

How to NOT Listen to God **1Kings 20 – BPC 5pm – 16/5/2021**

One of my most memorable experiences from my apprenticeship as a chef was a dreary Wednesday afternoon at Box Hill tafe working with stone fruit.

And what stood out was a fellow apprentice struggling to remove the seed. And so with peach in hand, she plunged a knife in to remove the seed, only to keep going all the way through the fruit and into her palm resulting in a swift trip to hospital to have it removed.

But what makes this so memorable for me is not the screams, the panic, the blood, or anything about the event itself but what happened the next day. I was back in the restaurant at work and eager to tell my colleagues of the event: the foolishness of the choice of tool and the panic that followed.

However, as I told them about it to their smiles and laughs, I was squeezing limes for a dressing. And it just so happened that I couldn't find the hand citrus juicer and had decided to use my largest chef knife as a replacement.

And so as I told joked and laughed and told them the story, the blade in my hand twisted and as I squeezed the lime resulting in my finger promptly running down the blade causing lots of blood, a bit of panic, 4 stitches and a lasting scar that reminds me to this day of at least one valuable lesson: we must learn from the mistakes of others.

And the events of 1Kings 20 are given for this exact purpose. In the NT, Paul tells us that part of the reason the life and history of Israel is written down in all its gory detail is to teach and warn us so we won't repeat them (1Cor 10:11-12; Rom 15:4)

In 1Kings 20 we are still living in the aftermath of the events at Mt Carmel where God showed up in glorious fashion with fire falling from heaven and the false prophets slaughtered. Last week concentrated on the aftermath for Elijah as he broke down and went on the run as he despaired at the lack of change in Israel.

But Elijah doesn't even feature in this chapter, he's still off on the run and the focus is squarely on Ahab. Did you notice in the reading that the prophets aren't even named and a whole year passes between the battles, to draw our attention in on what Ahab is doing in the wake of Mt Carmel.

And just so we're clear, this isn't a 'be more like Ahab' kind of story, but the opposite. He's the anatomy of disobedience, a model of how to make a mess of your life and kingdom, and especially how to ignore and not listen to God.

Because central to the bible's message about how we are to respond to God is to listen to him. The true God of the universe is a speaking God – which is exactly what God himself made clear to us in chapter 19 last week as he sought out Elijah on the mountain and spoke to him.

To know God is to listen to him, and to truly listen is to obey him. This is the basic response to God throughout the bible. And Ahab sits squarely in the negative example of how to do all you can to ignore God and refuse to listen to him.

But as Ahab shows how to not listen to God, what I think we'll find most disturbing about this chapter is how much of ourselves we'll see. How often we are actually so much like Ahab and need to learn from his mistakes and heed the warning that the chapter finishes on.

The first way to make sure we don't listen to God is to ignore him completely. We see this in vv.1-12 as Ahab finds himself in quite a pickle. In v.1 we see Ben-Hadad, king of Aram shows up with his entire army along with 32 of his royal buddies and their armies.

It's meant to be an intimidating scene as they show up and with their supreme advantage start making demands in v.3, *Your silver and gold are mine, and the best of your wives and children are mine.*

And what does Ahab do? Well he essentially says take what you want. V.4, *just as you say, my lord the king. I and all I have are yours.* Now whether this was fear or just hoping that if he gave up something it would be the end of it, we can't be sure. But either way, it doesn't go well as Ben-Hadad ups the ante in vv.5-6 as he says he'll send his boys over to search the place and take everything Ahab values.

Now Ben-Hadad isn't playing fair but nor does he have to. And although we don't want to be too harsh on Ahab, surely this is a good time to pray right? To cry out to God or at least call for prophet?

But what do we get instead? Well in vv.7-9 he summons his godless elders, who give him godless advice and make a godless decision. Ahab now refuses to pander to Ben-Hadad, which makes him angry and throw down some pretty serious threats in v.10.

Now it's hard to be sure what's going in Ahab's mind in v.11 when he sends a message back, *"Tell him: 'One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.'"* He's essentially saying, don't count your chickens before they hatch. Is he getting a bit lippy or arrogant? Is this a final verbal blow before the inevitable defeat happens? Either way, Ben-Hadad responds by getting ready for battle (v.12)

But what is more shocking than Ahab's strategy or arrogance in these verses is the complete absence of God. The picture of fire falling from heaven fresh in his mind, perhaps the smell of the burnt sacrifice still in his nose, puddles on the ground from three-year drought ending that only came by the word of God through Elijah, Ahab still ignores and shuts out God completely.

It's shocking isn't it, even disturbing how defiant Ahab is in the face of reality? And yet we know how quickly we do the exactly the same. When under the pump or the pressure is on how easily do we simply decide we can think our way out, talk our way out, plan our way out.

How quickly, how often do we act as if God isn't there or that he's silent, to ignore God or just shut him out of our decision making completely. So let me ask you right now, are you ignoring God? Have you allowed yourself to live without reference to God in aspects of your life?

And to answer that, ask yourself: Are you making time to read God's Word, asking him to speak to you by His Spirit? Are you giving yourself to reflect on what he says, praying for wisdom in how to apply it and longing that God would work in and through you in every aspect of life or situation?

As you study, go to work, meet with friends, or process life during a pandemic, is God and His Word shaping your thinking and guiding every decision? How easily do we lose sight of the most

basic yet important daily task of listening to God, relying on him, and have him at the centre of our lives.

Because sadly it is our default, when things are tough, when we're stressed or under the pump, to just roll up our sleeves and think that it's all about us. Ahab shows us a sure way to not listen to God is to just shut him out completely. But sadly this doesn't only happen when things are bad! In vv.13-21 Ahab shows us that a sure way to not listen to God is to make sure we don't acknowledge or thank him when he does speak.

v.13 Meanwhile [Behold] 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.'"

Despite Ahab's insistence on ignoring him, God mercifully intervenes, demands his attention in order to give him a generous promise of victory: this vast army will be given into your hand today.

This word of hope, the act of grace is unasked for, certainly undeserved, and why would God do this? *then you [Ahab] will know that I am the LORD.* This is who God is: the God of grace who seeks the undeserving to bless them and draw them to himself.

How does Ahab respond, spiritual guy that he is? V.14 *"but who will do this?"* And after being told it's the junior officials, Ahab can only say: *"who will start the battle?"* To which the prophet says *you will.*

So as God mercifully shows up, speaks to Ahab to promise him an unlikely victory and how it will happen, what does He do? Well in vv.15-21 he simply takes the information and moves on. No acknowledgement, no thanks, no awareness or care for God's generous intervention and promise.

He just gets on with it. His silence is deafening especially as we see how clearly the battle is only won by God's initiative. Did you hear the strategy? Ahab takes the 232 'junior officials' – which sounds grander than it is, it's literally just 'young lads'. So Ahab marches out against Ben-Hadad's army and the 32 armies with 232 unskilled boys in v.17 while leaving his best troops for later.

Victory seems unlikely to say the least. But the whole point is being clearly made that the victory belongs to God. We especially see this as the God works that the Ben-Hadad actually contributes to his own downfall. Back in v.12 he orders his troops to attack while they are out drinking.

And he must be drunk given what he commands in v.18, *If they have come out for peace, take them alive; if they have come out for war, take them alive.*" He's essentially saying while they are trying to kill you, don't harm them! The enemy king is helping Ahab's unskilled boys have success!

The victory is so clearly God's as we are told in v.20, *each one struck down his opponent. At that the Arameans fled with the Israelites in pursuit.* All is not perfect though as Ben-Hadad escapes to which God again intervenes to warn Ahab in v.22, it's no time to relax because he'll surely attack again.

And so the whole battle is bracketed by God generously intervening to speak, to reveal himself to Ahab, to give him hope and victory and what does Ahab say? Nothing. He just gets the information and essentially says "I'll take it from here."

Can you imagine being so thankless, so brazen and dismissive in your treatment of God? Well sadly I think we really can! Time and time again God forces himself into our lives, demanding our attention, to graciously speak to us, to reassure, comfort, or challenge to bring us back to himself.

Whether we are prepared or expecting or seeking it or not, God surprises and speaks to us whether it's through a sermon we were only half paying attention to, a bible study we didn't want to go to, or just a friend speaking the Gospel into our lives. These happen all the time, but how do we respond?

We just take it and move on. Yes I need to rest more, be more patient, pray for wisdom or opportunities, realise my own limitations or not be enslaved by the approval of others. And what do we do? So often no thanks or acknowledgement of the generosity of God to pursue and speak to us.

And why do we do this? Why is thankfulness so hard for us? John Piper says, "At the root of all ingratitude is the love of one's own greatness. For genuine gratitude admits that we are beneficiaries of an unearned bequest. Therefore, while a man loves his own glory, and prizes his self-sufficiency, and hates to think of himself as sin-sick and helpless, he will never feel any genuine gratitude to the true God and so will never magnify God, but only himself."

As thanklessness convinces us that we don't anything from God it makes listening to God irrelevant at best and uncomfortable at worst. So although confronting we must see our thanklessness for what it is, come back to the beauty and kindness and generosity of God revealed to us as we listen to the Gospel and give him the thanks he deserves.

Colossians 3:¹⁶ *Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.* ¹⁷ *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Just as thankfulness magnifies God, thanklessness magnifies ourselves.

Thirdly, if we want to make not listening to God an art form, we will make God small and ourselves big. We see this in vv.23-34 as Ben-Hadad does what every good coach does at the end of a dismal season: he regroups to rethink the strategy with fresh perspective of the opposition.

And their solution? V.23, *their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they.*

So they get new leaders, raise a new army, and v.26, next spring they march out again to fight Israel. And the battle again, on the surface, looks ridiculous. V.27 is a great picture isn't it? *The Israelites camped opposite them like two small flocks of goats, while the Arameans covered the countryside.*

The situation looks hopeless until God again, without prompting or request, intervenes through a prophet to speak and give hope. V.28, *"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.'"*

Because of the trash talking bad theology of the Arameans God says I am going to reveal myself to you again, this time all of Israel is the focus, as he gives them another unlikely victory. And like before the victory could not be more clearly God's.

In scenes that deliberately draw us back to the walls of Jericho coming down, they camp opposite each other for seven days (v.29), after a brief battle and heavy losses to the Arameans in v.29, those left run to Aphek in v.30 where the city walls collapse on them, killing 27,000.

But what is surprising about this whole story is that it's given from the perspective of the Arameans whose insulting view of the true and living God prompts him into action. Israel, God's people, just kind of passively get the spoils. So why include this? it's because all throughout the bible, we see that it is God's people who need reminding and compelling of how great and big God really is!

It's God's people who often have a small view of God. And we do this when we think there are areas of our life that God has no presence in or no control over. We have a small view of God when we think God can't change us, provide for us, fulfil or satisfy us and we have to do it all ourselves.

And we need to see how prone we are to do this because making God small is the other side of the coin of making ourselves big. We see this clearly in Ahab's response. In v.30 we see Ben-Hadad has again escaped from battle and after two humiliating defeats he changes tactic.

Rather than fight again, in v.31, his officials convince him that humility and grovelling might just save their life. So they put on their humble clothes of sackcloth in v.32 and come to Ahab with a simple request: *Your servant Ben-Hadad says, Please let me live.*

To which Ahab replies, *"Is he still alive? He is my brother."* What? This scene is a lot like watching the third Star Wars movie as Anakin Skywalker makes bad decision after bad decision that you know will result in him becoming Darth Vader... You just can't help but want to yell no, no, no, just stop!

Ahab hears the enemy king that has mocked him and invaded twice is alive and he is excited, he welcomes him in to his own chariot in v.33, lets him set all the terms of a treaty as Ben-Hadad essentially pretends he is being generous to give back what he took in v.34.

Like what is Ahab doing? Fresh of yet another victory that was so clearly given by God at the promise of God, Ahab pretends it was all his doing. His ego kicks in as the enemy king shows up grovelling and Ahab makes it all about himself. He takes the opportunity to make himself look great as tiny Israel makes a covenant with the big bad Arameans.

So a small view of God now meets a big view of self. And we need to see that this is exactly what we do when we expect that God should operate on our terms, bending everything to our plans, or only relating to us in terms of our happiness or prosperity.

How easily are our prayers purely shaped by our desire for status or comfort? How quickly do we get frustrated when we feel church or growth group isn't tailored to our particular needs or wants? How willing are we to make it all about us and forget that it was Jesus who said, *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*

In his little book "Your God is too small," J.B Philips says, "God will inevitably appear to disappoint the man who is attempting to use Him as a convenience, a prop, or a comfort, for his own plans.

God has never been known to disappoint the man who is sincerely wanting to co-operate with His own purposes.”

God is most glorious and most satisfying when see him for who he is and listen to him. But there is not just disappointment in making it all about ourselves and not listening to God, there is also real danger. This point is both clear and confronting in the final verses of the chapter.

With Ahab’s ego filling the screen in v.34, the lenses again turns to an unnamed prophet. ³⁵ *By the word of the LORD one of the company of the prophets said to his companion, “Strike me with your weapon,” but he refused.³⁶ 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.*

These scene seems a bit random right. But what is super clear that the command to strike the prophet in v.35 is a word from the LORD. God has spoken, the companion disobeys and the consequence is death by lion. Listening to God is serious, very serious, a matter of life and death.

Not listening to God is no small matter. And although a bit strange at first, this prophet seeking to be struck isn’t random, but part of bigger goal to bring this reality home to Ahab. In v.37 he gets his way. ³⁷ *The prophet found another man and said, “Strike me, please.” So the man struck him and wounded him.³⁸ Then the prophet went and stood by the road waiting for the king. He disguised himself with his headband down over his eyes.*

So the prophet, now bruised and bloody, is in disguise looking like a soldier that has just come from battle, waiting for Ahab who may, just by a random chance, also have just come from battle.

³⁹ *As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, “Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, ‘Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent of silver.’⁴⁰ While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared.” “That is your sentence,” the king of Israel said. “You have pronounced it yourself.”*

In scene much like Nathan the prophet with King David, Ahab falls for the trap. Having been given the scenario of failing to do his duty, failing to take seriously the responsibility entrusted to him, Ahab announces the verdict and condemns himself.

⁴¹ *Then the prophet quickly removed the headband from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets.⁴² He said 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.’”*

Now that might seem a bit harsh? How was Ahab to know this? Well this requirement is made clear in Deuteronomy 20 that Ahab should have known as the King of Israel. But even putting that aside, Ahab is condemned for thinking he can take from God and make it all about himself.

By constantly refusing to listen to God, to acknowledge what God has done and said and provided, Ahab has decided that God’s Word is both small and insignificant and is judged for it.

And rather than humble himself and seek mercy, rather than cling to the God who has proven himself to be forgiving and generous time and time again in this chapter alone, Ahab sulks. V.43, ⁴³ *Sullen and angry, the king of Israel went to his palace in Samaria.*

Well he doesn't just sulk, he is furious. Which rounds out this chapter with yet another excellent way to ensure you don't listen to God, is to reject or get angry at what he does say. Ahab is resolved in his commitment to not listen to God which God himself takes very seriously and will see him judged.

But none of this is really surprising is it? The Ahab we've seen in 1Kings 17-19 who opposes God's rule, ignores God's revelation, promotes idolatry, and is self-absorbed. Why should it surprise us this is what he does? And it isn't surprising really is it.

But what is both surprising and even shocking is God. Because I don't know what you would have done if you were God, but as I read 1Kings 20 directly following chapters 17-19, I would have thought the invading Ben-Hadad would have been a prime opportunity to teach Ahab a lesson.

Let him suffer some insult and humiliation. But God patiently and constantly gives grace – time and time again taking the initiative to speak, make promises, give victory, and reveal himself.

1Kings 20 is a picture of grace undeserved and unasked for. And we get this same picture in the good news of Jesus, as God sends his Son world to save sinners, to seek and save the lost, those who reject and kill him, giving his life for the forgiveness of the very ones who are nailing him to the cross.

Speaking of Jesus, John 1 says, ¹⁰ *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.* ¹¹ *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.* ¹² *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

Because what is the problem with shutting God out of your life, refusing to acknowledge or thank God, or just making it all about yourself? Well not only it is a denial of reality that God does speak, that God has revealed himself to us in Jesus, but to miss on the joy of listening to him.

Jesus says in John 10: ²⁷ *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.* ²⁸ *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

1Kings 20 shows us that God is gracious to keep speaking, but we must listen and as God calls us to respond. Grace still calls us to account. Ahab persists in refusing to listen to God and is condemned. And so if you are not yet a follower of Jesus here tonight, grace is on offer to you as God is taking the initiative to speak and offer you life by believing in his Son Jesus.

Why wouldn't you listen to that generous, life giving offer? But for many of us here who have responded and do trust Jesus, 1Kings 20 is a clear confronting exposure of how easily we fall into habits of not listening and how offensive and tragic that really is.

So let me ask you right now, how are you going with listening to God? If I was to ask you tonight, "what has God been teaching you lately? How has he been challenging, changing, confronting or comforting you lately" what would you say? Because often when we don't have answers to those questions, it's because we aren't listening.

How are you going at listening to Jesus? Will you learn by Ahab's mistakes and misery by taking the time every day to make sure Jesus is at the heart of every decision, ensuring we acknowledge and thank him for his patient persistence to keep speaking to us, make sure that all of our lives

revolve not around ourselves but around him and his beauty and his glory, because we know that will actually be good for us.

And these are good questions to finish on because they are questions we can ask each other. We know that a life and habit of listening to Jesus will not happen automatically, but needs work and encouragement and help.

As Hebrews 3 says, ¹² *See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.* ¹³ *But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.* ¹⁴ *We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.* ¹⁵ *As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*

Let's pray.