

Naboth's Vineyard

by F.B. Meyer

The sermon explores the story of Naboth's vineyard, highlighting the consequences of sin and the importance of speaking truth and standing for what is right, even in the face of persecution.

Scripture: 1 Kings 21:3-22, 2 Kings 9:26, Matthew 5:11-12

Topics: "Justice", "Conscience"

Description

F.B. Meyer explores the tragic story of Naboth's Vineyard, where King Ahab's greed leads to the wrongful execution of Naboth, who refuses to sell his ancestral land. Ahab's despair and subsequent actions reveal the depths of his moral failure, while the prophet Elijah, after a period of silence, boldly confronts Ahab, acting as a voice of conscience and truth. Elijah's unwavering faith and commitment to God's word highlight the consequences of sin and the importance of standing firm against injustice. The sermon emphasizes that true prophets may be hated for speaking the truth, yet their words will ultimately be vindicated by God. The narrative serves as a reminder of God's justice and the inevitable consequences of wrongdoing.

Transcript

In a room of the palace, Ahab, king of Israel, lies upon his couch with his face toward the wall, refusing to eat. What has taken place? Has disaster befallen the royal arms? Have the priests of Baal been again massacred? Is his royal consort dead? No, the soldiers are still flushed with their recent victories over Syria. The worship of Baal has quite recovered the terrible disaster of Carmel. Jezebel -- resolute, crafty, cruel, and beautiful -- is now standing by his side, anxiously seeking the cause of this sadness which was, perhaps, assumed to engage her sympathy and to secure through her means, ends which he dared not compass for himself.

The story is soon told. Jezreel was the Windsor of Israel and the location of the favorite royal house. On a certain occasion, while Ahab was engaged there in superintending his large and beautiful pleasure-grounds, his eye lighted on a neighboring vineyard which belonged to Naboth the Jezreelite. It promised to be so valuable an addition to his property, that he resolved to procure it at all hazards. He therefore sent for Naboth and offered a better vineyard in exchange or the worth of it in money. To his surprise and indignation, Naboth refused both. And Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid it {134} be, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee" (1 Kings 21:3).

At first sight this refusal seems churlish and discourteous. But a little consideration will justify the refusal of Naboth, and aggravate the subsequent guilt of the royal pair. By the law of Moses, Canaan was considered as being, in a peculiar sense, God's land. The Israelites were His tenants, and one of the conditions of their tenure was that they should not alienate that which fell to their lot except in cases of extreme necessity, and then only until the year of Jubilee. The transfer was always coupled with the condition that the land might be redeemed at any moment before that time by the payment of a stipulated price. If these two conditions had remained in force, Naboth would have felt less compunction at this temporary alienation of his paternal inheritance; but both had probably fallen into disuse, and he anticipated that if it once passed out of his hands, his patrimony would become merged in the royal demesne, never to be disintegrated. Taking his stand then on religious grounds, he might well say, "The LORD forbid it me." His refusal was in part, therefore, a religious act.

But there was, without doubt, something further. In his mention of "the inheritance of his fathers," we have the suggestion of another, and most natural, reason for his reluctance. Beneath those vines and trees his fathers had for generations sat. There he had spent the sunny years of childhood. Many a holy memory was associated with that spot, and he felt that all the juice ever pressed from all the vineyards in the neighborhood would never compensate him for the wrench from those clustered memories.

Naboth's refusal made Ahab leap into his chariot and drive back to Samaria and, like a spoiled child, turn his {135} face to the wall in a pet, "heavy and displeased." At the close of the previous chapter we learn that he was heavy and displeased with God; now he is agitated by the same strong passions toward man. In a few more days the horrid deed of murder was perpetrated, which at one stroke removed Naboth, his sons, and his heirs and the unclaimed property fell naturally into royal hands. There are many lessons here which would claim our notice if we were dealing with the whole story, but we must pass them by to bend our attention exclusively on the part Elijah played amid these terrible transactions.

HE WAS CALLED BACK TO SERVICE

How many years had elapsed since last the word of the Lord had come to Elijah, we do not know. Perhaps it was five or six. All this while he must have waited wistfully for the well-known accents of that voice, longing to hear it once again. And the weary days, passing slowly by, prolonged his deferred hope into deep and yet deeper regret, he must have been driven to continued soul-questionings and heart-searchings, to bitter repentance for the past, and to renewed consecration for whatever service might be imposed upon him. Using a phrase employed of Samson who was as remarkable for physical force as Elijah was for spiritual power, we may say, "the hair of his head began to grow again."

It may be that these words will be read by some, once prominent in the Christian service, who have been lately cast aside. They have been removed from the sphere they once filled. They have found audiences slip away from them, and opportunities close up. They have seen younger people step in to fill the ranks from which they have fallen. This may be attributable to the sovereignty {136} of the Great Master, who has a perfect right to do as He will with His own, and who takes up one and lays down another. But before we lay this flattering unction to our souls, we should inquire whether the reason may not lie within our own breasts, in some inconsistency or sin which needs confession and forgiveness at the hands of our faithful and merciful High Priest, before ever again the word of the Lord can come to us.

It is also quite possible that we are left unused for our own deeper teaching in the ways of God. Hours, even years of silence are full of golden opportunities for the servants of God. In such cases, our

conscience does not condemn us or accost us with any sufficient reason arising from ourselves. Our simple duty is to keep clean and filled and ready, standing on the shelf, meet for the Master's use, sure that we serve if we only stand and wait and knowing that He will accept and reward the willingness for the deed.

ELIJAH WAS NOT DISOBEDIENT

Once before, when his presence was urgently required, he had arisen to flee for his life. But there was no vacillation, no cowardice now. His old heroic faith had revived in him again. His spirit had regained its wonted posture in the presence of Jehovah. His nature had returned to its equipoise in the will of God. He arose and went down to the vineyard of Naboth and entered it and strode through its glades, or waited at the gates, to find the royal criminal. It was nothing to him that there rode behind Ahab's chariot two ruthless captains, Jehu and Bidkar (2 Kings 9:25). He did not for a moment consider that the woman who had threatened his life before might now take it, maddened as she was with her recent draught of human blood. All fear was but as the cobweb {137} swinging across the garden pathway and swept before the child rushing resolutely forward. Who does not rejoice that Elijah had such an opportunity of wiping out the dark stain of disgrace which attached to him from the moment when he had forsaken, so faithlessly, the post of duty? His time of waiting had not been lost on him!

HE WAS ACTING AS AN INCARNATE CONSCIENCE

Naboth was out of the way, and Ahab may have comforted himself, as weak people do still, with the idea that he was not his murderer. How could he be? He had been perfectly quiescent. He had simply put his face to the wall and done nothing. He did remember that Jezebel had asked him for his royal seal to give validity to some letters which she had written in his name, but how was he to know what she had written? Of course if she had given instructions for Naboth's death it was a great pity, but it could not now be helped. He might as well take possession of the inheritance! With such palliatives he succeeded in stilling the fragment of conscience which alone survived in his heart. And it was then that he was startled by a voice which he had not heard for years, saying, "Thus says the LORD, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?" (1 Kings 21:19). He killed! No, it was Jezebel that had killed. Ah, it was in vain to shift the responsibility thus! "Hast thou killed?" The prophet, guided by the Spirit of God, put the burden on the right shoulders.

Often a man, who dares not to do a disgraceful act himself will call a subordinate to his side and say: "Such a thing needs doing, I wish you would see to it. Use any of my appliances you will, only do not trouble me further about it -- and of course you had better not do anything {138} wrong." In God's sight that man is held responsible for whatever evil is done by his tool in the execution of this commission. The blame is laid on the shoulders of the principal; and it will be more tolerable for the subordinate than for him, in the day of Judgment.

Further than that but based on the same principle; if an employer, by paying an inadequate and unjust wage, tempts his employees to supplement their scanty pittance by dishonest or unholy methods, he is held responsible in the sight of heaven for the evil which he might have prevented if he had not been willfully and criminally indifferent.

It is sometimes the duty of a servant of God fearlessly to rebuke sinners who think their high position a license to evil-doing and a screen from rebuke. And let all such remember that acts of high-handed sin often seem at first to prosper. Naboth meekly dies, the earth sucks in his blood, the vineyard passes into

the oppressor's hands, but there is One who sees and will most certainly avenge the cause of His servants. "Surely I have seen yesterday the blood of Naboth, and the blood of his sons, saith the LORD; and I will requite thee in this plat" (2 Kings 9:26). That vengeance may tarry, for the mills of God grind slowly; but it will come as certainly as God is God. And in the meanwhile, in Naboth's vineyard stands Elijah the prophet; and in the criminal's heart stands conscience with its scourge of small cords, weighted with jagged metal. This lesson is enforced again and again by our great dramatist, who teaches men who will not read their Bibles that sin does not pay in the end. No matter how successful it may seem at first, in the end it has to reckon with an Elijah as conscience, and he always finds out the culprit; and with God as an avenger -- and He never misses His mark. {139}

HE WAS HATED FOR THE TRUTH'S SAKE

"And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" (1 Kings 21:20). Though the king knew it not, Elijah was his best friend, while it was Jezebel who was his direst foe. But sin distorts everything. It is like the gray dawn which so obscures the most familiar objects that men mistake friends for foes and foes for friends. Many a time have men repeated the error of the disciples, who mistook Jesus for an evil spirit and cried out for fear.

When Christian friends remonstrate with evil-doers, rebuke their sins, and warn them of their doom, the Christians are scouted, hated, and denounced as enemies. The Bible is detested because it so clearly exposes sin and its consequences. God Himself is viewed with dislike. It cannot be otherwise. The Egyptians hated the blessed pillar of cloud. The Philistines sent away the ark of the covenant. Wounds shrink from salt. The broken bone dreads the gentle touch of the physician. The thief hates the detective's lantern.

Let us not be surprised if we are hated. Let us even be thankful when men detest us -- not for ourselves, but for the truths we speak. Let us "rejoice, and be exceeding glad." When bad men think thus of us, it is an indication that our influence is at the very antipodes to the bent and tenor of their lives. "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

Oh, do not turn from the surgeon's knife, or the lighthouse gleam, or the red warning light, or the deep baying {140} of the hound -- as if these were your foes. It is you that is wrong; not they.

HE WAS A TRUE PROPHET

Each of the woes which Elijah foretold came true. Ahab postponed their fulfillment for some three years by a partial repentance, but at the end of that time he went back to his evil ways, and every item was literally fulfilled. He was wounded by a chance arrow at Ramoth-gilead, "and the blood ran out of the wound into the midst of the chariot" (1 Kings 22:35) and as they washed his chariot in the fountain of Samaria, the dogs licked his blood. Twenty years after, when Jehu sent out to see, there was nothing of Jezebel left for burial. Only her skull, feet, and palms, escaped the voracious dogs as she lay exposed on that very spot. The corpse of their son Joram was cast forth unburied on that same plot, at the command of Jehu, who never forgot those memorable words. And there, in after days, the armies of Israel were put again and again to the rout, saturating the soil with richer fluid than ever flowed from the crushed grapes of the vine. God is true, not only to His promises, but to His threats.

Every word spoken by Elijah was literally fulfilled. Jehovah put His own seal upon His servant's words. The passing years amply vindicated him. And as we close this tragic episode in his career, we rejoice to learn that he was reinstated in the favor of God and stamped again with the divine imprimatur of trustworthiness and truth.

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