

PAY-DAY WILL COME

I Kings 21

Ahab, the seventh king of Israel, is remembered as the husband of Jezebel, one of the most unscrupulous, despicable, and notorious women who ever lived. She never hesitated to do anything to accomplish her purpose.

At the zenith of his prosperity, after his signal victory over the Syrians, and its attendant extension of his territory, Ahab returned to his luxurious summer palace and pleasure resort at Jezreel, which was about twenty miles from Samaria, the capital city. This pleasure resort was noted for its scenic parks, beautiful flower gardens, and pools of sparkling water.

Adjacent to the property on which the royal palace stood was a vineyard which belonged to Naboth. Its location and condition made it desirable from Ahab's viewpoint. He wanted it for his own use as an herb garden. There was nothing wrong about his desire to procure it, for there is no sin in honest buying and selling. Nor was there anything wrong with the use to which Ahab proposed to put the vineyard.

Ahab decided that he would interview Naboth, the owner, concerning the procurement of his vineyard. With a smile upon his face, and with words as smooth as butter, Ahab made a very interesting proposal to his neighbor. His proposition was strictly honorable. He offered him another and better vineyard for it. He also offered to pay him a high cash price for it. He made every reasonable and legitimate effort to obtain it, thinking it would round out his property. He did not attempt to confiscate it, but he offered an ample equivalent, either a better vineyard, or sufficient money with which to purchase another of equal value. He assured his neighbor that it would be to his personal advantage to trade with him. On the surface, his proposition seemed fair and attractive.

With the possibility of being remembered favorably by his king, in various ways which would have been to his temporal advantage, there was a real temptation for Naboth to grant the request of Ahab. However, because he possessed a manly courage, such as is needed greatly in these days, Naboth refused to accept Ahab's offer. Two things stood in his way of obliging the king. The first of these was his duty to God. In the Mosaic law God had fixed the tenure for which the Israelites were to hold the land. God said, "The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine" (Leviticus 25:23). So, Naboth refused to yield to the temptation to violate an expressed command of God. The second obstacle in his way was his duty to his forefathers and to his posterity. God had said, "So shall not the inheritance of the children of Israel remove from tribe to tribe: for every one of the children of Israel shall keep himself to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers" (Numbers 36:7). Naboth's vineyard was his cherished possession because it had belonged to his father, who, when he died, left it to him as his inheritance. The retention of his inheritance was a part of honor, of patriotism, and of religion.

Naboth's refusal to comply with the wishes of the king was not the result of stubbornness or of any disloyalty to the king, but because of his faithfulness to God and obedience to His Law. He declined the generous offer because it was unlawful and dishonorable to accept it. To him, obedience to God and right conduct toward others were vastly more important than the making of money. What a pity that so many today do not realize that it is always better to obey God than it is to comply with the wishes of men!

Since it was specifically required that inherited land should remain in the tribe where it was first owned, Naboth was unwilling to sacrifice the right in order to please the king, and with manly independence and courage told him so. He regretted the fact that Ahab sought his vineyard, which was sown with the rich seed of history, planted with touching associations and endeared with so many precious memories. He said, "The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."

When Naboth declined to accept the offer of the king, on the basis that it was wrong to do so, Ahab was sorely displeased. He was annoyed and vexed at being refused. Possibly this was the first time his selfish whims had been thwarted during his entire reign, and in this case it was by one of his subjects who was only an ordinary landowner. Ahab had such an insatiable desire for this vineyard that he could not stand to have his purpose thwarted. He is a good illustration of the fact that a covetous person is frequently unreasonable in his demands. Instead of being contented with what he had and expressing gratitude for it, he was coveting the possession of another. Covetousness is that sinful craving for something other than what one has.

Ahab considered Naboth's refusal to accept his offer a matter of unreasonable and incorrigible obstinacy. He made a terrible grievance of his disappointment. He forgot the abundance which he possessed and fretted over the little which was withheld from him. Like a spoiled and pouting boy, he returned to the palace, threw a sulky fit, flung himself on his bed, turned his face to the wall, and refused to eat or to see his friends. He sulked simply because he could not have his way.

What a ridiculous picture! A king acting like a spoiled child, impotent in disappointment and ugly in petty rage. A king whining like a sick hound. Think of it! In the middle of the day the commander of an army was captured by pouts. A monarch moaning and refusing to eat because a good man, a man who "feared the Lord," would not sell his little vineyard which he had inherited. No one had injured Ahab. Yet he, a king, was acting like a blubbering baby. His cannon ability was expressing itself in popgun achievement. He was like a lion sulking because it was not granted the cheese in a mouse trap. How do you act when you cannot have your way?

When Jezebel, the wicked queen, heard that her husband would not eat, and that he had gone to bed when it was not bedtime, she went to his room and asked him, "Why is thy spirit so sad that thou eatest no bread?" As the manner of women is, she stroked his brow to see if he had any temperature. In answer to her query as to what was the matter with him, he told her, "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!" His words stung like a lash this woman who was never for one minute burdened with any conscientious regard for the rights of others. Hear her laugh as it rings through the palace like the shrill cackle of a fowl that has found a serpent in its nest! What hornet-like sting in her sarcasm! What bitterness in the teasing taunts she hurled at him for his timidity! "Are you not the king of this country?" she chides bitingly, her tongue as sharp as a butcher's knife. "Cannot you command and have it done?" she scolds as a common village hag who has more noise than wisdom in her words. Can you not seize and keep?" she cries with reproach. "I thought you told me you were the king! And here you are crying like a baby and will not eat anything because you do not have courage enough to take a bit of land. You the king of Israel, and allow yourself to be disobeyed and defied by a common clodhopper from the country. Shame on you! But you leave it to me! I will give you Naboth's vineyard." Alas! some people are so generous with the property of others.

Ahab knew Jezebel well enough to know that she intended to do what she said. So he came out of his sulks long enough to inquire how she was going to do it. In substance she replied, "That's my secret just now; just leave it to me, Old Boy!" Then, Jezebel wrote letters to the elders of Jezreel in which she made a subtle declaration that some terrible sin had been committed, for which it was needful that a fast should be proclaimed in order to avert the wrath of the deity.

"So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city, dwelling with Naboth. And she wrote in the letters, saying, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people: And set two men, sons of Belial, before him, to bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the king. And then carry him out, and stone him, that he may die" (I Kings 21:8-10). Black ink never wrote a fouler plot or death scheme on white

paper. Every syllable of every word of every sentence was full of hate toward him who had done only good continually. The whole letter was a diabolical death warrant. When Jezebel had finished with her iniquitous pen, she asked Ahab for his signet ring, and with that ring she affixed the royal seal. When Ahab gave the ring to her, he knew it meant crime of some sort, but he asked no questions.

Jezebel said to herself, "This man Naboth has refused my honorable lord on religious grounds, and by all the gods of Baal, I will get him yet on these very same grounds." Understanding fully the passion of a devout Jew for a public fast, she knew that nothing would keep Naboth away. He and every member of his household would be there. "Proclaim a fast!" Fasting has ever been a sign of humiliation before God. The idea in calling for a fast was clearly to declare that the community was under the anger of God on account of a grave crime committed by one of its members, which crime is to be exposed and punished. "Set Naboth on high" meant in the seat of the accused, and not in the seat of honor. The two witnesses which she required to be set before Naboth were men without character, men who would take bribes and swear to any lie for gain. She wanted Naboth put out of the way by judicial murder and not by private assassination.

The plot was carried out exactly as planned. A double charge of blasphemy and treason was made, and the false witnesses substantiated it. They testified that Naboth had spoken evil of both God and Ahab, whereupon a band of hired ruffians seized the ill-fated man, carried him out of the city and stoned him to death. And then, to make sure that his heirs would never lay claim to the inheritance, his sons were slain too. II Kings 9:26. Oh, the lengths to which wicked people will go to accomplish their nefarious purposes!

When Jezebel received the news that Naboth was dead, she was glad and did not make any attempt to conceal her satisfaction. What was it to her that outside the city walls was the body of a good man whose bones the dogs would gnaw? What was it to her that there were the faces of his sons bruised with stones and then torn by the claws of hungry scavengers? What was it to her that God's holy name had been profaned? What did she care if justice had been outraged, just so she had gotten the little plot of land close by their summer palace of ivory? What pang did it give her heart that innocent blood had been shed? Absolutely nothing.

She hurried into the room where Ahab was, and with profuse caresses and words blig with joy she told him what she termed the "good" news. She had the triumphant manner of one who had accomplished successfully what others had not dared to attempt. She had "pulled the stunt."

"And it came to pass, when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab rose up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it!" Ahab did not express any condemnation of this awful conspiracy, which culminated in such a tragic horror. He did not have any scruples against availing himself of the results of a murder perpetrated by another. However, it must be remembered that, even though God sometimes permits wicked people to carry out their evil desires and purposes, He does not ignore their sins, or fail to see that punishment follows in due time. Disregard of God's law always brings judgment and retribution.

And now Jehu and Bidcar, the royal charioteers, are called. They are given orders to prepare the royal chariot. The gilded chariot is drawn forth. And soon these furious drivers are directing the brief journey of the gilded chariot to Jezreel. Ahab rode in something of military state as he went, proudly and gratefully, to take possession of the desired vineyard, gift of the queen to him. Doubtless, all of the way from Samaria he congratulates himself that he has such a woman for a wife, so talented and so successful in "putting things over." Ere long the brief journey is over. The prancing and panting horses are brought to a stop outside the gate to the vineyard. Strong hands of ready servants seize the fiery horses by the bits, other servants open the gates, and obedient servants bow courteously as Ahab enters the vineyard.

As he walked through the vineyard a shadow fell suddenly across his path. Quick as a flash, he whirled around, and there, before him, stood Elijah, the prophet of the living God. To Ahab there was an eternity of agony in the few moments they stood thus, face to face, eye to eye, and soul to soul. Suddenly Ahab's face turned pale, his lips quivered, and he trembled as he said to Elijah, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" And Elijah, without a tremor in his voice, and with his eyes burning their way into Ahab's guilty soul, answered, "I have found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord." With every sentence a withering denunciation, Elijah continued, "God told me to ask you, Hast thou killed and also taken possession? Thus saith the Lord, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine. Behold I will bring evil upon thee, and will take away thy posterity....And will make thine house like the house of Jereboam 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." With other merciless words he continued, "And of Jezebel also spake the Lord, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel! Him that dieth of Ahab in the city the dogs shall eat; and him that dieth in the fields shall the fowls of the air eat." When Elijah had thus spoken, he went his way.

From Elijah's message Ahab received a horrible vision of bloody slaughter. He envisioned himself being gnawed by the dogs which roamed at night. Because the all-seeing eye of God is ever resting upon the evil deeds of every sinner, the wrong-doer must inevitably face his sins. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Ahab was wounded in battle and his chariot was filled with blood which the dogs licked up. God said it would happen, and it did. Jezebel was thrown out of an upstairs window, and some of her blood was sprinkled on the wall and some of it splattered on the horses, and she was trodden under foot. By the walls of Jezreel the dogs ate her flesh and licked up her blood. The gains of ungodliness are always weighted with the curse of God.

1. Beware of covetousness.
Covetousness always ends in disappointment.
2. Keep out of the way of temptation.
Sin always has small beginnings, so resist it at first.
3. Sin is loved when it is tempting, but loathed when it has been committed. The vineyard looked entirely different before and after it was possessed. It became insignificant when compared with its cost. Judas bargained Jesus Christ away for thirty pieces of silver. After he betrayed Him with a kiss and the money was in his purse and the Master was in the hands of His enemies, He looked purer and nobler than ever. The money looked much smaller to Judas. He did not want it, and carried it back to its source. Sin was loved when he was being tempted, but it was loathed after he had committed it. Some things are not worth what they cost. They promise much but produce little.
4. Sin blinds to true friends and real foes.
Ahab believed Jezebel was his best friend. She stooped to the depths to get for him what he wanted. And what he wanted was not what he needed. In fact, it was the worst thing for him. She wrought his destruction.

Ahab said to Elijah, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Instead of being an enemy, Elijah was his best friend. Ahab's sin caused him to think Elijah was his enemy. The faithful rebuker is the wrong-doer's best friend. Sin even makes men believe that God is their enemy. When He convicts and warns and disciplines men, they often think He is their enemy.

5. Your sin will find you out.
There will always be a resurrection of deeds. Sin brings retribution. You will have to pay the final installment on your sin. The drunkard thought he paid for his dissi-

pation when he laid the money on the counter, but there were other considerations. He paid with the stupidity of his mind, the insensibility of his conscience, the weakening of his character, the loss of his business, the happiness of his home, and life's greatest asset, which is his influence for good. That is too much to pay for imaginary hilarity.

You may not believe me, but pay day will come to you. Some day the illusion will break, you will see sin as it is, you will hate it, and you will want to be through with it, but it will not be through with you.