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When Evil Prevails I Kings 16:29 – 17:1

Intro: Last time we introduced the latest character in the tragedy that was the monarchs of the northern kingdom of Israel. After the death of Jeroboam, the kings were stacking up like dominos and they were dropping like flies. Each ascended to the throne and then was either quickly removed or eventually removed. Why? It all seemed to hinge on their tendency to carry on the sin of Jeroboam, the sin of idolatrous worship. Each king had both the authority and the responsibility under Yahweh to put a stop to Jeroboam's bull cult but none chose to do so. They allowed the sin to continue. None seemed to learn anything from the king that came before them.

Now we've come to the life and times of old king Ahab, the scoundrel. As we saw last week, it wasn't enough for Ahab to continue in the sin of Jeroboam; no, he had to excel in them and expand them. The events of Ahab's reign will carry us to the end of this book but; even though Ahab will not be the main character of the last few chapters, his reign and the abysmal condition of Israelite society under his leadership will serve as the dark backdrop for all the amazing miracles that will follow. So, before we can grasp the magnitude of what Yahweh's representative is about to face and do, we must understand the dark spiritual environment in which he is forced to minister. The writer lays it out for us pretty clearly at the end of [ch16](#).

29-30 – If this seems different, if it's a little shocking even – that's intentional. What the author is insinuating in his description of Ahab's ascension to the throne is a new departure, a definite turn in the road. We can surmise Ahab's importance from the fact that in a book that is short on details, he received 6 chapters of press. Ahab's regime had its own distinctive flavor; it was unique but not in a good way. It excelled in everything God's people were supposed to avoid and oppose. It almost looks like Antichrist had arrived well ahead of time.

Ahab was an evil man so we can be sure that the days of his reign in Israel were evil too. Of course, on the surface, they didn't seem so evil – not if you

were a politician or an economic advisor. Ahab did, after all, reign over Israel in Samaria 22 years. That means stability! There were no assassins running around killing kings – no 1 week wonders. The political turmoil was put on hold for quite a while. Then there was the marriage alliance: Ahab married Jezebel, the Phoenician princess. It's possible that Daddy Omri engineered this deal but who knows. All that mattered was, Israelite goods had access to world ports via Phoenician shipping. This alliance would have profited both countries. The economy was booming and who can argue with prosperity?

But, the text doesn't carry an economic or political view; it holds a prophetic view and from this perspective, it contends that Ahab was particularly and uniquely evil. Up to this point, Ahab's father had held the title of the most evil king, so far (25). But now, the trophy is wrenched from his cold, dead fingers and handed to Ahab. He has bested his own father in the despicable scoundrel category. He wasn't just worse than Jeroboam; he was worse than the last guy who was worse than Jeroboam. The writer emphatically repeats his negative estimate of Ahab in v33. But what was it that Ahab did to merit this infamous distinction?

31-33 – What made Ahab so much worse than those who came before him? Baal worship! That's what put Ahab's name in 1st place on the monument of apostasy. The text literally bounces on Baal. We 1st hear the term in Jezebel's father's name: Ethbaal. Then, in rapid succession, we are told of Ahab's worship of Baal, his altar to Baal, the house of Baal. This is a clear departure from the bull cult of Jeroboam. Jeroboam tried to serve the Lord through idolatrous images (golden calf) in disobedient ways (other than Jerusalem). Ahab introduces the worship of completely new, pagan gods. In his disobedience, Jeroboam said, "I will worship the Lord in my own way." Ahab wanted to forget about the Lord completely and just worship Baal.

The text clearly assesses Ahab's Baal worship as more deplorable than Jeroboam's bull worship. By comparison, Jeroboam's was a pastel evil while Ahab's was of a darker, deeper, color. Jeroboam's state cult was like drinking polluted water while Ahab's imported paganism was like slurping down raw sewage. Neither is good but one is worse than the other. After all this time, after all Yahweh had done for those 10 tribes, they're right back to **Judges 2:11-13**.

Yes, in his later years, Solomon tragically worshipped pagan gods. Yet Omri

and Ahab were far worse in that they commanded the worship of idols. **Micah 6:16** implies that Omri made statutes in favor of idolatry and required the people by law to commit it. Later, we'll see that under Ahab, those that resisted Baal worship were executed.

Baal worship is lethal all on its own but even more so when it comes with its own passionate in-house evangelist. Jezebel wasn't content to practice her foreign superstition privately within the confines of her personal palace chapel. Nope, she had an agenda and she knew how to push it! She brought her own cabal of Baal enthusiasts who were skilled in fertility theology and fed them all at the king's table so they would be free to practice and push their beliefs. Jezebel is known as a woman infamous for her idolatry, cruelty, sorcery and filthiness. One commentator has stated that, "So well known was the hostility of Jezebel to all good, that his marrying her was esteemed the highest pitch of vice, and an act the most provoking to God" (Clarke). As we move through the next chapters, we'll see Jezebel's wickedness firsthand. She wore the pants in the kingdom (**21:25**) and used her usurped authority to execute Yahweh's prophets (**18:4, 13**) and squash Yahweh loyalists under trumped up charges (**21:7-15**). It may very well have been Jezebel's orders that directed the destruction of proper Yahweh worship centers (**18:30, 19:10, 14**). Not that Ahab had any love for prophetic criticism and wasn't above oppressing Yahweh's prophets himself (**22:8, 26-27**). But Jezebel was the driving force, the rabid propagandist, determined to establish an outpost for the faith of her fathers in Israel. She didn't have an ecumenical bone in her body. It was Baalism or death.

Speaking of her; the name Ethbaal means with Baal. The Roman historian Josephus tells us that Ethbaal was originally a priest of Astarte who only ascended to the throne by assassinating the previous king. This explains where Jezebel got her ruthless streak from. Jezebel's name is thought to have originated from the cultic cry that was used in the worship of Baal meaning, "Where is Baal?" When her name is translated into Hebrew it creates a verbal pun that many in Israel would have gotten a big kick out of in that day. Zebel in Hebrew means dung: a fitting moniker for such a filthy person.

34 – Before our author concludes his general Ahab introduction, he provides us with just a brief glimpse of just how bad things were during Ahab's reign. This is not simply a piece of unrelated trivia about an odd construction

project. This is what characterizes Ahab's administration in Israel. The opening phrase, in his [Ahab's] days means Hiel didn't undertake this project on his own initiative but by Ahab's order. The word "built" means to rebuild or fortify (15:17). After the destruction of Jericho, Joshua pronounced a curse on anyone attempting to rebuild the city (Josh 6:26). This curse didn't prohibit people from living on the site, since there seemed to be inhabitants there for some time after (Josh 18:21, Judges 3:13, II Sam 10:5). The curse was on anyone who dared rebuild Jericho as a fortress.

After the division of the kingdom, Jericho came under the control of the northern kingdom. It was a strategic location and Ahab may have wanted to fortify it both as a defensive measure and as an outpost to keep Moab towing the line. But what regime would ever want to defy Joshua's curse? Ahab's; of course! It seems he wanted to challenge the prophecy of Joshua. He ordered the Department of Defense to grant the contract to Hiel of Bethel. Hiel repaired the foundation of the walls and his first born son Abiram died. When he finished the project, installing the doors of the gates, he had time to make arrangements for Segub's funeral, his youngest. We don't know how his sons died; just that they died in accordance with Joshua's prophecy.

What the text reveals here is that open defiance of Yahweh's word typified Ahab's administration. The author makes this abundantly clear in that he doesn't just say that Hiel's sons died according to Joshua's curse; he explicitly says it was according to the word of the Lord, which He had spoken through Joshua... Was Jericho fortified? Yes, it was a monument to Ahab's defense strategy. But there were other monuments as well. Walk outside Bethel to Hiel's family burial plot and see the headstones for Abiram and Segub, monuments to Yahweh's sure word and certain judgment. If Ahab thought he could rebuild Jericho and not be affected by the curse, he was wrong. But that was the reign of Ahab – people thought nothing of flying in the teeth of Yahweh's word. This was the new age of Ahab, where the word of God doesn't count!

So, what good is there in knowing about all this evil? What possible benefit can there be in the Bible pounding into us how Ahab took the prize for excessive evil and gross godlessness? Well, for one thing, this text should sober us with its realism. How often do God's people consider the times they live in, discover they are facing cultural decadence, vanishing moral

standards, godless governments and spiritual compromise and come to the foolish conclusion that things can't possibly get any worse? Our text is literally screaming, "Oh yes, they can!" Evil is always capable of exponential progress. You may be grappling against a Jeroboam level of godlessness only to find yourself warring with an Ahab level. There may be times when you think antichrist has moved into your neighborhood!

Still, this passage also sustains us with hope. Where's the hope, you ask? Here's God's word describing the excruciating times that God's people must live through which just goes to show us once again that God always knows the peculiar circumstances His people are facing. He knows when the heat is turned up and He has His eyes on the fire and His hand on the thermostat. Is this not the same testimony of [Rev 2:13](#)? How much comfort this letter must have brought the saints in Pergamos to hear that their Lord knew exactly where they were and what they were going through! The Lord says the days are evil. And because He says this, we know that He knows exactly what we are facing because He knows where we dwell. But, not only does the Lord know what we are going through, He already knows what He's going to do about it!

Now, just because there is a chapter break here doesn't mean there is a break in thought. In more than a few instances, the arbitrary chapter divisions obscure rather than assist proper interpretation. So, just because there is a yawning gulf of several blank centimeters here between ch16 and 17, we're going to jump right into vs1 because it belongs with the rest of our text today.

[17:1](#) – the 1st thing striking about this verse is the suddenness of Elijah's appearance on the scene. Everything in Israel seems to be sliding in Baal's ungainly direction when suddenly, we're staring at a prophet whose confession of faith is in his very name: Elijah = My God is Yahweh! We're not used to such abrupt appearances, not even in the Bible. We expect a little bit more of a warm up, a more deliberate approach. Maybe some credentials, Father's name, birthplace – something! We don't even know how he came about being sent by Yahweh to confront the most evil king to ever rule Israel (so far).

Nope, nothing! No introduction. We've never heard of him before and now he's just – there. We know nothing about him – where he went to seminary?

Did he have a family? Was he a sports fan? Did he like being a prophet? All the inane facts we are dying to know. We don't even know where Elijah met up with Ahab. As we have seen so often in the Bible, the details of the meeting are suppressed because the message is supremely important. Elijah is merely informing Ahab that Yahweh is going to inflict covenant curses on Israel for her covenant-breaking behavior ([Deut 11:16-17](#)). And since Elijah announces this beforehand, it bars secularist from making any excuses. The drought couldn't be passed off as a bad break because Elijah already said it was God's gift to Ahab.

The lack of rain would also strike a blow at the alleged power of Baal. Baal was a fertility god, a storm god, who was supposed to be able to send rain to water the crops and make the harvest abundant. Thunder and lightning were signs of Baal's strength and vitality. Elijah's prophesied drought was a direct challenge to Baal the rain-maker. Ahab and Israel will now be able to see exactly what sort of fertility god Baal really is. If he can't produce in the area of his expertise, his specialty, his reputation will suffer a staggering blow. Baal's deity will shrivel as the cracks in the fields grow wider. Elijah says Yahweh has decided to shut Baal's faucet off.

Let's turn back to Elijah's sudden appearance because it's there that we begin to understand the encouragement in Elijah's intervention. Ronald Wallace said, "To see him [Elijah] appear thus [so suddenly] reminds us that we need not despair when we see great movements of evil achieving spectacular success on this earth, for we may be sure that God, in unexpected places, has already secretly prepared His counter-movement. God has always His ways of working underground to undermine the stability of evil. God can raise men for His service from nowhere... Therefore the situation is never hopeless where God is concerned. Whenever evil flourishes, it is always a superficial flourish, for at the height of the triumph of evil God will be there, ready with His man and His movement and His plans to ensure that His own cause will never fail."

Ahab's government was pumping the raw sewage of paganism into Israel and it looks like Baalism will win the day and the worship of the true God would effectively be eliminated and Yahweh's remnant extinguished. "Then Elijah... said to Ahab! Not so fast, Buster; the covenant God of Israel has something to say to you... See, we can be sure that God "has already secretly prepared His counter-movement." Satan's throne has been installed

in Samaria but “at the height of the triumph of evil God will be there, ready with His man.” Doesn’t it put iron in your bones and grit in your craw to see that, whatever threat may arise, our God’s defense is always ready?

What does all this have to do with resurrection Sunday? Well, nothing; and everything! When the spiritual life of Israel was at its worse, when the days of Ahab were nothing but wickedness and enforced paganism, God sent His man to confront and challenge the authority of evil. Later, after Israel had been conquered by the pagan Greeks and then again by the cruel Romans, the worship of the true God began to fade as political power and materialism became the new faith of her religious leaders. It was at this darkest hour that Paul says, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” ([Gal 4:4-5](#)). Again, John assures us that “God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” ([Jn 3:17](#)).

Jesus was sent to this world not to just confront evil but to defeat it and in so doing; He defeated the consequences of evil – death and hell! His sacrifice on the cross was the required price necessary to purchase our forgiveness and win our salvation. His resurrection was the proof, the receipt as it were, that the price had been paid and accepted by the Father. The debt of sin can now be cancelled for everyone who accepts His gift of salvation. In the face of all evil, God sent His Man and ensured that His plan would be achieved and His will would be accomplished.

I would be remiss not to point out that our days are strikingly similar to the days of Ahab. Like the saints in Israel, we are also facing cultural decadence, vanishing moral standards, godless governments and spiritual compromise. But make no mistake – it can still get worse. At the same time, we know God is still in control. What we don’t know, what we need to consider is this: in the growing darkness of our times, will God send us another Elijah or will He send us His Son? Just between you, me and the fence post; I’m looking for the Son but I will gladly accept another Elijah if God extends His grace in that direction, because there are so many more who need to avail themselves of His good grace! 😊