

Signs of Mercy

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Our study today takes us to a rarely-told story in the Old Testament. I'm sure this text is one on which I've never preached before. Part of the reason for that may be that it concerns two individuals who were not in the least exemplary followers of God. In fact, the story pertains to one who was slated to be punished by God by the other, who failed to do his duty. Nonetheless, there is something in the story that caught my attention and spoke to me of the Gospel. I hope you'll be blessed as I am by this story and what it tells me of God's love.

King Ahab of Israel lived during the ministry of the prophet Elijah, some eight centuries before Christ. Though the candle of his spirituality flickered at low ebb most of the time, God tried His best to win him. And even though Ahab married the heathen princess Jezebel "as if it had been a light thing," who did much to persuade God's people into Baal worship, the Lord still tried to win wicked Ahab's heart.

Did not the Lord send Elijah with the message that it wouldn't rain for over three years, to demonstrate the futility of looking to Baal for blessings? Didn't the Lord send fire to consume the sacrifice on the top of Mt. Carmel to confirm that He is the Creator God and in charge of the forces of nature? And didn't the Lord send rain to refresh the land in answer to the prophet's prayer? Look at the picture of God's tender care for this heathen king, as God's man Elijah leads the royal chariot through the driving rain back to the palace at Samaria. Oh, His mercies are great!

After this, we find that Israel's capital of Samaria is attacked by Syria (known today as Iraq), under the rulership of Ben-Hadad. This was a title which means "Son of Hadad," and was worn by many of the kings of Syria, similar to the title "Pharaoh" used by the kings of Egypt. Hadad was their god of nature and was the equivalent of Baal in Palestine. "Now Ben-Hadad the king of Syria gathered all his forces together; there were thirty-two kings with him, with horses and chariots. And he went up and besieged Samaria, and made war against it." I Kings 20:1.

Then the king sent messengers to the king of Israel and said, "Everything you have is mine, including your gold, your wives and your children." Ahab agreed saying, "Yes, it's all yours." But then Ben-Hadad went further and said, "You will deliver

over to me everything that I want, and in fact my messengers will come into your city, search your houses, and take whatever is pleasant in their eyes.”

This was getting very serious! The king of Israel consulted with his elders, who said, “You can’t agree to that,” and this message was delivered back to Ben-Hadad. His reaction was to immediately threaten total extermination. Ahab offered this reply, “Tell him, ‘let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off.’” Today we’d say, “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” Was there, we wonder, a glimmer of faith in the Lord in the heart of Ahab? In any case a prophet of the Lord came to Israel’s king with this announcement. “Thus says the LORD: ‘Have you seen all this great multitude? Behold I will deliver it into your hand today, and you shall know that I am the LORD.’” I Kings 20:13.

Sure enough, though the number of the Israelite army was small (7,000) in comparison with the vast hoards of the Syrians (which must have been at least 127,000, according to what we’re told in the story), Israel gained a significant victory. You would have thought that Ben-Hadad would have learned his lesson and left Israel alone, but that was not the case. He escaped and plotted his next move.

His advisers came up with an explanation of their recent defeat. They said, “We’ve figured out why we lost that battle.” “Then the servants of the king of Syria said to him, ‘Their gods are gods of the hills. Therefore they were stronger than we; but if we fight against them in the plain, then surely we will be stronger than they.’” I Kings 20:23. They superimposed their theology onto the religion of the Hebrews. Their reasoning seems so immature to us, but are our mental processes sometimes just as weak? God is God! He’s the God of the hills, the valleys, everything in between and the entire universe!

Again the Syrians attacked, this time at Aphek, east of the Sea of Galilee. Once more, the Israelites were vastly outnumbered. “Now the children of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats, while the Syrians filled the countryside. Then a man of God came and spoke to the king of Israel, and said, ‘Thus says the LORD; “Because the Syrians have said, ‘The LORD is God of the hills, but He is not God of the valleys,’ therefore I will deliver all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD.’”’” I Kings 20:27, 28.

The result of that battle was that 100,000 of the Syrians were killed in one day, and another 27,000 died when they fled inside the city of Aphek and a wall fell on

them. At this, Ben-Hadad fled for his life and “went into the city, into an inner chamber.” He knew that he had been fighting against a Power bigger than his armies, bigger than Hadad, the god whose name he bore. He knew that now his life was in the hands of the forces of Israel and Israel’s God, and that his life could end very soon. What was he to do? There he was, crouching in fear in the “inner chamber,” somewhat like his twenty-first century counterpart Saddam Hussein when he was found.

His counselors came up with a suggestion. “And his servants said to him, ‘Look now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings. Please, let us put sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads, and go out to the king of Israel; perhaps he will spare your life.’” I Kings 20:31. The sackcloth would indicate humility and repentance, and the ropes would suggest their recognition that they were essentially captives of Ahab.

It was a bold and desperate move, but it might work. Ben-Hadad had little choice. What other option was there? The once proud Ben-Hadad, the one who boasted he would annihilate Ahab and his people, would throw himself on Ahab’s mercy. That’s just what his servants did. They went out, dressed as they had described to make their plea. Here’s where we come to the critical part of the story, as it pertains to us. As they waited for Ahab’s response they listened intently to every word, every inflection of the reply to see if there were any hint of pity, any suggestion of compassion. Every phrase would be measured, every syllable weighed.

Look at them there, leaning forward, ears ready to seize any semblance of benevolence. Listen carefully to the conversation that ensued between the emissaries of Ben-Hadad and the king. There are a few words and phrases in this dialogue on which we’ll focus our attention. Catch the key word that would spark hope in the heart of the fearful king. “So they wore sackcloth around their waists and put ropes around their heads, and came to the king of Israel and said, ‘Your servant Ben-Hadad says, “Please let me live.”’ And he (Ahab) said, ‘Is he still alive? He is my brother.’ Now the men were diligently watching to see whether any *sign of mercy* would come from him; and they quickly grasped at this word and said, ‘Your brother Ben-Hadad.’ So he said, ‘Go, bring him.’ Then Ben-Hadad came out to him; and he had him come up into the chariot.” I Kings 20:33.

Now it’s true that Ahab was not a very good reflection of God’s character. Overall, he recorded a low score in his walk with God. In fact, at the end of this chapter, he

was reprimanded for not killing Ben-Hadad. Nevertheless, there is a Gospel message in this story. It is that part of the account that we wish to highlight.

Here's the connection. Here's why we are reviewing this story today. You and I find ourselves in the position of Ben-Hadad. We were born sinners. We have nothing to recommend ourselves to the great righteous and holy Creator God. At times, we have been proud like Ben-Hadad. We have boasted of our accomplishments. We have fought against the divine will, thinking that our visible resources would get us through. Like Paul we have "kicked against the pricks" of conscience in our battle against the One Who rules eternity.

We have wearied ourselves trying to work out our own solutions, trying to do things our way and like Jacob, find ourselves in a desperate struggle against a stronger Foe, without answers, exhausted of strength and solutions.

Did you hear about the megatropolis Dubai in the news lately? All those impressive skyscrapers, but 60 billion dollars in debt. We're like Dubai with its multibillion dollar landscape; we've built what may appear to be an impressive life but find ourselves with liabilities beyond our handling; we are spiritually bankrupt. We are Ben-Hadad cowering in the inner chamber, without any answers of our own making left. We look at our lives and find nothing of real value that we've done. All we see is wretchedness and failure; promises that were no stronger than ropes of sand; intentions not fulfilled; goals not achieved; opportunities lost and time running out. We realize that the future holds no hope if the solution must come from within us. We need more than justice; we need mercy.

Is there any hope? Yes! What can we do? The only answer is to throw ourselves on His mercy, as did Ben-Hadad the boaster who became Ben-Hadad the beggar. Ben-Hadad before was like the proud Pharisee in the temple, thinking he had everything under control. Ben-Hadad now was the humble Publican who beat his breast and said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Like the lepers of Elisha's day, we can conclude that it is best if we humbly throw ourselves at the feet of the superior power and depend on compassion. Mercy is what we need. Mercy is the only answer.

Drawing an illustration from a legal setting, Jesus said, "If you find yourself compelled to go to court, it's best to resolve the case beforehand. Settle out of court, before the trial takes place." He wasn't talking merely about earthly lawsuits; He was speaking of our standing with God and our arraignment at the great bar of the Almighty. His words were, "Agree with your adversary quickly,

while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you are thrown into prison.” Matthew 5:25. It is time now to make peace with God. Now, we can “settle out of court.” Now, while the door of mercy is still open, it is time to seek reconciliation. In the book of Job we read, “Now acquaint yourself with Him, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you.” Job 22:21.

It will require a recognition that there is no other answer. Is there any other solution that you can think of out of this mess? None that I’m aware of. We are all on a road which has only one destination, and that is the cemetery. Can you think of any exceptions to that in this present life? Unless the Lord comes, 100% of the people alive today will die. Perhaps you would like to put your faith in the science of cryonics, that is, having your body frozen in the hopes that at some future date the secret of immortality can be found and you can be thawed back into existence in a then-perfect world without any of the problems of today. I don’t think I’ll be signing up for that right now.

It will require an acknowledgment that I can’t do it myself. I used to think that I could. Like Paul, I used to put together a pretty impressive spiritual resume, but that now has become as ashes. Now those things I counted as gain appear as loss. Like Ben-Hadad, I thought I was in complete control. Now I realize that the only hope is in mercy.

What promises are given in the Bible to the one who recognizes his spiritual poverty? Listen to these words written by King David, who was anything but poor in the monetary sense. Remember, he contributed billions in gold toward the building of the temple. He was speaking of poverty in the spiritual sense. “This poor man cried out, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.” Psalm 34:6. “I am poor and needy; yet the LORD thinks upon me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.” Psalm 40:17. “I am poor and sorrowful; let Your salvation, O God, set me up on high. The humble shall see this and be glad; and you who seek God, your hearts shall live. For the LORD hears the poor, and does not despise His prisoners.” Psalm 69:29, 32, 33. “Bow down Your ear, O LORD, hear me; for I am poor and needy.” Psalm 86:1. “But You, O GOD the Lord, deal with me for Your name’s sake; because Your mercy is good, deliver me. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me.” Psalm 109:21, 22. Do you feel “poor and needy” today? There’s mercy and hope for you in Christ!

When the ambassadors of Ben-Hadad stood before Ahab, they stretched their hearing abilities to pick up any clue that mercy might be extended. Was there anything in what the king would say that might give them hope? What does the Bible say? With one word Ahab reversed Ben-Hadad's death sentence.

“So they wore sackcloth around their waists and put ropes around their heads, and came to the king of Israel and said, ‘Your servant Ben-Hadad says, “Please let me live.”’ And he (Ahab) said, ‘Is he still alive? He is my brother.’ Now the men were diligently watching to see whether any sign of mercy would come from him; and they quickly grasped at this word and said, ‘Your brother Ben-Hadad.’”

That one word spelled for Ben-Hadad the difference between life and death. The fact that Ahab called him his “brother” signaled that there might very well be mercy available.

Is there a sign of mercy offered to us, that we might have hope in our predicament? Yes, there is! In fact, there are many. Look at the tokens of God's love displayed in nature. Yes, there are thorns and thistles, but there also delicate flowers and beautiful sunsets. There are fangs and venom, but there are also the exquisite tastes of freshly squeezed grape juice and the fragrant aroma of pine trees. The clear air after the rain; the bright sunshine that warms our planet; the glorious landscape in spring; are these not tokens of His love? Is there not a “sign of mercy” in the world about us?

The incomprehensible mysteries of human life; the complicated systems that interact and assist each other in the maintenance of existence; are these not tokens of His love and signs of mercy? All the gifts we so often take for granted, like the gift of speech of which we spoke last week, coupled with the gifts of vision and hearing; being able to walk, being able to think and plan. Are these not tokens of His love and signs of His mercy?

What about God's providences in your life? As you look back, have you seen His hand moving within the chapters of your life story? Have you seen that certain “unexplainable” circumstances have worked for your good? This week I took my car to my mechanic because it was running very roughly. He explained that it was because the PCV valve was stuck open and would have to be replaced. He then added, “But...I noticed that while I was working on your car that the grommets that connect your gear shift to the transmission are very loose and liable to fail at any moment.” If that were to happen, I would find myself unable to shift gears, and stuck in whatever gear I happened to be in at the time. It would have been a great

inconvenience, depending on where I was at the moment. I choose to believe that God in His mercy allowed this to be discovered in a timely way. I'm sure you've had similar experiences. Are these not tokens of His love, signs of His mercy? A line from the great Christian hymn "Blessed Assurance" by Fanny J. Crosby says, "Angels descending bring from above, echoes of mercy, whispers of love."

What about the Book that tells the story of a God Who loved us so much that He sent His Son to die for our sins, that we might live? Undeserving though we are, He took the first step, He made the first move in making a way of salvation. Adam and Eve had sinned and now stood before their Maker, Who was now their Judge. He had said that in the day they ate of the forbidden fruit, they would surely die.

There was nothing ambiguous about the command given. But they had disobeyed. Like Ben-Hadad, they retreated to the "inner chamber" of the Garden to hide. But God came looking for them, and now they were standing before Him without excuse, naked. Justice administered would result in their immediate death. It's what their choices and actions merited. It would have been fair. What they needed was something beyond justice, something more than mere fairness. They needed mercy. They needed grace.

When the Lord spoke to the guilty pair, would there be any "sign of mercy" in anything He would say? Would there be any glimmer of light in this dark moment? Yes! He said, "I will put enmity between the serpent and your Seed. The heel of the Seed will be bruised, but the Seed will crush the serpent's head." To Adam and Eve, these words had the same effect as Ahab's referring to Ben-Hadad as "brother." They spoke of hope. They spoke of life. These words alluded to a tomorrow instead of an instantaneous death. There would be a way in which they could be restored into God's favor.

It would be expensive. There would be no shortcut solution. It would cost the life of God Himself. Jesus, the One equal to the Father, the One through Whom all things came to be would Himself suffer the death that Adam deserved.

"Sign of mercy"? Look to the cross! It **shouts** mercy. You don't have to strain your ears to hear the message of God's love when you look to the cross; in fact, you'd have to stop your ears to avoid hearing it! Think of it; the King of the universe Who wore the crown of thorns so we could wear a crown of life. God Who stepped off His glorious throne and came to live a life of poverty, self-denial ending in a painful and ignominious death. Calvary shouts His mercy! You'd have to be spiritually deaf not to hear it!

What does the Bible tell us about God's mercy? The word *mercy* occurs 276 times in the King James Bible; the word *merciful* appearing 40 times, the vast majority of these usages referring to God. God's mercy is written into the Ten Commandments; "showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." Exodus 20:6. Mercy is the first attribute spoken by the Lord when He described himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai: "Then the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name (character) of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty.'" Exodus 34:6, 7. It is doubtful if there is a single word in Scripture used more often than *mercy* to describe our God.

The servants of Syria's king "quickly grasped" the word "brother" as it came from Ahab's lips. That word breathed life. They latched onto it like a drowning seaman would a life-preserver. That word has significance to us today. Because of Jesus' great sacrifice, we have been adopted into the family of God. The Bible says that He is not ashamed to call us brethren. Hebrews 2:11. By His calling us His brothers and sisters, we can have the same hope as did Ben-Hadad back then; indeed a greater hope. Ahab's mercy to Ben-Hadad gave him life, but life that eventually expired. God's mercy grants life eternal.

When Ahab extended mercy to Ben-Hadad, in a gracious and magnanimous gesture, he invited him to come out from his "inner chamber" of hiding and step with him into his royal chariot. One day, by His grace and through His mercy, that's what will be our privilege. Jesus will come back, as He promised to this earth. God's plan will be fulfilled. Everything in this Book will come true. He will invite all those who have received His mercy, all those who have become His brothers and sisters through Gospel adoption, to step into His royal chariot. What a day that will be! Is there anything here that is worth trading for the life that God has promised for us? Is there any other solution to the problems of life that offer any lasting answers? Today He is holding out to you "signs of mercy." Will you "quickly grasp" the message of His love and receive Him as your Savior and Lord?