

The Perils of a Passive Man



Article by Marshall Segal Modal
Staff writer, desiringGod.org

I had never thought of myself as passive. Throughout high school and college, and all throughout my twenties, I had been the driven dreamer and achiever. I thought of myself as the organized one, the proactive one, the disciplined one, the visionary. I was the one who initiated next steps, important meetings, needed changes, group plans, hard conversations.

And then I married, and marriage showed me sides of myself I had never had to see.

A man does not change much by making vows and putting on a ring, but an awful lot changes for a man that day. The apostle Paul tried to prepare us: “The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided” (1 [Corinthians 7:32–34](#)). Divided me was not as put-together and proactive as single me had been. And as the pressures rose and the cracks began to show, I suddenly saw just how tempted to self-pity and passivity I could be.

What God Expects of Husbands

Over the first year or two of marriage, the passivity of Christian husbands went from a foreign and somewhat perplexing problem to a profoundly familiar and personal and humbling one. Vision and initiative were easier, in some ways, when they were fenced into certain parts of my life. Now, as two became one, all of life required a leading love.

Will I give myself up for her good again today ([Ephesians 5:25](#))? Will I keep pursuing her, studying her, wooing her? Will I develop and carry out a vision for our family? Will I consistently open the Bible and pray with them? Will I lead our family in loving and serving the church? Will I lean into conflict with patience and love, or will I withdraw? Will I anticipate our family's needs and preserve space to rest? Will I discipline our children, even when I'm tired? Will I bring up difficult conversations and make tough decisions? Or, like Adam, when God comes calling, will I hide and point the finger somewhere else ([Genesis 3:12](#))?

God expects much from husbands. As my senses have been heightened to my own tendencies to passivity, stories of husbands in Scripture — good and bad — have come alive with greater gravity and relevance for marriage.

Weak and Wicked Example

God often trains men to be faithful husbands and fathers by giving us great examples to follow — the faith of Abraham, the conviction of Moses, the leadership of Joshua, the wisdom of Solomon, the heart of David. Sometimes, however, God trains us for faithfulness by showing us just how wicked men can be. He trains us to love by showing us men who failed to love, to lead by showing us men who failed to lead, to fight by showing us men who refused to fight, to die for others by showing us men who saved themselves.

And as husbands and fathers go, few were as corrupt and shameful as King Ahab.

“Sometimes God trains us for faithfulness by showing us just how wicked men can be.”

When we first meet the man, Scripture tells us, “Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him” ([1 Kings 16:29–30](#)). The kings before him were a cauldron of evil — conspiring, deceiving, stealing, murdering, and in it all, insulting God by choosing idols over him. Ahab, we learn, was worse than them all.

And his marriage was at the center of his rebellion. “As if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his

wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him” (1 Kings 16:31). He first mocked God by marrying an idolator, and then — as God warned would happen — he caved and bowed in submission to her and her god.

The facets of Ahab’s wickedness are worthy of much reflection, but here I want to focus on a scene that exposes the allure and peril of his passivity.

Seduction of Self-Pity

When 1 Kings 21 opens, Ahab covets the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth, and asks to buy it from him — disregarding God’s law that prevented the permanent sale of land (Leviticus 25:23). Naboth doesn’t merely refuse because he wants to keep his land; he refuses because to do otherwise would be to disregard God.

Now watch how Ahab responds, crumbling into self-pity and passivity:

Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him, for he had said, “I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.” And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food. (1 Kings 21:4)

The most powerful man in the land curled up in a ball, like a brokenhearted teenager. He refused to eat. He pouted because he didn’t get his way. He’s almost a parody of passivity — almost. As pitiful as the cry-baby king seems, many husbands will know something of the temptation he indulged. Self-pity is strangely seductive, and can be equally paralyzing. It can keep a man from confessing his sin, from initiating reconciliation, from picking up the phone, from attempting family devotions, from making a difficult decision or taking the hard next step.

What happens next, as Ahab nurses his hurt feelings, compounds his shame all the more. See how self-pity imprisons and disables him.

Passivity Encourages Iniquity

Knowing his wife and what she was capable of, Ahab should have stepped up to stop her — for the good of Naboth and those who loved him, for the good of the kingdom, for the good of his own soul, for the good of his wife. A passive husband will inevitably enable and encourage the sins of his wife (and vice versa!). When Jezebel sees how miserable and pathetic poor King Ahab is, she takes matters into her own hands. She says to him, “Do you now govern Israel? Arise and eat bread and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite” (1 Kings 21:7). Ahab’s sorry silence suggests he was all too glad to acquiesce.

So Jezebel instructed the leaders in Naboth’s city to kill him. She wrote letters (and signed them with Ahab’s name and seal), saying, “Set two worthless men

opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God and the king.’ Then take him out and stone him to death” (1 Kings 21:10).

The greed, the deceit, the robbery, the conspiracy, the murdering of a blameless man. These were the weeds of wickedness in full bloom.

We could explore the devilry of Jezebel — a wife so awful Jesus himself uses her as a metaphor for immorality (Revelation 2:20). For now, however, notice how her peculiar sins were kindled by her husband’s passivity. While he wallowed in self-pity, he nurtured her iniquity. Had he had the conviction and nerve (and honor) to act as God called him to, he likely could have prevented all that unfolded here. He could have saved a good man’s life.

But he stayed in bed instead. Ahab proves that sometimes a man who does nothing is as harmful as the man who does the wrong thing.

“Sometimes a man who does nothing is as harmful as the man who does the wrong thing.”

A good husband cannot keep his wife from sinning, but he also will not lie on the couch while she does. A bad husband — especially a passive husband — will encourage her to sin all the more. In the challenging moments of our own marriages, some men will lie down like Ahab, others will rise up like the man we meet next.

Refusing the Pull of Passivity

Jezebel tells Ahab that Naboth is dead and that his vineyard is now available.

“As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it” (1 Kings 21:16).

Again, the passivity. Not, What have you done? Not, How did he die? Not, Is this dead man’s vineyard mine to have? No, “as soon as he heard that Naboth was dead,” he finally found the strength to leave his bed and went to enjoy another man’s field.

“Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite” (1 Kings 21:17). As much as I despise how selfish, passive, and evil Ahab was, I admire all the more the man who stepped up to confront him. While Naboth’s innocent blood ran in the street, the prophet Elijah came knocking at Ahab’s door — notice he comes to Ahab, not Jezebel — with a word from the Lord: “You have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord” (1 Kings 21:20).

They had just killed a man for refusing to sell them a vineyard. Imagine what evil they might do to a man who accused them like this. While other men watched and stayed silent (and even participated in the injustice), one refused the pull of

passivity and embraced the costs of obedience. He would rather die than sit and watch God's law be vandalized.

Don't miss what God says next through Elijah. Ahab's passivity would come back not just on his own head, but on the heads of all he loved — his sons, their sons, his wife: "I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel . . . for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. And of Jezebel the Lord also said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel'" (1 Kings 21:21–23).

Ahab's judgment is a vivid, bloody picture of how unchecked sin ruins a home. When a husband grows passive, the whole family suffers — perhaps not in judgment like Jezebel, but they will suffer nonetheless.

Mercy for Passive Men

The story circles back to where it began with Ahab: "There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited" (1 Kings 21:25). The narrator wants us to see all that just happened as a clinic in iniquity, a masterclass in marital failures. The next verse, however, is one of the more surprising verses in Scripture:

And when Ahab heard [Elijah's] words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. (1 Kings 21:27)

One might think this is the same man we found lying in bed, feeling sorry for himself, refusing to eat. This, however, is not the same man — not in God's eyes anyway. Instead of lashing out in fury at the prophet, instead of retreating into more self-pity and passivity, Ahab humbles himself in repentance. He does the hard thing. He sees his sin, hates his sin, and seeks the Lord's mercy.

"And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house'" (1 Kings 21:27–29). Consequences still remained, to be sure, but something of his sin had died. The selfish, prideful, passive husband became a humble one, at least for a time, giving hope to selfish, prideful, passive husbands.

It's easy to hate the passivity of Ahab — a king who stubbornly mopes while his wife commits murders, who blatantly disregards, even mocks, God's calls to lead and love, who selfishly sets God's will below his own desires. It's harder, however, to hate the passivity in ourselves. Will we, as husbands in Christ, practice an intentional, costly, active love? Will we keep leading when it's inconvenient to lead? Will we receive the mercy of God, humble ourselves before him, lay down our pride and self-pity, and resist the enticing pull of passivity?

