

1 Kings 21 (PM)

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] If you're new with us, my name is Aaron. I'm the minister for this service. That's wonderful to see you. So we're looking at a snippet of 1 Kings here, but 1 and 2 Kings together covers 400 years of history.

I don't know if you know that, 400 years of history. That's a lot of grounds to cover. So some of the chapters go through a lot of history, but chapter 21 slows right down, slows the story right down and describes this quite small incident.

It's flanked on either side in chapter 20 and 22 with these big wars, nations fighting each other. But here we just have the story of a plot of land that a king wants for a vegetable garden.

So why is this story here? When you're covering 400 years of history, why cover this particular story? Why cover this particular incident? What is God trying to tell us?

What's God trying to teach us? Let's go through it. Let me remind you of the story. So Ahab, the king. So he's a king. He's got a few places to stay. He's got a few palaces. One of them is in a place called Jezreel. Beside that, there's a plot of land, and he thinks that would make a great veggie garden.

[1 : 22] So he goes to Naboth, the owner of the land, and proposes an exchange. And it's a proposal that actually sounds quite reasonable. I'll give you a better plot of land for the plot of land that you have right here.

I really like this one. I can see it out my window. Indoor, outdoor flow, and all that. It will be perfect. And Naboth says, the Lord forbid, which sounds to us a bit dramatic.

Why not take the deal? It's a really good deal. It makes financial sense. Now culturally we need to know that Naboth, by refusing to sell the land, he's not being difficult.

He's not holding out for a better deal. Because land back in the days was not just, you know, a good investment. Land represented the covenant that God had made with his people.

It was rich with meaning. God said, you will be my people in this place. So back in the days, you know, there were lots of complicated laws and rules around land.

[2 : 25] The main purpose of them being keep the land in the family line because of what it represented. You remember before 1 Kings, we studied the book of Ruth. And you remember in Ruth, Naomi was very poor.

It looked like she had to sell her land to support herself. But a wealthy relative came in. This was one of these rules. To buy it back for her. To give to her. So it would stay in the family.

So all that to say. So Ahab rolling up to Naboth and just saying, hey, hey, look, look, let's make a deal here. I want to buy you a nice supply. Was completely out of line. It was not the request of somebody that loved and followed God.

It was not the request of somebody whose heart was bent towards God, who had godly aspirations. And Naboth refusing to sell it was him simply being obedient to God.

Which is why he said, the Lord forbid this. So Ahab asks. He gets shot down. And he is gutted. Like he is gutted and depressed.

[3 : 26] Verse 4 says he got really sad. And he wouldn't eat. And he wouldn't get out of bed. And he's kind of acting like a sulky child. And you get the feeling that that would have been the end of the story, right? The story could have finished right there.

If it wasn't for Jezebel. She comes to Ahab. She says, I didn't see you at dinner. What's wrong, honey? Is everything okay? What's going on?

And he's like, oh, this guy won't sell me his land. My garden. Blah, blah, blah. And Jezebel essentially says to him, what kind of leader are you?

You're the king. You don't ask. You take. So she had this kind of Phoenician pagan view of kingship, which is just that the king makes the rules.

They can do whatever they want. And you get the feeling she was a bit kind of disgusted by Ahab. Ahab, you're pathetic, is what she's thinking. So she says, look, I'll get the land for you.

[4 : 27] Just leave it up to me. So she writes a letter to the city that Naboth lives in. She writes a letter pretending to be Ahab. And she says, look, could you guys find a couple of characters who will lie about Naboth, say that he cursed God.

Do that and then we can get Naboth executed. Gone. And the local authorities do it. They just go along with it. Naboth is killed. Playing goes like clockwork.

In fact, you read a couple of chapters later, we find out that Jezebel actually had Naboth's children killed off as well. So there wouldn't be any sort of inheritance complications. Ahab is ultimately, I think, presented here as just a very weak-willed man.

And Jezebel is the driving force behind the drama. And she's completely ruthless. So verse 16, Naboth's out of the way. Ahab visits his new vegetable garden, dreaming about, I don't know what he dreams about, Middle Eastern vegetables.

He's feeling good, probably. Let's just pause here for a moment to reflect on what we've heard so far. Even if you've never heard the story of Naboth before, you've heard this story before.

[5 : 42] You've heard it a lot. There's a lot of corrupt people, powerful people doing terrible things, doing what they want. There is so much injustice in the world.

So much abuse of people's rights. And what it's rooted in is a lack of the fear of the Lord and just simple greed. The story of Naboth is played out over and over again, all over the world.

It's always been around. Dictators siphoning off billions of dollars from poor countries. The murder of political enemies. Nepotism, cronyism, bribery. Injustice is real.

Every now and then you'll read a story that makes your blood boil. Here's one that I read that I've been following for a couple of years. The heir to the Red Bull drink dynasty is worth billions of dollars. He's a young guy.

A few years ago he got drunk. He drove his Ferrari through residential streets in Thailand at 110 miles an hour. He hit and killed a policeman. Initially the family tried to blame it on the chauffeur, but that was quickly seen as not possible.

[6 : 50] This young guy admitted he was drunk. He admitted hitting and killing the policeman. But he kept not showing up to court dates. His lawyer kept phoning up and saying, Oh, I'm really sorry, he's on holiday.

Or he's just out of town or he's really sick or something. And then he skips the country. And he's been living in luxury all over the world, doing what he wants for the past eight years. A little while ago this year, the charges against him in Thailand were dropped.

Completely dropped. Now why is that happening? Why did that happen? Corruption. It's just corruption. Corruption is an old sin.

If you could go back in time and you could speak to like a, you know, like an, you can find an Aztec woman in, you know, Central America or South America. And you pull out your iPhone and you show to your iPhone and you, you basically couldn't explain it to her, right?

You would have no way to connect with regards to this piece of technology. But if you said to her today, let me tell you about the world in 2021. Powerful people sometimes unjustly treat those further down the food chain.

[8 : 01] She would nod her head and say, yes, I understand that. It's always been the way. 3,000 years since Naboth was killed, was murdered, was executed.

The world has made no progress on this. It's all that to say the story of Jezebel and Ahab, what they did to Naboth is being played out all over the world. So back to the story.

What's God's response to this? Verse 17 to 23. What does he do? What does God do? He speaks. He speaks his word into that situation. The word of God comes to Ahab.

God speaks to Ahab through Elijah and says, I saw what you did. I know what you have done. And then in very colorful ways says, judgment will come for you.

Now you might say, yes, but that's a bit late for Naboth though, isn't it? And you're right. Why not beforehand?

[9 : 02] Why did not God stop it before it happening? And I don't know the answer to that question. But this is what the Bible promises. The Bible does not guarantee that faithful people will not be the

victims of injustice.

We know this. It happens all the time. But it does promise that justice will come. It will come eventually. And that is important. So the question is here, is this.

Knowing this about God. That he will judge. That he will bring justice. What does that do for us? How does that change us? How does that form us? You might think, well, won't that make us into angry, judgey people?

No. It won't. Knowing God will judge the world. That he will bring justice. Eventually. Should actually make us peacemakers.

Let me explain this. Sometimes people who seek after justice. Who seek after justice passionately. Sometimes.

[10:09] If they don't have the biblical meta narrative. Of God as ultimate judge. Sometimes these folks who are very justice focused.

Can become so committed to justice. They become what they hate. They become people who lack mercy. Miroslav Volf is helpful here.

I think I've quoted him before to you. Volf is a theologian. He grew up in communist Yugoslavia. His father was tortured in a concentration camp. He was interrogated himself many times.

And persecuted. And I say that just to show you. Just to let you know. That he's not some ivory tower scholar. He says. The only way. That we can be people who are peacemakers.

Who seek justice. But be peacemakers in that. Is by believing in a God. Who will write things one day. Who will judge. And let me quote him here. He says. My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance.

[11:07] I'll read that again. My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance. My thesis will be unpopular with people in the West. But imagine speaking to people as I have.

Whose cities and villages have been plundered. Burnt. Leveled to the ground. Whose daughters and sisters have been raped. Whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. Your point to them. We should not retaliate.

Why not? I say the only means for prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God. If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end of violence.

That God would not be worthy of our worship. Volf says we can put our swords down. We cannot be people who seek revenge.

Doesn't mean we don't seek for right outcomes and fairness. But we don't be people that seek revenge. Because we know that God will settle accounts one day. Let me tell you another story. So this is Chris Wright.

[12:08] Dr. Chris Wright. He's an Anglican theologian. He was speaking in India at a conference a few years ago. And he was speaking on Old Testament narratives. And a local professor, an Indian professor, came up to him and said, I'm a Christian.

And I became a Christian by reading the Old Testament. The Old Testament stories. He said, that's what led me to trusting in Christ. Chris Wright relays the story in an article.

I'll read a little section to you here. He, that's the Indian professor, grew up in one of the many oppressed groups in India. Part of a community that systematically exploited and treated with contempt and justice 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 in his community. He threw himself into his education.

He 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 vengeance.

[13:11] He was contacted in his early days at college by some Christian students. And they gave him 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, 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, abusive 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. He was a God of real justice. A God who identified with the real villains and took real action against them. I never knew such a God existed, he proclaimed. He read on through the rest of the Old Testament and found his first impression and confirmed this God constantly took the side of the oppressed and took direct action against their enemies. [14 : 15] 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. Folks, God will bring justice, he will bring judgment.

This is a good thing. Now you might be impatient for this and you might look around the world and your lived experiences. But I read about the, you know, the heir of the Red Bull dynasty. I read these stories and it seems like people are getting away with lots of things in the world today. Does God even care about justice? It doesn't look like it. Is God even in control? My response to that is consider the cross. Jesus' journey to the cross was a lot like Neighbors' story. False witnesses, a rigged court case, an execution. And now to a tree, in an act of astonishing injustice, God never looked less in control. [15 : 21] But of course he was. Of course he was. God was using the worst thing a human could do to another human. He was using that to save us.

God knows what he's doing. God is in control. Justice will come. It is delayed. It is not cancelled. Delayed. So more can know him. And more can know his forgiveness. Now, before we finish, the passage throws us a curveball right at the end. Elijah confronts Ahab. And then verse 27. When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite saying, Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? A curveball. To our great surprise, I think, Ahab actually repents. And what does God do? God postpones any immediate judgment on him. [16 : 23] Why? To give Ahab time to deepen his repentance. Does he do that? No. I have falls back into his old ways.

And all the things that God said would come to pass happen. Let's finish here by talking about big points. God will judge. He will bring justice. It is our great hope for the world made right. Also, he has gusto for mercy. I love that. That's how one scholar put it this week. God has gusto for mercy. It's your great personal hope. See, the cross means that God's judgment will not fall on you. God moves quickly towards the smallest step in the right direction. He is always keen to forgive. Even somebody as abhorrent as Ahab and Jezebel.

[17 : 33] So let me finish with this. You can trust in God's justice. You can trust in his justice. And you can rest in his forgiveness, knowing it won't fall on you.

Because you've trusted in the cross. And I hope that is a comfort to you this evening. Amen. Amen.