

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

Confronting the Dragon of Selfishness | Book of Kings (Part 6) 1 Kings 21:1-28

Like a lot of you, I imagine, Amy and I are going to be at the door tomorrow night, happily greeting the trick-or-treaters who will parade through our neighborhood. I still remember our first such celebration in 1997. For the first part of the evening, Amy covered the door at our house while I took our five-year and our 18-month old around the neighborhood. I recall going up to one house and being greeted by a seasoned father at the door. "Here's something for you," he said cheerily, as he put a great big candy-bar into Rush's bucket. "Here's something for you," he said, as he dropped another confection into Cole's bucket. And, then, reaching behind the door, he dug around in what sounded strangely like an ice-bucket and said, "And here's something for YOU, Dad," as he handed me a Heineken! *I think I'm going to LIKE living here in the Midwest, I thought. These people are very generous!*

For all the associations Halloween admittedly has with dark spirits, there is a light that shines in that darkness and that light is often one of GENEROSITY. Generosity is one of the most beautiful and heavenly of virtues. I say, "heavenly," because GOD is a being of staggering generosity. Think about it. God had everything he could ever want in himself. In poetic terms, God lived in an unimaginably splendid mansion. He had all the candy and companionship he needed. He could have spent eternity, sitting by the fire of his own glory, eating chocolate, and laughing with angels.

But, instead, God goes out into the night to bring light and life and love and laughter to others. He starts by creating a wondrous neighborhood around himself. We call it the Universe. Then, on at least one little planet there, God establishes life and lavishes stunning blessing upon it. We're not talking – mini Milky Ways or tiny rolls of Smarties. No, God, pours out massive bowls of blessing on planet Earth. He endows it with flora and fauna of every conceivable kind, delicious tastes and spectacular colors, shapes and topographies that defy imagination -- everything that creatures need not only to survive but to thrive. And, then, God gives to one particular form of life the capacity to think and to love and to create and to give in some ways like He does -- with one evidence being that on the last day of October, a lot of them will get up from their couches, and open their doors on a chilly night, and extend bowls full of blessings to little strangers – and do so with joy.

We are seldom so like God, as when we are being generous – when we do not have to leave our easy chairs... when we could hunker down and keep everything to ourselves... but, instead, choose to get up and go out to bless others. And this is why the story we read today from the BOOK OF KINGS is somewhat disturbing.

If you are just joining us, we've been following the story of King **Ahab**, a Jewish king

who has married a queen from Sidon by the name of **Jezebel**. Together, this power couple has led the nation of Israel on a descending path toward idolatry and corruption of the worst kind – thereby earning the courageous opposition of God’s prophet, Elijah. There have been so many life lessons from the Book of Kings that unfold from encounters that happen at places on this map. You might find it helpful to go to our website and catch up on past episodes. Let me invite you to take in a few more practical pointers today.

In 1 Kings 21, we read this: ¹ **Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria.** The important context for this verse is that Ahab normally ruled his empire from the mountain city of Samaria in northern Israel. Like some “snowbirds” in our time, however, Ahab also had a winter residence. This palace was located in **Jezreel** – a valley whose lower elevation made it a warmer and more hospitable spot in colder months. Think Denver and Palm Springs.

Apparently, King Ahab thought that as nice as his estate was, it could be even better if he acquired a piece of property next to it. So, ² **Ahab said to Naboth, “Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.”** You can hear that Ahab is pretty used to getting what he wants. He’s like one of those robber barons in the old western movies. He’s confident that he can manipulate this guy or buy him out.

³ **But Naboth replied, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.”** This isn’t just any piece of property to Naboth. This land really means something to him. It’s like the Dutton Ranch from the hit TV show, *Yellowstone*. Naboth’s people have been on this property forever. This vineyard is a treasured inheritance. By the way, in scripture, “vineyards” are often regarded as symbols of God’s gracious provision (Mat 21:33-41). A “vegetable garden” is viewed as a temporary asset that people create on their own, but a vineyard is seen as an enduring blessing from God. In Israel’s story, vegetable gardens were associated with Egypt (the place of bondage) or Babylon (the place of exile), but vineyards were associated with the Promised Land (the place of blessing). Furthermore, there were certain lands which had been apportioned to the twelve tribes of Israel which faithful Jews regarded as inviolably belonging to certain families because of God’s will. The fact that Naboth says: **“The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors,”** is likely a reference to this. In other words, Naboth is not just being possessive or traditional, he’s trying to honor GOD!

Somehow, this doesn’t alter Ahab’s heart. The Bible says: ⁴ **So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, “I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors.” He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.** Have any of you read or seen the movie version of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate*

Factory? Do you remember the character of Veruca Salt? She's a girl who has so much in life, but she demands even more. And when Willy Wonka won't give her everything she wants, she throws a tantrum. She's like a kid at Halloween that's allowed to eat too much candy and when mom or dad finally say, "No more," they melt down completely. Ahab is the archetype of this character. He's the king of a country and has almost everything money and power can buy. He wants more. He freaks out when he can't have it. There's a crucial life lesson for us and our children here. Just as there is a special kind of JOY that comes upon those who are generous – I think of the grin on the face of that guy who handed me the Heineken on Halloween -- there is also a tragic sort of SADNESS that comes upon selfish people.

When I picture Ahab lying on his bed sulking and refusing to eat, I think of the observations I read this week by spiritual growth coach, John R. Miles. He writes this: *"When we align our lives around materialism, we place wealth over substance, earnings over relationships, popularity over virtue, the hustle culture over family, and ego over serving others... We start thinking about materialistic objects as an extension of our identity and... lose access to who [we] truly are..."* Miles goes on to note that there's nothing intrinsically wrong with wanting to do creative things with the fruit of all our hard work. But, we need to stop and think when our desire for tangible goods... isn't driven by adversity [or real objective lack] but by our own inner discontentment. We are becoming more convinced that we can buy our way to happiness. *We become obsessed with comparing, accumulating, and acquiring instead of creating, helping, and adventuring.*¹

I remember one Sunday afternoon when I was seventeen and I was laying around on my bed, like Ahab, feeling pretty sulky. I was driving an old car my grandparents had given me and wanted a better one. I had a beaten up stereo system and wanted a newer one. I had my sites on acquiring a particular girlfriend who'd made it clear she didn't want that deal. My dad walked in, discovered how morose I was and said something I'll never forget: *"Drive over to the hospital. Ask one of the nurses if there's anyone who hasn't had a visitor lately and go visit them. Do something for someone else and see if it doesn't change your outlook."* I ended up visiting for more than an hour with an older gentleman, who'd lost his feet to diabetes. His wife had died years before. He had no family that cared about him. As John Miles might say: "I got re-focused on creating, helping and adventuring with this man and my life started to look different. You see, being denied what we want invites us to VALUE what we have. Why do you suppose Ahab couldn't do that? Why couldn't he rejoice at all that was already in his Halloween bucket – the beautiful properties and possessions he already had? Why did he have to focus on Naboth's "candy" (Exodus 20:17)?

In his book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, Hope College psychologist, David G. Myers, noted that, "Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, [but] less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology."² It's no wonder. Every

minute of the day, they are being presented with images and messages about what they don't have, what goodies and treats are in someone else's bucket. All of us are subject to this and the greed and envy it produces. We live in the midst of the most powerful discontentment-producing machine in the history of the world.

And then I think of the JOY on the faces of the teenagers and people of every age who served in our FOR CHICAGOLAND initiative last Saturday. I think of the happiness I feel every week by just getting to be some small part of the life-changing mission of this amazing church. I think of the heart of Jesus, who for the JOY set before him generously gave his whole life upon a cross to bring the blessing of forgiveness and eternal life to you and me. I think generosity is the antidote to our discontent.

It is why I don't believe it is ridiculous or unkind of me to suggest that of the ten "candy bars" God puts into the Halloween basket of our life each year, you and I ought to have no problem giving at least one candy bar back to God so that he can bless someone else with it. Many years ago, in my former church, I called the children of the church forward on the Sunday after Halloween and gave ten candy bars to each of them. Then I told them that I knew of someone who was hungry and wondered if I could have just one of their candy bars back, because Jesus wanted everyone to feel his love. Not a single child hesitated for a moment. Every one of them rushed to give that one-of-ten candy bars back.

I invite you to join me in taking our eyes off of the vineyard we don't have and to consider all that you and I have been given. Remember the wonder of life at all in this infinitely empty dark universe, then life on this planet, then life in this era of history, then life in this country, then life in this county, then YOUR life. Ask yourself, as I am asking myself: "Am I giving even a **tithe**, a **tenth** of what I have in my bucket to the purposes of God?" If our answer is: "Well, NO, because I need THAT," then maybe we are more like Ahab than we'd like to think.

I wish Ahab had a dad like mine or the blessing of a church like this or that he knew Jesus. Instead, he had a much less helpful spirit in his life. At the moment when he might have reconsidered everything, ⁵ **His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?"** ⁶ **He answered her, "Because... Naboth the Jezreelite... said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'"** ⁷ **Jezebel said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."**

What follows from here is the kind of story that has defined too much of human history. If you have the stomach, you can read it for yourself in 1 Kings 21. Suffice it to say, it's the story of the horrific damage done by the fire-breathing Dragon of Selfishness. It's a tale of lying and manipulation and corruption and abuse of power and *"MY will be done,"* that is so consistent with many of the events in the public and private world we inhabit today that it would send chills down our spine, were we not so accustomed to it.

Jezebel pays to have Naboth set up, framed for a deed he didn't actually do, and brutally murdered for it, all under the guise of legitimate law. It's the kind of scenario for which the word "injustice" was invented. But life in Israel goes on.

17 Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: 18 "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. 19 Say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!'"... 23 "And also concerning Jezebel the Lord says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.'

History records that, in the face of this message, Ahab momentarily came to his senses. There is no record that Jezebel changed at all, but Ahab humbled himself for a season, repenting of his selfishness and idolatry (1 Kings 21:27). And, then, he went right back to his familiar practices. For this, God exacted the punishment he promised. Ahab and Jezebel died in a way far too gruesome for discussion here. But this highlights a crucial lesson.

I know that all of us are uncomfortable with the notion of God as a punishing judge. But God judges selfishness severely because HE is so very generous. He views human selfishness as an offensive repudiation of the massive grace by which he has given and sustains all life. He is appalled by kids who empty into their Halloween bucket an untended candy bowl, because of its impact on those children who will follow them. His sense of justice is wracked by uncommonly blessed and powerful people who do not, in turn, seek to bless and empower others. God is upset by people who have been forgiven much but who cannot somehow manage to forgive others.

The British scholar, N.T. Wright, puts it this way: "*God's wrath is rooted in [his character] as the good, wise and loving creator, who hates—yes, hates, and hates implacably—anything that spoils, defaces, distorts, or damages his beautiful creation, and in particular anything that does that to his image-bearing creatures.* If God does not hate racial prejudice, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not wrathful at child abuse, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not utterly determined to root out from his creation, in an act of proper wrath and judgment, the arrogance that allows people to exploit, bomb, bully and enslave one another, he is neither loving, nor good, nor wise." But God is all these things and that needs to shape you and me.

So, don't be selfish, envious or greedy. Because God is not. He is generous. So, in gratitude for all we've been given, let you and me be generous too.

¹ <https://johnrmiles.com/why-materialism-is-impacting-your-happiness-success/>

² <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jun04/discontents>