

ELIJAH'S LAST DAYS

II Kings 2:1-11

Jezebel had been angry about many things since she had married Ahab, the king of Israel. She had never been pleased about the size of the palace he gave her or the size of the garden adjacent thereto. She thought that the whole situation of the royal family in this backward land required radical improvement.

Ahab seems to have preferred Jezreel as a place of residence. Next door to his ivory palace in Jezreel there was a vineyard which belonged to Naboth. Thinking that this vineyard would be a valuable addition to his property, Ahab decided to procure it. He therefore offered to give Naboth a better vineyard in exchange for it or to purchase it for cash if he preferred. While that offer appeared to be an innocent and fair proposal, in reality it was a subtle temptation. God had said, "The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine" (Leviticus 25:23). So it did not lay within the lawful power of Naboth to dispose of his vineyard. But for that, there could not have been any harm in accepting the offer of Ahab. Regardless of how desirous Naboth might have been about granting the request of the king, he could not do so without violating the law of God which expressly forbade a man's alienating any part of his family inheritance. Thus a very real and severe test was presented to Naboth. He had to choose between pleasing the king and displeasing God.

To Ahab's surprise and indignation, Naboth rebuked him with as noble an answer as any commoner ever gave a king: "The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee." Naboth was a devout man who "abhorred that which is evil and clave to that which is good." He would not exchange his heavenly principles for loose expediences. He would not dilute the stringency of personal righteousness for questionable compromises.

Without any desire to be discourteous or unneighborly, Naboth stood firm on his rights and, with an expression of horror on his face and in his words, refused to sell his vineyard to the king. The ties of sentiment, religion and family pride bound and endeared him to the place. So his refusal to sell was quick, firm, courteous and final. Then, too, from the vineyard which was adjacent to the palace Naboth had seen with his own eyes what orgies idolatry led to when the queen was at home in Jezreel, and, being deeply pious, he was hurt at the very request. He felt that his little plot of ground, sanctified with sweet and holy memories, would be tainted and befouled and cursed forever if it came into the hands of Jezebel. Courageously, he took a firm stand on the Word of God and refused to act contrary thereto, even when solicited to do so by the king himself. He would die rather than surrender what really belonged to God.

Ahab was greatly displeased with Naboth's refusal, for it shattered all of his plans. In the thwarting of his desire his pride was wounded, and so vexed was he to meet with this denial that he sulked like a spoiled child when his will is crossed. He went home heavy of heart and sore displeased, got in bed, turned his face to the wall and refused to eat. What a ridiculous picture! He was a king acting like a spoiled child, impotent in disappointment and ugly in petty rage. Think of it! In the middle of the day the commander of an army was captured by the pouts. Ahab had not lost anything. No one had injured him. Yet he, the king,

was acting like a blubbering baby. 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. What a sight!

Puzzled at the news that her husband would not eat and that he had gone to bed long before bedtime, the unscrupulous Jezebel went to find out what was the matter. In anxious concern she asked Ahab, "Why is thy spirit so sad that thou eatest no bread?" Then, as the manner of women is, she placed her hand on his brow to see if he had any temperature or if some other ailment had laid hold on him. In telling her why he was pouting, Ahab made no mention of Naboth's conscientious grievance for not complying with his request, but he spoke of him as though he had acted only with insubordination and obstinacy.

When Jezebel learned the cause, she promptly took the situation in hand. In addition to sympathizing with his unlawful desire, she strengthened his feeling of disappointment, tempted him to exercise an arbitrary power, and urged him to disregard the rights of another and to defy the law of God. One can hear her taunting him about his weakness and stupidity and saying, "Leave it to me, old man! I'll get the vineyard for you, and all that I require is that you ask no questions. Just leave it to me!"

Jezebel knew enough about the laws of Israel to be aware of the fact that kings fell heir to all lands confiscated through treason and blasphemy. Her plan was to have Naboth so accused. First, she resorted to forgery, for "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." Second, she was guilty of deliberate hypocrisy. In these letters she made definite and subtle declaration that some terrible sin had been committed in their city, for which it was needful that a fast should be proclaimed in order to avert the wrath of heaven. Third, she employed men to testify falsely. The elders and nobles were base enough to carry out her orders, and in due time Naboth and his sons were murdered by stoning.

When the murderers had left the bodies of Naboth and his sons to be devoured by the wild dogs which prowled after nightfall in and around the city, they reported to Jezebel that her orders had been carried out carefully. She received the news gladly and made no attempt to hide 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 did she care if justice had been outraged just so she had gotten the little plot of land? What pang did it give her heart that innocent blood had been shed? None whatever!

How Jezebel must have strutted her stuff before Ahab when she went with the tidings that the vineyard which he wanted to buy was now his for nothing! How keen must have been the sarcasm of her attitude when she made it known by word and manner that she had succeeded where he had failed, and at far less cost! In compliance with Jezebel's orders, Ahab went down to take possession of the vineyard.

As Ahab stood in the midst of the vineyard surveying the property and planning the layout of his new garden, a voice spoke to him saying, "Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?" Quick as a flash Ahab whirled on his heels, 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, soul to soul. Trembling like a hunted animal before the mouths of ferocious hounds, Ahab's face turned pale and his lips quivered as he said to Elijah, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" A guilty heart can never be at peace. It was because his heart condemned him as an enemy of God that Ahab was so disconcerted at being confronted by His ambassador.

Without a tremor in his voice but with his eyes burning their way into Ahab's guilty soul, Elijah answered, "I have found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord." This ordeal which confronted Elijah is in essence the one which confronts every servant of Christ today. He was the bearer of an unwelcome message. He was required to face the ungodly king and tell him precisely what he was in the sight of God. It was a task which called for firmness of mind and boldness of heart. It is a task which demands that the glory of God shall override all sentimental considerations.

Then Elijah added, "Thus saith the Lord, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine." The prophet also informed Ahab that Jezebel would meet a worse fate than that which she had inflicted upon the innocent Naboth. He said, "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 field shall the fowls of the air eat." When he had finished speaking these words, Elijah went his way, but the fate of which he had spoken came in due time and exactly as he had declared. Behold here the justice of God in making Ahab reap as he had sown.

No vain threats were those which the prophet uttered, but announcements of divine judgment which were fulfilled not long after. Jezebel outlived her husband for some years but her end was just as Elijah had foretold. True to her depraved character, we find that on the very day of her death "she painted her face, and tired her head, and looked out at a window" to attract attention. Meanwhile she was thrown out of the window, her blood sprinkling the wall and her corpse being ruthlessly trampled under foot. A short time after when orders were given for her burial, so thoroughly had the dogs done their work that naught remained but "the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands" (II Kings 9:35). God is as faithful in making good His threatenings as He is in fulfilling His promises.

In his gloriously eventful life Elijah passed from wonder to wonder, and the closing scene is the greatest wonder of all. No journey which he made was any more remarkable than his last day's pilgrimage from Gilgal to Jordan. Of every step of that way Elijah was able to say, "God hath sent me." From Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho and from Jericho to the Jordan River, he was led by the command of God. In each of these places there were those young men who had been the object of Elijah's earnest care, so his last ministry to them would never be forgotten by them. When Elijah and his companion, Elisha, arrived at the Jordan, the former took his mantle and divided the waters so that the two of them might cross on dry ground. After they had crossed dryshod over Jordan, "Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee."

Fully aware of his own weakness and lack of qualification for such a work as that to which he was called, that of being the successor of Elijah,

Elisha was very anxious to become qualified for his eminent office. He did not want to undertake such great responsibilities without becoming especially equipped with spiritual power. So, instead of asking for riches, wisdom, power or glory, Elisha requested that he be given a double portion of the spirit that rested on and wrought through his predecessor, the man of God.

Elijah replied, "Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (II Kings 2:10-11).