

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

I KGS. 21:17 And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,

18 Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, which is in Samaria: behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, whither he is gone down to possess it.

19 And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the LORD, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the LORD, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine.

20 And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the LORD.

21 Behold, I will bring evil upon thee, and will take away thy posterity, and will cut off from Ahab him that pisseth against the wall, and him that is shut up and left in Israel,

22 And will make thine house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the provocation wherewith thou hast

provoked me to anger, and made Israel to sin.

23 And of Jezebel also spake the LORD, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.

24 Him that dieth of Ahab in the city the dogs shall eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat.

25 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.

26 And he did very abominably in following idols, according to all things as did the Amorites, whom the LORD cast out before the children of Israel.

27 And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly.

28 And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,

29 Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: *but* in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.

NOTES

Elijah Rebukes King Ahab

Lesson Text: I Kings 21:17-29

Related Scriptures: I Kings 21:1-16; 22:29-40;
II Kings 9:30-37; Leviticus 19:9-18; Numbers 36:7-9

TIME: about 854 B.C.

PLACE: Jezreel

GOLDEN TEXT—"I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord" (I Kings 21:20).

Lesson Exposition

A HEAVY ASSIGNMENT— I Kgs. 21:17-19

The background to the prophetic message under study today is as well known as it is infamous. A man named Naboth owned a vineyard that happened to abut the palace of King Ahab in Jezreel (I Kgs. 21:1). Ahab decided he wanted the vineyard for himself, but Naboth, in obedience to inheritance laws in the Torah, refused to sell it. Ahab went home and sulked. His wife, Jezebel, aghast that he was not exercising his royal privilege, hatched a diabolical scheme to have Naboth put to death on false charges of blasphemy.

Although Ahab had nothing directly to do with the outrageous crime against Naboth, he was fully complicit because he went along with it and eagerly took possession of the property for himself. It was this knowing involvement in the breach of justice that brought a swift and shattering response.

A mission from the Lord (I Kgs. 21:17-18). Ahab had barely made his move into the vineyard when "the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite" (vs. 17). We are not told where Elijah

was when he received this message, but he must not have been far away. It is apparent that God wanted Ahab to be confronted on the spot.

Whether Elijah knew anything about what had happened to Naboth is also not told here, but he did not have to guess what the mission was about. The Lord spelled it out for him in exact detail. He began by telling the prophet, "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel" (vs. 18).

Elijah had dealt with Ahab previously, most notably in predicting a three-year drought (17:1-7) and in the contest with the prophets of Baal (18:17-46). Since Elijah's flight to the Sinai wilderness (chap. 19), the two had not had further contact.

A stern message to convey (I Kgs. 21:19). "Thou shalt speak unto him" points to a precise message Elijah was to deliver, and he would make clear who the message was from: "Thus saith the Lord."

Elijah was to address Ahab with a question: "Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?" But this would not be a request for information; it would

be a sharp-edged accusation, and Ahab would acutely feel its sting.

Elijah was not to let the matter rest with the accusatory question but was to move immediately to the next step of informing Ahab of the severe sentence the Lord had passed on him: in the place where dogs had licked up Naboth's blood after his execution, dogs would lick his blood.

Naboth had been stoned to death outside the city, as was customary for executions. No mention of dogs is made in verse 13, but evidently it was common to see packs of wild dogs take advantage of the aftereffects of such operations. The Lord's sentence on Ahab was carried out not long after this. Ahab foolishly (and against prophetic warning) instigated an attack against Israel's Aramean enemies. Mortally wounded in the battle, his body was brought back to Samaria, where dogs licked the blood from his chariot (22:34-38; cf. II Kgs. 9:24-26).

A DEVASTATING REBUKE— I Kgs. 21:20-24

Disaster in store for Ahab (I Kgs. 21:20-22). The narrative moves straight to the actual encounter without any further detail. The conversation was opened by Ahab when he spotted Elijah approaching him at his newly acquired property. Ahab knew that the prophet had not come for a pleasant chat, as seen in his hostile greeting: "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" (vs. 20).

Elijah brusquely confirmed Ahab's surmise and gave the terse reason. He had come because the king had sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. The text does not repeat the accusatory question that God had instructed Elijah to utter (vs. 19), but we may assume that he indeed said those words to Ahab.

In verse 21 we see Elijah speaking directly for the Lord Himself, lending support to the idea that he had already

spoken the formula "Thus saith the Lord" given to him in verse 19. Now, through Elijah, the Lord passed sentence on Ahab.

The general penalty is that disaster would soon fall upon Ahab. The term "evil" in verse 21 does not refer to moral evil or wickedness but rather to calamity, which in this case was fully deserved. Primarily, this calamity would be seen as the Lord taking away Ahab's "posterity." "Posterity" literally means "what follows you" and is clearly a reference to Ahab's descendants.

That is made unmistakably clear in the next phrase, which refers in quite graphic terms to every male belonging to Ahab. Each one of those would be slain, leaving Ahab no living heritage in Israel. His family tree would be summarily cut off, brought to an abrupt end (cf. II Kgs. 10:1-11).

To drive home the reality of what Ahab had brought upon himself, the Lord drew a comparison that the king would not misunderstand. Ahab's household would suffer the same fate that befell the households of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and Baasha the son of Ahijah. Both these dynasties were utterly wiped out (15:25—16:13).

All this was punishment that Ahab had brought upon himself. His complicity in the crime against Naboth had provoked the Lord to anger. Over the course of his reign, Ahab had done many things to provoke the Lord, but the sense we get here is that this was the last straw. Up to now the Lord had patiently withheld judgment, but now Ahab had gone beyond further leniency.

Sentence on Jezebel and descendants (I Kgs. 21:23-24). If Ahab had any thoughts that he was being unfairly singled out for a crime his wife had instigated, the Lord put those to rest now. Jezebel would not escape

punishment; indeed, her fate would be severe but fitting. Whereas dogs had merely licked up Naboth's blood, they would consume Jezebel next to the city wall of Jezreel (cf. II Kgs. 9:30-37).

The Lord was not finished yet. Not just Jezebel, but all who belonged to Ahab's family who died in the city would likewise be devoured by dogs. And all those who died in open country would be devoured by birds.

A MIXED ASSESSMENT—

I Kgs. 21:25-29

Ahab's terrible legacy (I Kgs. 21:25-26). At this point the Scripture writer paused to make a comment about Ahab and his dismal place in Israel's history. Indeed, he was exceptional, but in the worst way. The writer tells us there was no one like Ahab when it came to selling out to evil, as urged on by his wife, Jezebel.

Ahab's apparent repentance (I Kgs. 21:27). Ahab's reaction to Elijah's dire message is not what we might expect from a king just described as the worst one Israel ever had. When the prophet was finished, Ahab responded with all the marks of repentance: he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, fasted, and "went softly," that is, conducted himself with astonishing meekness.

Ahab's reprieve (I Kgs. 21:28-29). God, for His part, took Ahab's penitent behavior at face value. Rather than dismiss the actions as insincere, the Lord called Elijah's attention to the king's about-face. In essence, God said, "Have you noticed Ahab's new humility toward Me?" And since Ahab had shown himself humble and contrite, God would show Himself gracious by granting a reprieve.

The consequences of Ahab's sin were not removed, but because of his repentant demeanor, they would be delayed. In particular, the destruction

of his dynasty would not happen in his lifetime.

Was Ahab's repentance genuine? Was the Lord responding to a true change of heart? Judging from Ahab's later actions (chap. 22), probably not. But it was not necessarily an outright sham. Ahab may have felt actual remorse—he certainly was genuinely fearful of God's anger—and may have felt he was sincerely repentant. But at some point, he changed his mind and slipped back into his old ways.

King Ahab truly is a tragic figure. There was no one like him among the kings of Israel, who made approaches to following God but ultimately rejected Him and chose evil. He stands as a warning to all who toy with the grace of God but fail to accept it wholeheartedly in faith.

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did God want Elijah to meet Ahab in the vineyard?
2. What was Elijah's question in reality?
3. How did Ahab's punishment fit his crime?
4. How did Ahab react to Elijah's arrival?
5. What does it mean that "evil" would be brought upon Ahab (I Kgs. 21:21)?
6. What would happen to Ahab's descendants?
7. Why was this a just penalty?
8. What would happen to Jezebel?
9. How did Ahab respond to Elijah's message of judgment?
10. How did God respond to Ahab's apparent repentance?

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Faith is a simple choice to believe what God has said (I Kings 21:17-18).
2. Injustice is morally wrong and offends God and His people deeply (vs. 19).
3. God's people will be counted as enemies by those who indulge their own wickedness (vss. 20-22).
4. Corruption and immorality will be met with the judgment of God (vss. 23-24).
5. Troubles increase when we align ourselves with the enemies of God (vss. 25-26).
6. God wants mankind to humble themselves and turn to Him (vss. 27-29).

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. What should we do when we need just the right words for a particular situation?
2. What warnings are found in I Kings 21 for leaders who would manipulate the law to get what they want?
3. Why do you think God was so protective of land rights in Israel (cf. Num. 36:7-9)?
4. How did the prophets of God provide balance to the king's authority?
5. How did Ahab's actions affect both him and his family (cf. I Kgs. 22:37-39; II Kgs. 9:30-37)?
6. How should we evaluate Ahab's repentance in view of the statements regarding his evil character?

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

Golden Text Illuminated

“I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord” (I Kings 21:20).

Ahab was the king of Israel, and he was involved in a murder plot to kill a man named Naboth because Ahab wanted his vineyard. The Lord sent Elijah to tell Ahab that he was in the wrong and declare his punishment.

The golden text shows us that unrepentant sinners will not escape punishment for their wrongdoing. The Lord came to Ahab right where he was, in Naboth's vineyard (vs. 18), the exact place where he was reveling in his murderous gain.

The outcome of this conversation is important to note. While the Lord carries out justice toward unrepentant sinners, He shows mercy to those who recognize their sin and surrender.

Though Ahab initially resisted, by the end of his conversation with Elijah, he repented. He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and fasted. The Lord saw his mourning for his sin and had mercy on him; the bulk of Ahab's punishment was delayed until after his death. The only way for people to ultimately avoid punishment from the Lord is for them to turn away from their sin, humble themselves, and trust in God's promises of mercy.

The Lord does not ask His followers to do things in vain. Without Elijah's visit, Ahab would have rejoiced in his sin instead of mourning it. Believers can trust in God's justice for the wicked, mercy for the repentant, and desire to see hardened hearts transformed through Him.

—Carissa Dobson.