Hadad says, Please let me live. And he said, Does he still live? He is my brother. Now the men were watching for a sign, and they quickly took it up from him and said, Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad.

Then he said, Go and bring him. Then Ben-Hadad came out to him, and he caused him to come up into the chariot. And Ben-Hadad said to him, The cities that my father took from your father I will restore, and you may establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.

And Ahab said, I will let you go on these terms. So he made a covenant with him and let him go. And a certain man of the sons of the prophet said to his fellow at the command of the Lord, Strike me please.

But the man refused to strike him. Then he said to him, Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, behold, as soon as you have gone from me, a lion shall strike you down. And as soon as he had departed from him, a lion met him and struck him down.

Then he found another man and said, Strike me please. And the man struck him, struck him and wounded him. So the prophet departed and waited for the king by the way, disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes.

And as the king passed, he cried to the king and said, Your servant went out into the midst of the battle, and behold, a soldier turned and brought a man to me and said,

Guard this man. If by any means he is missing, your life shall be for his life, or else you shall pay a talent of silver. And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone.

The king of Israel said to him, So shall your judgment be. You yourself have decided it. Then he hurried to take the bandage away from his eyes.

And the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. And he said to him, Thus says the Lord, Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life and your people for his people. And the king of Israel went to his house vexed and sullen and came to Samaria.

From 1 Kings chapter 20 to the end of the book there are a series of chapters presenting an indictment of Ahab and his sins in various contexts. And in this chapter, chapter 20, we have interactions between Ben-Hadad and the Arameans and Ahab and Israel. Asa made a covenant with Ben-Hadad earlier in chapter 15.

The Ben-Hadad there was a contemporary of Beasha and there had been intermittent conflict between the Arameans or the Syrians and Israel from that time on. The Ben-Hadad in this chapter is most likely a different one. Ben-Hadad may have been a throne name and there are probably three Ben-Hadads in scripture.

In this chapter there are two different attacks by the Arameans or the Syrians. At this time the Assyrians were rising in power and the Syrians or the Arameans who were in the region of Damascus to Israel's east were being pressured from them and pushed towards Israel. The Arameans or the Syrians were forming a regional alliance.

They had 32 kings and they wanted to make Ahab's kingdom of Israel a tributary kingdom also, presumably to assist in the anti-Assyrian cause. At the beginning they have much greater power than Israel which enables Ben-Hadad to come with these extravagant demands. He comes against Samaria.

He does not seem to be surrounding Samaria at this point. He's demanding silver and gold and then the best wives and children of Ahab and Ahab initially accepts he has no power to resist. He doesn't have the power to stand up against a command even as brazen as that of giving over his best wives and children.

However Ben-Hadad comes back with even greater demands that they should be able to go through his house and the houses of his servants and ransack them for anything that they wanted and so he sends out messengers to the elders of the land who counsel him to resist the demand. When he refuses Ben-Hadad declares that he will destroy Samaria and Ahab warns him not to be overly confident. Don't boast in your victory before you've achieved it.

The Lord sends a prophet to Ahab. The Arameans will be given into his hand and this will be a means by which he and Israel will know that God is the Lord. The prophet instructs

him to begin the battle and that his forces must be led by the servants of the governors of the districts.

This is not a crack force. These would seem to be weaker men that he is sending out and he sends out 232 of them perhaps connected with the 32 kings that are associated with Ben-Hadad. They are followed by 7,000 which might remind us of the word of the Lord to Elijah concerning the remnant in the preceding chapter.

Ben-Hadad is drunk and overly confident. He doesn't actually appreciate his weakness. The Syrians are defeated and driven off but the Syrians will regroup and return to fight them again on the plain in the spring.

The prophet instructs Ahab to prepare for that return. In the spring the Syrians return and they fight Israel in Aphek on the plain. This is the same place where Israel had lost the great battle to the Philistines a number of centuries earlier.

The Arameans believe that by changing the ground of the battle they will have a better chance that the Lord will not be able to act on behalf of his people as effectively in the valley as he has in the hills. Ben-Hadad has also changed the leaders so he is no longer leading the men with the 32 kings but with chosen commanders. The army is being consolidated under his leadership.

It might also seem that he's not just gathering the army he's gathering the wider group of the people. He musters the Syrians not just the army. Once again a man of God comes to Ahab.

There is a close parallel between these two events the first attack of the Syrians and then the second attack of the Syrians in the spring. In both cases the Syrians attack, a prophet visits Ahab, Ahab wins the battle, then Ben-Hadad is advised by his servants and then Ben-Hadad takes action accordingly. This is a battle that the Lord himself is going to win and he's going to win this battle against the Syrians because they have taken up the battle against him.

They have dishonored his name by claiming that he just rules over the hills rather than being the ruler and creator of all things. Neither the battle nor the enemy then are ultimately Ahab's. Ahab has to recognize that the Lord will give him the victory because the enemy is the enemy of the Lord and he is being called to play the part of a servant of the Lord in bringing the victory about.

There is a remarkable victory won over the Syrians even though Israel was completely outnumbered. They end up crushing the Syrians and a large number of the Syrians who take refuge in the city are destroyed as the walls of the city come down on them and Israel overcomes them. As all of this happens on the seventh day it shouldn't be hard to see a reminder of the story of Jericho.

The city of Jericho was rebuilt as part of Ahab's re-canonization of the land back at the end of chapter 16 but now there is a new defeat of a type of Jericho and the Lord overcomes the Syrians. Ben-Hadad flees and holds himself up in an inner chamber in the city. At his servant's council he comes to terms with Ahab.

The story begins with Ben-Hadad very much in power and it ends with Ahab in the position of power. They forge a new covenant between them with Ahab now the overlord in the relationship. He will receive back cities that had been taken from his father.

It is likely that father here is not referring to his literal father Amrei but to his royal predecessor most likely Beasha. He is now the overlord. However like Saul wrongly spared Agag, Ahab should not have spared Ben-Hadad.

The battle we must remember belonged to the Lord. As a result Ahab did not have the right to choose whether to spare Ben-Hadad or not. Ben-Hadad should have been put to death.

Like Achan took devoted things and Saul took the devoted person of Agag, he is taking another devoted person. The passage ends with a peculiar account. One of the sons of the prophets instructs another man to strike him and when the other man fails to do so even at the explicit command of the Lord he is struck down by a lion.

This should recall to us the story of the man of God from Judah and the old man of Bethel in chapter 13. It is also once again a parable for the nation. It's a parable for the king of Israel.

As in chapter 13 the king is not usually named rather he is spoken of as the king of Israel or the king. This might be one of the details that heightens the sense of the symbolic character of what is taking place. This is an enacted parable.

The second person who is instructed to strike him does indeed strike him. He wounds the prophet and the prophet places a bandage over his eye and disguises his identity. When the king passes he gives a story to the king of how he was instructed to guard a prisoner and while he busied himself with other affairs he found that the prisoner was gone.

He was now either to forfeit his life or to pay a talent of silver in ransom. The king of Israel confirms the judgment upon the man and then the man uncovers his identity and he's revealed to be one of the prophets. He declares that the man who has really committed this sin is the king himself.

He had been entrusted with Ben-Hadad. Ben-Hadad was not ultimately his prisoner but the Lord's and he was responsible for letting the man go. As a result of his failure his life and his people would be forfeit.

Ahab responds not with repentance, not even by seeking to see if there was another

opportunity, if there was some ransom he could pay like the one talent of silver that was required of the hand of the man in the parable. No, he returns to his house vexed and sullen, still resistant to the word of the Lord. A question to consider, how should Ahab have known that he did not have the right to treat Ben-Hadad as he wished but should rather have treated him as a prisoner who belonged to the Lord? 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 7 to 19.

The end of all things is at hand, therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace. Whoever speaks is one who speaks oracles of God, whoever serves is one who serves by the strength that God supplies, in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever.

Amen. Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God, and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good.

In the second half of 1 Peter chapter 4 we see the way that life must be lived in the shadow of the day of the Lord to come. The end of all things is at hand. The last times are introduced by the death and the resurrection of Christ, and Peter is here writing just a few years before the destruction of Jerusalem, which would radically transform the world.

The nearness of the day of the Lord is a common theme throughout the New Testament writings. James chapter 5 verse 8 Romans chapter 13 verses 11 to 12 1 John chapter 2 verse 18 Children, it is the last hour. Revelation chapter 22 verse 12 Philippians chapter 4 verse 5 Almost two thousand years later, what are we to make of this sense of the imminence of the day of the Lord? It may be of some help to draw a distinction between a theology of eschatological imminence and a chronology of eschatological imminence.

The New Testament has some sense of chronological imminence. The day of the Lord is

near at hand because the destruction of Jerusalem is near at hand, and the destruction of Jerusalem is the initiation of many of the last day processes. However, a theology of eschatological imminence is something more.

It's a recognition of the penultimacy of the present age. The fact that the reality of the last things is already being worked out in our midst, and the present age is transitory and passing away. The judgment that we await in the future is already in the process of arriving, and the destruction of Jerusalem would be a key inauguration event of the last day judgment.

The future that we await at the end is already incipiently operative in the present. We're already seeing its effects. Christian theologians have talked about the already not yet pattern of the New Testament.

We already have a reality-filled promise and down payment of what awaits us at the end. In Christ, the future has already arrived, it just has not yet been widely or evenly distributed. In the life of the body of Christ, we are participating in the powers of the age to come.

As we experience the work of the spirit in our midst, we are having an anticipatory foretaste of the future and the present. And recognizing all of this, we must be sober, alert, we must stay awake and be vigilant. This is a common message in the New Testament, perhaps most notably in Jesus' Olivet Discourse.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 verses 4-8 we read, But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night, or of the darkness.

So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

We must keep our wits about us, be alert, we must recognize the transitory character of our current activities, and not be overly invested in this present age. It is passing away, and this sobriety is in part for the purpose of prayer. We must watch and pray as Jesus encouraged his disciples, bracing ourselves for the coming of the time of testing.

We must keep ourselves prepared for prayer. This involves keeping short accounts with God, and being at peace with our neighbours, knowing how essential they can be. We do not want anything to hinder our prayers.

We are marked out as children of God by our love, and a commitment to each other will be immensely important when the times of testing come. Love covers a multitude of sins. A similar statement is found in James chapter 5 verses 19-20.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins. Love is needed for solidarity and mutual support, especially in persecution. Love forgives.

It is that that enables us to cover those sins that have been committed against us, and to enable relationships to be healed and restored. Peter charges his hearers to show hospitality. Hospitality would have been very important for the early church, as people were travelling from place to place.

The importance of hospitality is also seen in Jesus' teaching concerning the sheep and the goats. The sheep are recognised in part by the hospitality that they show to the unknown strangers, who are the brothers of Christ. Likewise, when Jesus sends his disciples through the towns and the cities of Israel, the places where they go are faced with a test of hospitality.

How will they receive the messengers that have been sent to them? And Peter wants the people to whom he is writing to show that pattern of hospitality to each other, without grumbling. He talks about the exercise of spiritual gifts, and his teaching here is similar to that which we find in Paul in Romans chapter 12 and 1 Corinthians chapter 12. The very grace of God that he talks about here is similar to the one gift of the Spirit that is manifested in numerous different gifts of the Spirit.

God's grace has a beautiful diversity and variety to it. It accentuates difference, but in a beautiful unity. The distinctiveness of each is discovered in the mutuality of all.

In Romans chapter 12 verses 4 to 6, For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 7, To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

He gives two examples, speaking and serving. The speaker must speak as one bearing the oracles of God. As one who's handling the word of God, this is not just human speech, it is speech that has weight and must be delivered as such.

The other example he gives is that of service, practical service that must be ministered in the strength that the Lord supplies. And all of this is for the purpose of God's glory in Christ. And he ends this section with a doxology.

The time of testing is about to come, and it will test them and prove them. It will show the actual metal of their faith. And they should not be surprised that this is coming upon them.

It has been announced beforehand. But when it comes, they will be sharing Christ's

suffering, recognising that they were told this ahead of time, and recognising God's hand in the events. They will be able to see the purpose of this testing and proving them so that they might share in Christ's glory, going through the sort of suffering that he underwent in order to enter into the glory that he has entered.

And this leads to a different approach to sufferings. Sufferings are no longer the worst thing that can befall us. In fact, we can find much cause for rejoicing in them.

We are blessed if we are insulted for the name of Christ. This is a sign that the spirit of glory and of God rests upon us. We've been marked out by his name, and in the eyes of those around us, we are identified with him.

This is teaching that is found on various occasions within the New Testament. Philippians chapter 1 verse 29, For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake. Matthew chapter 5 verses 11 to 12, Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Acts chapter 5 verse 41, Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. For the third time in the letter, he distinguishes suffering for that which is good, and for the name of Christ, from suffering for wrongdoing.

And he gives a list of the different ways in which people could suffer for wrongdoing, as a murderer, as a thief, as an evildoer, presumably comprehending the various ways, for instance, someone might be seen as a lawbreaker, or as a meddler. Various other translations have been suggested for the word translated meddler, but meddler does seem to be the right interpretation here. Why might it be mentioned? One of the important themes of Peter's letter to this point is the way that Christians should live among the Gentiles as aliens and strangers, and as those who live respectable and quiet lives.

As such, Christians should mostly be those who keep themselves to themselves. While they witness to others, they will not meddle in others affairs or make a nuisance of themselves. They live peaceably with those around them, and quietly with relationship to wider society.

If they suffer as a Christian, they should not be ashamed. They should glorify God in that name. Suffering as a Christian, it suggests that that term had a particular sting to it.

It was a term that was used by outsiders of believers. The earliest Christian movement did not call itself Christianity. It called itself the way, and other such things.

The term Christian was first used of believers in the city of Antioch in Acts 11, verse 26.

The term is also used by King Gripper in chapter 26, verse 28 of Acts. It seems to be a term that is meant to shame, but there is no shame in being associated with Christ and his name.

Rather, that name ought to be born with pride. When judgment comes, it begins at the household of God. It is a dangerous place to be near to God.

If you are near to God, you will more immediately face judgment. However, within the household of God, you are prepared for judgment. Every single time we come before God, for instance, we're having a sort of rehearsal of the final judgment that we await.

However, those who have rejected the gospel, who are outside, do not have such preparation, and will face far more severe consequences. He quotes Proverbs chapter 11, verse 31. If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? In light of all of this, we should entrust our lives to our faithful creator, while we seek to do good.

We will suffer, but we will be suffering according to his will, the will of our loving Father who created and saved us. A question to consider. Throughout the New Testament, the one thing that Christians are taught to expect in this life is suffering.

Yet suffering is almost always framed by the purpose and loving will of God, and by the fact of Christ's return in judgment. We see the reality of what our sufferings here and now are, in the light of the transitory and passing character of this present age. What practices could we develop in our personal lives to make us more prepared for suffering when it comes?