

God's unfailing justice

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[0 : 00] The reading is going to be from 1 Kings chapter 21, and if you've got a church Bible, it'll be on page 363. Now Naboth, the Jezreelite, had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria.

And after this, Ahab said to Naboth, Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house, and I will give you a better vineyard for it. Or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.

But Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers. And Ahab went into his house. But Jezebel, his wife, came to him and said to him, Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?

And he said to her, Because I spoke to Naboth, the Jezreelite, and said to him, Give me your vineyard for money, or else, if it please you, I will give you another vineyard for it.

And he answered, I will not give you my vineyard. And Jezebel, his wife, said to him, Do you now govern Israel? Arise and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful.

[1 : 11] I will give you the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite. So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, and sealed them with his seal. And she sent the letters to the elders and the leaders who lived with Naboth in his city.

And she wrote in the letters, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people. And 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. And the men of his city, the elders and the leaders who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. As it is written in the letters that she sent to them, they proclaimed a fast and set Naboth at the head of the people.

And the two worthless men came in and sat opposite him. And the worthless men brought a charge against Naboth in the presence of the people, saying, Naboth cursed God and the king.

So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, Naboth has been stoned, he is dead. As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money, for Naboth is not alive but dead.

[2 : 33] And 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. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Arise, go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who is in Samaria.

Behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. And you shall say to him, Thus says the Lord, have you killed and also taken possession?

And you shall say to him, Thus says the Lord, In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, shall dogs lick your own blood. Ahab said to Elijah, Have you found me, O my enemy? He answered, I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. Behold, I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel.

And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, and like the house of Basha, the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin.

[3 : 48] And of Jezebel the Lord also said, The dog shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel. Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city, the dog shall eat.

And anyone of his who dies in the open country, the birds of the heaven shall eat. There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel, his wife,

incited.

He acted very abominably in going after idols as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel. And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes, put on 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.

Hopefully you have a handout either printed, I think the points for the sermon will come up on the screen. Let's pray before we start.

[5 : 04] May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen. From very young, we all have a keen sense of justice.

He hit me. She's cheating. Referee, that was a foul. But Phil got a phone when he was my age. Phil's my older brother, that was one of mine. I wonder if those sound familiar to you. Our world longs for justice. And that long doesn't just stay inside the home and sport, but to the big things of the world.

I typed in justice for on Google, and all the autocomplete things came up, including justice for George Floyd, justice for Grenfell, justice for the 96, referring to the Hillsborough disaster in 1989. And all of us, Christian or otherwise, despise injustice. But yet, whilst some injustices are brought to light and rightly dealt with, others aren't, aren't they?

[6 : 25] It's estimated there are around 2,600 unsolved murders in the UK at the moment. We live in a world where injustice seems to reign.

And it looks like it was going to be that way in this chapter of 1 Kings, chapter 21. Please have it open if you've shot your Bible.

We're looking at the dynasty of King Ahab, a very evil king. He's part of an evil royal family. In fact, at the end of our passage, in verse 25 to 27, it tells us he's in the Guinness World Records for evil. In chapter 16 and chapter 18, his evil saw him worship other gods and lead God's people to worship other gods.

And in chapter 20, which you've noticed we've skipped over from last week, his evil saw him treat an enemy in Ben Hadad, king of Aram, like a brother.

[7 : 25] And now in chapter 21, his evil sees him treat someone who should have been a brother, Naboth, like an enemy, having him killed to get his allotment.

Now, at first glance, this chapter seems pretty small, Fry. It's a domestic land grab compared to Israel at war either side of this chapter. But the writer of 1 Kings has zoomed in here to show us what life is like for God's people in this world and to show us what our God is like because he is the God of justice.

Ahab's wickedness has not gone unnoticed by God and won't go unpunished by God. Three times in these closing chapters, God tells Ahab he has seen his wickedness and pronounces judgment. In chapter 20, verse 42, it comes through an unnamed prophet. In chapter 21, God's judgment comes through Elijah. In chapter 22, it comes through Micaiah.

God is a God of justice. He won't let Ahab get away with it and his sin won't go unpunished. So our first point then, if you are following along, God's people will suffer injustice in this world.

[8 : 48] God's people will suffer injustice in this world. The action starts as a sulky King Ahab takes up residence in his holiday palace in Jezreel.

Have a look down at verse 1 with me. Now Naboth, the Jezreel-like, had a vineyard in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria. And after this, Ahab said to Naboth, give me your vineyard that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is near my house and I will give you a better vineyard for it or if it seems good for you, I will give you its value in money.

So Ahab is sunning himself in his Windsor castle. The one thing lacking isn't a swimming pool or a tennis court but a vegetable garden. He really wants to grow his cucumbers.

He sees Naboth's neighbouring vineyard and he wants it. He really wants it. So him and Ahab, Naboth, enter negotiations.

They end pretty quickly. No deal. Verse 3, Naboth said to Ahab, the Lord forbid it that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.

[10 : 04] It's a fair offer from Ahab. It's quite a generous offer. But the sticking point is the word inheritance. The vineyard was passed down to Naboth through his family but more than just a

family heirloom, it's down from God.

When God's people first arrived in the promised land, God divided the land up between the 12 tribes and the different families with them and this land was given to him by God.

You see, Naboth probably knew verses like Numbers 36, verse 7 on the handout. The inheritance of the people of Israel shall not be transferred from one tribe to another that every one of the people of Israel shall hold on to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers.

Naboth honoured, trusted and obeyed God's word. His vineyard mattered more to him than money or better land elsewhere.

It was a picture of his salvation of being part of God's people. And so he says in effect to the king, I'm sorry, God's word doesn't permit me to sell you this land.

[11:20] Well, Ahab takes that like a grown man, he finds another plot of land and says, thank you very much Naboth, that's okay. No, of course he doesn't.

He obeys, well he takes this like a toddler who doesn't get their own way. He sulks off to his bedroom, refuses to eat. Enter Jezebel, the wicked wife stage left.

After she listens to her husband's moan and her sulk, she in effect says to him in verse 6, oh come on, man up, you're the king, just take what you want.

Look, I will do it for you if you want. So she comes up with a simple but evil plan, verse 9. She wrote in the letters, proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people and set two worthless men opposite him and let them bring a charge against him saying, you've cursed God and the king and take him out and stone him to death.

It's tragically ironic that she uses God's law to break God's law. She knows enough about God's law that knows that blasphemy means the death penalty and you need two witnesses for a verdict.

[12:43] And we want to read that the plan failed, that at the last moment it was foiled and the king and queen were removed from office. But it didn't fail.

It went like clockwork. Jezebel's plan was executed and so was Naboth. It's underlined five times in verses 13 to 16 that Naboth is dead.

Righteous Naboth is killed and evil Ahab gets a vineyard. And so we get to verse 16. 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.

As we read this, we are meant to think and say that's not fair. It should be the other way round. Naboth keeps his vineyard and Ahab gets justice.

But God's people who obey God's word will face injustice in this world. Naboth took a stand because of his trust in God's word and ended up dead.

[13:57] Now this persecution sadly is not an isolated case, is it? We saw it earlier in 1 Kings, Obadiah hiding God's prophets in chapter 18 and Elijah fleeing for his life in chapter 19 and ultimately it's seen in the death of Jesus.

He knows exactly what Naboth went through because he endured similar that leaders wanting him dead, false witnesses at a trial and an execution.

God's people will suffer injustice in this world. That was true for Naboth and Jesus and it is true for us today.

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3, indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. You see King Ahab and the queen were the government of their time and today God's people do face persecution throughout the worldly governments.

Open Doors is a Christian charity that seeks to raise awareness of persecuted Christians around the world and they estimate there's approximately 300,000 Christians in North Korea which is the top of their watch list for persecution and 50,000 to 70,000 of them are currently imprisoned in terrible labour camps for their faith.

[15:23] Believers are arrested for attending underground church services, sharing their faith or owning a Bible. Open Doors also report that Christians worldwide being ordered to renounce their faith in order to receive COVID-19 emergency aid.

God's people are facing injustice for holding to God's word. Now we may not face anything as extreme as that but we may still face injustice in the UK for holding to God's word, a disciplinary action at work for speaking about Jesus or our beliefs on sexuality agenda or Islam.

People looking through a social media account to find where Christians do this and that's seen them sacked. at school you may be treated unfairly by a teacher for standing up for what God's

word says.

That is treading the path of Naboth and of Jesus and Christians around the world. That is to be expected. And yet Ahab is not just the political government of his time but the religious establishment of his time.

He is God's king. And sadly today Christians who seek to obey God's word do face injustice from religious authorities. Recently I read about a vicar in America forced to leave his home and church building by the diocese who changed the definition of marriage.

[17:00] The vicar refused to obey. The church was taken to court for their buildings and the church lost. They had to leave their house and church building and meet somewhere else.

Now God's people will suffer injustice in this world that stems from obedience to God's word. Even from religious authorities. And who knows?

Perhaps something like that is round the corner for churches in the UK. Now some of God's people do get justice in this life. Like the street preacher recently, Dominic Muir, who recently received compensation.

For wrongful arrest in Dorset for preaching from his truck. But some, like Naboth, get the death penalty. And at the end of verse 16, it seems like case closed, doesn't it?

Naboth is dead. Ahab has his vegetable patch. Jezebel has planned the perfect murder. But whilst God's people will suffer injustice in this world, God's justice will be done.

[18:10] That's the second thing to see from this story. God will bring justice to his wronged people. Because the twist comes when God saw what has happened and he speaks.

Now have a look down at verse 16. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite saying, Arise, go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who is in Samaria.

Behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth where he has gone to take possession. This is no leak from the government. The speaking God of verse 17 is the omniscient God who saw it happen.

It looked like a slick operation, didn't it? The perfect crime, airtight cover-up, Jezebel's letters have gone through the shredder and there's no vineyard gate headlines in the newspapers.

It seems like even Elijah himself didn't know before God told him. But God did know. God was watching. I recently watched the new film *The Trial of the Chicago Seven*.

[19:16] I don't know if you've seen that about people on trial for inciting riots in 1968 against the Vietnam War over in America. And the chant comes from outside the courtroom from the protesters there the whole world is watching.

The whole world is watching. Will justice be done in this trial? Well, in 1 Kings 21 it shows us that God is watching even when the world isn't.

And his justice will be done. So Elijah delivers God's verdict. Have a look down at verse 20. Ahab said to Elijah, Have you found me, O my enemy?

He answered, I have found you because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. Behold, I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up and will cut off from Ahab every male bond or free in Israel.

And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and like the house of Bashar the son of Ahijah for the anger to which you have provoked me and because you have made Israel to sin.

[20:29] And of Jezebel the Lord also said, The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel. Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat.

Anyone of his who dies in the open country, the birds of the heavens shall eat. Jezebel may have been the plotter, but God holds Ahab fully responsible.

His evil will be punished. And sure enough, it happens. Ahab is killed and we find that and we'll come back to that next week. And Jezebel meets her grisly end in 2 Kings 9 and both of them go to the dogs, literally.

God will bring justice to his wronged people. But what about the timing of all this? God nailed Ahab with his judgment, but Naboth is still dead.

Did he receive justice? Why did God intervene at verse 17 and not verse 7 and stop it from happening? Well, we don't know.

[21:37] We don't know why Naboth is allowed to die. We don't know that with other cases in the Bible. the Apostle James beheaded in prison, the Apostle Peter rescued by an angel.

But we do know that God's justice will be done. It may not happen when or how we want it, but we can be certain that evil and injustice have not gone unnoticed and won't go unpunished by God. And ultimately, this chapter is a preview of the full and final judgment to come for God's wronged people. 2 Thessalonians 1 says this on your handout, since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Full and final justice will be done when Jesus returns and everything is put right. And so, whilst we may have questions over timing, why isn't God intervening now? We can take great comfort that God's justice will be done, even when it looks like injustice reigns. One of the people who survived extreme persecution in North Korea was asked by an investigator from Open Doors whether they were afraid. [23 : 22] She said, no, Jesus looks over us. Indeed, he does and God will bring justice to his wronged people.

people. And yet, there's a double twist. There's a final twist in the story. Because through his justice here, God shows mercy.

And that's our final thing to see from this story. God delights to show mercy in his justice. Have a look down at verse 27. Ahab is no longer in a sulk, but sack cloth.

No longer is there a fast to commit murder, but a fast for repentance. Is this just a show, we might think? Like a child who says sorry, but they're not really sorry.

They're just going through the motions. Well, God sees this as sincere. And mercy has shown to him. Verse 28. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah, the Tishbite, saying, Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?

[24 : 42] 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 almost as if God is excited and he nudges Elijah in the ribs and says, Did you see that?

Did you see what Ahab's done? And so he shows him mercy. But there's a difference here between a postponement and a cancellation. Lots of us missed out on going away on holiday over the summer, and over a half term.

Maybe your holiday was cancelled and you managed to get your money back from the airlines. Well, congratulations if you have done that. But perhaps instead your holiday wasn't cancelled but rebooked.

It was postponed for a future date. It will happen, we hope, but at a later date. Well, in a similar way, God's mercy to Ahab is not that the judgment is cancelled, but rebooked, postponed to a later date. But unlike our holiday, God's judgment is certain to happen. You see, this is a moment of opportunity for Ahab. But whilst his repentance may have been sincere in the moment, it doesn't seem long lasting.

[26 : 05] It doesn't look like he handed back the vineyard to Naboth's estate and he continued to show contempt for God's word. So he could say this is remorse more than repentance.

But what this does show is God's enthusiasm for mercy. And the same is true today. God's delayed judgment to show mercy.

2 Peter 3 verse 9. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

God's full and final justice will come when Jesus returns. But because that didn't happen yesterday, more people have come to know Jesus.

and receive God's mercy today. Now it's estimated that 3 million people turn to Jesus each year and receive God's mercy. When you boil that down, that's 8,002 people a day, 342 an hour, 5 people a minute, 1 every 12 seconds.

[27 : 23] Of course that's rough and assumptions are being made, but isn't that extraordinary? God's patient and mercy is great news for us and for our friends and family and neighbours, those we dearly love and those we long to respond to Jesus.

But it will come. God's full and final justice will come. God's So as we close, if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here this morning, then the story for you ends at verse 16.

The powerful exploit the vulnerable and get away with it. That seems to be the world we live in. But 17 to 29, those verses are what makes the God of the Bible so attractive.

He is watching even when the world isn't. There are no miscarriages of justice in his courtroom and his mercy is extended to anyone who would bow the knee to Jesus and come to him in repentance and faith.

You see, the biggest injustice of all time, Jesus' death on a cross, was God's plan to bring justice for the sin of his people.

[28 : 44] That God is just and holy but he's loving and patient and merciful. He delays his judgment now for people like you and me. And when we see and suffer injustice for obeying God's word, we can take comfort that although justice might not come for us in this life, it's not gone unnoticed.

If it's not dealt with now, it will be dealt with in the future. God delights to bring justice and yet he delights to show mercy.

Let's pray together. Father God, we praise you for your justice and your goodness, that you see the plight of your people and that you will one day bring final justice.

We praise you too for the mercy that you have shown us and others in the Lord Jesus. We pray that more people will come to him before it's too late.

In his name we pray. Amen.