

Ravens and the Prophet



May our hearts be free from idols!

Chapter twenty-three. Part One

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: 'Go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: "Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?"' . . .

Ahab said to Elijah, 'So you have found me, my enemy!' 'I have found you,' he answered. "Because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel."

. . . There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel. When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

(From 1 Kings 21:17-29)

Six years have passed since the mighty confrontation on Mount Carmel – years during which the Lord had been merciful to Israel. He had raised up other prophets, and brought about a mighty deliverance in the face of the vastly superior Syrian army of Ben-Hadad.(1) One thing had not changed, however, and that was the underlying condition of Ahab's heart. When he failed yet again in his duty (this time sparing an adversary whom God had determined to depose) a courageous young prophet rebuked the king to his face. Never one to welcome being challenged, Ahab returned to his palace in Samaria 'sullen and angry'.

God's kindness in continuing to reach out to a willfully disobedient and stubborn ruler is amazing – but that is His nature! So long as there is any hope of repentance, the Hound of Heaven continues to woo and to warn – a point worth remembering when we are tempted to write someone off prematurely. However, there sometimes come moments beyond which God's grace can no longer cover us from the consequences of our actions.

The Final Straw

Ahab had set his heart on possessing a garden that adjoined his property. It never seems to have crossed his mind that Naboth would decline his request to buy the land – especially when he offered his neighbour a better vineyard elsewhere. Naboth was quite within his right to turn Ahab's advances down, however, because they contravened the law of God.(3) The king and queen saw the matter quite differently. Outraged by his refusal, the queen devised the vilest of stratagems to secure the property. She twisted the law of God (which she despised so much) and invented a religious fast, at which she arranged for false witnesses to claim that Naboth had cursed both God and king.

All this reminds us of the way Christians have been brutally persecuted in our own day for allegedly insulting the prophet Mohammed in countries such as Pakistan. When a nation allows people like Jezebel to reign, there are many innocent victims like Naboth. Evil rulers lead weaker people astray, and cause the nation to lose its conscience.

As soon as Naboth had been stoned to death for a crime he had never committed, Jezebel urged her husband to go and take possession of the vineyard. This was the final straw and God's patience finally ran out in the face of Ahab's continuing abuse of power.

At this crucial juncture, the Lord sent for His most experienced prophet and entrusted him with the strongest word he had yet given against the wayward king. Once before Elijah had fled in terror in the face of Jezebel's threats, but not this time. In verse 22 God showed him exactly what the king had done, where he was, and what the terrible doom that awaited him.

An Unexpected Response

We know Ahab well enough by now to be able to predict how he ought to have responded to Elijah's challenge. We could justifiably expect him to run back to Jezebel 'sullen and angry,' like a spoilt child crying, 'It isn't fair.' But something entirely *unexpected* happened. At long last it dawned on the king's dulled conscience that it was beyond the realms of coincidence for Elijah to turn up at precisely the moment he was about to set foot on his new property. He was overcome by the realisation that God knew all about the stratagem he had devised and murder he had sanctioned.

Never one to do things by halves, Ahab tore off his royal robes and went about in sackcloth, in full view of his subjects. He was too distressed even to eat. Gone now was the arrogance with which he had strutted through the land. Gone too were the threatenings and the flattery. . .

And so it was that the Lord looked on the abject figure of the repentant king with mercy. It is one of the most moving moments in the Elijah narrative. For the first and only time, God gave Elijah something good to say about the king: *'Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster on his house in his day, but rather in the days of his son.'*(3) Ahab and Elijah were never to meet again. The prophet's task was done, and Ahab would end his days a sadder, but wiser man.

Ahab's repentance does not appear to have been radical enough, however, to have curtailed the actions and attitudes of his wife, let alone to have put right the many wrongs he had done to the household of God. It was, perhaps, more as a consequence of being 'found out' that Ahab humbled himself, rather than because of any great infilling of divine love and power.

Partial as it was, Ahab's repentance sufficed to postpone judgement on his family line for the immediate future. Whenever we take a step towards God, He takes two towards us. Nevertheless, each of the dreadful woes Elijah had foretold against the house of Ahab came to pass in the years immediately following the king's death. The evil forces he had set in motion would have consequences far beyond his own reign.

The Perils of Greed

As Ahab and his descendants were to discover, the illusory quest to find happiness through riches and property causes untold misery. Solomon, who was better placed than most to understand its dangers, sounded a warning for all generations to heed: *'Whoever loves money never has money enough, whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.'*(4) In modern times, Nelson Rockefeller, one of the richest men in the world, was once asked how much money he would need to feel really secure and happy. 'Just a little bit more,' was his sobering answer.(5) *'People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap,'* lamented Paul.



Whenever our hearts and minds are filled with an exorbitant passion for something or someone other than God, trouble is usually not far away. Given that none of us bow and scrape before bronze statues, how are we to discern where idolatry has a hold on us?

Of all sins, covetousness is perhaps the most impossible to satiate and one of the most difficult to overcome. It means to desire or long in such a way as to hope to enjoy as a *property* the person or thing so eagerly sought. Paul himself recognised it as the one commandment that 'found him out.' (Rom. 7:7)

For Ahab it was greed as well as cruelty that found him out. Would the Lord convict you of any specific areas in which the greed that lies behind covetousness remains an active issue for you?

One possible source of "idolatry" concerns the way we look at others. I'm not speaking of coveting our neighbour's wives so much as the matter I mentioned in last weekend's send out, '*Beyond good Intentions*,' that it is helpful to ponder people we know who reflect Christ's likeness and to learn from their example. The only danger of this is that we can fall into the trap of expecting them, effectively, to be perfect. We set ourselves up then to feel disappointed when we discover that they too can be frail and flawed in certain areas – and end up pushing them off the pedestals we have wrongly mounted them on.

Be warned: the pedestal back flip causes serious damage to all concerned! Far better to accept that 'flesh is frail' and to rejoice that God works through highly flawed vessels! Years ago a dear friend said to me 'I'm going to take you off the pedestal I am in danger of putting you on so that we can be friends.' I appreciated that beyond words!

God will not share his glory with another. In Obadiah 1:3, we hear that '*the pride of your heart has deceived you.*' It is a solemn phrase and a serious warning. It's easy to spot the pride of idolatry in the heart of rulers who build outsize statues and monuments of themselves; it is usually much harder to spot our own blind spots. Let me ask you: **what measures are you putting in place to identify genuine blind spots as opposed to mere emphases, pleasures and preferences?**

Here's a hint: the presence of such an "idol" can often be discerned by the fact that we become **angry** when challenged about it! Or when we find ourselves willing to sacrifice much **time**, and many of the things and relationships that really ought to matter more to us in order to accommodate it. As so often in such cases, **other people can usually spot the things we try so hard to mask from ourselves or seek to justify.** 'The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.' (Pvbs. 12:15, cf 13:10)

Let's not settle for the Ahab way of life. Find safe people and places and bring these things out into the open to get them sorted. It's so much easier to enjoy the Lord's presence when neither He nor we have idols to compete with in our hearts!

References

- 1 See 1 Kings 20:1-30
- 2 Numbers 36:7
- 3 1 Kings 21:29
- 4 Ecclesiastes 5:10
- 5 1 Timothy 6:9-10