"And the servants of the king of Syria said unto him, Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they."

I Kings xx, 23

Psalm 95
New Book of Worship, Psalm 95, p. 71

Benaḥadad king of Syria was making war on Aḥab king of Israel. After the reign of Solomon, when the northern tribes revolted and set up a separate government, these northern tribes, called Israel, were continually at war with Syria - at times paying tribute and at times gaining independence, but, as we know, finally taken captive by the Assyrians, never to return.

We recall that in the Scriptures Babylon represents the love of self, the love of ruling over others, the lust of dominion; and Syria - or Assyria, the longer form of the name - represents pride in one's own intellectual powers, pride of self-intelligence, the belief that men are able of themselves to determine what is true or false, good or bad.

When Naaman the Syrian came to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy and was told to go wash in Jordan, he replied, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them and be clean?" The Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus the capital city of Syria, which seemed to Naaman better than all the waters of Israel, represent streams of natural thought - the judging of right by worldly standards rather than by the Lord's teachings and commandments, represented by the Jordan.

Syria was at war with Israel. So it ever is. The powers of natural thought and reason, when they are proud and self-confident, are ever enemies of true intelligence. Benaḥadad, king of Syria, was making war against Aḥab, king of Israel. Benaḥadad was so proud that he sent messengers to Aḥab demanding that Aḥab give him all the gold and silver he had, and even his wives and children. Aḥab said that he would give them up. But Benaḥadad sent again and asked for more, saying that his messengers would go through the palace and the homes of the rich and take away whatever they desired. After consulting with the elders, Aḥab refused. Benaḥadad's reply was a threat that Samaria, Aḥab's capitol, would be entirely destroyed and that the dust of its ruins would not be enough for each one of the Syrian army to take away a handful. Then he marshalled his army and encamped before Samaria. So proud, self-confident, and foolish was he that he and his officers became drunken, and Aḥab with a small army put them to flight.

After this battle was won, a prophet was sent to Aḥab who said, "Go, strengthen thyself, and mark, and see what thou doest: for at the return of the year the king of Syria will come up against thee... And it came to pass at the return of the year, that Benaḥadad numbered the Syrāns, and went up to Aphek, to fight against Israel."
But he did not march against Samaria, the capital, which is in the hills. The reason given is, in the words of Scripture, as follows: "And the servants of the king of Syria said unto him, Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they." "And the children of Israel were numbered, and were all present, and went against them; and the children of Israel pitched before them like two little flocks of kids; but the Syrians filled the country." "And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, The Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord."

The two armies stood encamped against each other for seven days, and on the seventh day the battle was joined and the Israelites were victorious.

But there is another episode in the story. Benhadad gave himself up to Ahab, but instead of keeping him captive, Ahab called him brother and made a covenant of friendship with him. Because he did this the Lord sent a prophet to him, who told him a parable of a man who went into battle and brought back a prisoner, and charged his servant not to let the prisoner escape, for if he did, he would pay for it with his life, or with a talent of silver. But while the servant was busy, the prisoner escaped. And the king ruled that as the man had declared, so should the judgment be. Then the prophet said to Ahab: "Thus saith the Lord, Because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people." Such is the story. The lesson, of course, is a spiritual one. Israel represents the Lord's church, and the enemies of Israel the evil and false principles which are the enemies of the church and of every man of the church.

To secure peace evils must be exterminated. The Divine command to Israel to destroy their enemies seems very hard. Truly these things were hard, but they were the Lord's dealings with very hard men. Today even in the most advanced Christian countries the necessity of dealing differently with different kinds of men is recognized. Good men have their freedom, but some criminals must be kept in prison. And proper discipline is good for the bad men themselves as well as for the community. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works. For a bad child mercy is not indulgence but discipline and restraint.

The story relates to our conflicts against evil. As we progress in regeneration, we change our ways and our thoughts. What we once condoned now we reject. When we are in temptation, the Lord opens our minds so that we see the truth, and this truth discloses to us some false principle that has been fighting against our life. He says, "Keep this man a prisoner. Do not allow him freedom again. If you do, he will plot against you and undermine your spiritual life. If you do not keep him in subjection, it cannot be otherwise than that the life of evil will supplant the life of good." If the prisoner escapes, we are responsible. The prophet says, "Thyself hast decided it." Yes, we decide for ourselves. David says, "My soul is continually in mine hand."
If our will is to do the Lord’s will, then He can gift us with His own power and give us certain victory over our foes. By nature we seek self-interest; by nature our ambitions are worldly and selfish. How can they be changed? We can recognize that it is our duty to serve the Lord, which is to love the neighbor and to do what is just and righteous. At first the love of the Lord and the neighbor is not in the heart. We can see the truth even though we do not love it. And within every truth we learn there dwells a power which enables us to live it, and if we do, the Lord will plant the love of this truth in our hearts.

We recall that there were two battles, one in the hills of Samaria and the other in the plain about Aphek. The danger exists not only in our inward thought but also in the practical doings of our outward daily life. When we recognize that in principle a certain thing is evil, we may hold it prisoner as far as our thoughts about it are concerned. When we see what our pattern should be - the laws given to Moses upon the Mount - our mental Benhadad acknowledges that the God of Israel is a God of the hills, the high places of the mind. Said the servants of the king, "Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they."

When we go down to the plain of practical daily life, we come into fresh danger. When we are "busy here and there," the prisoner escapes. There is a vast difference between theoretical and practical virtue, between knowing what we ought to do and doing as we ought.

The second battle is the battle on the plain of daily conduct. What good is knowledge of truth if we do not use it? In the world today there is much confusion even as to what truth is, and also a great conflict of desires, motives, and ambitions. We are living in a time of change, a time of the breaking up of old ideas, a time of disbelief and of doubts and suspicions. The New Church should be able to help here.

The story of Ahab and Benhadad pictures this double conflict which goes on within the soul. First the battle is fought in the higher region of our minds, and then it is carried down to the field of our daily labors. Because the first battle is won with comparative ease, we should not be off our guard and feel secure. The enemy will return. We should continually strengthen ourselves so that when it returns, we shall be ready - with the Lord's help - to defeat it again.

The second battle was fought on the plain. We may perhaps be strong in good resolutions. If the enemy attacks us in our higher states, he could not have success. It is when we are busy with the work and cares of the world, when we are tired and discouraged, and when our good resolutions are in part forgotten that we must be watchful.

Our Holy Land is a land of hills and valleys. There are in every good life both internal and external states - times for worship and holy resolution, and times for the business of the world. The Lord is ready to give protection and blessing in them all. Only let us be sure that the Lord is with us as we go from the hills into the valleys.

Amen