

1 Kings 21

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[0 : 0 0] Well, well done. Suffering through the, sitting through the parental guidance rated chapter 21 of 1 Kings.

We decided not to read the second half while the children were here. So it's on page 303 in the Bibles, if you'd like to take that out. Page 303, 1 Kings 21.

Some of the material we've come across in the Elijah narratives has been quite difficult to relate to. You know, calling fire down from heaven on your enemies.

Oh, well, that comes in a couple of chapters. You know, the attraction of worshipping Phoenician wooden gods on mountaintops, perhaps. Raising children back to life.

Fire and mountain, fire and earthquakes and that sort of thing. Chapter 21, very contemporary. Very easy to relate to. It's not about bowing down to foreign gods on a mountaintop.

[1 : 0 1] It's about how idolatry works in our desires and cravings and loves in the daily circumstances of our lives.

And it's placed between two chapters, which are all about international wars between Israel and Syria. But this one, this chapter, takes place all in and around a vineyard that belongs to Naboth in Jezreel, which is 30 kilometres up from Samaria, the capital.

And it is the domestic picture of what idolatry looks like at home. And to help us understand the passage, the writer himself reminds us in verse 25 and 26 near the end of the chapter that Ahab was absolutely the worst king Israel ever had, that he sold his soul to do evil, that he holds the all-time record for evil in the kingdom of God.

And this comment comes not on the top of Mount Carmel, when God sends fire from heaven, but in the vineyard. And it's the fruit of Ahab's coveting.

You know, when God gave the Ten Commandments back at Sinai, the first is all about having no other gods before God, not putting anything before him, not putting anything in the place of God.

[2 : 2 7] It's a commandment against idolatry. And the Tenth Commandment moves in exactly the same direction. It says, you shall not covet. And that goes into our hearts and to our motives and desires and says you have a problem with your love, what you fix your loves on.

And it does the same thing as the first commandment, saying if you fix your love on anything but God, then you will desire to possess what's not yours, that craving is sin.

So coveting is a life dominated by craving for something, something that becomes really important to me, that I stake my life on it, and I start to invest my happiness in it.

And the New Testament tells us that coveting is idolatry. It's not just desire, which can be neutral, it's desire which is out of order, because God is the only one above all others whom we should love.

And of course, you can covet things that are right in themselves and you can covet things that are wrong in themselves. You can covet your neighbour's wife or you can covet your neighbour's veggie garden.

[3 : 38] You can covet your neighbour's house or their perfect family. The key is this possessive instinct, which is second nature to us. And greed and coveting are the most common form of idolatry, because they're so perfectly natural to every single one sitting around you except you.

That was a joke. The thing about greed is that it's different from other sins, because most of us don't know when we're being greedy. We know when we're stealing and when we're lying, but this one hides itself from us and gives us a sort of a spiritual blindness.

We think we're doing okay. We don't think we're really greedy. Nobody does, while all of us struggle with it. And chapter 21 is like a case study of how coveting works in our hearts, how it spreads outward, how it makes us blind to how we treat others, how it always devastates community, and how God deals with it, how God deals with our greed today.

And in the first half of the chapter, I don't know if you picked this up, but it seems as though God is almost completely absent. And that's how coveting works. It's a kind of a replacement love.

We don't need God anymore. And in the second half, God is entirely present, and there's a bit of a shock at the end, which we'll have a look at. So I've got basically two points.

[5 : 06] One I've called Replacing God, verses 1 to 16. What sets the whole chapter going looks so normal. On the surface, it just looks like it appears to be a property deal.

And I'm so glad we didn't get this passage last week. And the property deal doesn't quite go the way that King Ahab wants.

We find verse 1, Naboth, poor old Naboth, he has the misfortune to have his property smack dab next to the new summer palace that Jezebel and Ahab have built away from Samaria.

And we know later it's inlaid with ivory and it's got every luxury. And Naboth, his extended family, have worked this land for generations, and it's now a beautiful vineyard.

And Ahab is relaxing on his ivory deck one day, and he looks over the vineyard, and his heart is gripped with a greedy thought, that vineyard would make a perfect veggie garden to feed all the profits.

[6 : 12] I could rezone it. I could plough in the vines and grow leeks and onions. I want it. I have to have it. So the king goes over to Naboth, the owner, and he offers him a very good price for the land, even offers to give him a better vineyard in exchange.

He's saying to himself, I'm not being greedy. I'm a good king. I'm not just going to take it. You know, I'm not a complete despot. But Naboth has a completely different view of the land.

Look at verse 3, please. The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers. This is the only reference to the Lord in the first 16 verses.

Naboth is horrified by Ahab's idea, not because he's ornery and wants a better price, but because this is the opposite view of the land of Israel than God's view.

To Naboth, it's like Ahab coming to him and saying, I'd like to buy your wife. I'd give you a good price or a better wife. Because since the Exodus, the land of Israel has been a fundamental component of the relationship between God and his people.

[7 : 27] And God says, the land is mine. It's holy land. It's not yours to buy and sell. And I'm giving it. I allocate land in clans, in tribes, and in family groups so that you will have it as an inheritance for your children.

And once you grow on the land, generation by generation, you are to share with those around you. And God makes a series of laws through Exodus, through Leviticus, through Deuteronomy, even through Joshua, that prevent land from changing hands, that prevents the accumulation of land in the hands of just one or a few people.

And the only exception we met in our last series, in the book of Ruth, where there may be no heirs to inherit the land, and the Lord makes provision for a member of the extended family to redeem the land.

That's why Naboth says, the Lord forbid. It's precisely because the Lord has forbidden this. The land is not mine, O King.

The land belongs to the Lord our God. He allocated it as an inheritance to the family. It's holy land. It truly belongs to him. What you are suggesting is not just against the law. It's a sin against God personally.

[8 : 45] And what Ahab is doing by offering Naboth money for the land is he is stealing away the true meaning of land. He's hijacking its holiness for his own grubby purposes.

He transforms this good gift that God had meant for an inheritance for the family into a simple financial transaction, which is exactly what we...

So much of what we do today, isn't it? I mean, we... In our culture, we've turned coveting into a virtue. And we fix our virtue by what I want.

I have, therefore I am. And what do you do when your greed is blocked? Well, Ahab's response is exactly the same as it was to God's announcement of judgment in chapter 20.

He's vexed and sullen and he goes to bed without his supper and buries his face in his pillow. And for the rest of the first half of the chapter, now Jezebel dominates.

[9 : 49] You see, verse 5, but Jezebel. Where is the king, she says. It's supper time. She finds him.

She wants to know why he's in one of his moods. And Ahab tells her a highly modified version of what happened. He omits Naboth's reference to God and the Lord's view of the land.

He makes out as though he's being really generous and the problem is with Naboth, which means he's already breaking more of the Ten Commandments on the go. He's bearing false witness to defend his coveting.

That's how coveting works. When you break the Tenth Commandment, you start to break others. In fact, generally, we don't break the other commandments unless coveting lies underneath because we set our heart on something else.

And in verse 7, Jezebel is incredulous. She says, did I marry a king or a pushover? Stop pouting. I'm going to fix this. I will do what you should have done in the first place.

[10 : 52] And in just a moment, the plan is fixed in her head and she swings into action. She grabs the king's seal. She writes letters to the elders and leaders in Jezreel. And under the cover of a Jewish religious fast, she says, put Naboth at the head of the table.

Bring some false accusers. Verse 10, then take him out and stone him to death. And they do. Here are the men who grew up with Naboth, who've known him since childhood, who are charged with the protection of this community.

And they do exactly what Jezebel wants so that Ahab gets his vineyard. Because coveting always leads us to treat others as obstacles in the way of what we want.

And it's very interesting. This chapter is written so beautifully. The writer drags us for a second time through every detail of Jezebel's devious scheme.

In verses 11 to 14, it's an exact mirror image, their action, of her letters and what she wants in verses 8 to 10. And why do we get this repetition?

[12 : 04] I think because the writer wants to highlight the weakness and cowardice of the elders. Not one of them lifts a finger to protest. There's not even an empty virtue signal sent.

They all recognise the ruthless plot to murder the innocent Naboth. They all know the lies it's going to take. They all know they're going to get their hands dirty. And they're going to have to execute him by throwing the rocks themselves.

Not one of them stands up for right. And what is true, as one commentator says, it's not just a lack of goodness, it's a lack of guts. And it may have been very costly for them to stand up to this woman.

It may have caused real suffering. It may have even cost them their lives. But it's highly instructive, isn't it? How in a culture which is given over to the worshipping of idols, when we replace God with what we want, there is a cruelty that takes place.

And we find out in ten chapters time that Jezebel has been so thorough that she's arranged the execution of Naboth's two sons at the same time.

[13 : 15] Because greed never takes place in a vacuum. It's always destructive of community. And you can tell it because it perpetuates fear, not faith.

It shows as we begin to care about all the wrong things. We love things that are less important more. And things that are more important less. And so much of what we see of injustice and the abuse of rights and people and victims in our world arises out of simple greed.

And a lack of a fear of God. So Naboth and his boys are ploughed into the earth and left to be eaten by the dogs. And it makes Jezebel's cheerful and chirpy tone in verse 15 disgraceful.

She happily announces to Ahab that she's done what she said. She's gotten the vineyard by getting rid of Naboth. She says, take possession of it. And it looks like Ahab's coveting has paid off.

And as he skips over to take possession of the vineyard, it seems like he's going to get away with it. And I think at this point in the chapter, if we're reading it, in our minds the question is, where is God?

[14 : 28] Is this God's kingdom or not? Why doesn't God step in? Why doesn't he stop this? Why doesn't he prevent Naboth's death? And so we turn to the second half of the chapter, my second point.

Because God does step in at verse 17. And the way God steps in in verse 17 is by his word, which is a sharp two-edged sword.

And one edge of the sword spotlights judgment. And one edge of the sword spotlights his mercy. So I've called the second point facing God. So we go from replacing God to facing God, verses 17 to 24.

And although the Lord is only mentioned once in the first half of the chapter, after verse 17, the Lord dominates the rest of this section. And notice, please, in verse 18, that the timing of God's word is absolutely perfect.

The word of the Lord comes to Ahab in verse 17. Arise, go down to meet Ahab the king who's in Samaria. Behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth where he has gone to take possession.

[15 : 40] The word of the Lord comes to Ahab right at the moment he is trying to take possession of the vineyard. And you can tell what God thinks of this because he still calls it the vineyard of Naboth, even though Naboth is dead.

And the perfect timing is matched by the perfect punishment God announces that perfectly fits Ahab's crime. Verse 19. Have you killed and taken possession? You will now be treated in exactly the way you've treated Naboth.

You left his body out to be eaten by the dogs. That's what's going to happen to you. Verse 20. How does Ahab respond? He says to Elijah, have you found me, oh my enemy?

He wants to blame Elijah. He wants to play games still and cover up. He says, Elijah, you're just a hater. You've got a problem with hate here, man.

You're going to try and ruin my day. What you are saying is only motivated by the fact that you're my enemy. Why can't we just be friends? He's fixed his love on the vineyard.

[16 : 53] He's gotten God out of the way. He's gotten Naboth out of the way. Come on, Elijah. Lighten up. Then Elijah lays out the edge of God's word of judgment with blistering clarity in the next verses.

Ahab, he says, you've traded your soul for evil. The Lord will cut off your house, every person in your family, just as you did to Naboth.

And Jezebel will die in similar circumstances. Again, we ask the question, why has God left it so late? Why didn't you step in, Lord, and protect Naboth?

Isn't justice delayed, justice denied? I mean, every day, Lord, that you delay your judgment is another day for innocence to be ploughed under, and Ahab and Jezebel to get away with worshipping their idols.

And I think that's exactly the question the writer wants us to ask, because he points out in verses 25 to 26 that Ahab's the worst king Israel's ever had.

[18 : 01] And I think it's a pain for him to even write this. And then in verse 27, we find that the word of the Lord has a different edge altogether.

It's the edge of mercy and abounding grace. And I think this comes as an even bigger surprise than the word of judgment. See, this time, Ahab's response to the word of judgment in verse 27 is that he repents.

And in verse 27, when he hears the words of Elijah, the word of judgment with blistering clarity, he puts off all his royal robes, he puts on sackcloth and ashes, he stops eating, he seems to have had a change of heart.

And my response as I study this, and your response probably is, Lord, don't get taken in by this. He's a fake. It's just crocodile tears. Bring the judgment, if not for our sake, for Naboth's sake.

We're always free, aren't we? We're asking God to bring judgment on others. But the word of the Lord comes again in verse 28, 29 to Elijah, announcing grace. And it's no good to doubt this repentance as being fake.

[19 : 13] It seems as though God himself treats Ahab's actions as genuine. And he says, have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself? Because he has, I'm going to delay the disaster again for his house.

And one commentator says, is it more of a surprise that Ahab humbles himself or that God restrains his hand? It's extraordinary grace that God is able to offer mercy even to an Ahab.

I think it's a wonderful thing when you start to think about it. Even when we're gripped by greed and our hearts full of coveting and other idols, even as we are sinning against the community by our attitudes and actions, we fear we cannot control our disordered loves.

It's here God is slow to judge, abounding in mercy and full of grace. And his mercy is meant to lead us to repentance.

And even the smallest movement of the heart of someone like Ahab, based on God's grace and goodness, finds deeper riches of mercy than we can imagine. And if you read on in the text to next week's passage, God does not cancel the judgment of Ahab, but he reschedules it.

[20 : 39] He moves the timetable, he postpones the sentence, offering Ahab the chance to continue his remorse and to deepen his repentance, to truly turn back to God.

Because even though his humbling is real, it doesn't continue. It's short-lived. And within six verses, he rejects the word of the Lord, follows lies, and so the judgment of God falls on him.

And we step away from the passage, and I think if we're honest with ourselves, we have to say we're powerless against the idolatry of our cravings and our covetings. And the Lord comes to us by a two-edged word.

And we have to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest what he says, because the word of the Lord is not just the opinion of God on things. We see here, as we've seen throughout these narratives, that the word of the Lord is the active agent by which God brings change.

And when we surrender our desires to the word of the Lord, by the power of his spirit, God is able to give us new hearts and begin to transform our desires, which is what we've already prayed for in this service.

[21 : 56] If you take the word of the Lord out of chapter 21, all you get is another headline. We have to find ways of allowing God's word to do the same thing in us.

To bring both edges of the sword of the word to our idols. The sword of judgment exposing our idols, killing our self-liars and our disordered loves.

And we also need to bring the word of the Lord as the sword of salvation. Continually changing our mind that God is tender in his love toward us. That as a father is toward his children, he knows our frame, that he gives us new life by his word.

And to do that, we can't treat his word like social media. You know, it can't just be a confirmation bias. We look to quickly look for things that I agree with, you know, a little bit of support or inspiration.

We need to lay our hearts open to murder and possession. And then we need to learn the grace of God to teach us habits of contentment and generosity. Kill the ■ Trade and conversion on our reward.

[23 : 03] And we need to learn the grace of God to our sh■hjure, to our lives of .. An open■azigh, to our advent from the■■e at theiah, and to our city. If the truth has been declared as a prisoner, that's of course, we want to do one another part, we want to ask ourselves. And so, we need to understand how our own territory is to our unlock the peninsula.