

“Forbidden Desire”
1 Kings 21
June 4, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

The long, sad story of Ahab is about to come to a close. At every turn, we have seen him choose to harden his heart against God and continue in sin rather than humble himself and repent. In case we’ve missed the point, the author reminds us that this king was the most evil of all Israel’s evil kings. **“There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably in going after idols”** (21:25-26). This chapter describes another of his sins, the sin of covetousness. This sin, forbidden in the final of the Ten Commandments, is a sin of the heart. But it does not stay in the heart, as we can see from the events that unfolded as a result of Ahab’s desire for the vineyard belonging to Naboth.

Before we get into this story, we need to talk a little about our desires. It is not sinful to have desires. God has desires, and we as his image bearers do as well. Desires for such things as beauty, meaningful work, loving relationships, good food, and to know and love God are all good, God-given desires. Covetousness is a sin of the heart in which we desire what God forbids us to have. The desire itself is a sin of the heart, but it often leads to even greater sins. So we need to see the difference between desires that bring us life and joy, and those on the other hand that destroy us.

When I grew up, we had three horses. I learned that a horse can graze in the pasture all day long, or nibble on hay hour after hour with no ill effects. But when taking care of a horse, you have to be careful not to let him near a large bin of oats, because no matter how much he eats of the oats, he will always want more. Eventually, he can eat himself to death. Ahab’s desire for Naboth’s vineyard was just like that. He had plenty of vineyards already, some even nicer than Naboth’s. But he wanted more, even though it was forbidden him to have Naboth’s vineyard. His desire resulted in his death. This story is both a warning to us and an invitation. It is a warning against covetousness, but an invitation to contentment.

I. Forbidden Desire

Ahab wanted Naboth’s vineyard because it was close to his palace in Jezreel, and he envisioned a vegetable garden to supply him with fresh vegetables. He made what seems to us a reasonable offer. He would give Naboth an even better vineyard in trade for his own, or, if Naboth preferred, he

would pay him in cash for his vineyard. The only problem with Ahab's proposal is that it would run afoul of Israel's land laws. Leviticus 25:23 says, **"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine."** Naboth rightly recognized that the land wasn't his to sell, but belonged to the Lord. The Old Testament taught that if a family encountered economic difficulties, their land could be rented out. But in the year of Jubilee once every fifty years it had to be returned without cost to the original family. This would have a couple of positive results. First, it would prevent a class of the superrich from accumulating ever larger land holdings. Second, it would preserve to the poor access to the capital needed to earn a living. In this agrarian economy, capital was in the form of land, allowing a family the means of working to supply their needs. These laws would have the effect of increasing the size of the middle class and diminishing the other two poles of the rich and the poor.

So it would seem that Naboth is one of those seven thousand righteous in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal. And he lived right next door to the biggest advocates of Baal worship in the entire nation, Ahab and Jezebel. He valued faithfulness to God more than money, and he valued it more than risking the anger of the most powerful family in the nation.

Ahab desired something God had forbidden him to have. That is what it means to covet. Sometimes it is something God forbids in his word. God clearly forbids you from having someone else's spouse, for example. At other times, though, God is putting off limits something that is not sinful in itself but simply something in his wisdom that he has decided not to give you. There is nothing wrong with good health, and we are not wrong to desire it. But if God has decided in his wisdom to visit you with a thorn in the flesh, like he did to the apostle Paul, it is covetous to demand that God give it to you. It helps me to think of covetousness as the opposite of contentment. If there is something more that you think you need right now to be happy, you are guilty of covetousness.

II. Forbidden Desire Acted Upon

I notice that Ahab and Jezebel respond differently to Naboth's refusal to give Ahab what he wants. Ahab responds with self-pity and pouting. He **"went into his house vexed and sullen"** (v. 4) and couldn't get out of bed even to eat. Such a response indicates that he had given his heart to the idea of having this vineyard. Self-pity is a common indicator of the sin of covetousness. I think Ahab's response helps us make an important distinction between temptation and sin. It is not wrong to be tempted to have something not yours. You may find yourself at times with the thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to be married to a different person." And perhaps a particular candidate comes to mind, who happens to be married to someone else. When that thought first comes, it is a temptation, not a sin. But if you permit it to stay and find

yourself imagining what it would be like to be married to that person, that is the sin of covetousness. Martin Luther said it well. “It is one thing to have a bird land on your head and quite another to allow it to build a nest there.” Ahab was letting the bird build a nest.

While Ahab’s response was largely passive, Jezebel’s was active. I don’t think we misread the text to hear in her response to Ahab some scorn. **“Do you now govern Israel? Arise and eat bread and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite”** (v. 7). It is as if she is saying to him, “What kind of king are you? Do I have to do everything? Just watch me and I’ll show you how it’s supposed to be done.” So she forged a letter to the leaders of Naboth’s city, using Ahab’s name and authority. She asked them to proclaim a fast and a time of prayer. Naboth was to be given a prominent seat, but then two false witnesses were to come forward and accuse him of cursing both God and the king. Sadly, showing the general condition of wickedness in Israel at this time, the city leaders agree to do what was asked of them. Then Naboth was judged with the penalty assigned in the law for blasphemy. He was taken out and stoned to death. 2 Kings 9:26 makes it clear that Naboth’s sons were also killed at this time, thus clearing away all who might have a claim upon the vineyard and freeing it up for Ahab’s possession.

One thing very clear in this story is the need to take care in the selection of a marriage partner. A spouse will either lead you to walk more closely with the Lord, or will lead you away from the Lord, as Jezebel did. So Ahab responds with passivity to the sin of covetousness, while Jezebel responds by taking action. Both responses are wrong. And as we are going to see in the next point, God judges both Ahab and Jezebel.

III. Forbidden Desire Judged

Once again, God sends Elijah to Ahab with a word of judgment. Though Ahab might plausibly plead that it was Jezebel’s doing, not his own, God holds him just as guilty as his wife. It would seem that Elijah arrives at Naboth’s vineyard not long after Ahab. Possession of the vineyard would prove more challenging than acquisition. God’s judgment upon Ahab would be this: **“In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood”** (v. 19). For Jezebel it was even worse: **“The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel”** (v. 24).

It happened just as God said it would. The next chapter records how Ahab died. Israel was fighting Syria, and Ahab disguised himself so he wouldn’t be recognized as the king of Israel. At first, it would seem that it was a good thing he did, because the Syrian king had declared to his troops that Ahab was to be their primary target. But since he had disguised himself, they couldn’t find him. But the word of the Lord had come to the prophet Micaiah saying that

Ahab would in fact lose his life in this battle, and God's word will always be fulfilled. It happened as God had said it would when a Syrian soldier drew his bow at random and just shot toward the Israelite army. Even though Ahab was clad in armor in order to protect him from such a thing, the arrow struck in a seam of the armor, leading to his death. After his death, they washed the blood from the chariot and the dogs licked it up, just as Elijah had predicted.

Jezebel lived a while longer until she was done in by Jehu, whom God raised up to cleanse the nation of every remaining vestige of Ahab's rule. Jehu ordered her to be thrown down from a window. The fall killed her, and Jehu left her lying there while he had lunch. When he returned to collect her body and bury her, all but her head, feet and hands had been eaten by the dogs.

There are several lessons from this judgment. Let me just mention two of them. First, there is always an ugly underside to sin that we don't see when we give in to sin. Being eaten by dogs was not part of Jezebel's vision when she concocted her vineyard acquisition plan. The world God has made has an inescapable sowing and reaping quality to it. Ahab and Jezebel may have thought they had gotten away with this deed. Who was there to challenge their actions? Did you notice the language used for Ahab's sin? Twice the phrase is used that he **"sold himself"** to do what was evil (v. 20, 25). People are sold into slavery, and Ahab was enslaving himself by his sin. God's judgment mercifully shows us the ugly, underside of sin.

One more lesson to be learned from this is that we can renounce vengeance and leave things in God's hands because he will answer wrongdoing. He knows the best time and way of doing so, and his judgments are always perfectly just and holy. God knows when to show mercy and when to bring judgment.

IV. Forbidden Desire Healed

The chapter closes in a way that puzzles many. After reminding us that Ahab's wickedness exceeded that of all other kings in Israel, the text informs us that Ahab responded appropriately to God's word of judgment brought by Elijah. **"He tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly"** (v. 27). God said to Elijah, **"Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house"** (v. 29). Judgment would still come, but it would be delayed.

The question raised by this is whether or not Ahab's repentance was genuine. Some commentators say that Ahab was remorseful only for the consequences of his sin. He was sorry he got caught, not sorry he had sinned. They point to the fact that in the next chapter he is up to his old tricks again

by refusing to heed the words of God's prophet. They would also point to the fact that we don't read anything about the restoration of the vineyard to Naboth's family. Others would say that the only one who can see man's heart says that Ahab has truly humbled himself before the Lord. It is true that a person can fake the outward appearance of humble repentance. But God can easily see through such things, and God himself says twice that Ahab has humbled himself.

I would go even further. God's response here shows enthusiasm. When do we begin questions with the words, "Did you see..."? It is when we are enthusiastic about something. "Did you see that video on Facebook about the cat that learned to use and flush the toilet?" Several weeks ago, our grandson began walking. His parents captured his early steps on video and sent it to us. Wendy asked me, with great enthusiasm, "Did you see the video of Hastings' first steps?"

The enthusiasm of God for Ahab's humbling of himself is all the more remarkable in light of two things. First, he was a great sinner. As the author has just reminded us, he was unsurpassed in evil by Israel's other evil kings. Second, his repentance was clearly flawed. Thankfully, God doesn't wait for us to repent perfectly before showing mercy to us. He sees just a flicker of a humble, repentant heart and he gets excited. For at least a moment, Ahab stopped trusting in himself and came with empty hands before the Lord. He came not as the great king of Israel, but as a poor, needy sinner.

In his mercy, God didn't cancel his judgment against Ahab, but he did delay it. We have received an even greater mercy. Though God has not cancelled the judgment due us for our sins, he has redirected it. It has been directed at Jesus. Jesus and Naboth had some similarities. Both were righteous Israelites, true worshipers of God. Both were falsely accused of blasphemy and executed as a result. And both died to provide a vineyard for others. Ahab appropriated a vineyard that didn't belong to him. But those who follow Jesus get the vineyard of a heavenly home with God.

It is this mercy that heals the covetous heart, for it teaches us that God is enthusiastically for us. He wants us to come to him for mercy.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with an application. Ask God to show you your covetous heart that you might repent of it. Ask him to replace your covetous heart with a heart of contentment.