

God of Peaks and Valleys

1 King 20

Peaks and valleys! We all know what they are. Life is full of them.

Mountaintop and valley experiences fill us with different emotions. One fills our hearts with celebration, admiration, and strength. The other one makes us feel fearful, tearful and doubtful. In many cases, the steep valley feels like a soundproof chamber; we experience nothing but absolute silence and isolation.

But, the summit is different. The feeling of being closer to God is a given when we are at the peak. That's perhaps the reason we are always seeking upward mobility.

Think about it! Everybody wants to go up not down. We are always trying to climb the ladder financially, professionally, and even intellectually. The peak is our preference because we think it is at the mountaintop where we encounter God. And sometimes, this idea of finding God only at the top may propel us to climb mountains that God does not even want us to climb.

Yes, we find God in the peaks of life—when we are experiencing vigor, abundance, love, success, and joy. Indeed, we find God during moments of accomplishment. Yet, God's presence and power is not exclusive to high places.

You will find God in the peaks of life, but you will also find God in lonesome valleys full of shadows. The psalmist said it beautifully, "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*" (Psalm 23:4). God's presence is not only reserved for those at the top of the hill. God is a "refuge and strength, an ever-present help" for those who are in the bottom of the pit.

God is present in the valleys of addiction, bereavement, scarcity, unemployment, sickness, betrayal, and unfriendliness. God is present in the valleys of splintered trust, unanswered prayers, and feeble faith. God is present in the valleys of both merited and undeserved criticism, abandonment, guilt and shame. God is the God of peaks and valleys.

The biblical narrative this morning takes us to one of the most vivid and detailed descriptions of any battle to be found in the Bible. A coalition of thirty-three kings was ready to make war against the northern portion of the fractured kingdom of Israel. They sent a loud and clear message, "We are big and powerful. Do not fight! Surrender! We will take your silver and gold, and the best of your wives and children, and you will do nothing."

This was a very overwhelming situation. The first reaction of Ahab was to shrink before such an intimidating message. The king of Israel was willing to accept the deal of his oppressors who, after seeing King Ahab's feeble heart, became more demanding. However, the elders and the

people of Samaria came to Ahab and said to him, “Don’t listen to him or agree to his demands” (v. 8).

This is a very important part of the story. The success the Israelites experienced at this moment of history came through the encouragement the elders gave king Ahab. Here are a couple of lessons we learn from this specific detail.

1. We all need people to encourage us...

When he was a young boy, Benjamin West attempted to draw a picture of his sister. His first piece of art was a mess of lines and colors. Yet, his mother saw his creation, kissed him on the head, and remarked, “Wow! It’s Sally!” He would later say that it was this kiss that made him an artist—and the great American painter he would become. Encouragement is a powerful thing!¹

When Abraham Lincoln was shot at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. on April 14, 1865, among the belongings found in his pockets were eight newspaper clippings, including several favorable to the president and his policies. It’s not hard to imagine why president Lincoln carried the newspaper clippings with him. They were a source of encouragement.²

We all need encouragement. It does not matter who you are, where you are from, the type of situation you are facing, we all need encouragement. We don’t only need to receive it. We also need to give it.

2. Encouragement is not empty flattery (blowing smoke)

Encouragement is more than complementing others. The reason we give encouragement is not to simply make people feel good. We should offer encouragement to help people recognize their talents, restore hope, and give direction, much like we see in the account we are studying today. As he dealt with a mighty opposition, the elders offered encouragement to Ahab and helped him find direction.

Encouragement is about breathing into others the valor they may lack to achieve their God given potential. Encouragement is not about boosting the ego. It is about strengthening that heart and building character. When we encourage others, we are developing something in them. The elders helped Ahab develop a stronger heart in the face of intimidation and hostility.

I am grateful for people who are encouragers. I appreciate people who don’t let me chicken out of intimidating situations. I am thankful for people, who in the midst of adversity help me find direction and speak life into my spirit. I am grateful for those who have supported me as well as those who have held me accountable. I am thankful for those who have embraced and challenged

¹ Peter Chin, “The Power of Encouragement,” Our Daily Bread, published August 10, 2019, <https://odb.org/2019/08/10/the-power-of-encouragement/>

² Mike Wittmer, “Lincoln’s Pockets,” Our Daily Bread, published August 15, 2019, <https://odb.org/2019/08/15/the-contents-of-lincolns-pockets/>

me at the same time. I have no words to express my appreciation for those who have listened to me while not allowing me to make excuses to cover up mediocrity. Those people have encouraged me greatly.

Encouraging means telling people what they need to hear in order to bring about a change in action, feeling or belief. Yet, when we encourage others, we should always do it with love, grace and wisdom.

The elders and the people encouraged King Ahab and said to him, “Don’t listen to him or agree to his demands” (v. 8). That encouragement resulted in a mind-blowing victory. King Ahab took heart, attacked the huge coalition that had formed against him, and received an unexpected and unimaginable victory.

After being defeated, the enemies of the Israelites regrouped and strategized a different offensive. Trying to explain their downfall and seeking to find a way to victory, the officials of the king of Aram concluded, “*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*” (v. 23).

It is no secret that the Israelites were experts in guerilla warfare. They mastered the art of fighting in the mountains. They were skillful people in that kind of terrain. That’s the reason the king of Aram and his minions said, “we need to bring them down to the valley so we can overcome them.” Little did they know, they were underestimating the power of God.

Church, I wonder how many times we have a mentality similar to that of the king of Aram. We may believe that God can provide as long as we are at the top of the mountain—as long as the bank account is in the black, as long as we are in control, when the situation is familiar to us, when there is reasonable evidence for healing and restoration. We may believe that God can help us, as long as we can help ourselves. We may believe that God is at work only when he is acting in our timetable. We may believe that God loves us, as long as we keep ourselves at the peak of our prayer life and piety.

Nevertheless, I want to remind you that God is the God of peaks and valleys. Even when you fall in the valley of spiritual slumber, God loves you and wants to restore you. When you find yourself in unfamiliar territories, God is present and leading you home. When you feel helpless and incapable of fighting on your own, God is securing a victory for you.

Even when you believe that your moment is long past gone, God is there inviting you to enter a new beginning full of unbelievable opportunities. When the circumstances tell you that you won’t make it through the valley because they are stronger than you, then a prophet, an encourager, will come your way to remind you of these words, “*This is what the Lord says: ‘Because the Arameans [terrifying, enslaving forces of the world] 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.” God will never let go of you. Through the calm, through the storm, in the highs and lows of life, God will take care of you.

Wait in the Lord! God is the God of peaks and valleys!