

Beloved,

Confusion! What else can we say about the Northern Kingdom's political situation but confusion! Kings are being killed while drunk. Commanders were replacing kings. Kings ruled seven days and were killed. Confusion and chaos! We read these events, and we cannot help but notice how bad things had gotten. The narrative there is marked by negative words. The sin of Jeroboam was being propagated. That sin was the setting up of the golden calves in Dan and Bethel. Jeroboam was scared that his people might head off to Jerusalem to worship, which is precisely what they should have done. But Jeroboam led the people to violate the second commandment, and soon, his dynasty was wiped out.

It did not have to be this way. For God had said to Jeroboam,

If you do whatever I command you and walk in obedience to me and do what is right in my eyes by obeying my decrees and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you. (1 Kings 11:38).

But Jeroboam immediately set up false worship, and King after King in Israel did the same so that dynasties are short-lived. Israel's history moves from the times the glory of David and Solomon to the times of humiliation, of forced slavery and dispersion all over the known world. Where the Lord was jealous for Judah, He is moved to final wrath against Israel.

As bad as all that, the ascent to the throne by Ahab marks a turning point in the history of Israel. The kings were bad. Yes, even his Father walked in the sins of Jeroboam. But Ahab went further. He took a wicked gentile wife; he established Baal and Asherah worship and led the nation of Israel into complete apostasy so that in the end, if you compared Israel, Moab, Tyre or Phoenicia, you would discover no noticeable difference. The Word of the Lord was as silent in Samaria as it was in these other kingdoms.

Or was it? We read there the curious add-on about the rebuilding of Jericho. And this serves as the introduction to the prophet Elijah's work representing God and His Word to apostate Ahab, Jezebel and Israel. The antithesis, that war between the woman's seed and the serpent we read of Genesis 3, takes on a new form. But God does not let Himself be mocked. Nor does He leave His people alone. I bring to you the Word of the LORD under the theme:

The LORD Confronts Ahab With His Word Executing Hiel's Sons

1. A Refuge 2. The Rebellion 3. The Retribution

A Refuge: In the days of Ahab, a man named Hiel set to rebuild Jericho's destroyed city. The rubble of Jericho's walls had remained until this time as a reminder of the power of God. In Joshua's days, Israel, after crossing the Jordan, had come to Jericho's fortress. It was a city of some significance, for it was right on the western trade route. Eastern commercial traffic came through Jericho. That also meant that armies coming from the west across the Jordan usually had to pass through Jericho to get to the other cities in Canaan. When we consider that Omri had not only settled the ten tribes under his leadership but had as well subdued the Moabites, it makes sense that Hiel might set about to repair Jericho's walls so that the Northern Kingdom might be more secure— at least from a human and military point of view.

We read there that Heil laid the foundations and set the gates. We read elsewhere in the book of Kings that Jericho had become inhabited again. But Hiel now will make the city a fortress. He will build the walls and set the gates so that any army that passed by Jericho would be an easy target for the Israelite army protected behind the newly resurrected walls of Jericho. Hiel sets out to make a refuge.

And we then read and think well, so what? What is so important here that we must read all of these things? Take, for instance, the few words spent on Omri. In Gentile history, Omri is known as a great warrior and king. For 1500 years after his death, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was known to the Gentiles as "the house of Omri." Archaeology has uncovered artifacts that speak of Omri and his prowess. Yet, in the eyes of God, his is a negative and utterly vain rule. Now we read of Ahab, and we read that he was wicked worse than all before him. And oh, by the way, Hiel set out to build Jericho at his sons' cost. So what is it that God wants us to know?

Let us not overlook that all this happened in the days of Ahab. We are told how wicked Ahab was. This event serves to show us how bad things had gotten. Hiel did not build Jericho's walls on his own but likely did so by commanding Ahab or at least Ahab's permission. In the end, Ahab desired that the wall be built. And as we have seen, it made good military sense to have Jericho rebuilt. And yet, Israel's king was to rule with the Word of God by his side as we read in Deuteronomy 17:18. He was to rule as the King under the LORD. The truth be known, it was Yahweh who was to be King in Israel. And the Lord had said by the

mouth of Joshua; ***Cursed be the man before the LORD who rises up and builds up this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn and with his youngest shall set up its gates*** (Joshua 6:26). The city was laid to the ban, condemned by God. Its rubble was to be a lasting testimony to His mighty work in the destruction of the city.

Do you children remember the story of the fall of Jericho? Israel came to Jericho, and on the first six days of her attack on the fortified city, she marched around Jericho's walls. On the seventh day, Israel's soldiers marched seven times, blowing ram's horns and trumpets. And then the walls fell down. The LORD God of Israel routes Jericho. And Jericho is to remain a heap of rubble and ashes as a testimony to Israel that God would give them the land. But the fortress city was to remain destroyed that Israel might know **that though her eastern flank was exposed, it was not the fortresses built by man but He as the powerful Almighty God that was to serve as her refuge.** The city of Jericho, in her dilapidation, stood as a testimony to and of God in Israel. Jericho's fallen walls were like a gateway sign into the city that said: THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD GOD OF ISRAEL!

But now Hiel, with Ahab's approval, builds what God says not to build. Under Omri, Israel still worshipped the LORD, however, in a false manner. But Ahab worships Baal. See, it was bad when he married Jezebel. It was worse when he set up altars for Baal and Asherah and worse yet to set up a temple for Baal. But the worst was when he allowed or even worse, command Hiel to rebuild Jericho's walls. Now, whether consciously or otherwise, he sets out to wipe out the LORD's testimony from Israel. He puts his trust in man and human-made fortresses. Together he and Hiel work in utter disobedience to God. They reject Him as their refuge. They stand in open rebellion before Him. They want to build a gateway with a sign that says: THE GREATNESS OF HUMANITY. Like Nimrod and his tower of Babel before or the coming empire of Nebuchadnezzar still to come, Ahab had become the king of Israel, a kingdom of the AntiChrist.

What we need to see this morning is that Jericho stands not only as a testimony of God's judgement upon the wicked citizens of Jericho and the Kingdom of darkness but of His grace to Israel, the Kingdom of God! Here was a testimony of His grace to His chosen people in defended and protected them. The LORD in faithfulness will grant His blessing and the land to the sheep of His pasture. And He calls them to live by faith. "Trust me," He says, "and do not worry about rebuilding Jericho—I am, your keep by day and by night. I will never slumber nor sleep!"

Until the days of Ahab, even Saul David and Solomon, even Jeroboam did not rebuild Jericho's walls: when they looked at the sing of the fallen walls, they remembered and believed. They could say that God is our refuge and strength! For the righteous live by faith! And we too must not look to all sorts of human-made inventions by which to bring security to our lives. It is not through our works or grand ideas that we serve God. But it is instead by simple and quiet obedience that stems from trust and faith in Him, for we know that Christ builds a kingdom with open gates. He has torn down the walls of separation, and our only hope of survival is in Him. He blesses the church and builds the church, but He and not the church save us. Ahab placed his trust in the church, Israel, and in the church's leadership, himself and lost the sense of God's power. And losing God, he stands in opposition to Almighty God. Do you see? That is not just disobedience, but the King of Israel stands in open rebellion to the King of Kings!

Rebellion: That Hiel's rebuilding of Jerusalem here is mentioned is that Judah and we as the people of God might understand the power of His Word and driven to repent and believe. For to Ahab and Hiel and all those around, it might seem that the house of Omri is in power now. Ahab then is much more than a disobedient king here, but he has declared civil war upon God. He has hi-jacked and kidnapped the people who are known as the people of God. By his faithless leadership, Israel now becomes no different than any other surrounding nation. Ahab has brought in their gods, worship and evil. The Jews behave like the Gentiles. And to boot, God said, "Do not rebuild the walls." Ahab says, "It's okay, go ahead and build." He doesn't care anymore what God has said.

Now, this may in your minds bring up the question of Ahab's guilt here. If he did not know the Word of God from Joshua 6:26, how can he be held responsible? And if he did not know the Word of God, he has at best made an error in judgement, but we cannot call him a rebel, can we? Ignorance here, however, does not absolve Ahab. We must call out the rebel for who he is. For if he does not know the Word, who is to blame for that? God gave his Word and gave the command that the king ruled with the Word. By the way, the Book of Joshua was likely completed by the days of Samuel. The Torah and the Book of Joshua were there to read. That Omri probably did not teach Ahab does not make God responsible here. Ahab took the office of king and, by so doing, submitted himself to God as every office-bearer in the church does. But instead, he uses his office to lead the people of God astray.

Why does Ahab allow the rebuilding of Jericho? Congregation, he has rejected God. Ahab again denies the power of God and marries a gentile likely for political reasons so that Ethbaal, the King of Phoenicia, and Tyre, would be at peace with the house

of Omri. Ahab not only allows Baal worship, but the office bearer of God's people prostrates himself before Baal. He sets up the pillars, the symbols of Astarte or Asherah, the female consort of Baal. Israel's King is openly rebellious. He behaves like any other pagan king and is about human strength and the greatness of humanity. He is the king of the Kingdom of the AntiChrist, of Babel and Baylon. He has become his own God. "Have no other God before Me" has been thrown out the window. Jericho is about the power of the Word of God. He does not care about God and will do all he can to squelch the Word of God, which will become more apparent when Elijah comes.

We see not merely a disobedient Israel but an apostate and rebellious Israel. Do you understand why we say that the reign of Ahab and Jezebel marks a turning point in Israel's history? Now there is an open and pure rejection of God. God will not be mocked. Jericho does not stand as a testimony of grace for him and now will become a sign of judgment for the family of Hiel. Yet, the king does not care for his people either, and so he does not warn or direct Hiel to stop the reconstruction of Jericho's wall either.

What a terrible thing it is when the church rejects God's Word. And it does not usually start as a shocking event. But it comes over time through centuries of decay. In this case, it is six centuries of decay from Joshua to Ahab. Slowly that disobedient and weak church becomes an apostate church. In such a church, the word of God is silenced. In truth, it must be silenced that the sovereignty of man might be declared.

But the power here to us is that we believe because we read that God is not to be ignored. You cannot ignore Him. Even if you try, it will be impossible. And so the covenant God who has been patient will now come in a curse that too comes as a testimony of the grace and power of God. As we sing with Psalm 2, ***wherefore do the nations rage and the people plot a vain thing?***

Retribution: Hiel put up the foundations at the cost of his firstborn son, Abiram. There is a detailed account here, isn't there. The sons' names are mentioned. He set the gates, which is the finishing of the work with the death of his son Segub. Now some believe that all of his sons were lost in the meantime. And there may be truth in that. But what we know for sure is that these two sons died.

Did Hiel sacrifice his boys as some teach? Such was not uncommon in the pagan cultures that to ensure the blessings of the gods on eight sacrifice his son for the foundation. In actuality, archaeology has turned up human skeletons underneath the foundation of the walls of the city. But that is not what is going on here. But that is not a sacrifice by which God will be pleased.

On the contrary, that is the judgement of God upon the wicked deeds of Hiel. What's worse is that the evil king has allowed this to happen, perhaps even commanded the city's building with complete disregard for the Word of the Lord. A King was supposed to be a shepherd. When Ahab is your shepherd, I am glad that the LORD and the Lord Jesus is mine!

But the Word of the Lord never returns empty. As Paul wrote, it is ***"an aroma of death unto death for some and an aroma of life unto life and for others."*** (II Corinthians 2:16). The power of the Word of the Lord is revealed. Yes, the sons of Hiel are dead but, there is still time. Ahab and Hiel are confronted with the curse of God. Yet they continued to build even after the firstborn lay dead. And when it is all completed, the youngest son lay dead. Ahab and Hiel are like Achan, who took of Jericho when God said no. And because of their sin, innocent people lost their lives, for the wrath of God comes down upon them all. And so, the family of Hiel is met with death and sorrow. So bad were the days when Ahab and Jezebel ruled.

Ahab and Hiel built the city on spilt blood. It was the blood of curse. In a time like the two boys Jericho, like the tower of Babel and the city of Babylon, will fall as we read in the Book of Revelation. The Father, however, built the new Jerusalem on the foundation of the blood of Jesus. When the two boys of Hiel died under a curse, no curse was lifted but brought a further curse. When Jesus died on the cross, the curse against us covenant-breakers was lifted once and for all. We are the citizen of the great city, on the hill! We have life in our king who died for us and lives forever. Elijah! My God is the Lord. Jesus! The Lord saves! Blessed be the name of the Lord when Jesus is your king. Repent and believe in the power of the Word of the Lord!

Conclusion We recognize the power and truth of the Word today and must worship and hold onto God. We must see His terrible vengeance and believe in His wonderful goodness. We must finally understand that we stand before God in His goodness to us in his grace. Through His son, Jesus Christ, He continues to build His church. He is our refuge and our strength, and we will not fear though the earth is moved. We must stand up and oppose all false worship and any leader, outside of the church or inside the church, who would lead us astray. God is not mocked and what He has decreed comes to pass. To this rebellious brood, He would send Elijah that once more Israel would shout: Elijah! My God is Yahweh! Amen.