

1 Kings 21

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[0 : 00] And the scene of our passage tonight is in verse one of that chapter.! Now Naboth, the Jezreelites, had a vineyard in Jezreel.

And everything tonight happens, doesn't it, in this little allotment patch just outside King Ahab's royal palace walls that belong to this guy Naboth.

And I want to invite you to stand with me this evening, to walk with me between the vines or the trees in his vineyard and to listen to its story.

Because this is not just any old vegetable patch, is it? His vineyard has been witness to things that have happened there, which teach us truths about right and wrong and God.

It's a theological vegetable patch, isn't it? And it shows us three things this evening. In the vineyard, we see, first of all, a gross injustice for God's people.

[1 : 06] A gross injustice. You might know this story really well. There's this vineyard next to King Ahab's palace, owned by this guy Naboth.

And Ahab wants it, doesn't he, for a vegetable patch. Ahab doesn't need it. He's the king of Israel, but he wants it. But the problem is that Ahab can't have it, can he?

He can't get it. He offers Naboth some cash or another plot of land, even better, somewhere else. But verse three, Naboth refuses his king, doesn't he?

It's quite bold. The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my father's. It's his family inheritance. So, no, no, Ahab. This isn't just any old allotment.

This is the family land passed to me by my father and from his father before him and his father before him. So, I can't sell it to you, King Ahab.

[2 : 10] And Naboth's not being unreasonable there. He's not being difficult for the sake of it. Because there were rights for landowners of the inheritance that God gave to families and tribes in the land.

And unless you absolutely had to sell your land, that there was a necessity, God's law stated really clearly that you shouldn't sell it and you needn't sell it.

Naboth isn't just being hard work. He is being godly. Notice how he says to King Ahab, the Lord forbid that I should give you this inheritance.

Because Naboth knows that there is one thing that is greater than the great King Ahab in the land. It is the word of God. So, he refuses King Ahab's request.

Ahab wants it. But you can't have it. God's word says so, Naboth says. So, in steps Jezebel, his queen.

[3 : 15] Jezebel has the plan, doesn't she? And the vineyard becomes the scene for a grisly takeover. To free up the property deeds. To deal with the Naboth situation once and for all by having him killed.

Get rid of Naboth. And I want you to see the grossness of the injustice. To see the slickness of how Jezebel does it.

Of how it all happens. Just look with me at the details. Jezebel begins by going through the plan, doesn't she? By going through all the legitimate routes.

So, she sends out letters to the leaders of the city. To the elders. To the magistrates. She follows the chain of command. She gets the letters signed by King Ahab's seal.

She goes through the city magistrates. And then in verse 9. She orders them to proclaim a fast. And get Naboth at the head of the table. It's like convening a court.

[4 : 19] She gets witnesses brought. To bring charges against him. It's like a courtroom scene. She uses and works within the justice system, doesn't she? And so to outsiders.

It looks so slick and watertight. She plays it by the book. She plays it by God's law, actually. The courtroom. The requirement for two witnesses, at least.

A day of fasting. The penalty. Stoning to death. Are all described in God's law. It all looks really good. It's done by the book.

It looks legit. It's all given this kind of religious, righteous gloss. It looks so slick. So right. But of course, it's so wrong, isn't it?

She manipulates the king's authority. And he, in his weakness, allows her to do that. The witnesses are dodgy. And the dodgier, the better, the letters say.

[5 : 22] And she twists the truth into a lie. It's interesting. In the Hebrew, there's a similarity. But there is a difference between what Naboth actually says when he refuses Ahab.

The Lord forbid that I should give the land to you. There's a similarity there. And with the false charge of blasphemy, of cursing God. It's a similarity, but it's a different thing.

You see, Jezebel masks the lie of the whole thing. The injustice of it all with a bit of truth. She twists Naboth's words. It's so slick.

And it's a cut and dry case, isn't it, to outsiders. And so the narrator tells us the outcome in such a matter-of-fact way.

We're told in five times, in quick succession from verse 13, how Naboth died. Naboth had been stoned.

[6 : 25] He is dead. Verse 17, Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead. She tells Ahab, Naboth is not alive.

He is dead. Verse 16, Ahab heard that Naboth was dead. So he took the vineyard. Naboth was dead. Naboth was dead. Naboth was dead.

All for a vegetable patch. And we stand in the vineyard, don't we, and we can almost hear the ground weeping for Naboth. For the gross injustice of it all.

We know what happened, but, you know, no one then was listening, were they? It's so matter-of-fact. It's so lacking in emotion. The narrator tells it in that way because no one cried for Naboth.

No one defends Naboth. No one gets him to the appeal court. And while Jezebel does the dirty on him, King Ahab was having a snack.

[7 : 28] He was oblivious to the whole thing or just in denial. It was so slick. No one suspects. No one questions. Later in 2 Kings chapter 9, we learn that Jezebel doesn't just get rid of Naboth, but the rest of the family.

She gets rid of the family line, so there won't be any challenges. Naboth's body lies motionless and it's disposed of.

And we never hear of him again after this chapter, never once in the Bible. The paperwork is shredded up. The whole issue is covered up. And no one's bothered. The magistrates that receive the letters from Jezebel, they should have said something, shouldn't they?

They said something. But they bow to the injustice of it. Maybe we shake our heads at them. But would we have done differently? You do not want Jezebel's mafia heavies knocking on your front door at night, do you?

You've got your own family to look after. And if we resist, if we blow the whistle, who knows what will happen to us? So through weakness, through negligence.

[8 : 41] This is often how the way things go, isn't it? Injustice like this thrives under slick wickedness and moral weakness.

And even if people can be good, they often lack the guts to stop things like this happening. It's just how it goes so often. It's how it goes for particularly for God's people.

God's people like Naboth. Who refuse and make us stand because of what God's word says.

Because they realise that there is one thing higher than the king in the land.

It is the word of God. And they are treated wrongly and suffer gross injustice, but few minds. It's rarely headline news, is it?

And often it's done in such a slick way. It's often done under the gloss of righteous authority or of some religious mandate. As if done by the book.

[9 : 46] Daniel under Nebuchadnezzar. Joseph under Potiphar. God's people under Medo-Persia. Or under Nero. Or under Pontius Pilate. This is the slick way God's people are oppressed.

Even today. I don't need to shock you, do I? With all the stories of killings and rapes and people's lives destroyed. And often it's done with a religious gloss.

It's done because of weakness often. That people don't stand up. And it's the way things go. Just remember where Jezebel came from. She's been around since the end of chapter 16 in 1 Kings. And we're introduced to her there. And she's the daughter of the Sidonian king, Ezbai. She's the daughter of a man who rules a nation where the powerful are used to getting what they want. And no one stands in their way. And so she wouldn't feel that out of place in many parts of the world today, would she? And there are plenty of Naboth's today too.

[10:53] Victims of slick injustice. God's people. Many of which we've never even heard of. And that is because God's people aren't immune to gross injustices like this.

Naboth wasn't immune, was he? There is no guarantee of immunity from injustice for God's people. And the vineyard this evening cries out to us not to be naive about that.

This is the experience of many of God's people to a lesser or greater degree. This will be our experience, won't it? If we stand up for and hold to God's law.

So it speaks to us of a gross injustice for God's people. But next, the vineyard speaks to us of something else. A gross injustice.

But number two, it speaks to us of a guaranteed judgment. Speaks of a guaranteed judgment. And from verse 17, the story changes, doesn't it?

[11:58] Something really big happens in verse 17, if you look there. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite. And that is a big moment.

That's a seminal moment in these events. If you think about it, up until that point, the Lord is never mentioned, is he, at all? He never features, as all of this injustice is being carried out, as Naboth is killed.

He doesn't seem to be present. It feels as though he's absent. But that's only what it feels like, isn't it? God wasn't apparent when the heavies turned up at Naboth's front door.

God didn't feel apparent when his body was broken with stones. When his blood was spilt outside the city of Jezreel. Not apparent, but it turns out he was present.

It was so slick, wasn't it? Everything seemed so settled at the end of verse 16. Ahab gets his allotment and the case is closed.

[13:05] Naboth is dead. Naboth is dead. Naboth is dead. He wanders around the vineyard and his conscience is calmed. He doesn't know the half of it, maybe.

Naboth is dead. He picks up a grape from one of the vines, puts it in his mouth and it tastes really sweet. And the whole thing is covered up and concealed and put away.

The whole episode was airtight. Not even Elijah, the great prophet, knew what had happened. He needed the word of the Lord to come and tell him, didn't he? The paperwork is shredded up.

There is no justice and God doesn't seem to be apparent, but he is present. The word of the Lord came. And the Lord knew.

The Lord saw what had been concealed. He sees the injustice. And he sends his word of judgment to Ahab through Elijah.

[14:05] And justice is going to be done, isn't it? And Ahab will get what he deserves and the vineyard will be relieved of its pain.

The message to Ahab, look at verse 17. Have you killed and taken possession, Ahab? It's a rhetorical question, isn't it?

Notice how straight to the point God's word is. The Lord knows exactly how and what has happened. When everyone else is oblivious or in denial.

He goes on, because you've done this, I'll bring disaster upon you. In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, they'll lick up yours, Ahab.

And Ahab knew what was true all along, didn't he? That there was a greater thing than Ahab in the land. And it was the word of the Lord. And God's word would find Ahab in the end.

[15:08] Ahab seems surprised in verse 20, doesn't he? When Elijah finds him. Have you found me, O my enemy? And Elijah says, I have found you. You have not wriggled out of this, Ahab.

God does not need spies. God does not need WikiLeaks. The successful plan was sorted. It was so slick in human terms.

But there is no hiding from God's jurisdiction. Kings and queens, Ahab, are under it. Terrorists are under it. You and I are under it.

The feeling up until now is we got away with it. We got away with it. Ahab walks around the vineyard. We've got away with it. We're told the dogs licked up Naboth's blood. There was blood on the ground. And they thought, we've got away with it. But God saw and sent his word of judgment. Naboth's blood spilled and being licked up.

[16:13] It's such a graphic image, isn't it? If you can imagine it. Maybe it reminds us of the first murder in the Bible. Do you remember Cain murders Abel, doesn't he?

And Cain thought, I've got away with it. But Genesis 4, the Lord said to him, what have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

God sees the blood. God sees the vineyard. He sees the injustice. And then in Egypt, Pharaoh thought he'd gotten away with it.

But the Lord said, I've seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and I've heard their cry. And so Elijah delivers a message of judgment. God's guarantee of justice for his people.

There's no guarantee of immunity, is there? But there is a guarantee of justice. And he might not seem to be apparent at times, but God sees the blood.

[17:14] He sees the injustice. Sees the blood in the villages of Burkina Faso or in Nigeria or anywhere else.

And it cries to him from the ground. Naboth's vineyard is a picture, isn't it? It's a plot of land which represents the sufferings of God's people in all places, in all times.

And God sees it. The grace and justice, the guaranteed judgment. But thirdly and lastly, the gracious mercy.

The gracious mercy. It is a shocking passage, this, isn't it? There is corruption and greed and bloodshed. But I think there is something even more shocking than dogs licking up blood.

It's what happens to Ahab at the end of this chapter. He receives this word of judgment from God. He cannot escape the word of God, the jurisdiction of God.

[18:19] He and his family, Elijah says, are to be cut off forever. Obliterated. And Jezebel will go the same way that Naboth went.

And it's pure, satisfying justice, isn't it? And we kind of feel like putting our fists in the air and going, go, Lord. They got what was coming to them.

But the shock of it is in the last three verses, isn't it? This is 27 to 29. Look there. When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly.

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. It's shocking, first of all, because of the way that Ahab responds in a way that we don't expect in humility.

[19:33] He listens to this word of judgment and he's humbled by it. He's softened by it. He turns back to God. That's what it means when you put on sackcloth and you tear your clothes.

But even more shocking is God's response to Ahab. Verse 29, he says to Elijah, have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?

There's a sense there of delight almost and excitement from God, isn't there? Have you seen this, Elijah? This is fantastic.

I love this. Ahab of all people has humbled himself before me. And he withholds the judgment that Ahab deserves.

Now, if you know the story, we realize later that Ahab's repentance is pretty short lived, actually. And we might question, well, how genuine is he being? Is he just in a sulk?

[20:36] But actually, Ahab's genuineness isn't the point of this part of the text. The point here is seeing the genuineness of God's mercy.

That when God imposes judgment on gross injustice, God delights to give mercy. He's on the edge of his seat to give mercy.

He delights to relent from disaster. Have you seen this, Elijah? I'm going to show mercy to him.

I don't know about you, but this passage then is bittersweet, isn't it? The justice that God brings is so sweet. Jezebel, she's going to get what's coming to her soon.

And Ahab too. And we stand in the vineyard and we feel the relief of that justice. But at the same time, we're conscious of this tremendous weight of the inescapable judgment of God.

[21 : 44] That justice will be done wholesale in every detail. Even over our own lives. For the times that we've passively allowed wickedness to thrive in and around us.

In our moral weakness. And maybe sometimes we've done wrong and we've thought, I've got away with it. Maybe you think you're getting away with it now.

The vineyard of Naboth points to all that has happened in our backyard, doesn't it? Done by us and done to us.

And so we are really glad that verses 27 to 29 are here in this passage. When we hear God's word of judgment and we come to him, God delights to show mercy.

On the edge of his seat to show mercy to us. Now, as we close in all of this, we just can't help but be reminded of the life and death of Jesus Christ, can we?

[22 : 56] There are so many elements of Naboth's story that converge in the life of Jesus. The son who was sent to a vineyard that was his own property and was thrown out by the tenants and killed outside of the city, outside of the vineyards.

Who was betrayed in a vegetable patch in Gethsemane. The one who was taken up in a slick court case with false witnesses and false charges.

Whose blood was spilt outside the city of Jerusalem. Who was murdered with a religious gloss. And it all looked so slick.

And good old Pontius Pilate, the magistrate, was too weak to stop it. It was denied or covered up and buried, literally.

And no one defended him. No one stopped it. He was forgotten. But God saw. And Jesus, too, was guaranteed justice.

[24 : 07] Raising him from the dead and declaring him to be Lord and God. And isn't that so wonderful? Isn't that wonderful for the Naboth's of today? Wonderful that the Lord Jesus stands with the Naboth's amongst God's mistreated people today.

But where no land of injustice, no killing field, no garden of pain is a place where Jesus Christ has not already walked. No land of bloodshed is a land where Jesus Christ has not already shed his blood in it.

Amongst his people. The Lord Jesus is the God who stands with and takes the side of the oppressed. And sees that justice is done.

Paul says in Thessalonians, God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, brothers and sisters. And to grant relief to you who are afflicted.

When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. And so God's people, as they suffer injustice today, along with their attackers, need to know that no one gets away from the jurisdiction of God.

[25 : 23] That God will impose justice for his people. But perhaps more wonderful even than that.

As we see that this God, when he does that, when he brings justice, he also delights in mercy. Ahab says to Elijah when they meet, have you found me?

Verse 20. Seems surprised. None of us can escape the word of the Lord, can we? God's word found him out in the end. But as he received his word, as the word of the Lord found Ahab, at the same time, God found Ahab in mercy.

If you're hearing God's word of judgment, that all wrongs will be put right, then at the same time, along with Ahab, we're receiving mercy.

We're receiving a chance to humble ourselves before him. That is why God speaks of judgment before he does judgment. It's part of mercy.

[26 : 33] It's a kindness to Ahab that God said anything at all to him, isn't it? And so when his word of judgment finds you and I, his mercy is after you too.

Ahab is an overblown version of an unjust character, isn't he? But perhaps we see glimmers of ourselves in him. And like him, you know tonight that you can't say anymore, I'm getting away with it.

His word has found me out. Well, just as we close, do something strange with me for a second. Put yourself in his shoes for a moment. And come and humble yourself before God and turn back to him.

No matter what you've done, however gross it is or what you haven't done. And put your name where Ahab's name is in verse 29.

If you look there. God delights to show you mercy. And God says over you as you humble yourself before him. Have you seen this evening, Sunday 24th of May 2020.

[27 : 53] How Ahab, how your name has humbled himself or herself before me. So I will not bring disaster upon him or her.

And there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who turns back to him. Being as we can't get away from God's judgment, we can't get away from his words.

What we have to do is go to his mercy, isn't it? He will impose justice. Let us pray.