

WHOSE SLAVE ARE YOU?

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1 Kings 21:1-29

INTRODUCTION

I'm holding two DM 10,000 bills. They're real. How long will you work for me to earn this money?

If you remember recent German history, you'll immediately ask me when they were printed. And when I tell you they were issued by the Reichsbankdirektorium on 19 January 1922, you'll laugh and tell me to keep my money. It's worthless . . . well, maybe I can sell them for a few euros a piece to a collector. Inflation in Germany before WW II became so severe that in January 1922 one of these notes could buy you a little over 100 kg of beef. A year later the same note would buy you 2 kg of beef, and yet one more year later you'd pay 100 billion marks for that bit of meat.

So it is with idols fashioned by our hearts. Consider, for example, the idol of freedom. Modern Western culture adores it. Politicians in quest of votes swear to guard it. Citizens intent on living as they wish invoke it. Academics, often at odds about where it begins and ends, debate it. Fallen man yearns for freedom, but when this "freedom" becomes uncoupled from God-honoring responsibility, then it is really just lust for sovereignty – we want autonomy. We want to live as we wish. That "freedom" is an enslaving idol.

The Bible gives us God's unique perspective on this question. Only God is sovereign. If we submit to him as His slaves – his servants – we will be free indeed. But if we pretend to shake ourselves loose from His authority over our lives, our families, our future, we will find that we become enslaved to idols of our own making. Isn't this Paul's argument in Romans 6:16-18, 20, 22? ***"Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin, resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. . . . When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. . . . But now, having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit (literally "fruit" or "gain"), resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life."***

In other words, if we sell out to a false god, even if it promises us freedom, we will find ourselves enslaved to it . . . and that will lead to separation from God (that's what death is). On the other hand, if we sell out to our Creator and live for Him by faith, relying on His promises simply because it is He who has given them, then instead of death we will bear fruit like a living plant. Sin's wages are death; God's free gift, paid for by the Son of God, is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (6:23).

Our text for this morning vividly illustrates this principle. It's one thing to master an idea as a concept. It's yet another thing to see it lived out in a life. That's where we learn the most. The real-life lesson for this morning is drawn from Ahab, who "sold himself to do evil" like no other king before him in Israel. Let's track the circumstances of his scandalous and tragic interaction with a neighbor who had done him no wrong, but who became his enemy simply through Ahab's worship of his own childish desires. His worship of Baal spilled over into his soul, leaving him a self-centered man who would stoop to anything to get his way. ***He served the idol of his own pleasure, and it ended up putting him in chains. All who imitate his example will face the same consequences, apart from the great grace of God.***

I. A PROPOSAL REFUSED (21:1-4a)

- A. **"After these things"**: The phrase pins our chapter to the events described in chapter 20, where Ahab makes a deal with the Syrian king Ben-hadad. Ahab had been able to defeat the Syrian by God's gracious intervention. When Ben-hadad knew he was defeated, he proposed a covenant of peace with the king of Israel, a deal which Ahab unjustly accepted because he wanted to get back cities captured earlier by the Syrians and build streets for his own renown in distant Damascus (20:34). By making this deal, Ahab released a man whom God had devoted to judgment. God sent a prophet to Ahab to tell him that Ahab would therefore forfeit his own life and the people of Israel would suffer in the place of Syria.

Ahab is deeply disturbed by this pronouncement against him. He returns to his palace in Samaria "sullen and vexed" – the reaction of a freshly spanked child. And this pouting, self-preoccupied heart is precisely what we are going to see recur as we enter our text.

- B. **Ahab and his palace:** Ahab was a builder. 1 Kings 22:39 mentions the ivory house he erected for himself. The Jews knew of Solomon's ivory throne, but a whole house inlaid with ivory? That was unique! A man with this kind of clout and so much money would want to expand his holdings into accompanying gardens. Samaria was the capital, but Jezreel – a town to the northeast with a strategic position at the eastern end of the fertile Jezreel valley – merited all the investment and imagination a king could muster.
- C. **Naboth and his vineyard:** So when Ahab saw his neighbor Naboth's fruitful vineyard and realized it could be transformed into a vegetable patch – prime real estate to grow herbs for the kitchen in traditional Syrian style, or flowers for the palace urns – Ahab went to work. Naboth's property was conveniently placed next door – what could be more logical than a trade or a sale? Ahab proposed what would have been fair enough: Naboth's vineyard for an even better one elsewhere, or the property's fair market value in silver.

But Naboth did not agree to the deal. He looked at the property as “the inheritance of his fathers”. He would not give it away because God had told his people not to sell the land of Israel to others just to turn a shekel. The land, after all, belonged to God (Leviticus 25:23-28) and was simply to be used by His people. In cases of indebtedness land could indeed be handed over to other tenants to generate emergency cash, but in the year of Jubilee it must revert to the original owners. Naboth was within his rights to resist the deal. His position is legally unassailable, and king Ahab certainly knows it. Sorry King Ahab – no sale!

II. A CHARACTER UNVEILED (21:4b-6)

Ahab comes into his house “sullen and vexed”. In 21:4a the same phrase is used for the king's emotions as in 20:43; the paired adjectives are not found elsewhere in the OT. What doesn't go Ahab's way makes him depressed and angry – he pouts and fumes. We'd expect this reaction from a five-year-old, not from a man. He lies on his bed, points his nose toward the wall, and refuses to eat. He's on a hunger strike because he can't have a new vegetable garden for the palace kitchen!

Jezebel, the queen from Phoenicia, wonders about her Jewish hubby. Why is he pouting? Why has he lost his appetite? Ahab moans to her about neighbor Naboth, but apparently does not mention the issue of the fathers' inheritance. The past and the future of a chosen people don't seem to matter. It boils down to this: “Naboth won't give me what I want”.

III. A PLOT HATCHED (21:7-10)

Pagan Jezebel has great political instincts. In her country, a reigning monarch never accepts “no” for an answer. He insists on his way. Why shouldn't Ahab? She asks him, “Do you now reign over Israel?” She knows the answer to the question, but she uses the emphatic independent pronoun: “Ahab, are **you** (*'attah*) the one in charge of Israel?” Her rhetorical question is insulting – he must not act like a child over such trivia, but respond like the sovereign he is! Let him rise from his bed of tears, return to his royal table, eat his fill and enjoy life. Be merry like all other kingly epicures. Why? How? Look at the steps in the unjust plot Jezebel hatches . . .

- A. **False promise:** Jezebel uses another independent pronoun here to emphasize that if Ahab is unable to get what he wants, she will act instead: “**I myself** (*'ani*) will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite”. The vineyard, as we have already seen, is not hers any more than it is Ahab's or Naboth's. It belongs to God. But she promises she will “give” it to her husband. She is a Gentile who is usurping God's privilege. This is a false promise!
- B. **False writer:** Jezebel now pretends to be Ahab her husband by writing a letter in his name and sealing it with his seal (all potential readers must be convinced it comes from his desk). She sends it to Naboth's neighbors, the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's town of Jezreel.
- C. **False humility:** In the letter Jezebel uses religion as a ploy to entrap Naboth, who has done nothing wrong. A fast must be proclaimed – what would otherwise be a public rite expressing humility before God and a repentant heart. But just the opposite is actually taking place here.
- D. **False justice:** During the fast Naboth must be placed “at the head of the people”. This could mean that Jezebel intended to launch the event by granting him a place of honor, thus better disguising the plot to discredit him and aggravating the horror of his ruin (EBC). Or it may mean that he is directly brought before the public as a probable criminal, exposed to all on a raised judgment platform. Why is the fast

needed, after all? Because a guilty man – Naboth, who has refused to comply with the king’s sovereign will – is harbored in the people’s ranks, Achan-like. He must be brought to trial; evil must be expunged from God’s people.

- E. **False witnesses:** Jezebel instructs that two “sons of Belial” – two worthless men – be seated in the witness chairs in front of Naboth. Her plan gives an apparent nod to the Law of Moses, which requires that every legal matter be confirmed by two witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6-7). But if the witnesses are lying, then what? Ultimately God is the true witness, and He will have the last word despite Jezebel’s treachery.
- F. **False accusation:** The two false witnesses must testify that Naboth has cursed God (an accusation sure to bring him down because this is a capital offence in Israel, Leviticus 24:16) and cursed the king (this is closer to home, because Naboth has resisted the king’s will . . . but cursing him? Really?).
- G. **False judgment:** Once the two testimonials are given, Naboth is surely to be condemned, and so he can be taken out of the city and stoned to death for his capital crimes.

IV. A PLOT ENACTED (21:11-14)

So what happens? Exactly what Jezebel has instructed! The writer of 1 Kings recounts the action point by point, underscoring the corruption of each of the actors: **Ahab** (he did not overrule his wife’s deceit), **Jezebel** (her calloused cruelty is no surprise after we see what she has done to threaten Elijah’s life in chapter 19) and the **elders and nobles** (they agreed to the whole set-up, knowing that the inquest’s conclusion was pre-arranged). Following the false testimony and unjust conviction, Naboth is taken out of the city of Jezreel for stoning. 2 Kings 9:26 also reveals that Naboth’s sons are killed, ostensibly to purge the city of the evil this God-rejecting family represented. Here is Jezebel’s retribution for the slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal!

V. AN INJUSTICE REWARDED (21:15-16)

When the queen gets news of the kangaroo court, she tells her husband, “arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money”. He resisted giving you the inheritance of his fathers; it’s now up to you to seize it for yourself instead. So Ahab rides in victory in his chariot, tracing the ten kilometers from Samaria to Jezreel to carry out her insolent suggestion. He is accompanied by Jehu and Bidkar, who four years later would remember this day and avenge the blood of the innocent (2 Kings 9:25-36). The plot of ground is now his through intrigue, but so is the guilt. So what will happen to sort out this evil?

VI. AN INJUSTICE CONFRONTED (21:17-24)

The living God is not indifferent to what has happened. He calls upon Elijah the prophet – until now pretty intimidated by Jezebel and Ahab – to confront the situation. He must get up and go across the Jordan to the city of Jezreel where Ahab of Samaria is plotting out his veggie garden. Elijah must ask Ahab a convicting question that comes right from the throne of heaven: “Thus says the Lord: have you murdered, and also taken possession?” In most cases a person inherits by the death of a parent. In this case Ahab “inherited” by the murder of an innocent man. His “taking possession” is seizure of property that is not his. Furthermore, Elijah must also announce God’s judgment. “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”.

So Elijah obeys and calls Ahab on the carpet. Ahab says, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” Yes, Elijah has searched for him and found him, but not to settle a personal vendetta. The reason is a point of divine justice. Ahab has “sold himself to do evil in the sight of Jehovah”. This is a key clause in the text. Meditate on it for a moment . . .

- A. **Ahab has acted deliberately.** The language points directly at Ahab’s choices. The queen had hatched the whole plot, but Elijah does not finger her right away, even though he will later. Nor does he say Ahab’s choices were due to bad parenting. True enough, Omri – Ahab’s father – was an evil man, worse than all his forebears. But there’s no wiggle room for Ahab. He is himself responsible for his own decisions. So are we. The first step in getting things right with God is confessing our own actions without excuses.
- B. **Ahab has sold himself away.** Here’s a central concept. By choosing to worship his own cravings instead of doing right, Ahab has traded away his own soul. He has forfeited his life and his privileges

for an idol. That's the way idolatry works. As the motor behind organized religion, idolatry offers us what we want . . . if only we will sacrifice to something that cannot see, hear, think or act. Idols come in all shapes and sizes. The fallen human heart is the greatest idol factory in the cosmos. We can sacrifice our lives to our **jobs** in exchange for respect, prominence, and a high paycheck. We can sacrifice our integrity to a **compromising situation** in exchange for political advantage or the admiration of our peers. We can sacrifice our purity to an **attractive person** or to the entertainment industry in exchange for excitement and a regular adrenalin rush. But what we decide to serve becomes our master. If we serve what is powerless to give us life, our friendly idol will kill us. If we serve the living God, we will find that He is a gentle Master who rules us in love, and that is life now and eternal life after we pass from this life.

- C. **Ahab has acted in an evil way.** God is Himself the measure of good and evil. What Ahab has done might be commonplace in the land of the Sidonians where Jezebel grew up, but it is an evil thing. God through His prophet clearly labels it. Covetousness, leading to deceit and murder, is evil. They are not just "weak values" or "insensitive acts". They are called "evil in the sight of God". An absolute standard of right and wrong exists. That standard is God Himself.
- D. **Ahab has acted stealthily, but not secretly.** He knew. Jezebel knew. The elders in Jezreel knew. The two false witnesses knew. And Jehovah knew. Nothing is hidden from His omniscience. That's true for us as well. Our hidden thoughts and even our motives, which sometimes we ourselves do not discern, are an open book before God. That is why we glorify God when we invite Him to probe our hearts and show us how we fail to meet His perfect standards, so that we can agree with Him and confess that He is right and we are in the wrong.
- E. **Ahab will need to face the price of his sin.** The sin of idolatry and the fruits of idolatry have consequences, because God is a just judge. Elijah announces those results in 21:21-24. Ahab has done evil; evil will come upon him. Ahab has swept away Naboth and his sons; Ahab and his sons, both slave and freeman, will be swept away. Ahab has tried to extinguish the house of Naboth; Ahab's house will become like the house of Jeroboam and of Baasha, kings of Israel whose posterity was wiped out earlier in the history of the northern tribes (Jeroboam in 1 Kings 15:29; Baasha in 1 Kings 16:11). Why? Because Ahab had provoked God to anger and had caused others in Israel to sin (the elders and populace who had stoned Naboth, for example). His posterity, if they die in the city, will be eaten by dogs; his posterity, should they die in the countryside, will be eaten by birds of prey.
- F. **Jezebel, too, will pay.** She will be eaten by dogs in Jezreel, where she had desired to stone Naboth. She incited Ahab to do evil, so she bears special responsibility.

Ahab's character is summarized in 21:25-26. He was unique in the history of the northern kings in his pursuit of idolatry (rare word for idols, *gillulim* = "logs, blocks, shapeless things"). He acted under the influence of his Sidonian wife and imitated the pattern of the Amorites, whom God had cast out of the land centuries earlier. Those whom we claim as our models and most intimate friends deeply influence us as well. That's why we must choose them wisely! Who is your hero? Whose face is on the poster in your room? Whom do you admire and try to emulate? Who gets the phone call when you're discouraged and depressed, or when you need advice? I don't want this epitaph on your tombstone: "he acted very abominably in following idols". I want you to be remembered as one who followed the living Lord, not a log.

VII. A GRACE UNDERSCORED (21:27-29)

Now here's an amazing conclusion to our text! Many of Ahab's forebears died without any evidence of repentance. But Ahab turned around! He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, fasted and lay down in the prickly, rough garments he had donned. Unlike the trumped up fast that trapped Naboth, this was a real one! He went about despondently ("slowly, gently, softly, in a depressed mood"). His bold bravado was gone. For apparently three years Ahab had a change of heart. His repentance was temporary, but even here God showed His grace.

It is never too late for you to repent of your sin and turn from it, because God loves to forgive, not to judge.

CONCLUSION

Whose slave are we? We are owned by what we worship. We worship what we sacrifice for. God gives us true freedom when we sell out to Him. What keeps us from doing that today? May God help us clearly to see the worthless banknotes, the shapeless logs and stones, that we believe will give us joy, so that we can set them aside in favor of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.