

1 Kings 21 – The Lord of Justice

Intro

The human heart is hungry for justice. When we experience sin done against us or see it done against others part of us is just not satisfied until the wrong has been righted.

Sometimes this comes out in the little moments of wrong against that we all experiences in the humdrum of life.

- When someone vandalizes your fence or a dog owner doesn't pick up their dog's stinking mess on your nature strip, you get annoyed and think "how does someone get away with that. That's not right. That's not fair."

Our hearts get hungry for justice in the little stuff, but they particularly hunger for justice in the big and far more devastating of sin, oppression and general injustice.

Maybe you've experienced this or have seen it in the lives of others. The abusive partner who has never really been held to account for the trauma he or she caused. The faceless online scammer who got away with stealing thousands of dollars. The now deceased paedophile priest, who is not alive to stand trial for the unspeakable crimes he has committed.

Too often, the world we live in leaves us hungry for a sense of justice. And I don't know about you, but I'm not okay with the fact that some people simple just get away with it. I want to know my hunger for justice will be satisfied. And maybe you're the same. Well, in our passage tonight, God is saying that if you want to know the satisfaction of true justice, you need to know to Him. For this passage tells us that He is the God who sees when evil is done, cares about the victims, and will ultimately hold guilty people to account.

So, what we are going to do with 1 Kings 21 is consider the sickening injustice done against Naboth and then think through the satisfying justice that comes from God. After that we'll think about the implications of this text in light of Jesus and how it shapes our lives today.

1. The Sickening Injustice Against Naboth.

So first, let's think about the sickening injustice done against Naboth.

I don't know about you, but I love listening to true crime pod-casts. I've just finished my second season, of a series called Dr. Death. This last season followed the story of a respected oncologist who diagnosed healthy people with cancer so that we could charge them for the expensive chemo treatments that he performed in his clinic at profit to himself. Innocent patients suffered. A greedy doctor grew rich. This series is gripping, but it leaves you with a sense of horror over the sickening amount of injustice that was able to go on for so long.

And I don't know about you, but I had a similar feeling of horror when I first read about the account of Naboth – the innocent Israelite who was unfortunate enough to live next door to one of the palaces of the depraved King of Israel - Ahab. Read with me from verse 1:

21 Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. ² Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth."

King Ahab, ruled from and lived in Samaria the capital of Israel, but notice how we are told about a *second* palace he had in Jezreel. Ahab was not a man who was in short supply of land and possession. And that's what makes his desire to turn Naboth's only possession into

nothing more than a veggie patch so despicable. This whole horror story starts over nothing more than a man's desire for a veggie patch.

But, notice Naboth won't sell will his vineyard, no matter the offer. In verse 3 he replies to Ahab:

"The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors."

Now it's not because Naboth is simply stubborn or sentimental that he doesn't sell. Naboth refuses to give up his land because he's godly. He appears to be one of the handful of people left in Israel who actually cares about God and living His way.

You see God had made it very clear in His law to Israel that the land was His gift to them – And he had actually put in His law provisions to ensure no Israelite family would ever be permanently stripped of their land. Take Leviticus 25:23:

²³ *"The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.*

Naboth is not only an innocent man. He is a godly man. Out of reverence for God he bravely says no to the most powerful and wicked man in his country.

And like many godly people before and after him he suffers for his godliness.

I have tried to capture the sickening injustice done against Naboth in four progressive steps of sin. The first is childish anger, the second evil scheming, the third cold-blooded murder and the fourth shameless theft. So let's think about the first act of sin done against Naboth.

Ahab's childish anger.

This is perhaps the most pathetic image this chapter gives us. A grown man, a King, Sulking on his bed because he didn't get what he wanted. Verse 4 tells us plainly that after Naboth refused to sell, Ahab moped his way home "sullen and angry". And when he gets home, he collapses on his bed, and continues the sulking session.

He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

Remember, this was about a veggie patch.

Ahab responds like my four-year old daughter when we say "you can't have TV right now." Crossed arms, pouting face, sulking and angry. That's kind of the picture we get here. And at one level, it's so ridiculous that it would almost be comical... if it were not for the gross display of wickedness that then flows from this sulking and *angry* king.

God's word tells us in Ecclesiastes 7:9. *Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools* (ESV).

Childish anger against Naboth had lodged itself in the heart of this foolish King – He can't let it go. And so, like a fool, he lets himself be drawn in to the next step of sin that we see in this passage. Jezebel's evil scheme.

Jezebel's Evil scheming.

When Jezebel questions Ahab as to why he is sulking around, he responds to her in verse 6:

⁶ ... "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'"

Notice how Ahab conveniently omits Naboth's reasoning – nothing about the Lord. Nothing about it being the inheritance of his ancestors. Ahab deliberately makes Naboth look like nothing more than a stubborn pest who refuses a generous offer.

And, as you would expect, Jezebel's having none of it. She looks at her sorry husband, moping on his bed and says:

... "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

And so, like a mob boss, she get's busy concocting a plan to take out Naboth. Verse 8 tells us that she writes a letter in Ahab's name to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's village with the following instructions. Verse 9:

"Proclaim a day of fasting [that is create a sense of community crises] and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people [make sure he's positioned for all to see]. ¹⁰ But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them bring charges that he has cursed both God and the

king [make him the scapegoat of this falsified moment of crises]. Then take him out and stone him to death.”

All this over a veggie patch.

Cold-blooded murder.

From childish anger comes evil scheming. From evil scheming comes now, in step three of this picture of sickening injustice – cold-blooded murder. Verse 11:

¹¹ So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth’s city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them.

These cowardly and corrupt leaders followed the instructions to a tee and then:

they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. ¹⁴ Then they sent word to Jezebel: “Naboth has been stoned to death.”

This is cold-blooded murder. But the horrifying truth is that it’s actually worse than what is told to us here.

In 2 Kings 9, when this incident is again mentioned, we learn that it wasn’t just Naboth they killed – but his sons also. And in a sick way it makes sense that Jezebel would do that. It would be hard for Ahab to simply take Naboth’s property if his son were still alive and had a claim on the land. Both Naboth *and* his sons are murdered in cold-blood.

All this over a veggie patch.

Shameless Theft.

The fourth and final step in this sickening picture of injustice is the shameless theft of Naboth's property. God's law was clear that following this tragedy this land now belonged to the closest relative of Naboth (Lev: 25:25). The king had no right to just take it.

But, without hesitation, without any shame, Ahab takes the land as soon as Jezebel gives him the report (v.15) that Naboth is dead. You can almost imagine him having to step over the bloodied corpse of Naboth in order to claim what he wanted. Look at how quickly this theft happens. Verse 16:

¹⁶ When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.

Childish anger, evil scheming, cold-blooded murder, and finally shameless theft.

All this over a veggie patch.

What happens to Naboth in this chapter is a sickening picture of injustice. Now there is a reckoning coming by God. But before we get there, it's worth pausing to reflect on what this picture is telling us so far.

I think the very fact that this story is here, in so much detail is a reminder to us that God sees injustice and cares deeply about the victims of it. When this kind of corruption and oppression happens to people, it matters to Him. That's made clear in passages like Proverbs 22:22-23:

²² *Do not exploit the poor because they are poor*

and do not crush the needy in court,

²³ *for the LORD will take up their case*

and will exact life for life.

The Lord doesn't ignore injustice. When his people are oppressed, he cares and will take up their case.

Perhaps you have experienced injustice at a personal level. Maybe you still live with the scars of it. God knows about your situation too. He cares about what has happened to you. And as we'll see soon, he acts to do something about it.

As I've been observing the BLM protests over the past year on the news, I've notice that many of the people in the crowd hold signs that read "#sayhisname." The goal of this hashtag is to make sure the names of African Americans killed by police are not forgotten and the circumstances surrounding their death is dealt with justly. Saying someone's name in that context is a way of keeping their case in the spotlight of public accountability.

What is striking about this passage is how many times Naboth's name is mentioned – by my count it is around 19 times. And I think that fact alone tells us something. It says that although Naboth was so disregarded by others, his name and his case was not forgotten by God. God is saying his name all over this chapter.

God sees, God cares. And what we see clearly in the coming of Jesus is that God also understands injustice at a personal level. When God came to us in the man Jesus Christ, He suffered terrible injustice. In fact, *like* Naboth, Jesus is described in the gospels as an

innocent man, who is obedient to God but who is condemned on the testimony of two false witnesses and shamefully murdered for all to see. [Put up Matthew 26:57ff].

What God shows us in this passage and then in the gospel is that He both *cares* about injustice but also *understands* it at a personal level.

We don't worship a God who sits outside or aloof from the unjust mess of this world and our lives. We worship a God, who in Jesus, experiences it first-hand.

It's only the Christian who can truly say, "my God gets what it feels like to be treated like rubbish by those in power." "My God gets what it feels like to be mocked and laughed at by the in group." "My God gets what it feels like to suffer death as an innocent."

Both Naboth and Jesus show us that God's people, like the rest of the world are not immune from injustice. But, they also remind us that in moments of injustice and sin we do have a God who cares about what we've been through, who understands, and who will act to bring the justice we hunger for. Which leads us to point two.

2. The Satisfying Justice of the Lord.

So, we've seen the sickening injustice done against Naboth here. Now it's time to think about the satisfying justice of the Lord that comes next in this chapter.

There is something just so satisfying about that moment when, you see justice finally getting done. Sometimes you get a taste of this satisfaction during the evening news as you watch

heinous criminal get led away in handcuffs. Sometimes it comes when a work colleague, who you know is dodgy, finally gets the sack.

I remember having a taste of this satisfaction a number of years ago when my friend and I were driving up to Qld. About half way through NSW, we started getting tail-gated by a hoon on the highway. After dangerously harassing us for a few minutes, he then overtook us and sped off at high speeds. We were annoyed and angry. But our anger quickly turned to rejoicing, when about 5 kms up the road, we saw the same car, pulled over on the side of the road with a police car behind it. In our jubilation, we wound down the windows and cheered loudly as we drove by.

Justice is satisfying. It gives you hope that wrongs are being righted. It makes you cheer.

In verse 17, we read of that satisfying moment of justice, in which Ahab is finally held to account for the sickening evil he had committed against Naboth.

Just when he thinks Jezebel's plan has worked to a tee. Just when he starts walking through the vineyard mapping out in his mind how he will design his dream veggie patch – that's when God's word of justice bursts into this story. Look at verse 17:

¹⁷ Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: ¹⁸ "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. ¹⁹ Say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' [Are you not a killer and a thief!] Then say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!'"

Elijah is coming to Ahab with some raw justice. But when he arrives, Ahab simply looks down his nose at him and scoffs (v.20):

“So you have found me, my enemy!”

Look at Elijah’s Reply:

“I have found you,” he answered, “because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. ²¹ He says, ‘I am going to bring disaster on you. I will wipe out your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free.’²² I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have aroused my anger and have caused Israel to sin.’

And Jezebel doesn’t get off the hook either does she? Verse 23 gives us the chilling pronouncement that “dogs (giant rats of the ancient world) will devour her by the wall of Jezreel.”

In fact, verse 24 tells us that God’s justice is so sweeping that all those belonging to the wicked house of Ahab will suffer a similar judgment. Their bodies will become food for dogs and scavenging birds.

And just in case you’re wondering whether all this punishment really fits the crime. God reminds us in verse 25 reminds us just how bad the crime was:

²⁵ (There was never anyone like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. ²⁶ He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.)

God is telling us here that Ahab's punishment fits his crime. As Job says of God (34:12):

"Surely, God will not act wickedly,

And the Almighty will not pervert justice.

God does not underreact, He does not overact. He is just.

Ahab wasn't only guilty for the sickening display of evil against Naboth, he was guilty of sinning against all of Israel, by leading them into destructive idol worship.

This passage is telling us that God not only cares about those who have been treated unjustly, but that He will bring justice against their oppressors.

And that is something that is profoundly good. A God who turns a blind eye to evil and injustice whether big or small would be inconsistent and awful.

If you've experienced injustice and evil at the hands of others, I suspect you, particularly, know how good the idea of God's justice is.

Biblical Scholar, Chris Wright, writes about a time in his life when he was in India speaking at a Christian conference. After one of his sessions a man approached him and spoke about how thrilled he had been to hear that Wright would be preaching on the OT – because, he said, he had become a Christian through reading the OT. Now, I know some of you might be thinking, wow! Really? But it's true. Listen to How Chris Wright describes this conversation:

He grew up in one of the many backward and oppressed groups in India, part of a community that is systematically exploited and treated with contempt, injustice and sometimes violence. The effect on his youth was to fill him with a burning desire to rise above that station in order to be able to turn the tables on those who oppressed him and his community. He threw himself into his education, and went to college committed to revolutionary ideals and Marxism. His goal was to achieve the qualifications needed to gain some kind of power and thus the means to do something in the name of justice and revenge. He was contacted in his early days at college by some Christian students and given a Bible, which he decided to read out of casual interest, though he had no respect at first for Christians at all.

*It happened that the first thing he read in the Bible was the story of Naboth, Ahab and Jezebel in [1 Kings 21](#). He was astonished to find that it was all about greed for land, abuse of power, corruption of the courts, and violence against the poor—things that he himself was all too familiar with. But even more amazing was the fact that God took Naboth's side and not only accused Ahab and Jezebel of their wrongdoing but also took vengeance upon them. Here was a God of real justice. A God who identified the real villains and who took real action against them. **'I never knew such a God existed!'** he exclaimed. He read on through the rest of OT history and found his first impression confirmed. This God constantly took the side of the oppressed and took direct action against their enemies. Here was a God he could respect, a God he felt attracted to, even though he didn't know him yet, because such a God would understand his own thirst for justice.*

Those who are hungry for justice, find satisfaction in the God of 1 Kings 21.

Implications

As we come to the implications of this text, I want to speak first to those who, like that man, are longing for God's justice. But I then want to speak to those of you who may be fearing God's justice – because in the final words of this chapter, there is also message of mercy that God is wanting you need to hear.

To those thirsting for justice.

So first, to those of you longing for God's justice. I would encourage you to look at how God responds to Naboth's circumstance in this passage. God's response, says he knows about what has happened, he cares about what you have gone through, and He will act to bring justice on the sin and wickedness committed against you.

And in fact, this is one of the big gospel promises God gives to you through faith in Jesus.

God sent Jesus to our world to deal with sin. And Jesus does this. He did it in his first coming at the cross, as he bore God's justice on the sin committed by those who humbly put their faith in him.

But Jesus also promises to bring justice on human sin on the day of his *second* coming, when every form of evil and injustice will be exposed and brought to account before Him. We see this in 2 Thessalonians 1:

*⁶ God is **just**: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.*

Here that promise – Justice will be done and you will know the relief and satisfaction of it on that day.

God's total and comprehensive justice on every form of wickedness and oppression gives us hope in a world that, so often, struggles to see, care and deal adequately with injustice.

- It says to those of you who have been mistreated or exploited by an employer, that their dodgy behaviour, will face God's justice on that day.
- It says to those of you who have been abused, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, sexually – that the sinful deeds done against you will be exposed before God's final justice, and there will be an accounting.
- It tells Christians who are persecuted, beaten and killed for their faith, that their enemies will answer for that.
- It tells us as we watch the news that no unrepentant paedophile or murderer, or online scammer will ever get away with – they too will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Because God is just, you have real hope in a world of injustice. And, like the man in Chris Wright's story, the hope of God's justice, allows you to be freed from seeking personal revenge – which may not actually give you the satisfaction your looking for, and will often just perpetuate a toxic cycle of retribution. Romans 12:19:

¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"

To those who long for justice, take comfort in the fact that God will deliver it. His response to Naboth shows us this, His promise in Christ confirms it.

To those fearful of God's judgment.

Finally, I want to speak to those of you who are maybe a little fearful of God's justice that we've been reading of here. Those of you who maybe don't resonate so much with the victim of injustice but the perpetrator. Those of you who feel the guilt of having sinned terribly against another person. Does this passage just have a message of justice for you. Well, no actually, to you, and to all of us who are sinners, there is a message of mercy here.

You see, this passage finishes on two shocking notes. The first is that Ahab actually responds humbly to God's condemnation on his sin – For the first time ever Ahab seems to know that he has wronged God and, in his actions, he appeals for mercy. You see that in verse 27 – he tears his clothes and goes walking about meekly in sackcloth.

But perhaps the greater shock actually comes from God, who willingly extends mercy to Ahab. You see it there in the last two verses:

²⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹ "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son."

Now we know that Ahab's justice is not totally removed only postponed. Unfortunately, he doesn't keep leaning into God's mercy, but reverts back to his old ways in the following chapter. But God's mercy to Him here signals something to us – something that is confirmed in much greater detail in the coming of Jesus. That God not only satisfies our hunger for justice, but our hunger for mercy.

In fact, it is in the cross of Jesus that we see those two great attributes of God coming

together. Jesus dies for our sin (justice), but saves the sinner who humbly puts their faith in him (mercy).

It's the cross that gives hope to people who may well feel they have more in common with Ahab than they do Naboth. People who feel the weight of their sin and desperately want mercy from God. Maybe that's you tonight

- Maybe you feel guilty before God for the way you've selfishly used or abused or mistreated someone in your life.
- Maybe you feel guilty before God for failing to do the good you should have done when someone's well-being was at stake.
- Or maybe you simply feel the guilt of living your entire life as though your good creator does not matter and is not worthy of your worship.

The cross of Jesus is telling you to come and receive in full what the end of this passage gives you a taste of – God's undeserved mercy and love. The cross tells us that Jesus came to give God's mercy to sinners, even, as Paul says, the worst of sinners - like Ahab, and like Paul was in his former life. So, if you've haven't yet humbly put your faith in Jesus, now is the time. You will receive God's mercy, His forgiveness and eternal life.

I'll close with the words of John Newton, the author of Amazing grace and a former slave trader who saw himself as some who was the worst of the worst but had received mercy from Jesus.

May we sit at the foot of the cross; and there learn what sin has done, what justice has done, what love has done.

Let's be thankful that the Lord of Justice is also a Lord of love and mercy.

Amen..