

Game of Thrones: 5. What Goes Around...Comes Around
1 Kings 21:1-11
August 19, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

A week ago, I boarded a plane in Albuquerque for a flight home. My goal in flying is to find the best seat possible for the least amount of money. It's why I have a specific credit card that allows me to check a bag for free and select an aisle seat without an additional fee. Then there is a website where you can check the seating for a specific plane to see which seats have more legroom. That might not matter if I was 5 foot 4 inches, but I'm 6 foot 4 inches – and I want as much comfort as possible without paying extra. So even after I purchase my ticket, I keep checking the seating so that I can claim the best possible seat. And last week, I had it. I boarded the plane, knowing I had the seat I'd worked for. I sat down and fastened my seatbelt when a young man walked up to me and said, "My girlfriend and I are traveling together. I have the seat next to you but she is seated elsewhere. Would you be willing to change seats so that we could sit together?" I'd like you to think that your pastor is always looking out for the interests of others and would always act with compassion, but in that moment I wasn't feeling very charitable. And I thought, "Man, this is my seat. Do you know what it took for me to get this seat?" And I said, "Ask the flight attendant," knowing that some flight attendants do not allow passengers to change seats. He went to the front of the plane and when he came back he said, "it's okay." "I won't have to sit in a middle seat, will I?" "No." Do you know how someone can say the words, "OK" and you know they don't really mean OK? I wanted him to know the huge sacrifice I was making. And as I settled into my new seat, I heard this voice in my head saying, "Steve, this is not about you." Have you been there? To that place where you really, really wanted something – and in the end, you didn't get it? That's where today's message begins.

In this series on the Old Testament kings and queens, we turn to Ahab and Jezebel. The first king of Israel was Saul who did what was evil in the sight of God. Then there was David who did what was right except for one major failure, but later he found redemption. His son, Solomon, was the next king. Solomon began well but finished poorly and by the end of his reign he was enslaving his own people to accomplish what he wanted. Last week, we looked at Solomon's son, Rehoboam who was approached by the leaders, pleading for some relief from the oppressive practices of his father. But Rehoboam replied, "If you think my Dad was harsh, just wait until you see how I will treat." And as a result of his harsh treatment, the people rebelled and the kingdom of Israel was torn in two with Rehoboam ruling over the southern kingdom named Judah and another king ruling over the northern kingdom that retained the name Israel.

Sixty years after this division, Ahab came to power in Israel with his wife Jezebel who was a Phoenician. The two of them – Ahab and Jezebel – represent the greatest villains in scripture. Ahab has a winter palace in the capital city of Samaria and a summer palace in Jezreel that is known as the Ivory Palace because it was covered with ivory carving. He also built similar palaces for all of his sons. How many sons did he have? 70! Obviously, Jezebel was not his only wife. Ahab is wealthy. He can have anything he wants. One day, he's at his summer palace when he looks out the window and sees Naboth's vineyard and says to himself, "I want that plot of land to grow vegetables." So he contacts Naboth and says, "Name your price." And Naboth says, "It's not for sale. This vineyard was my father's, my grandfather's, great grandfather's and my great-great grandfather. It's all I have and I can't sell it." But Ahab says, "I'll give you another one." And Naboth says, "Even the law of God says I cannot sell the land of my ancestors." So Ahab returns to Samaria and pouts. He is so upset he cannot eat.

I wonder if there's a part of Ahab in each of us. When our children were little, I would watch as they played with toys and when one of them saw a toy she wanted but the other had – what did she do? She took it away from her sister or at least tried to take it. "It's mine!" And if she was successful in getting the toy, it wasn't long until she noticed her sister playing with a new toy and she wanted that one too. We call that desire. Or in the Ten Commandments, it is called coveting – wanting what someone else has. How old are we when we outgrow that? The Ahab in us wants what we see, and today we may not take it, instead we charge it. Our neighbor has a 50 inch LED television, so we want a 55 inch screen – or a new car – or a new house – or the corner office. Ahab could have anything he wanted except Naboth's vineyard and that became the one thing he wants, but for Naboth, that's all he had.

Ahab hates to be told "No." What happens when you are told "No, you can't have it"? Ahab gets depressed. He pouts. He stops eating all because he can't have a little plot of land. Do you see how this little things gets blown out of proportion? Do we even do this? Get upset because you now have to sit for two hours in a chair you didn't want?

Jezebel is a Phoenician. She worships the god, baal, who is considered the storm god, the one who controls the rain. Even her name Jeze-bel means she worship baal. This is very different from the God of Israel, and she leads her husband, Ahab away from God to follow baal. Jezebel comes home and sees Ahab is upset. She could have said, "Ahab, get a grip! This is not a big deal. You have thousands of acres. You don't need another vineyard. We will find another spot for a vegetable garden, beside you have more important matters. Let's not worry about this." She could have done that, but instead, she says, "Ahab, you are the king. Nobody says no to the king. Just take his land. Kill him if necessary. You always get what you want. In fact, I'll take care of it for you." Jezebel shows us what not to do in a marriage. In marriage, two people balance each other and when I am not seeing things in their proper perspective, I need Amanda to help me get on track – and I do that for her. Our responsibility in marriage is to help our spouse be the person God intends them to be. But that's not what Jezebel does. She led Ahab away from God. Then she writes a letter to the leaders in Jezreel, telling them to find two scoundrels who will bear false witness against Naboth. They are to put together a banquet where Naboth is invited and the two scoundrels are to be seated so they can accuse Naboth in front of others that he has cursed God and the king. Both are punishable by death. And then they are to take Naboth outside the city and stone him to death. That's Jezebel's answer. What kind of person does that? In the words of Lord Acton (1887): "**Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.**" Jezebel believes everyone exists to serve Jezebel and Ahab – and to be in power means doing whatever you want, when true power is meant to serve God and others.

Jezebel doesn't just have Naboth killed but she also has his children killed so no one will have a claim on the property. We would never do that, but I wonder – Have you ever waited in line and got so impatient that someone at the front of the line was taking too long and you suddenly despised them. Or you were in a restaurant and the person waiting on you is stressed and then you notice someone who sat down after you already has their food – do you feel like you were entitled to be served first and you say something unkind to the server? Or you are in the workplace and you make demands on the people around you – and it doesn't matter to you whether they miss their child's soccer game or that school concert – what matters is what you want. Or in our home, when we treat our family poorly or we get frustrated with that customer service person on the phone. I think there is a little of Jezebel in us.

During my week in New Mexico, I met a woman who was also spending a week at the monastery. She is 77 years old, having retired 5 years ago. She lives alone in Albuquerque. I

asked her what she does in her retirement and she said 3 days a week she goes to a park where there are persons who are homeless. She brings bottles of water, and she sits and listens to people. She said, you'd be surprised how rarely a homeless person meets someone who treats them with respects and takes the time to listen. How do you treat the people around you? If you have some position of authority, how do you treat others? How do the people around you experience you?

The elders and the nobles receive the letter from the king and what do they do? What would you do if your boss or a community leader or a coach or the President of the United States sent you a letter asking you to do something that you felt was morally wrong? None of the elders said no. The king and queen asked them to lie about an innocent man and then kill him and they went along with it. Why? Maybe they were afraid of what would happen if they didn't or maybe they wanted to impress the queen. We tend to do things so people will like us. I wonder – have there been times when we didn't speak up – and it ended up hurting others.

So the elders and the nobles do as the queen commands. Naboth and his children are killed. Ahab gets the vineyard. But that's not how this story ends. Do you know the saying: "What goes around comes around?" Ultimately, this story is about consequences. Eastern religions call this karma. You live your life in a certain way and you carry the sum total of good and bad deeds into the next life. Jesus called this the final judgment. One day we will stand before the judgment seat of God. We would rather talk about God's grace and mercy and not judgment but how is it loving for Naboth to be killed? The apostle Paul writes this to the Galatians: **Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. People reap what they sow. Those who sow to please their sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; those who sow to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.** (Galatians 6:7-8) Eventually what you've done will catch up with you, which is what we see with Ahab and Jezebel. You can't do what they did without a day of judgment.

God sends a prophet to warn Ahab that he will lose the throne and die and his children will not rule over the land. And Ahab repents. God shows mercy and doesn't take his life, but then Ahab doesn't really mean it. He doesn't change his ways after all, and when Ahab goes into battle, he is killed and when his chariot is brought back, the writer of Kings tells us dogs lick up his blood. The writer wants us to know that Ahab experience this final insult. And Jezebel? She lived another 14 years and continued her evil ways. Everything was about Jezebel. But the day comes when Jehu is king, and he mounts a revolt against Ahab's family. Jehu enters the capital city and when Jezebel looks out the window of the palace and sees him coming, she shouts insults at him. Jehu shouts to the servants inside the palace to throw her out the window. And I imagine the servant could not act fast enough – finally they could be rid of her. Three of them pick her up and throw her from the window and she dies. And on what piece of ground did she land? Naboth's vineyard. What goes around comes around. Jehu then enters the palace for a meal and when he comes out he says, "Let's bury her, she was the queen after all." But while they were inside, a pack of dogs has devoured everything but her head and hands. I think the writers want us to see what happens in the end when you treat people as Jezebel did. What goes around comes around – it may not be in this life, but there will be a judgment day.

In Romans we read: **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** (Romans 3:23-24) What Paul is saying is that we all sin, but Jesus' death paid the debt that we owe – he suffered the consequence – and we ask him to save us from what we deserve. Ahab, Jezebel, and the elders – there is something of each of them inside us. We need a savior, and so we live our lives to honor the one who paid a debt we cannot pay ourselves.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 19, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Dear God, we gather here to seek your guidance and direction. You know that we want things we should not have, and sulk when we don't get them. We sometimes abuse our power over others, and seek to be served rather than to serve. Our courage shrivels in the face of evil, and we keep still. And yet, in spite of our worst failures, you love us and pour out your grace and mercy on each of us. Forgive us. Help us to be like Jesus, and to grow the fruit of your Spirit in our lives. Amen.

Monday, August 20

Scripture: 1 Kings 16:29-33

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa's reign over Judah, Omri's son Ahab became king over Israel. Ahab son of Omri ruled over Israel for twenty-two years in Samaria. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the sight of the LORD than all who were before him. As if following in the sinful footsteps of Jeroboam son of Nebat were not bad enough, he married Jezebel the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians. Then he worshiped and bowed to Baal. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal he had built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole; he did more to anger the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

Observation: This week we will focus on King Ahab's reign. A function of Biblical Narrative is to illustrate the nature of humanity and the nature of God through the plot of the story. As you read this week, consider how the relationship between the people and God mirror your own relationship with God. In 1 Kings 16, Ahab son of Omri is now king of Israel. He is even more evil than all the kings before him. Note the evil things that Ahab does in this passage.

Application: What attribute of God is illustrated in this passage? Baal is a title of honor given to various gods, such as rain, agriculture or fertility. What are the Baals of the 21st century? Why would honoring these things anger God?

Prayer: Loving God, I begin this new week with gratitude for your presence in my life. I need your guidance and the confidence that you know beyond all that I know. Give me the courage and the humility to follow your direction. Amen.

Tuesday, August 21

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-16

The LORD told him, "Get up, go to Zarephath in Sidonian territory, and live there. I have already told a widow who lives there to provide for you." So he got up and went to Zarephath. When he went through the city gate, there was a widow gathering wood. He called out to her, "Please give me a cup of water, so I can take a drink." As she went to get it, he called out to her, "Please bring me a piece of bread." She said, "As certainly as the LORD your God lives, I have no food, except for a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. Right now I am gathering a couple of sticks for a fire. Then I'm going home to make one final meal for my son and myself. After we have eaten that, we will die of starvation." Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go and do as you planned. But first make a small cake for me and bring it to me; then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD God of Israel says, 'The jar of flour will not be empty and the jug of oil will not run out until the day the LORD makes it rain on the surface of the ground.'" She went and did as Elijah told her; there was always enough food for Elijah and

for her and her family. The jar of flour was never empty and the jug of oil never ran out, just as the LORD had promised through Elijah.

Observation: God, through the prophet Elijah, predicts a drought. Then God tells Elijah to run away quickly, promising to provide Elijah with food and water. How does Elijah get his food (see verse 6)? Elijah goes to Zarephath and meets a widow and her son who are starving due to the drought. The woman feeds herself and Elijah with her last bit of flour, yet Elijah promises that God will not allow the flour and oil to run out. Later, her son will become ill and die. Elijah will pray to God who will bring the boy back to life.

Application: As you read the miraculous details of this story, what does it tell you about the nature of God? How has God shown up in your life during a time of need? This story foreshadows many of Jesus' miracles. Read Luke 4:25-26; 7:11-17 for a couple of examples.

Prayer: Blessed Lord, help me to keep my eyes on you, Lord, as I struggle each day to turn my will and my life over to your direction. Give me your strength so I might stand firm with courage and conviction ever believing that you will never let go of me. Amen.

Wednesday, August 22

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:16-39

When Obadiah went and informed Ahab, the king went to meet Elijah. When Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is it really you, the one who brings disaster on Israel?" Elijah replied, "I have not brought disaster on Israel. But you and your father's dynasty have, by abandoning the LORD's commandments and following the Baals. Now send out messengers and assemble all Israel before me at Mount Carmel, as well as the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah whom Jezebel supports. Ahab sent messengers to all the Israelites and had the prophets assemble at Mount Carmel. Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long are you going to be paralyzed by indecision? If the LORD is the true God, then follow him, but if Baal is, follow him!" But the people did not say a word. Elijah said to them: "I am the only prophet of the LORD who is left, but there are 450 prophets of Baal. Let them bring us two bulls. Let them choose one of the bulls for themselves, cut it up into pieces, and place it on the wood. But they must not set it on fire. I will do the same to the other bull and place it on the wood. But I will not set it on fire. Then you will invoke the name of your god, and I will invoke the name of the LORD. The god who responds with fire will demonstrate that he is the true God." All the people responded, "This will be a fair test." Elijah told the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls for yourselves and go first, for you are the majority. Invoke the name of your god, but do not light a fire." So they took a bull, as he had suggested, and prepared it. They invoked the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "Baal, answer us." But there was no sound and no answer. They jumped around on the altar they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, "Yell louder! After all, he is a god; he may be deep in thought, or perhaps he stepped out for a moment or has taken a trip. Perhaps he is sleeping and needs to be awakened." So they yelled louder and, in accordance with their prescribed ritual, mutilated themselves with swords and spears until their bodies were covered with blood. Throughout the afternoon they were in an ecstatic frenzy, but there was no sound, no answer, and no response. Elijah then told all the people, "Approach me." So all the people approached him. He repaired the altar of the LORD that had been torn down. Then Elijah took twelve stones, corresponding to the number of tribes that descended from Jacob, to whom the LORD had said, "Israel will be your new name." With the stones he constructed an altar for the LORD. Around the altar he made a trench large enough to contain two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut up the bull, and placed it on the wood. Then he said, "Fill four water jars and pour the water on the offering and the wood." When they had done so, he said,

“Do it again.” So they did it again. Then he said, “Do it a third time.” So they did it a third time. The water flowed down all sides of the altar and filled the trench. When it was time for the evening offering, Elijah the prophet approached the altar and prayed: “O LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are the true God and that you are winning back their allegiance.” Then fire from the LORD fell from the sky. It consumed the offering, the wood, the stones, and the dirt, and licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they threw themselves down with their faces to the ground and said, “The LORD is the true God! The LORD is the true God!”

Observation: Three years later, still in drought, Elijah gets a message from God that it will soon rain. Elijah goes back to King Ahab and challenges him and all of the people to choose between God and Baal. In a contest between whose God is more powerful, the God of Israel answers Elijah’s prayer and wins. All the people fall down and worship God. Soon it begins to pour rain, and Elijah grows stronger.

Application: In what ways do you choose between God and other temptations each day? Notice that nobody asks God for rain, yet God initiates the end of the drought. How do you understand God’s sovereignty and grace in light of the actions of the people in this story? How has God been at work in your life?

Prayer: God, sometimes it is difficult to live a Christian life. I am tempted in countless ways to put aside my values and do things in an easier, less Christ-like way to get what I want. Sometimes I fail to ask you for guidance because I might not like the answer I receive from you. Help me to remember you are in my life to guide and support me in doing the right thing instead of the easy thing. Bless me with the serenity and peace that come with knowing I am living a life that is pleasing to you. Amen.

Thursday, August 23

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-12

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, including a detailed account of how he killed all the prophets with the sword. Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah with this warning, “May the gods judge me severely if by this time tomorrow I do not take your life as you did theirs!” Elijah was afraid, so he got up and fled for his life to Beer Sheba in Judah. He left his servant there, while he went a day’s journey into the desert. He went and sat down under a shrub and asked the LORD to take his life: “I’ve had enough! Now, O LORD, take my life. After all, I’m no better than my ancestors.” He stretched out and fell asleep under the shrub. All of a sudden an angelic messenger touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked and right there by his head was a cake baking on hot coals and a jug of water. He ate and drank and then slept some more. The LORD’s angelic messenger came back again, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, for otherwise you won’t be able to make the journey.” So he got up and ate and drank. That meal gave him the strength to travel forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. He went into a cave there and spent the night. All of a sudden the LORD spoke to him, “Why are you here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been absolutely loyal to the LORD, the sovereign God, even though the Israelites have abandoned the agreement they made with you, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left and now they want to take my life.” The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD. Look, the LORD is ready to pass by.”

A very powerful wind went before the LORD, digging into the mountain and causing landslides, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the windstorm there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire, there was a soft whisper.

Observation: Jezebel, Ahab's foreign wife, threatens Elijah with death as revenge for the death of all her Baal prophets. Elijah runs away again and in his exhaustion, asks God to take his life. An angel wakes Elijah up and feeds him; then Elijah walks forty days and nights until he gets to the mountain top so he may meet God there. There are hurricane-like winds, then an earthquake, then fire, but still no God. Then there is sheer silence and stillness, and God instructs Elijah in a whisper what to do next.

Application: We long for that "mountaintop moment" in which God's voice is loud and clear, letting us know his will for us. Yet, we often receive God's instruction within the quietness of our souls or through unspectacular events and ordinary people. Could God be waiting for you in the silence? When and where do you make room for enough silence to meet with God? Pay attention this week to God in the quiet and the ordinary.

Prayer: Wondrous God, there is so much clutter in my life that even if you are speaking to me, I am unable to hear what you have for me. Help me to slow down, to be still, and to wait long enough in the silence that I may hear your whisper of assurance and love. Amen.

Friday, August 24

Scripture: 1 Kings 21:1-11

After this the following episode took place. Naboth the Jezreelite owned a vineyard in Jezreel adjacent to the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard so I can make a vegetable garden out of it, for it is adjacent to my palace. I will give you an even better vineyard in its place, or if you prefer, I will pay you silver for it." But Naboth replied to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should sell you my ancestral inheritance." So Ahab went into his palace, bitter and angry that Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not sell to you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, pouted, and would not eat. Then his wife Jezebel came in and said to him, "Why do you have a bitter attitude and refuse to eat?" He answered her, "While I was talking to Naboth the Jezreelite, I said to him, 'Sell me your vineyard for silver, or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not sell you my vineyard.'" His wife Jezebel said to him, "You are the king of Israel! Get up, eat some food, and have a good time. I will get the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite for you." She wrote out orders, signed Ahab's name to them, and sealed them with his seal. She then sent the orders to the leaders and to the nobles who lived in Naboth's city. This is what she wrote: "Observe a time of fasting and seat Naboth in front of the people. Also seat two villains opposite him and have them testify, 'You cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death." The men of the city, the leaders and the nobles who lived there, followed the written orders Jezebel had sent them.

Observation: King Ahab, already depressed after a battle, asks if he could buy Naboth's vineyard, which bordered Ahab's palace. When Naboth declines, Ahab goes to Jezebel and sulks. Jezebel concocts a plot that leads to Naboth's death by stoning, and Ahab takes the land. God, through Elijah, says that Jezebel will pay for these evil actions by her own gory death; however Ahab will be spared because he is penitent. Sadly, Ahab is not truly penitent and also experiences judgment.

Application: Most of us, at some time, desire what someone else has. How do you respond when you cannot have what you really want? How does the violence in this story mirror our world today? At the end of this story, God responds with mercy when Ahab shows remorse. What does that tell us about the nature of God? What are some present examples in which God has brought good out of violence and destruction?

Prayer: Merciful God, you know me well. You know the truth of my thoughts, my words, and my actions even when I am unwilling to acknowledge the truth to myself. As I seek you, as I seek your purpose for my life, help me to do all the things that are right and good in your sight. Amen.

Saturday, August 25

Scripture: 2 Peter 1:3-9

I can pray this because his divine power has bestowed on us everything necessary for life and godliness through the rich knowledge of the one who called us by his own glory and excellence. Through these things he has bestowed on us his precious and most magnificent promises, so that by means of what was promised you may become partakers of the divine nature, after escaping the worldly corruption that is produced by evil desire. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith excellence, to excellence, knowledge; to knowledge, self-control; to self-control, perseverance; to perseverance, godliness; to godliness, brotherly affection; to brotherly affection, unselfish love. For if these things are really yours and are continually increasing, they will keep you from becoming ineffective and unproductive in your pursuit of knowing our Lord Jesus Christ more intimately. But concerning the one who lacks such things—he is blind. That is to say, he is nearsighted, since he has forgotten about the cleansing of his past sins.

Observation: The big picture is what God wants for his people. Often people think religion is about what God wants from us. Peter makes clear that what God wants for us is that we should come to share his own nature/character. Becoming more fully human, he says, by building one aspect of Christian character on top of another: faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, affection for others, and finally love.

Application: Christian character does not happen by accident. You have to want to do them; you have to choose to do them. But when you do, and pray for God's grace, promises and power to help you, you will be coming to know Jesus. Which of the aspects of character are more challenging to you? Which ones are truly part of who you are?

Prayer: Dear God, when I struggle against my own vanity and self-will, remind me you are calling me to "a holy life." Let me hear your voice of encouragement as I endeavor to be more and more like you. Amen.