

WHAT PRICE, AHAB?

Read With 1 Kings 21

3032a

"But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up."

I stood upon the dusty, rubble-covered hill that used to be Jezreel, the royal city where King Ahab, with Jezebel his heathen wife, chose to build his winter palace. A westerly breeze along the beautiful Jezreel Valley occasionally lifted the sour aroma of a nearby cattle farm across the scrubby bushes and into our faces. I walked around the newly begun archaeological dig and saw the uncovered remains of an ancient gateway to the royal city. Rows of stone were beginning to emerge from the huge mound of sediment and debris, stones that once served as the lower parts of walls of houses and shops, long since torn down by foreign invaders and time. For many centuries these walls lay forgotten by man, covered by dirt, debris, and the useless plants which spring up in places like this. It appeared that modern men had used this place as a dumping ground for old building material and trash, and the labor required to uncover the entire city, in my unskilled opinion, would be enormous.

I spoke briefly with an archaeologist that afternoon on the hill as he sat in the shade, sketching out with much care and precision the parts of the city which had just been exposed. He told me they already could tell that at some point in the ruined city's long history, it had been thoroughly plundered by treasure hunters. That is always a disappointment to archaeologists, but there is still hope that in addition to the great value of knowledge of the city itself, there may yet be found some artifact overlooked by those ancient treasure hunters, covered by a collapsed wall or buried and hidden from searching eyes by the dirt and debris.

My heart cried out as I stood on the rubble, "Oh, Ahab, my brother! Is this what you sold your soul for? Is this what you clung to, what you hid behind, what you boasted of? Look at your royal palace now, my brother! Look at this place that you cherished more than you loved God! Oh, Ahab, my dear brother, what a fool, what a fool, you were!"

NABOTH

We are told in 1 Kings 21 that a righteous man named Naboth lived in Jezreel and that he owned property there. This property, on which Naboth tended his vineyard, had been passed down from his forefathers from the days of Joshua and the conquest of Canaan. We are also told that Naboth's property adjoined King Ahab's winter palace. Naboth's property line went right up to the wall of Ahab's palace. There came a day when King Ahab approached Naboth with an offer to purchase his land from him so that the king could have a garden of herbs next to his house. The king was stunned when Naboth refused, saying, "*The LORD forbid me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.*" The land had been given to Naboth's family by God, and he valued the gift of God.

Now, Ahab had made an offer to Naboth that was fair enough. He had offered to purchase the land for money or, if Naboth preferred, to give him a better vineyard than this one that stood next to the king's house. Naboth, being an upright man, could not even consider relinquishing his portion in the Promised Land, given by lot to his forefathers by God after Joshua had taken the land. That was a holy gift which no man of integrity would despise. Ahab was not a man of integrity; he was a profane man of pampered self-indulgence.

JEZEBEL

Now, Ahab did some very evil deeds in his life, but the careful student of the Bible will notice that Ahab did not have a vicious, cruel spirit as did some other evil kings. His downfall was not so much that he *intended* to do the evil he did but that he was so easily influenced to doing evil by others, especially by his altogether worthless, though physically ravishing wife, Jezebel. He was putty in her hands.

Jezebel was a heathen. She was also a manipulative, idolatrous woman whom Ahab had married. The marriage may have been part of a political alliance with Jezebel's father Eth-baal (a name meaning "man of Baal"), who was king of Zidon, a city to the north. Jezebel was coolly methodical in her wickedness. She probably prided herself in being a woman who "got what she wanted". She held absolutely no respect for Jehovah the God of Israel, even though He was the God of her own husband's ancestors. In fact, she appears to have had nothing in her heart for Jehovah but contempt. She once ordered every servant of Jehovah in Israel to be arrested and put to death, and she caused the blood of many a righteous soul to stain the ground that Jehovah had given to her husband and his people. She even put a price on the head of the prophet Elijah and uttered a curse upon herself if she didn't kill him (1Kgs. 19:2), causing the humble prophet to flee the country for his life. Still, Ahab clung to her, enamored by her charms, bewitched by lust for her favors and by fear of her disapproval.

When Naboth rejected Ahab's offer to purchase his vineyard next to the king's palace, the sulking king went home, "*and laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread.*" Ahab was disappointed and hurt, but his lack of maliciousness is revealed in the fact that instead of murdering Naboth and seizing his vineyard, Ahab merely went home and pouted; that is, he went home and pouted until Jezebel came to find out why he refused to eat.

"*But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said unto him, 'Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread?' And he said unto her, 'Because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite and said unto him, 'Give me thy vineyard for money, or else, if it please thee, I will give thee another vineyard for it.' And he answered, 'I will not give thee my vineyard.'*"

Jezebel was outraged. "Who is king around here?" she demanded. What this wretched woman was thinking is made clear by the events that followed. "If this wimp didn't know how to rule over people . . ." Well, she would show him how to do it! Before leaving his bedside, in a sweet, pampering voice, she coddled the depressed king as he lay in despair upon his bed. "*Arise and eat bread,*" she cajoled him, "*and let thine heart be merry! I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth.*" One can imagine the soft tone of this beast as she stroked Ahab's weary, tear-stained face, much as an over-indulgent mother would pamper a whining, tantrum-throwing brat. Whether Jezebel allowed Ahab to know what her scheme was before she committed the deed, we do not know, but it seems doubtful that she did.

The Bible narrates the tale. Naboth is arrested and put on trial by Jezebel's ungodly judges in Jezreel. He was convicted (by the testimony of hired liars) of blasphemy against God and executed, along with all his sons, and his lifeless body was cast outside the city in the place of execution, broken and bleeding beneath a pile of blood-stained stones. Naturally, inasmuch as Naboth and all his sons were dead, and there were no descendants remaining to possess the property, the land went, of course, to the state. That is, to King Ahab. Jezebel was a woman who got what she wanted.

How joyfully Jezebel entered into the king's chamber that day! "*Arise!*" she called out cheerfully, "*Take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money. For Naboth is not alive, but dead.*" She never showed even the slightest hint of shame or remorse for her wicked and cruel murder of righteous Naboth and his family. So far as we are told, Ahab never even questioned his darling, generous wife about the event. He probably didn't want to know all the details. The important thing to him was that, by what ever means, the vineyard was without an owner now, and it was his responsibility as king to possess the property. He was only doing what was expected of a king to do. When he went out to view his newly-acquired possession, Naboth's vineyard, he must have been excited about his plans for it. But as he stood there, trying to envision how he would arrange his long-desired herb garden, his plans and his joy were interrupted by an unwelcome intruder - the prophet Elijah!

ELIJAH

God has a wonderful way of cutting through red tape and philosophical meandering to get to the real issues. Just as God condemned David for the murder of Uzziah, though David was not even at Rabbah when it happened, so He cut through the smokescreen of man's excuses now. King David had given the order to murder righteous Uriah so that he could have Uriah's beautiful young wife for himself, and God ignored the fact that David was miles away from the crime and went to the heart of the matter, saying to David, "*THOU hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife*" (2Sam. 12:9). Forget the legal wrangling to which we are accustomed, the twisted logic of lawyers in modern courtrooms, the straining at legal gnats which make the truth concerning a person's guilt or innocence secondary to a lawyer's ability to manipulate the law. When God judges, there is no escape for the guilty and there is no condemnation for the innocent. No one on earth has ever lived under a just form of government, never known what it is like to live without fear of being wrongly accused and punished. Oh, how we long for Jesus the righteous Judge to come! His judgment is always perfect and just, and he can neither be bought nor confused.

It made not one iota of difference to God whether or not Ahab knew the details of Jezebel's plot to murder Naboth. Ahab was the head of his house, and he knew that his wicked wife was up to no good. He also knew that she would murder, lie, steal, or do anything else she had to do in order to get what she wanted. Ahab was entirely responsible for what happened to Naboth. In human courts, he might have by some legal maneuver escaped conviction for the crime, but there are no legal maneuvers against the righteous judgment of God. With Him, there is only truth.

Here, in Naboth's vineyard, Ahab got a taste of the perfect judgment of God, a foretaste of the eternal judgment which both he and Jezebel have yet to face at the judgment seat of Christ Jesus. "*Have you killed*", bellowed the prophet, "*And taken possession? Thus saith the Lord, 'In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine.'*" And of Jezebel Elijah also spoke from the LORD, saying, "*The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.*" This spot of ground by the wall where Elijah stood, this very place where years later Jezebel would crash after being thrown out a palace window and eaten by dogs, was *the portion of ground which belonged to Naboth!* Oh, the wonderful, perfect justice of God! She killed to gain a portion of ground on which God would execute His furious wrath against her! Paul spoke the truth, my friends. "*Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Whatsoever any man soweth, that shall he also receive of the Lord.*"

When Elijah stood in the vineyard with Ahab, sternly rebuking him for his sin and prophesying of the unsavory results that it would bring, Ahab was frightened, as a little child, caught in some mischief, fears being punished by a parent. This time, there was nothing Jezebel could do to comfort him now. She had just as much control over the power of the living God as she understood His righteousness, and that left her completely helpless, cunning and beautiful as she may have been. As for Ahab, he put on sackcloth, and fasted, and “walked softly” before the LORD. And God, whose mercy is as incomprehensible as is His wisdom, sent Elijah again to the trembling king, whose wife had provoked him to do so much evil, and told him that because he had humbled himself in fear before the LORD, that God would not bring Ahab’s house to ruin in his lifetime, *“but in his sons’ days will I bring the evil upon his house.”*

OH, AHAB!

As I stood on the hill of rubble where these events happened so long ago, I tried to ignore the odor of the place and to forget the ugliness of the hill in its present state. I tried to imagine Jezreel as it appeared to Ahab and his heathen wife, Jezebel. Beautifully situated in the valley, it has lovely Mount Gilboa not far away to the southeast. The hill of Moreh rises from the valley floor nearby to the north, and beyond that, impressive Mount Tabor. Westward, the picturesque valley of Jezreel stretches like a brilliantly woven blanket toward the famed city of Megiddo, and from there it continues to the Mount Carmel range, where Elijah called down fire from heaven in a contest between Jezebel’s gods and Jehovah.

How majestic it must have appeared at the time! What an appealing situation! And how blessed was King Ahab, descendant of Abraham and inheritor with the nation of the promises of God! Yet, all these blessings and eternal life itself were traded for the body of a godless woman. Oh, the tragedy of it all! What a waste! As I stood on the hill, I mourned in my heart for Ahab, who valued his part in God’s family so little and sold his soul for what has amounted to a pile of trash behind a smelly cattle barn.

Oh, Ahab, my brother! My brother, Ahab, how I wish that you could have seen in your day the city of Jezreel as I can see it now! Would doing that have helped you? Would that have given you the strength to say “no” to your evil-hearted wife? Would to God you could have seen the end of it all in your time! How I grieve for you, my brother, Ahab—you who had every good thing by birth and traded it all for nothing! Where is the finery of your flowered palaces, your stuccoed and brightly painted chambers filled with ornate, polished furniture? Where are your gifts to Jezebel and hers to you? Where are her rings, her gilded mirror (a prized possession for the vain woman), and the gold and the silver of her idols—the idols to whom you bowed in order to continue in her favor? Oh, Ahab, your precious possessions have been taken away and your palaces plundered by scavenging wanderers, dirty men you would not even have allowed into your presence. You feared God but feared Jezebel more, and what has become of both her and her charms? Oh, my brother, how I wish you could have believed! How God’s people could have been blessed if you had only humbled yourself to the God who had given you so much!

THE SCRIPTURES

I have long been of the persuasion that young people would be more inclined to fear God and seek his will for their lives if God would only give to them a glimpse of themselves in old age, battered and beaten by time. I have looked at the worn faces of elderly sinners and wondered if they would have lived godly lives and sought God if they could have seen themselves as they are now while they were still young. If instead of aging one day at a time, they could have seen the end from the beginning, wouldn't that have made them wise to fear God and wouldn't that have persuaded them to refuse to do evil? If the proud and rich of previous years had during those days been given a vision of their elegant homes now, disdained as outmoded by the proud and rich of our time, couldn't it have cut short their pride and inspired them to seek after an eternal home with God?

But in a sense, we all see ourselves at a later age when we see the elderly around us now. We do see the end of the grand houses of the rich if God will open our eyes to see the houses that were considered grand in the past. When the rich man who was suffering in the flames of Hell begged Abraham to send someone from Paradise to warn his brothers not come into that place of torment, Abraham responded by telling the rich man that his sinful brothers had the Scriptures to read, if they would read them. But the rich man persisted, "*Nay, but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.*" Still, Abraham refused, saying that if the rich man's brothers did not believe what Moses and the prophets wrote, then they would not believe the truth even if one rose from the dead (Lk.16:27-31). So, I suppose that if men will not believe even if a dead man rises from the past, then neither will they believe if one came from the future, revealing things to come. They have the Scriptures. Let them hear them.

As I picked my way through the prickly brush surrounding Jezreel's dusty hill to return to the van, I pondered these things. The summer sun beat relentless upon both the plain and our heads; nevertheless, the valley, irrigated in this typically dry season, was bursting with the greenery of orchards and vineyards. Another generation has come now to receive their gifts of God. Another generation has been born and has been given their opportunity to believe God's Word and be saved from the coming wrath. Do they ever look up from their labor in these green fields to contemplate the rugged hill that used to be the royal city of Jezreel and learn anything at all from the lessons which its dust can teach?