

# CHAPTER 21

Ahab is still the unhappy subject of the sacred history; from the great affairs of his camp and kingdom this chapter leads us into his garden, and gives us an account of some ill things (and ill indeed they proved to him) relating to his domestic affairs.

- I.** Ahab is sick for Naboth's vineyard (v. 1-4).
- II.** Naboth dies by Jezebel's plot, that the vineyard may escheat to Ahab (v. 5-14).
- III.** Ahab goes to take possession (v. 15-16).
- IV.** Elijah meets him, and denounces the judgments of God against him for his injustice (v. 17-24).
- V.** Upon his humiliation a reprieve is granted (v. 25-29).

## <1200>1 KINGS 21:1-4

### **NABOTH'S VINEYARD REFUSED TO AHAB**

Here is,

**1.** Ahab coveting his neighbour's vineyard, which unhappily lay near his palace and conveniently for a kitchen-garden. Perhaps Naboth had been pleased that he had a vineyard which lay so advantageously for a prospect of the royal gardens, or the vending of its productions to the royal family; but the situation of it proved fatal to him. If he had had no vineyard, or it had lain obscure in some remote place, he would have preserved his life. But many a man's possessions have been his snare, and his neighbourhood to greatness has been of pernicious consequence. Ahab sets his eye and heart on this vineyard, v. 2. It will be a pretty addition to his demesne, a convenient out-let to his palace; and nothing will serve him but it must be his own. He is welcome to the fruits of it, welcome to walk in it; Naboth perhaps would have made him a lease of it for his life, to please him; but nothing will please him unless he have an absolute property in it, he and his heirs for ever. Yet he is not such a tyrant as to take it by force, but fairly proposes either to give Naboth the full value of it in money or a better

vineyard in exchange. He had tamely quitted the great advantages God had given him of enlarging his dominion for the honour of his kingdom, by his victory over the Syrians, and now is eager to enlarge his garden, only for the convenience of his house, as if to be penny wise would atone for being pound foolish. To desire a convenience to his estate was not evil (there would be no buying if there were no desire of what is bought; the virtuous woman *considers a field and buys it*); but to desire any thing inordinately, though we would compass it by lawful means, is a fruit of selfishness, as if we must engross all the conveniences, and none must live, or live comfortably, by us, contrary to the law of contentment, and the letter of the tenth commandment, *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house*.

**2.** The repulse he met with in this desire. Naboth would by no means part with it (v. 3): *The Lord forbid it me*; and the Lord did forbid it, else he would not have been so rude and uncivil to his prince as not to gratify him in so small a matter. Canaan was in a peculiar manner God's land; the Israelites were his tenants; and this was one of the conditions of their leases, that they should not alienate (no, not to one another) any part of that which fell to their lot, unless in case of extreme necessity, and then only till the year of jubilee, <sup><1223></sup>Leviticus 25:28. Now Naboth foresaw that, if his vineyard were sold to the crown, it would never return to his heirs, no, not in the jubilee. He would gladly oblige the king, but he must obey God rather than men, and therefore in this matter desires to be excused. Ahab knew the law, or should have known it, and therefore did ill to ask that which his subject could not grant without sin. Some conceive that Naboth looked upon his earthly inheritance as an earnest of his lot in the heavenly Canaan, and therefore would not part with the former, lest it should amount to a forfeiture of the latter. He seems to have been a conscientious man, who would rather hazard the king's displeasure than offend God, and probably was one of the 7000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal, for which, it may be, Ahab owed him a grudge.

**3.** Ahab's great discontent and uneasiness hereupon. He was as before (<sup><1224></sup>1 Kings 20:43) *heavy and displeased* (v. 4), grew melancholy upon it, threw himself upon his bed, would not eat nor admit company to come to him. He could by no means digest the affront. His proud spirit aggravated the indignity Naboth did him in denying him, as a thing not to be suffered. He cursed the squeamishness of Naboth's conscience, which he pretended to consult the peace of, and secretly meditated revenge. Nor could he bear

the disappointment; it cut him to the heart to be crossed in his desires, and he was perfectly sick for vexation. Note,

(1.) Discontent is a sin that is its own punishment and makes men torment themselves; it makes the spirit sad, the body sick, and all the enjoyments sour; it is the heaviness of the heart and the rottenness of the bones.

(2.) It is a sin that is its own parent. It arises not from the condition, but from the mind. As we find Paul contented in a prison, so Ahab discontent in a palace. He had all the delights of Canaan, that pleasant land, at command the wealth of a kingdom, the pleasures of a court, and the honours and powers of a throne; and *yet all this avails him nothing* without Naboth's vineyard. Inordinate desires expose men to continual vexations, and those that are disposed to fret, be they ever so happy, will always find something or other to fret at.

## ~~<1206>~~ 1 KINGS 21:5-16

### NABOTH MURDERED BY JEZEBEL

Nothing but mischief is to be expected when Jezebel enters into the story — *that cursed woman*, ~~<1208>~~ 2 Kings 9:34.

**I.** Under pretence of comforting her afflicted husband, she feeds his pride and passion, and blows the coals of his corruptions. It became her to take notice of his grief and to enquire into the cause of it, v. 5. Those have forgotten both the duty and affection of the conjugal relation that interest not themselves in each other's troubles. He told her what troubled him (v. 6), yet invidiously concealed Naboth's reason for his refusal, representing it as peevish, when it was conscientious — *I will not give it thee*, whereas he said, *I may not*. What! says Jezebel (v. 7), *Dost thou govern Israel? Arise, and eat bread*. She does well to persuade him to shake off his melancholy, and not to sink under his burden, to be easy and cheerful; whatever was his grief, grieving would not redress it, but pleasantness would alleviate it. Her plea is, *Dost thou now govern Israel?* This is capable of a good sense: “Does it become so great a prince as thou art to cast thyself down for so small a matter? Thou shamest thyself, and profanest thy crown; it is below thee to take notice of so inconsiderable a thing. Art thou fit to govern Israel, who hast no better a government of thy own passions? Or hast thou

so rich a kingdom at command and canst not thou be without this one vineyard?" We should learn to quiet ourselves, under our crosses, with the thoughts of the mercies we enjoy, especially our hopes of the kingdom. But she meant it in a bad sense: "*Dost thou govern Israel, and shall any subject thou hast deny thee any thing thou hast a mind to? Art thou a king? It is below thee to buy and pay, much more to beg and pray; use thy prerogative, and take by force what thou canst not compass by fair means; instead of resenting the affront thus, revenge it. If thou knowest not how to support the dignity of a king, let me alone to do it; give me but leave to make use of thy name, and I will soon give thee the vineyard of Naboth; right or wrong, it shall be thy own shortly, and cost thee nothing.*" Unhappy princes those are, and hurried apace towards their ruin, who have those about them that stir them up to acts of tyranny and teach them how to abuse their power.

**II.** In order to gratify him, she projects and compasses the death of Naboth. No less than his blood will serve to atone for the affront he has given to Ahab, which she thirsts after the more greedily because of his adherence to the law of the God of Israel.

**1.** Had she aimed only at his land, her false witnesses might have sworn him out of that by a forged deed (she could not have set up so weak a title but the elders of Jezreel would have adjudged it good); but *the adulteress will hunt for the precious life*, <sup>4165</sup>Proverbs 6:26. Revenge is sweet. Naboth must die, and die as a malefactor, to gratify it.

**(1.)** Never were more wicked orders given by any prince than those which Jezebel sent to the magistrates of Jezreel, v. 8-10. She borrows the privy-seal, but the king shall not know what she will do with it. It is probable this was not the first time he had lent it to her, but that with it she had signed warrants for the slaying of the prophets. She makes use of the king's name, knowing the thing would please him when it was done, yet fearing he might scruple at the manner of doing it; in short, she commands them, upon their allegiance, to put Naboth to death, without giving them any reason for so doing. Had she sent witnesses to inform against him, the judges (who must go *secundum allegata et probata* — *according to allegations and proofs*) might have been imposed upon, and their sentence might have been rather their unhappiness than their crime; but to oblige them to find the witnesses, sons of Belial, to suborn them themselves, and then to give judgment upon a testimony which they knew to be false, was such an impudent defiance to

every thing that is just and sacred as we hope cannot be paralleled in any story. She must have looked upon the elders of Jezreel as men perfectly lost to every thing that is honest and honourable when she expected these orders should be obeyed. But she will put them in a way how to do it, having as much of the serpent's subtlety as she had of his poison.

[1.] It must be done under colour of religion: “*Proclaim a fast; signify to your city that you are apprehensive of some dreadful judgment coming upon you, which you must endeavour to avert, not only by prayer, but by finding out and by putting away the accursed thing; pretend to be afraid that there is some great offender among you undiscovered, for whose sake God is angry with your city; charge the people, if they know of any such, on that solemn occasion to inform against him, as they regard the welfare of the city; and at last let Naboth be fastened upon as the suspected person, probably because he does not join with his neighbours in their worship. This may serve for a pretence to set him on high among the people, to call him to the bar. Let proclamation be made that, if any one can inform the court against the prisoner, and prove him to be the Achan, they shall be heard; and then let the witnesses appear to give evidence against him.*” Note, There is no wickedness so vile, so horrid, but religion has sometimes been made a cloak and cover for it. We must not think at all the worse of fasting and praying for their having been sometimes thus abused, but much the worse of those wicked designs that have at any time been carried on under the shelter of them.

[2.] It must be done *under colour of justice* too, and with the formalities of a legal process. Had she sent to them to hire some of their danbitti, some desperate suffirans, to assassinate him, to stab him as he went along the streets in the night, the deed would have been bad enough; but to destroy him by a course of law, to use that power for the murdering of the innocent which ought to be their protection, was such a *violent perversion of justice and judgment* as was truly monstrous, yet such as we are directed *not to marvel at*, <sup><2KRB></sup>Ecclesiastes 5:8. The crime they must lay to his charge was *blaspheming God and the king* — a complicated blasphemy. Surely she could not think to put a blasphemous sense upon the answer he had given to Ahab, as if denying him his vineyard were blaspheming the king, and giving the divine law for the reason were blaspheming God. No, she pretends not any ground at all for the charge: though there was no colour of truth in it, the witnesses must swear it, and Naboth must not be permitted to speak for himself, or cross-examine the witnesses, but

immediately, under pretence of a universal detestation of the crime, they must *carry him out and stone him*. His blaspheming God would be the forfeiture of his life, but not of his estate, and therefore he is also charged with treason, in *blaspheming the king*, for which his estate was to be confiscated, that so Ahab might have his vineyard.

(2.) Never were wicked orders more wickedly obeyed than these were by the magistrates of Jezreel. They did not so much as dispute the command nor make any objections against it, though so palpably unjust, but punctually observed all the particulars of it, either because they feared Jezebel's cruelty or because they hated Naboth's piety, or both: They did *as it was written in the letters* (v. 11, 12), neither made any difficulty of it, nor met with any difficulty in it, but cleverly carried on the villany. They stoned Naboth to death (v. 13), and, as it should seem, his sons with him, or after him; for, when God came to make inquisition for blood, we find this article in the account (<sup><1106></sup>2 Kings 9:26), *I have seen the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons*. Perhaps they were secretly murdered, that they might not claim their father's estate nor complain of the wrong done him.

2. Let us take occasion from this sad story,

(1.) To stand amazed at the wickedness of the wicked, and the power of Satan in the children of disobedience. What a holy indignation may we be filled with to see *wickedness in the place of judgment!* <sup><2036></sup>Ecclesiastes 3:16.

(2.) To lament the hard case of oppressed innocency, and to mingle our tears with *the tears of the oppressed that have no comforter*, while *on the side of the oppressors there is power*, <sup><2101></sup>Ecclesiastes 4:1.

(3.) To commit the keeping of our lives and comforts to God, for innocency itself will not always be our security.

(4.) To rejoice in the belief of a judgment to come, in which such wrong judgments as these will be called over. Now we see that *there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked* (<sup><2184></sup>Ecclesiastes 8:14), but all will be set to rights in the great day.

III. Naboth being taken off, Ahab takes possession of his vineyard.

1. The elders of Jezreel sent notice to Jezebel very unconcernedly, sent it to her as a piece of agreeable news, *Naboth is stoned and is dead*, v. 14.

Here let us observe that, as obsequious as the elders of Jezreel were to Jezebel's orders which she sent from Samaria for the murder of Naboth, so obsequious were the elders of Samaria afterwards to Jehu's orders which he sent from Jezreel for the murder of Ahab's seventy sons, only that was not done by course of law, <sup><1206></sup>2 Kings 10:6, 7. Those tyrants that by their wicked orders debauch the consciences of their inferior magistrates may perhaps find at last the wheel return upon them, and that those who will not stick to do one cruel thing for them will be as ready to do another cruel thing against them.

**2.** Jezebel, jocund enough that her plot succeeded so well, brings notice to Ahab that *Naboth is not alive, but dead*; therefore, says she, *Arise, take possession of his vineyard*, v. 15. He might have taken possession by one of his officers, but so pleased is he with this accession to his estate that he will make a journey to Jezreel himself to enter upon it; and it should seem he went in state too, as if he had obtained some mighty victory, for Jehu remembers long after that he and Bidkar attended him at this time, <sup><1205></sup>2 Kings 9:25. If Naboth's sons were all put to death, Ahab thought himself entitled to the estate, *ob defectum sanguinis* — *in default of heirs* (as our law expresses it); if not, yet, Naboth dying as a criminal, he claimed it *ob delictum criminis* — *as forfeited by his crime*. Or, if neither would make him a good title, the absolute power of Jezebel would give it to him, and who would dare to oppose her will? Might often prevails against right, and wonderful is the divine patience that suffers it to do so. God is certainly *of purer eyes than to behold iniquity*, and yet for a time *keeps silence when the wicked devours the man that is more righteous than he*, <sup><3013></sup>Habakkuk 1:13.

## <sup><1217></sup>1 KINGS 21:17-29

### AHAB'S DOOM FORETOLD

In these verses we may observe,

**I.** The very bad character that is given of Ahab (v. 25, 26), which comes in here to justify God in the heavy sentence passed upon him, and to show that though it was passed upon occasion of his sin in the matter of Naboth (which David's sin in the matter of Uriah did too much resemble), yet God would not have punished him so severely if he had not been guilty of many

other sins, especially idolatry; whereas David, except in that one matter, *did that which was right*. But, as to Ahab, there was *none like him*, so ingenious and industrious in sin, and that made a trade of it. He *sold himself to work wickedness*, that is, he made himself a perfect slave to his lusts, and was as much at their beck and command as ever any servant was at his master's. He was wholly given up to sin, and, upon condition he might have the pleasures of it, he would take the wages of it, which is death, <sup><61623></sup>Romans 6:23. Blessed Paul complained that he was *sold under sin* (<sup><61714></sup>Romans 7:14), as a poor captive against his will; but Ahab was voluntary: he *sold himself to sin*; of choice, and as his own act and deed, he submitted to the dominion of sin. It was no excuse of his crimes that *Jezebel his wife stirred him up* to do wickedly, and made him, in many respects, worse than otherwise he would have been. To what a pitch of impiety did he arrive who had such tinder of corruption in his heart and such a temper in his bosom to strike fire into it! In many things he did ill, but he did *most abominably in following idols*, like the Canaanites; his immoralities were very provoking to God, but his idolatries were especially so. Israel's case was sad when a prince of such a character as this reigned over them.

**II.** The message with which Elijah was sent to him, when he went to take possession of Naboth's vineyard, v. 17-19.

**1.** Hitherto God kept silence, did not intercept Jezebel's letters, nor stay the process of the elders of Jezreel; but now Ahab is reprov'd and his *sin set in order before his eyes*.

**(1.)** The person sent is Elijah. A prophet of lower rank was sent with messages of kindness to him, <sup><12113></sup>1 Kings 20:13. But the father of the prophets is sent to try him, and condemn him, for his murder.

**(2.)** The place is Naboth's vineyard and the time just when he is taking possession of it; then, and there, must his doom be read him. By taking possession, he avow'd all that was done, and made himself guilty *ex post facto* — *as an accessory after the fact*. There he was taken in the commission of the errors, and therefore the conviction would come upon him with so much the more force. "What hast thou to do in this vineyard? What good canst thou expect from it when it is *purchased with blood*" (<sup><3122></sup>Habakkuk 2:12) and thou hast *caused the owner thereof to lose his life?*" <sup><31313></sup>Job 31:39. Now that he is pleasing himself with his ill-gotten



wealth, and giving direction for the turning of this vineyard into a flower-garden, his *meat in his bowels is turned. He shall not feel quietness. When he is about to fill his belly, God shall cast the fury of his wrath upon him,* <sup><18014></sup>Job 20:14, 20, 23.

2. Let us see what passed between him and the prophet.

(1.) Ahab vented his wrath against Elijah, fell into a passion at the sight of him, and, instead of humbling himself before the prophet, as he ought to have done (<sup><14632></sup>2 Chronicles 36:12), was ready to fly in his face. *Hast thou found me, O my enemy?* v. 20. This shows,

[1.] That he hated him. The last time we found them together they parted very good friends, <sup><11846></sup>1 Kings 18:46. Then Ahab had countenanced the reformation, and therefore then all was well between him and the prophet; but now he had relapsed, and was worse than ever. His conscience told him he had made God his enemy, and therefore he could not expect Elijah should be his friend. Note, That man's condition is very miserable that has made the word of God his enemy, and his condition is very desperate that reckons the ministers of that word his enemies because they *tell him the truth*, <sup><4016></sup>Galatians 4:16. Ahab, having sold himself to sin, was resolved to stand to his bargain, and could not endure him that would have helped him to recover himself,

[2.] That he feared him: *Hast thou found me?* intimating that he shunned him all he could, and it was now a terror to him to see him. The sight of him was like that of the handwriting upon the wall to Belshazzar; it made his *countenance change, the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another*. Never was poor debtor or criminal so confounded at the sight of the officer that came to arrest him. Men may thank themselves if they make God and his word a terror to them.

(2.) Elijah denounced God's wrath against Ahab: *I have found thee* (says he, v. 20), *because thou hast sold thyself to work evil*. Note, Those that give up themselves to sin will certainly be found out, sooner or later, to their unspeakable horror and amazement. Ahab is now set to the bar, as Naboth was, and trembles more than he did.

[1.] Elijah finds the indictment against him, and convicts him upon the notorious evidence of the fact (v. 19): *Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?* He was thus charged with the murder of Naboth, and it would

not serve him to say the law killed him (perverted justice is the highest injustice), nor that, if he was unjustly prosecuted, it was not his doing — he knew nothing of it; for it was to please him that it was done, and he had shown himself pleased with it, and so had made himself guilty of all that was done in the unjust prosecution of Naboth. He killed, for he took possession. If he takes the garden, he takes the guilt with it. *Terra transit cum onere* — *The land with the incumbrance.*

[2.] He passes judgment upon him. He told him from God that his family should be ruined and rooted out (v. 21) and all his posterity cut off, — that his house should be made like the houses of his wicked predecessors, Jeroboam and Baasha (v. 22), particularly that those who died in the city should be meat for dogs and those who died in the field meat for birds (v. 24), which had been foretold of Jeroboam's house (<sup><1141></sup>1 Kings 14:11), and of Baasha's (<sup><1164></sup>1 Kings 16:4), — that Jezebel, particularly, should be devoured by dogs (v. 23), which was fulfilled (<sup><1386></sup>2 Kings 9:36), — and, as for Ahab himself, that the dogs should *lick his blood* in the very same place where they licked Naboth's (v. 19 — “*Thy blood, even thine, though it be royal blood, though it swell thy veins with pride and boil in thy heart with anger, shall ere long be an entertainment for the dogs*”), which was fulfilled, <sup><1238></sup>1 Kings 22:38. This intimates that he should die a violent death, should come to his grave with blood, and that disgrace should attend him, the foresight of which must needs be a great mortification to such a proud man. Punishments after death are here most insisted on, which, though such as affected the body only, were perhaps designed as figures of the soul's misery after death.

**III.** Ahab's humiliation under the sentence passed upon him, and the favourable message sent him thereupon.

**1.** Ahab was a kind of penitent. The message Elijah delivered to him in God's name put him into a fright for the present, so that he *rent his clothes and put on sackcloth*, v. 27. He was still a proud hardened sinner, and yet thus reduced. Note, God can make the stoutest heart to tremble and the proudest to humble itself. His word is quick and powerful, and is, when he pleases to make it so, like a *fire and a hammer*, <sup><229></sup>Jeremiah 23:29. It made Felix tremble. Ahab put on the garb and guise of a penitent, and yet his heart was unhumiliated and unchanged. After this, we find, he hated a faithful prophet, <sup><1238></sup>1 Kings 22:8. Note, It is no new thing to find the show and profession of repentance where yet the truth and substance of it are

wanting. Ahab's repentance was only what might be seen of men: *Seest thou* (says God to Elijah) *how Ahab humbles himself*; it was external only, the garments rent, but not the heart. A hypocrite may go very far in the outward performance of holy duties and yet come short.

**2.** He obtained hereby a reprieve, which I may call a kind of pardon. Though it was but an outside repentance (lamenting the judgment only, and not the sin), though he did not leave his idols, nor restore the vineyard to Naboth's heirs, yet, because he did hereby give some glory to God, God took notice of it, and bade Elijah take notice of it: *Seest thou how Ahab humbles himself?* v. 29. In consideration of this the threatened ruin of his house, which had not been fixed to any time, should be *adjourned to his son's days*. The sentence should not be revoked, but the execution suspended. Now,

**(1.)** This discovers the great goodness of God, and his readiness to show mercy, which here *rejoices against judgment*. Favour was shown to this wicked man that God might magnify his goodness (says bishop Sanderson) even to the hazard of his other divine perfections; as if (says he) God would be thought unholy, or untrue, or unjust (though he be none of these), or any thing, rather than unmerciful.

**(2.)** This teaches us to take notice of that which is good even in those who are not so good as they should be: let it be commended as far as it goes.

**(3.)** This gives a reason why wicked people sometimes prosper long; God is rewarding their external services with external mercies.

**(4.)** This encourages all those that truly repent and unfeignedly believe the holy gospel. If a pretending partial penitent shall go to his house reprieved, doubtless a sincere penitent shall *go to his house justified*.