

Former American president Lyndon Johnson’s life is fertile ground for those who want to probe biblical truths about the dangers of power. In his book, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, Robert Caro writes, “The hunger that gnawed at LBJ most deeply was a hunger not for riches but for power in its most naked form; to bend others to his will. At every stage of his life, this hunger was evident: what he always sought was not merely power but the acknowledgement by others, face-to-face, subservient acknowledgment that he possessed it. You had to ask. He insisted on it.” In other words, LBJ wanted to *dominate* other people.

As our story opens, Ahab, who should be a model of godly faith, remains Israel’s king. But he also wanted to *dominate* people. God expected Israel’s leaders to be different than the monarchs of the surrounding nations who pursued their own wealth and power. God expected Israel’s kings to obey God’s law because their reign should be a reflection of God’s heavenly reign.

Ahab, descendent of Kings David and Solomon, inherited none of David’s courage, nor does he have any of Solomon’s wisdom. He is propped up only by a marriage to the evil and conniving Jezebel, a worshiper of the Canaanite storm god Baal. A scene from the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* makes me think of Ahab. Near the end, Indiana Jones’ adversary tries to choose from a number of cups that he thinks may be the Holy Grail. He opts for a very ornate, bejeweled chalice, but picks the wrong one because Jesus, a simple carpenter, would have used a simple cup. Because of this, and the fact that he is the bad guy in the movie, he loses his life in gruesome Stephen Spielberg fashion. The ageless medieval knight, who for centuries safeguarded the Holy Grail, looks at Indiana Jones and wryly says, “He chose...poorly.”

It seems Ahab never chooses what’s best for him or for God’s people. His wife Jezebel is an outspoken advocate for her (little g) god, Baal. Together they tried to make the life of the prophet Elijah both miserable and short. Ahab and Jezebel are symbols of the greatness and strength of “all that is wrong with the world.” Yet even sinful people feel the need to relax. So, Ahab and Jezebel would take time off from harassing Elijah to live in a winter palace in Jezreel. Apparently, Ahab fancied himself a kind of amateur gardener. Perhaps he thought he could stretch the royal budget by growing a few potatoes and beans.

The king, however, didn’t think his own garden was big enough or good enough. So, he looked enviously at the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth. As a result, Ahab made his

neighbor an offer he was certain he couldn't refuse. He offered a trade for the vineyard or outright purchase of the vineyard. Naboth, however, has no interest in selling or trading his vineyard. He says, "*The Lord forbid that I give you the inheritance of my ancestors*" (v. 3). He had apparently inherited it and had no interest in getting rid of what had been in his family for years. Yet when Naboth says he inherited his vineyard, he also means that God *leased* it to his ancestors when they entered the Promised Land. He essentially means that he inherited his land from Yahweh himself.

God gave the Israelites the land of promise that they were to always keep in their possession. So, while God allowed the Israelites to rent out or temporarily sell their land, God would not let them permanently sell it. Naboth, then, was *obeying* God by refusing to permanently sell his vineyard to Ahab. Ahab, however, is not much of a biblical or legal scholar. So, what does Israel's mighty king do when his neighbor won't give up his land? He goes home and pouts and refuses to eat anything. The king acts like a sulking spoiled child who slinks to the dinner table and then deliberately turns their chair away from the table so they won't have to eat.

Yet even for Ahab, this seems like a disproportionate response to his disappointment. Why does the king get so upset about such an apparently small thing? Some scholars point out that it's precisely the trivial of the situation that so bothers Ahab. The point being, Israel's mighty king can't even persuade an ordinary local landowner to sell or to trade him the land he badly wants. Ahab fully knows the power of neighboring kings. In fact, in the very next scene his wife will give him a lesson in royal brutality. Most kings don't ask. They simply take. Yet God limited the power of Israel's kings like Ahab. God expected them to be human imitators of God's royal ways.

When Samuel anointed Saul he predicted Israel's kings would exploit their people, just as foreign kings did. While God wanted Israel's kings to serve the Israelites, God knew that all too often they would mostly serve themselves. Yet apparently Ahab feels powerless to do anything about Naboth's refusal except to mope and pout like a toddler. This leaves it up to his wife to straighten things out. She has no qualms about brutally exercising royal power, much the way her own father, ruler of Tyre and Sidon, probably did.

Jezebel shows who is really in charge in Israel's royal court. She ruthlessly acts in Ahab's name to arrange a conspiracy that will put Naboth to death and seize his vineyard. If Naboth won't give Ahab his property, she'll take it from him. She first manufactures a crisis in which she gives Naboth a major role. She then manufactures trumped-up charges against Naboth for breaking the third commandment. If judges find Naboth guilty of the crime of cursing both

God and Ahab, he's liable to execution. When he's found guilty, Jezreel's citizens march him outside of the city, where they stone him to death.

Though the queen apparently didn't pick up a stone, Jezebel was responsible for Naboth's murder. This, however, doesn't seem to trouble Jezebel at all. When the authorities report Naboth's death to her, she triumphantly speaks to her probably still pouting husband. "*Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you,*" (v. 15) the queen tells Ahab. "Now you can plant a few extra cucumber and tomato plants. Your neighbor is dead, just like he deserved for disrespecting you that way."

While it seems as if Ahab and Jezebel have gotten away with an incredible injustice against a fellow Israelite, they actually haven't. God sends Elijah back to Ahab for at least the third time in recent memory. Remember, among other things, God's prophets often served as the conscience of Israel's kings. In this case, however, the relationship between Elijah and Ahab is more like something one biblical scholar calls *guerrilla warfare*. The prophet, upon arrival, confronts the king suddenly, and then quickly leaves again.

Elijah warns Ahab that Jezebel and his punishment for Naboth's murder will be severe. Yet amazingly, incredibly, miraculously, this somehow provokes Ahab to repent, for a time, at least. The king does all the necessary things to show that he's genuinely sorry for his sins. And while the Bible suggests Ahab's repentance is temporary, God responds to it by delaying the destruction of Ahab's kingship anyway. Ahab's dynasty will die, but not until his son Ahaziah ascends Israel's throne.

Yet Ahab proves to be sinfully unwilling to delay God's punishment permanently. So just as God has promised through Elijah, both he and Jezebel die horrible deaths, at the command of Jehu, whom the prophet anointed. In fact, Israel's king has his soldiers throw Ahab's mutilated corpse right where Naboth's vineyard once stood—a symbolic and just outcome.

The Israelites who first heard this story are probably in exile at the time. But this story helps answer the question of why God sent them into exile. Among other sins, it was because Israel's kings and queens betrayed God's laws for royalty. Even Israel and Judah's best kings, people like David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat and Jehu, were deeply flawed.

In a season of brutal political debate in our own country, we are reminded that Ahab and Jezebel's confrontation with Naboth has broader implications. It reminds us that God is the one who *lifts up* rulers into their places of power. While Ahab may have assumed that he ascended to power in his father's royal footsteps, we know that God actually put him in power. Yet, the Lord can also just as quickly *put him down*. You see, sins against society's

most vulnerable members are sins against God. The Old Testament is full of stories of how seriously God takes the abuse of power like Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard. This account invites God's people to pray for the leaders of the world who hold power.

We Christians sometimes have good reason to criticize our national leaders. But I want to ask if we are as eager to *pray* for them. Paul's letter to Timothy says, "*I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority*" (2:1-2). The temptation to rule and use power unjustly is, after all, very strong. While they may not be tempted to abuse them, leaders are tempted to use or ignore the poor, the weak and the powerless. Yet, Christians can pray that God will give those in power a heart of compassion for society's most vulnerable members.

In addition, this Scripture story invites Christians to make themselves more aware of powerful peoples' stands on the poor and other vulnerable people. Before casting a vote, we Christians ought to learn as much as we can about a candidates' attitudes and actions toward defenseless people, and the potential consequences of their policy decisions. What's more, when leaders abuse their power, this text invites Christians to assume Elijah's job of prophetically speaking out. It summons us to courageously bring God's Word to bear on the complex operations of our society's powerful decision makers.

This may not make Christians popular with the allies of those in power. But by the work of God's Spirit, prophetic witness may bless those whose abuse of power we address, since leaders who neglect and abuse society's vulnerable members aren't just hurting those people. They're also disobeying God! And our text for today forcefully reminds us what consequences that may have.

In the hymn *This Is My Father's World* (that we will shortly sing) we profess, "*though the wrong is great and strong, God is the ruler yet.*" In truth, "the wrong" often seems overwhelmingly strong. And "the wrong" often has many allies. Far too many powerful people and institutions seem eager to use their power for "wrong" purposes. Set against the modern backdrop of "what's wrong with the world," the Old Testament account of Naboth's vineyard may even sound tame. Yet it reminds us that no matter how unjust and "wrong" powerful people and institutions may be, God is, as we sing, "the ruler yet."

Amen and Amen.

(Thanks to Doug Brat for sermon input)