

Jezebel

By David H. Roper

SERIES: ELIJAH

Chapter 21 of 1 Kings tells a gripping tale about human rights and the violation of those rights, and the way that God looks at the violation of people's rights. It deals with justice and injustice and great social issues. A southern preacher of a past era, Dr. Robert G. Lee, once preached a message on this very famous passage and entitled it "Pay Day Sunday," which very aptly expresses its theme. This chapter deals with God's judgment and his retribution. However, we are going to look at this passage from a different standpoint--in terms of the relationship which we, as men and women in the body of Christ, have to one another, and the influence that we can have on one another for evil or good. Let's begin with verse 1:

Now it came about after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard which was in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria...

"These things" which he refers to here are the events that happened in chapter 20. There was a vast army, 125,000 strong, that besieged Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. At the head of that confederation were 32 kings from Mesopotamia. And, perhaps because the Israelites didn't have time to muster all their forces, they were able to raise an army of only about 7,000. Acting on the counsel of one of the prophets, Ahab, who was the king of the northern kingdom and resided in Samaria, launched an attack on the Syrian army as they were banqueting and prematurely toasting their victory. The Syrians were caught by surprise and driven from the land--put to rout--and Israel was victorious. Unfortunately, Ahab allowed the king of Syria, Ben-hadad, to slip through his fingers. He did it deliberately. He spared his life--not because of some humanitarian considerations, but because he had some private ideas of how a king ought to be treated--and Ben-hadad was allowed to escape. The results for both Ahab and his family were terrible. One of the prophets appeared at Samaria and told him that because of his folly, he would lose his life and the nation of Israel would suffer (chapter 20, verses 42 and 43):

And he said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people.'" So the king of Israel went to his house sullen and vexed, and came to Samaria.

In that one verse we are given the measure of the man Ahab. When he didn't get his way, he sulked and pouted and used his moods as a way of manipulating people, as we shall see in chapter 21.

In verse 1 of chapter 21, we are told that Naboth lived in Jezreel. Naboth is one of the major figures in this story. He had a vineyard near the palace of Ahab. Jezreel was the summer capital of the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom. It is located on the northern slopes of Mt. Gilboa, so it is shaded from the summer sun and overlooks the valley of Jezreel. It gets the winds that blow in from the Mediterranean during the summer, so it is a very cool and delightful place. Ahab had taken his court to Jezreel and had set up residence there. There is only a sleepy little Arab village there today, but in Ahab's time it was a thriving and bustling center of national life. Apparently, Ahab's palace was right on the wall that was a part of the citadel, and from his palace he could look down into a neighboring vineyard which belonged to Naboth. It was evidently a lovely vineyard, and because of its location it was very much desired by Ahab. He wanted it for a vegetable garden (verses 2 and 3):

And Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is close beside my house, and I will give you a better vineyard than it in its place; if you like, I will give you the price of it in money." But Naboth said to

Ahab, "The Lord forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers."

It appears that Ahab's request was legitimate, at least on the surface. He was willing to buy the vineyard. He didn't try to possess it, as any other eastern monarch might try to do. He wanted to purchase it or trade another vineyard for it, and therefore, Naboth's refusal to sell seems somewhat abrupt unless you understand the system of property and property rights that had been established in Israel.

In contrast to all the other nations of this time, the Israelites were not only encouraged, they were actually commanded to maintain their inheritance, the portion of land that they inherited from their fathers. When the nation of Israel conquered the land of Canaan, the land was first divided among the tribes and further subdivided by clans and families, so that every man in Israel had a plot of ground that he could call his own and could farm or do with as he pleased. Now, that wasn't true anywhere else in the ancient Near East. In most of these other countries, the kings owned the land and the common people worked the land. It was a feudal system. But in Israel, everyone had a piece of land, and the law established very stringent regulations that were designed to maintain the right to hold that land. In cases of hardship, an Israelite could sell his piece of land, but at the end of fifty years they declared what was called a "Year of Jubilee," and during that year, every piece of land reverted back to its original owner. This kept property from being accumulated by the rich and the powerful and it distributed the property to the common people throughout the nation.

Now, Ahab was aware of this law and he knew it was wrong to ask for Naboth's paternal inheritance. Nevertheless, he asked. Sometimes it is wrong even to ask (verse 4):

**So Ahab came into his house sullen and vexed because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers."
And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and ate no [bread] food.**

We can all identify with Ahab's behavior. I am sure we have acted childishly, too. What began as a whim became an overpowering impulse for Ahab. He was controlled by his emotions. Because he wasn't a man under authority, he wasn't willing to submit to the will of God, and therefore, he had no control of his own life, he had no authority over himself--over his moods, over his whims, over his desires. Of course, the basic problem was that he was covetous. He wanted something that belonged to someone else.

Covetousness was forbidden in Israel because God knows that a covetous spirit is destructive. When we want something that belongs to someone else, if we are not careful, we will go to any lengths to acquire it. And if we don't acquire it, it poisons our relationship with that person and affects the way we look at them and their possessions. And that is why the Bible says: "Thou shalt not covet your neighbor's property, your neighbor's field, your neighbor's wife, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (see Exodus 20:17). Don't covet it.

But the striking thing is that what was considered a vice in Israel was a virtue in Canaanite society. The very term that is used in Exodus 20, "Thou shalt not covet", is found in Canaanite literature and is ascribed to Baal as a virtue. It may well be that Ahab picked up this spirit from Jezebel and her Canaanite family and forefathers, and he allowed that spirit to be fostered in his own mind and thinking. It was that covetous attitude that gripped his life and controlled him and led to his own destruction and the destruction of Naboth and others. Ahab's pouting does get a response (verses 5-7):

But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "How is it that your spirit is so sullen that you are not eating food?" So he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite, and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it pleases you, I will give you a vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" And Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you now reign over Israel? Arise, eat bread, and let your heart be joyful; I will [get for] give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

This is Jezebel's finest hour. She had seen this mood in her husband many times before, and now she is going to exploit it for her own evil and twisted ends. Literally, what she is saying is something like this: What is this? You

are king. I will show you how kings act. I will show you the way we do it in my hometown. Her actions are described in verses 8-10:

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and sent letters to the elders and to the nobles who were living with Naboth in his city. Now she wrote in the letters, saying, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the people; and seat two worthless men before him, and let them testify against him, saying, 'You cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death."

Jezebel writes letters over Ahab's signature, sent as though they came from the royal house, directing the leaders of the city of Jezreel first to declare a fast to express as a community a sense of corporate guilt over having allowed a person like Naboth to continue to live. This man is guilty of high treason against the king and blasphemy against God, and that they should allow him to continue to exist is a violation of law. Therefore they are to express corporately their guilt. That is the first step. And secondly, they were to suborn the testimony of two men. In Israel's law a thing had to be established by the mouth of at least two witnesses--so the elders and nobles were to purchase the false witness of these two men. Verses 11-13 tell us that they followed Jezebel's instructions to the letter.

So the men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them, just as it was written in the letter which she had sent them. They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the people. Then the two worthless men came in and sat before him; and the worthless men testified against him, even against Naboth, before the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones.

They followed her instructions to the letter. Chapter 9 of 2 Kings tells us that they not only stoned Naboth, they stoned his sons as well, to silence any outcry that they might make and to keep the inheritance from falling into their hands after his death. The amazing thing is that there appears to be no public outcry in the city--people were so tyrannized by Jezebel and her court that they were afraid to say anything. And these leaders followed her instructions to the very letter because they knew what it meant if they didn't. Verses 14-16:

Then they sent word to Jezebel [they knew that was where the letters had come from] saying, "Naboth has been stoned, and is dead." And it came about when Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, that Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." And it came about when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

So Jezebel makes her report to Ahab: "You will be glad to hear that this poor, unfortunate fellow has died." We are not told that any further report was given to Ahab, but certainly, knowing the character of his wife, he must have known that she disposed of him in some illegal way. Now he goes down to take possession of his vineyard, and it appears that once more tyranny has triumphed. The oppressed are further victimized because they have no recourse in the courts. It appears that the rich and powerful again have triumphed, and the common man has been oppressed. But, as James tells us, the voices of those who have been oppressed in the fields, the laborers whose wages have been withheld through graft and corruption, cry out to God and the Lord of Sabaoth hears, he knows. And when men and women are oppressed, God knows and he acts. We have a description of his actions beginning in verse 17, at the time Ahab arose and went down to Jezreel to take possession of the vineyard of Naboth:

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth where he had gone down to take possession of it. And you shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "Have you murdered, and also taken possession?"'" [Notice that he is as responsible as Jezebel: "Have YOU murdered, and also taken possession?"] And you shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs shall lick up your blood,

even yours.'""

That is a grim prediction. It appears to me that Elijah never had an opportunity to utter it, because when he met Ahab in the vineyard, Ahab said (in verse 20),

"...Have you found me, O my enemy?" And he answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the Lord. Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and will [burn after you] utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, both bond and free in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah [these are the two dynasties that preceded the dynasty of Omri and Ahab and they both had been cut off], because of the provocation [anger] with which you have provoked Me to anger, and because you have made Israel sin. And of Jezebel also has the Lord spoken, saying, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the district [portion] of Jezreel [i.e., the land that was allocated to Naboth].' The one belonging to Ahab, who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat, and the one who dies in the field the birds of heaven shall eat."

Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do [the] evil [thing] in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him. And he acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the sons of Israel.

This was a fateful meeting. This was the third time that Elijah and Ahab had confronted each other--the first in Samaria when Elijah announced the drought, and then at the top of Mt. Carmel when the priests of Baal were defeated, and now in Naboth's vineyard. Ahab anticipates this meeting. He knows that Elijah is going to call him to account for his actions, so before Elijah can utter a word, he says, "Have you found me, O my enemy?"

I am sure that Elijah never intended to be anyone's enemy. Elijah was really a spokesman for God and, as we saw in 1 Kings 19, he had a great deal of uneasiness and insecurity about that assignment. He only wanted to say what God had told him to say. And yet, he became the enemy of Ahab because he told him the truth. That is what God's spokesmen are called to do--merely to speak the truth. And when they speak the truth, they often will be hated and treated as enemies. We don't want to hear the truth. None of us do.

I don't know how many of you saw the *Mary Tyler Moore* show last night, but Ted Baxter was told that he was not a good anchorman--which is the truth, as you know if you have ever seen that program. But his reaction to the truth was very violent. He began to cry and then he got angry. We don't like to have people tell us the truth, and we don't like the people who tell it to us. We don't want to be exposed and uncovered and told that we can't handle ourselves and that we have transgressed and are at odds with God. We don't like that. And yet, that was Elijah's task.

That is why people hated the Lord. Have you ever wondered why someone who could be so compassionate, who was the most peace-loving man who ever existed, who never did anything wrong, who was never hurtful toward anyone else, was positively hated and ultimately crucified? It was because he told people the truth. And that was Elijah's assignment. He had to tell Ahab the truth. Sometimes you have to tell people the truth and take the consequences, and so he tells Ahab that he has committed this sin.

Elijah is not talking about the plot of land specifically here. He is talking about the sin in Israel, which was the sin of idolatry; the transference of loyalty from the Lord and his Word to anything else is the sin. That was Ahab's problem. He sold out long before he had taken possession of Naboth's field illegally--he had sold out to the idols that Jezebel brought into Israel--and now, he was a slave to that system of thinking. He couldn't control his moods. He couldn't control his actions. He was imprisoned by his feelings and his desires. He had sold out. And Elijah tells him that he did so because Jezebel his wife had incited him.

Jezebel was an incredible character. She had a tremendous influence on her times. She has come down to us as the most wicked woman in history. She corrupted the king of the northern kingdom of Israel, and thus corrupted the kingdom. Baal worship became the state religion in Israel because of her. She corrupted her son, Ahaziah, who

succeeded Ahab. On his deathbed he cried out, not for the Lord, and not even for Baal, but for Beelzebub, the fly god, the god of the dung heap--that is the extent to which he had been corrupted. Her second son, Jehoram, had to be assassinated before Baal worship could be eradicated from Israel.

Jezebel's daughter was the wicked Athaliah who, because of some political alliance, married the king of the southern kingdom, Judah. She married Jehoram (another Jehoram) and not only infected him and the southern kingdom with Baal worship, but probably infected him in some other way because he died of a disease the symptoms of which are suspiciously like venereal disease. When her son died, she herself took the throne and began to eradicate all the princes of Judah so there would be no other claimant for the throne. She almost succeeded. She killed all of David's dynasty except one little boy, Joash, who was hidden away by the high priest. God had promised David that he would always have a lamp, he would always have a descendent who would sit on the throne. Had Athaliah accomplished what she set out to do, and killed Joash, there would have been no further descendent from David. The Davidic line would have been cut off--there would be no Messiah, because Jesus came from that line.

The point that I want to make here is that Jezebel had a tremendous influence upon her times. She corrupted five kings, a queen, and two kingdoms, and she almost extinguished the Messianic line. One woman did that. Now I want you to notice two responses in verses 25-29:

Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife incited him. And he acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites [i.e. the Canaanites] had done, whom the Lord cast out before the sons of Israel.

And it came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son's days."

God is not saying that he is going to judge Ahab's sons because of Ahab's sin. Ahab's sons had their own brand of wickedness, and God judged them appropriately. He is saying that he is going to lift the judgment from Ahab because he truly was repentant. Ahab must have experienced a superficial conversion at Mt. Carmel, but it was very short-lived. This conversion was genuine. He was truly repentant for his sins. God says so. *God saw his heart*. And as a result, judgment was lifted from him. He was a murderer, he was guilty of incredibly violent and wicked deeds, and he was forgiven.

On the other hand, Jezebel never repented. Turn to 2 Kings 9, beginning with verse 29:

Now in the eleventh year of Joram, the son of Ahab, Ahaziah became king over Judah.

When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it, and she painted her eyes and adorned her head, and looked out the window.

Women used eye shadow in those days just as they do today. They had a compound made of antimony and zinc and olive oil, which they rubbed on their eyes and it had the same effect as today's eye shadow. When Jezebel saw Jehu approaching the palace, he had just assassinated Jehoram, the king of Israel, her son. Jezebel is going to try to allure and entice Jehu just as she had Ahab, so she paints her eyes and fixes her hair. By this time, Jezebel was probably in her sixties; she had a 23 year old grandson. Some people never stop trying! She may well have been an attractive woman at this age, but, at any rate, she is going to try her womanly wiles on Jehu (verse 31):

And as Jehu entered the gate, she said, "Is it well, Zimri, your master's murderer?"

Zimri was an assassin who, forty years before, had slain the king of Israel, Elah. But when he came to take the throne, he only lasted seven days, because Omri (who was Ahab's father) assassinated him. The point Jezebel is

making is that she hopes Jehu's rebellion will be as short-lived as Zimri's was. Verses 32-37:

Then he lifted up his face to the window and said, "Who is on my side? Who?" And two or three officials looked down at him.

And he said, "Throw her down." So they threw her down, and some of her blood was sprinkled on the wall and on the horses, and he trampled her under foot. [That is, as he drove his chariot and his horses through the gate, she was trampled.] When he came in, he ate and drank; and he said, "See now to this cursed woman and bury her, for she is a king's daughter." And they went to bury her, but they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. Therefore they returned and told him. And he said, "This is the word of the Lord, which He spoke by His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'In the property of Jezreel [the property of Naboth of Jezreel] the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung on the face of the field in the property of Jezreel, so they cannot say, "This is Jezebel."'"

And as someone has said, "Though the mills of God's justice grind slowly, they grind exceedingly small. Though in patience he stands waiting, with exactness he grinds all." No one escapes the judgment of God. These are heavy words, but there is hope.

I have four observations to make concerning this passage in 1 Kings. The first and most obvious conclusion is that women can have an enormous effect on their men. They can affect their character and choices both for good and for evil. Don't ever think that you won't have an effect. The question is not whether or not you will have some influence on them, it is what sort of an influence you will have. It will be either in the direction of making your man a more godly and righteous man, or it will be destructive and detrimental to him. The real issue is where you are spiritually, whether or not you are developing your own spiritual life and growing in your relationship to God. The Bible is filled with accounts of women who had very positive, constructive effects upon their men. The Bible is also filled with accounts of women who were very destructive. The issue is really where you are spiritually, your own relationship to Jesus Christ and commitment to him, your commitment to growth in that relationship.

The second observation I would make from this passage is that men ought not to give heed to the voices of their women if they speak contrary to the word of God. The Lord told Adam that he fell into judgment because he listened to the voice of his wife. Adam knew better. He knew the truth. Eve was confused. She wasn't aware actually of what was happening. But Adam knew, and he acted contrary to the truth. Now, that is hard to do. I am sure you have probably asked yourself why Adam made that decision, why he didn't tell Eve to put the fruit back, and then, why he didn't tell the snake to leave his wife alone. I think Adam didn't do this because he didn't want to disrupt the peace and harmony in his family. Very often I think men will go along with their wives because they simply don't want to cause unrest and disharmony. So they adopt the policy of peace at all costs. But that is not a biblical policy. Our position ought to be purity at all costs, not peace at all costs. James said, "The wisdom from above is first pure and then peaceable." So we need to act on the basis of the Word of God, regardless of the counsel that we receive from others, whoever they may be--no matter how much they love us or are seeking the best for us. If their counsel is contrary to the Word of God, we need to follow God and his Word, no matter what it costs us. And that means, of course, that we as men have to take the spiritual and moral leadership of our families and of our relationships with the women that God has brought into our lives.

The third observation I would make is that if we as men or women have influenced others to do something wicked, or we have allowed ourselves to be influenced by someone else to do something wicked, we are held accountable. We can't blame our behavior on someone else. We are accountable; we are responsible. As all of you know, there are a number of schools of psychology that attempt to place the blame or responsibility for our actions on someone else--the hereditary make up that we have received from someone in the past, or the influences that have been brought to bear on us as a child growing up. But the Bible always looks at us as free moral agents. We are responsible and we have to stand before God and answer personally for the things that we have done in our body. Those of us who know Christ in a personal way will never be judged in any final and ultimate sense, but we will be chastened as the Lord chastens his own. And, as the Scripture says, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, even if you do know him as a Father. We are responsible. We have to stand before him.

The fourth observation I would make, and this is the comfort I think we can derive from all of these very hard things that have been said, is that God forgives us. God forgave Ahab completely, just as he forgives us. There may be some of you here who in the past have done some very evil things that influenced someone else to do evil and perhaps they are still in that sin and they have never come back from it. That is a heavy thing to have on your mind. You may have a tremendous load of guilt because you feel that you have caused somebody else to sin and you can't forget it. Well, remember: God loves you, God has forgiven you. That is what the cross is all about. That is where he assumed the guilt and the shame of our disobedience and our guilt is removed and taken from us. We don't need to bear that load of guilt. If you have never given your life to Jesus Christ, you can do it now and you can walk away from this meeting free from personal guilt of some action you have taken in the past. If you do know him, and you are still troubled with that guilt, you can look at the cross and know that you are free--from this point--to go on and act righteously and have a righteous and godly influence on others.

Father, your word tells us that if we know the truth, the truth will set us free. We thank you for relieving us of the guilt and the shame of our past actions and making every moment new. We thank you that it is of the Lord's mercy that we are not rejected, because his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness. We thank you for the forgiveness that we experience in you and we thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

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Catalog No.3375
1 Kings 21
February 6, 1977
David H. Roper
Series: Elijah: Fifth Message
Updated September 1, 2000.

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