

them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city, dwelling with Naboth.

And she wrote in the letters, saying, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people:

And set two men, sons of Belial, before him, to bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the king. And then carry him out, and stone him, that he may die.

And it came to pass, when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab rose up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,

Arise, go down to meet Ahab the king of Israel, which is in Samaria: behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, whither he is gone down to possess it.

And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the Lord, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the Lord, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine.

And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.

How human are the Bible's greatest characters!

Consider Elijah.

With incomparable courage, he had dared upbraid Israel's king for his idolatry. Facing alone the 450 prophets of Baal, he had proven their god false in the greatest prayer test recorded in history. As punishment for leading the 10 tribes of Israel from the worship of the Almighty God, he had put those priests of Baal to the sword.

But when word came to him from Ahab's idolatrous queen Jezebel that she would have his life on the morrow, he forgot his faith in the Almighty and fled in dismay—ran into the wilderness and, in despair, sat down to rest under a juniper tree. There he came to himself long enough to feel the sting of remorse. He was ashamed of his cowardice and, recognizing his weakness, wanted to die.

#### GOD DOES NOT DESERT US

It was an act dramatically inconsistent with the rest of Elijah's life—yet how human! In considering it, it must be remembered that he was not only frightened but weary. He had undergone a severe trial. His contest of faith with the followers of Baal had been long drawn out, and then he had run before Ahab for 18 miles to the gates of Jezreel. The flesh is sometimes weak when the heart is willing. And he was temporarily without anything to do.

But God did not desert Elijah, just as He does not desert us when we flee to the wilderness in our weak moments; He had other tasks not yet disclosed.

An angel awakened the prophet and put food before him. After he was refreshed he slept again, and again food was provided for him. In his restored strength he traveled 40 days and 40 nights unto Horeb, the mount of God. There he lodged in a cave, still fearful of the wrath of Jezebel. And there the word of the Lord came unto him in the inquiry, "What doest thou here, Elijah?"

Poor Elijah! How natural was his reply. He made the best excuse he could, and to the average man it seems a reasonable one.

He explained that he had been jealous for the Lord God of Hosts and for the children of Israel, and this was no more than the truth. He felt that he was alone and that his life was in danger. He had suddenly plunged from exaltation to despair. No wonder he forgot to take a census of the faithful. There were 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal, plain people who had not been so ecstatic in victory or so cast down in defeat. They are the ones who steady the boat in the storm.

#### THE STILL SMALL VOICE

The Lord summoned Elijah again, sent him upon the mount and taught him a great lesson that has been of unspeakable value to all the generations since that day.

Elijah represented rugged strength; the strong arm of the Lord was made manifest through him. But now he was taught that God was not always in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but that He was also in the still small voice. Then the Lord gave Elijah other work to do, and with new tasks his strength returned.

I am not sure that we will find many lessons of more practical importance than this: Keep busy. As "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do," so human weakness besets us most between our tasks. As sins abound in the nights that separate the days of toil, so our periods of discouragement and doubt lurk in the dark intervals between our seasons of activity.

When Elijah fled from the presence of Ahab's queen he had finished the work that God had put upon him and no call had come to new acts of consecration, but just as soon as he heard

the familiar voice of the Heavenly Father sending him on a new mission he went boldly about the Father's business.

#### A COVETOUS KING

And so we come to another great Bible lesson—Naboth's vineyard. A wonderful picture. A covetous king and the Man of God meet again—this time in a murdered man's vineyard.

Ahab coveted the vineyard of Naboth—not an unusual thing. Many a man has conceived the idea of rounding out his garden by the purchase of adjoining land. And Ahab proceeded in quite a natural and unobjectionable way.

He spoke to Naboth about it, explaining his reason for desiring it. It was suitable for a garden of herbs and near to the king's house. He offered in exchange a better vineyard or, if Naboth preferred, he would pay him the worth of it in money. So far, so good.

The king may not have thought of any objections that Naboth could have. He may have felt that he was doing all that could be expected, and even more, but to Naboth the place had a sentimental value. He prized it as an inheritance from his fathers. The courtiers of the king could hardly understand how any one could refuse so fair a request as that made by Ahab, but—the land belonged to Naboth and he was entirely within his rights when he preferred to keep it rather than to sell it or take another place in exchange.

Thus far the story is not unlike many that have been written or might be written.

#### JEZEHEL'S CONSPIRACY

But Ahab was provoked and, like a spoiled child, threw himself down upon his bed and sulked, refusing to eat.

It was not long before his conduct was reported to Jezebel and she hastened to inquire why he was sad. He frankly explained to her the grievous disappointment that he had suffered and then his wicked wife gave him a lesson in the exercise of authority. She bade him eat and be merry, assuring him that she would give him Naboth's vineyard. Then she proceeded to frame a conspiracy against Naboth.

Addressing the elders and nobles who lived in his city, she ordered them to proclaim a fast and set Naboth in the chief place. Then, by her direction, two base men, sons of Belial, were to be seated before Naboth with instructions to bring false witness against him.

The conspiracy was carried out to the letter: The fast was arranged, Naboth was put in the place of honor, the false witnesses appeared, made their lying accusations, and Naboth was carried out of the city and stoned to death.

"HAST THOU FOUND ME, O MINE ENEMY?"

Then these willing accomplices in the murder of Naboth reported their success to Jezebel and she immediately conveyed the glad news to the king. He rose up and hurried down to the vineyard to take possession of it. When he arrived he met Elijah for the third time, the same Tishbite who warned him of the coming drought and then commanded him to summon the prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel for the prayer test. The prophet appeared before him at the command of the Almighty. Elijah was himself again—he was God's spokesman.

The scene lends itself to the artist, and it is not strange that it has been put upon the canvas. The staging is perfect.

There is the coveted garden; the former owner being dead, it became the property of the king according to a law, that Jezebel doubtless understood, giving the land to the king when the owner was put to death for blasphemy. In the midst of the garden stands the king, wicked enough to enjoy the fruits of a victory bought by a murder that he was too cowardly to commit. Before him stands Elijah, stern voice of an offended God.

Ahab does not wait for Elijah to speak: his conscience accuses him before the prophet has time to hurl Jehovah's judgment at him. "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" exclaims the king! It is not necessary that one should be a king in order to stand, conscience stricken, before the evidence of his guilt. It is conscience that, as Shakespeare says, makes cowards of us all.

#### THE BEGINNING OF EVIL

The outstanding lesson of our talk is the sin of covetousness. Possibly nowhere else is the importance of the Tenth Commandment so emphasized. It comes last, but it is by no means least in importance. It is so intimately connected with all the others relating to man's dealing with his fellow man that its observance is of the very first importance.

In this case, covetousness led to false witness, to murder, and to theft. Covetousness would be better understood if the visible masks under which it operates did not divert atten-

tion from it. When one steals, attention is centered upon the act, although covetousness is concealed behind it. When one commits murder it is often due to covetousness, although the covetousness is hidden. False witness, too, is often but the outward manifestation of an inward covetousness.

It is the beginning of evil, and the beginning is the thing that needs most to be watched. Sin is not difficult to deal with if taken at its inception; it becomes a serious problem when it ripens into action.

Christ gave the only sure cure. He taught that the heart should be full of love to God—thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." No vacuum must be left in the heart for evil thoughts to fill. When the heart is full it overflows, and the overflowing heart is the symbol of a Christian life.

#### THE REAL CURE FOR COVETOUSNESS

But there is a second commandment that follows naturally after that which Christ declared to be the first and great commandment, namely, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." That is the real cure for covetousness; or, rather, it prevents the birth of covetousness.

All kinds of wrongdoing follow in the wake of covetousness. When one starts out to do evil he never knows what crime he must commit to carry out his purpose; one evil step leads to another until he finds that "the wages of sin is death." On the other hand, no one knows what unexpected pleasures he may invite when he travels the path of righteousness.

Obedience to the First Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," would have saved Ahab the experiences that he had at Mount Carmel. Obedience to the last would have saved him from the humiliation visited upon him in the vineyard.

"Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

#### THE MANTLE OF ELIJAH

By WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

#### BIBLE TEXT—LESSON FOR JAN. 23

(II Kings II:5-15)

And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace.

Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on.

And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off; and they two went by Jordan.

And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground.

And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elisha said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.

And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing; nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.

And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

And Elisha saw it and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more; and he took hold of his own clothes and rent them in two pieces.

He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of the Jordan;

And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over.

And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him.

Our talk today deals with the taking up of the prophet Elijah into heaven in a chariot of fire—a Biblical account that has exerted a mighty influence throughout the Christian world.

Here, too, we have presented one of the most beautiful lessons in history—a friendship between two great men.

They were prophets of God and were much alike in manner and in method. Elijah was devoted to the man who was to succeed him, and Elisha was not ashamed to take up the work that Elijah laid down.

The account given in the second chapter of II Kings is marked with great simplicity:

"And it came to pass, when the Lord would