

Elijah, the King and Naboth

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[0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on September the 6th 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Elijah the King and Naboth and is from 1 Kings chapter 21 verses 1 to 29.

And you may like to have open the passage from 1 Kings chapter 21 on page 286. This is a fourth in a series on Elijah the prophet and the series concludes in three weeks time after the Good News Week services.

Let's pray. God, we thank you that you have spoken. We pray that you'll give us ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to believe and respond with faith to your word.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, Christopher Scase is still swanning around in Majorca, still getting off scot-free for what seems to be fraud and other crimes.

The killer of two policemen still seems to be free. People who wrought the tax system seem to get away with it or often they do. Probably we can read every day in the paper of somebody who does something wrong but yet gets off free.

[1 : 4 0] Crime doesn't catch up with them somehow. The justice system breaks down at some point. Why is there so much injustice in our world? If you're like me, there are times when you long for Christopher Scase to be brought back to justice.

And you long for the killer of the policeman to be found and tried and so on. Why is there injustice all the time? Indeed, we could take a step back from that and ask a more basic question.

Why does God allow evil things to happen in the first place? It's all very well to ask the question, well, why doesn't God act to bring these criminals to justice? But why doesn't God actually stop them in the first place from doing the bad things?

Why doesn't he stop the Christopher Scase from committing fraud years ago? If indeed that's what he's done. It would certainly make the world a much better place. Well, they're questions that people ponder.

Why is there injustice? Why doesn't God act to stop evil things happening in our world? Is God unfair? Is God impotent to act?

[2 : 4 8] In 860 BC or thereabouts, King Ahab was King of Israel. A bad king, as we've seen in the last three weeks.

A king who's been confronted by God's prophet Elijah. And yet he continues in his bad ways. In the passage we're looking at today, chapter 21, he in fact makes a very generous offer to his neighbour called Naboth.

King Ahab is on his summer retreat probably at Jezreel where he has yet another palace. It's a fairly wealthy king, fairly powerful nation of the day.

And his neighbour Naboth has a vineyard. And the king says to this chap Naboth, Give me or sell me, the word can mean both, sell me your vineyard so that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is near my house.

I will give you a better vineyard for it or if it seems good to you, I'll give you its value in money. That's a fair offer, a generous offer.

[4 : 02] But Ahab is doing the wrong thing here. And that's seen in various ways. In the Bible, often a vineyard is a symbol for Israel as God's people.

It's the case in the second reading we had from Mark chapter 12. The parable of the tenants of the vineyard. The vineyard stands for God's people Israel. The tenants are being bad people and they kill the heir, namely Jesus.

That symbolism may apply here because what Naboth is doing is wanting to change a vineyard, which may symbolise God's people, into a vegetable garden.

Now, the word vegetable garden, we might think, well, that's a common everyday thing. It actually occurs only twice in the whole Bible. And the other time it occurs, it applies to Egypt.

So maybe what's being symbolised here in a little way is Naboth transferring God's people into a pagan nation, in effect. Not so much to Egypt as just away from the God of Israel.

[5 : 16] Now, that may symbolically suggest that what Naboth is wanting to do here is the wrong thing. But there's more than that. His motivation is covetousness.

He desires something that is not his. And as a wealthy man, he thinks he can just buy out and get what he wants. Naboth's response to this offer is vehement.

He says in verse 3, The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance. He doesn't just say, and remember he's speaking to the king here, your majesty, your humble servant does not really want to sell my vineyard.

But rather, the Lord forbid, it's a strong oath that he's making to the king. Why? Why so strong an oath?

Why doesn't he take a better vineyard? Count his gains. The reason is because this is his family inheritance. Now, it's not just the tradition of having his parents and his parents' parents and his parents' parents' parents having lived in the land as though there's lots of family mementos and photographs on the mantelpiece and so on.

[6 : 30] It's something more significant than that. Because in Old Testament law, people were not allowed to either buy or sell their own land to another person forever.

Now, they did sell land from time to time. But every 50 years, a year of jubilee it was called, land would revert to its original owners. What Naboth is reflecting here is this is the land that God has entrusted to my family and it's not yours and it cannot be yours.

Now, there were times when people needed to sell land but after that 50 year period was over, it would revert back to ownership. It seems that Naboth is keeping Old Testament law here and Ahab the king is not.

Ahab the king who has abandoned God is abandoning God's standards. He's trying to exploit somebody in his kingdom, buying them out for his own greedy purpose even if it is only a vegetable garden.

What Ahab reflects is a person who has abandoned God and therefore necessarily ends up abandoning God's standards. That is, you abandon the right thinking about God and you end up with the wrong practice about God or to put it in words I've used in previous sermon elsewhere was to abandon the orthodoxy of belief and therefore you abandon the orthopraxy of practice or life or behaviour.

[8 : 04] The two go together all the time and Ahab is reflecting that. He's abandoned God so God's standards mean nothing to him. Well, Ahab's response is strange to say the least.

From a king he went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him. He lay down on his bed turned away his face presumably when people came in to see him he'd just turn away his face and be silent and he would not eat.

Like a little child. Like a spoiled brat that hasn't got what it wants. Probably most of you have had children at some stage like this. If you yourself in years past were not like this.

When you don't get what you want you just sulk. But this is the king sulking. This is the powerful king of the nation sulking because he can't get a vegetable garden.

Isn't it pathetic? But every time we've looked at Ahab in these recent weeks he is a pathetic character. He is a wimp. He is not a king in practice.

[9 : 15] Now the story could have ended there. Naboth kept his vineyard. The king went home and sulked but in the end he found another toy to play with anyway. But no his queen Jezebel even worse than he is she comes onto the scene.

The queen asks well why are you depressed that you will not eat? Fair thing for a wife to ask her husband I suppose. And he said well because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him give me your vineyard for money or else if you prefer I'll give you another vineyard for it.

But he answered I'll not give you my vineyard. The king doesn't tell the queen why Naboth wouldn't give the vineyard. He just says he wouldn't give it to me or sell it to me. And Jezebel said to him do you now govern Israel?

That is you're the king aren't you? Aren't you in control? Don't you have power? Well we know that in the end Ahab is not the king.

The trousers in his household are worn by his wife. She's the one who exercises all the influence. In fact throughout it's Jezebel who pushes and provokes and Ahab just does what his wife says.

[10 : 24] But of course we also know that in the end it is God who is king even if the people do not realise that. The question do you now govern Israel is an ironic one because at one level Jezebel governs the nation but at a deeper level in the end it will be God.

She goes on to say to him get up eat some food and be cheerful. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. I wonder what he thought.

Oh it's Father's Day coming up soon this will be my Father's Day present. He asks no questions. He doesn't say to her how are you going to do that?

Oh you can't do that that's the wrong thing to do. He is silence. He is silent. He asks no questions. We know that the evil queen goes away and concocts a plan to get this vineyard.

She deceives people. She uses her husband's seal to write letters under his authority. Either it means that her husband colluded or as I think more likely the case she just stole his seal.

[11 : 34] The queen had no right to a king's seal even if he was her husband and so she deceives people as though she's writing from him. In verse 9 we're told that what she wrote to the elders and nobles of Naboth's town were to proclaim a fast.

A fast would be held usually in a time of some national or regional or local crisis. A fast accompanied by prayer would seek to win God's mercy and forgiveness and sometimes to find the cause or culprit for the crisis.

We're not told what crisis is provoking this fast. Of course there is none. It's just a concocted event. But the whole nature of having a public fast would make it easy to find a culprit and pin blame on a culprit.

So she says proclaim a fast, put Naboth in the chief seat, a very unusual thing to do, clearly he's going to be framed, and then find two scoundrels, two worthless fellows.

Why two? Because she knew her Old Testament law better than her husband, even though she's not an Israelite by birth. Two witnesses were needed in a judicial case.

[12 : 41] One person alleges something against another and the other person counters, the person is to be presumed innocent. Good warning for us in our own ways in which we deal with people.

But when two people make allegations, that must be taken far more seriously. Two witnesses giving testimony must be taken very seriously indeed.

So that's why she finds two scoundrels, to give wrong testimony about Naboth. They're to say that he has cursed God, and the king.

That's probably just a purely fictitious charge. It may be that she knows what Naboth has said to A, the Lord forbid that I should sell my family inheritance and she's twisted those words into some sort of blasphemy.

But it's probably just that she has made up the charge of blasphemy against God and the king, both of which were punishable in the Old Testament by death.

[13 : 43] Naboth's own town, they carry out her plans. It shows that the elders and local officials of Naboth's own town, who would have known him, a little town, little community in those days, they're under the queen's influence.

They're open to corruption or bribes. They're not going to stand by Naboth, whom they must have known was an upright fellow, surely. He lived next to the palace after all.

He must have been somebody of some significance in the town to live there rather than out in the sticks or in a little tiny pokey house somewhere. And yet they abandoned their fellow citizen, open to corruption and bribery.

It shows where society had gone without God, depraved and decadent and corrupt. And then when they stone him almost hypocritically in verse 13, they take him outside the city to stone him to death.

Outside the city because they don't want to bring the city into disrepute or make it ritually unclean by having a dead body in there. Take the person outside to exit just as they did to Jesus outside the then city walls of Jerusalem because that's where executions should happen.

[15 : 01] The hypocrisy is that the city is full of uncleanness and corruption and the innocent man is being taken outside to be stoned to death. Naboth is dead.

Naboth is dead, the queen is told. In verse 14, they send a message to her to tell her that her plans have been carried out. Naboth is dead.

Indeed, later in 2 Kings 9, we discover that his sons were killed along with him. His whole family is dead. What an abominable crime has been committed.

Naboth is dead, the king is told, in verse 15. Jezebel then goes and reports to the king. She says, go and take possession of the vineyard because Naboth's dead. He's not alive. Not put to death for some trumped up charge.

Oh, he's dead. What a shame. You might as well go and have the vineyard. Of course, his sons are dead as well, so go and take it. And Ahab does. He asks no questions about Naboth's death.

[16 : 09] He goes and takes possession of his vineyard. The spoilt brat gets his veggie garden after all. And yet even taking that veggie garden, that vineyard, is again an illegal act.

Even if Naboth's sons are killed, the king has no right or claim to his land. There must still be a next of kin somewhere who ought to be now the owner of that vineyard.

But no, the king just walks in and takes the vineyard. Notice what's been going on in this progression here. How one sin of covetousness for a little vineyard has led to other things.

Deceit, corruption, bribery, false testimony, murder and an illicit taking of land.

Sin doesn't often stay by itself. It prefers to keep company with other sins. Several years ago I saw a child's video called Jimmy and the white lie.

[17 : 18] It was a cartoon type video about a little boy who lied. But because he lied he then was in the situation where he had to cover up that lie by another lie and yet another and various other things of wrongdoing and deceit.

And in the video the lie that he committed was represented by a little blob inside him. blob and each time he lied to cover up the previous lie that blob grew and grew and grew and in the end he couldn't control it within him and it came out of him and gradually like a great big lump of plasticine or something it grew and grew and grew and in the end it covered his whole bedroom.

He couldn't control it in the bedroom and it started bursting out of the walls of the bedroom. Now of course it's a bit of a silly cartoon representation but it shows us very clearly the nature of sin.

It spreads, it grips, it grows, it takes hold. It was the same for Jimmy, it was the same for Ahab and Jezebel. One sin leads to another, leads to another and it snowballs and grows and in the end an innocent man is murdered along with all his sons and family just for the sake of a vegetable garden.

Naboth is dead, an innocent man killed for a veggie garden. He is a faithful Israelite, he's upholding Israelite law, he's a goody, he's not a baddie, he doesn't deserve this death, it's a perversion of justice.

[18 : 48] But what seems to be worse is that God seems silent. Why hasn't God acted? Why hasn't God got in there and got a righteous witness to stop Naboth's death? Why hasn't God sent a prophet earlier to stop all this happening?

Why has God allowed this injustice to happen? Is God unfair? Is God impotent? Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah.

Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel who rules in Samaria. He's now in the vineyard of Naboth where he's gone to take possession. Go to him. God's not silent, he speaks.

He sends his prophet here and Elijah's told what to say in verse 19. You shall say to him thus says the Lord, have you killed and also taken possession?

This is a stinging criticism and accusation. Are you a con man as well as a murderer? Is in effect what's being said here. It's the elders and the officials of the town who killed Naboth.

[19 : 57] Ahab was just silent. He didn't even know he was being killed. But he is guilty of murder.

His passivity is no excuse. He asked no questions, he kept silent, but he is as guilty as his wife and the elders and the officials.

He let the evil happen. Inaction is as guilty as action sometimes. Sins of omission, the things we omit to do, bring us guilt as well as some of the things that we do do that are wrong.

Sin you see is not just doing the wrong thing, it's keeping quiet, being passive, inactive when we ought to be active and do something to curb guilt and sin from others.

So Elijah pronounces sentence. You shall say to him, God says to Elijah, thus says the Lord, in a place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.

[21 : 07] Death, you see, is appropriate for a murderer, appropriate even for a coveter and the added indignity of dogs licking up the blood show just how severely God treats this crime.

That's what God told Elijah to say and now Elijah goes and he meets Ahab and it's Ahab who speaks first and says, have you found me, O my enemy? He knows from the beginning that the prophet is his enemy because he's met him before and he knows now that he comes as his enemy, as his adversary rather than as his friend.

And Elijah and the answer to the question is I have found you. But in the end it's not really Elijah who's found him, it's God.

God always finds out the sinner. There's no fugitive who can flee from God forever and live. God finds out the sinner in the end.

It is God who's found Ahab here. You may be able to flee from the Australian authorities in Mallorca for a long time but you'll never be able to flee from God forever and Ahab can't.

[22 : 20] God finds him in the form of the prophet Elijah and Elijah condemns the king. Because you've sold yourself to do what is evil, that is a deliberate action, you've deliberately rejected God and his goodness and pursued evil, then I, God, will bring disaster on you, I will consume you, I will cut you off from Ahab.

It's Elijah speaking these words but it's God who's going to do the action. It's an unusual way of expressing what God is going to do. I, Elijah, is saying but I, God, will consume you and cut off from Ahab every male bond or free in Israel.

That is his dynasty will end. The same will happen to Ahab as has happened to his predecessors, the kings of Israel. I will make of your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, 70 years before he was the king of Israel.

Indeed in some sense the first king of that kingdom because when Solomon died the kingdom divided into two. There was a sort of not so much a civil war but just a division, a defection. The north kingdom which is what we're talking about here, Jeroboam was king of but he was a baddie.

He set up false shrines for worship. He became the model of bad kings of Israel. Everyone was in the end a bit like Jeroboam the son of Nebat and Ahab's no exception.

[23 : 42] Jeroboam's dynasty ended. There was a coup a bit later on. Basha became king but the same thing happened to him. His dynasty ended and Ahab is king and now Ahab's dynasty also will end because all three of them have provoked the Lord to anger by their sin and led the nation astray into sin.

But God's not just concerned for Ahab, he's concerned for Jezebel. About her he says that the dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel. And what God says happens. 2 Kings 9.

This very thing happens. But notice that it's not just the dogs shall lick up her blood but the dogs shall eat her. She won't even be buried. It's not as though she'll be killed and her body buried but there's a bit of blood left on the ground that the dogs lick up.

No. The dogs shall eat her corpse. How humiliating because in the ancient world not to be buried was the ultimate indignity. But that will happen to this evil queen.

Indeed there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols as the Amorites the people who had lived in the land before Israel had done whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites.

[24 : 56] A summary condemnation of Ahab for all his sin not just the sin of Naboth's vineyard but for all his sin in his life. God you see is not unjust.

God is not unfair. No sin escapes his attention or action and what he says happens in the punishment of Jezebel and Ahab.

The judgment of sinners in the Bible is to be a warning for us. It's a warning to us because it points us to God's final ultimate and perfect judgment of all people.

Jezebel doesn't die immediately. She lives and for the term of her life probably people thought God is being unjust here. Why does she the wicked queen get away with it and live?

Even if in the end she does die terribly. But in the end you see it's a call to us to trust in God's final judgment. That no sin escapes him.

[26 : 06] Trust in that judgment on the last day when Jesus returns because God's justice is perfect. But this story has an odd post script.

Ahab repents. When Ahab heard Elijah's words he didn't accuse him of being the troubler. He didn't go fleeing sullen and sulky back to his bed but rather he repented.

Tore his clothes, put sackcloth over his bare flesh, fasted, lay in the sackcloth and went about dejectedly. This is not the sullen sulk so much as repentance.

We may think well he's just acting it here trying to pull the wool over Elijah's eyes but God seems convinced. God says to Elijah in verse 29 have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?

This is real repentance from the king. Reminds us that repentance is always a possibility. For any sinner no matter what any sinner has done.

[27 : 07] Indeed the Bible is full of forgiven murderers and adulterers and cheats and other sinners. The world, Christian churches are full of forgiven sinners. In effect we're no different.

Repentance is God's possibility for us always. It's also another reason why punishment is delayed. If God were to punish every sinner as they deserve immediately after they commit the sin this world would have no people left in it.

But God delays his judgment to give people time to repent and to turn to him. His silence therefore is not an acquiescence or acceptance or condoning of sin but is a merciful granting of time to repent.

God has not done. And yet having said that the very end of this chapter is still strange, very odd. Doesn't even seem fair.

Because Ahab has humbled himself before me I'll not bring the disaster in his days but in his son's days I'll bring the disaster on his house. And as Elijah here predicts that's what happens in 2 Kings 9 Ahab's son Joram dies in Naboth's place as predicted.

[28 : 24] But that doesn't seem fair. Why should the son suffer for the father's sins? Why should Joram have his blood licked up by dogs? What's he done wrong even though he turns out to be a baddie?

Is it God being unfair? Why should a son suffer for the sins of another or for the father? But on the contrary God is just. It's not an act of unfairness on God's part because sin has to be paid for.

The debts have to be met. They can't just be, oh well that's alright, forget it and be pushed aside. That would be immoral. The question is who pays for sin?

It looks unfair and unreasonable that Joram should pay for his father's sin. The unfairness of that points us to a greater unfairness.

When another innocent son, a perfectly innocent son, bears not the sin of a father but the sins of the world. Unjustly, unfairly we might say.

[29 : 32] He does not deserve that at all when he died on a cross for us. But it's there in that innocent son's death, 860 years after this and 2,000 years before us, that we find God's perfect judgment and justice and yet also his perfect mercy.

sin is dealt with properly. It is paid for properly. But it's paid for by God's son, Jesus Christ.

And that's the heart of what Christians believe. It's the heart of the gospel. That God has paid for our sin himself. He hasn't said, oh well forget it, it doesn't matter, that's immoral.

But at huge cost to himself, his innocent son bore our sins on the cross. A final question may still remain.

Why didn't God act earlier? Why doesn't God stop evil from happening in the first place? Why didn't he stop Jezebel's evil plan? Why didn't he intervene to save Naboth's life?

[30 : 48] In the end perhaps we don't know. But if there were no evil in this world, if God prevented any evil from occurring, then of course there would be no cross of Christ.

And while on the one side that would be a good thing because Jesus would not need to have died for us and gone through the agony of the cross. On the other, if there were no evil and therefore no cross, there would not be the glory of God's grace evident in our world.

The glory of a God who is perfectly just and yet abundantly and perfectly merciful. A God who is himself righteous, yet declares sinners righteous through faith in his son Jesus Christ.

Ours you see is an astonishingly great God. Bigger in one sense than our conceptions can grasp but yet a God who is perfectly just and holy and perfectly merciful.

Forgiving sinners but himself paying for their sin. A God whose love is so deep that he should do that for us who are sinners in effect just like Ahab, just like Jezebel.

[32 : 21] One songwriter has put it like this. How deep the Father's love for us.

How vast beyond all measure. That he should give his only son to make a wretch his treasure. How great the pain of searing loss.

The Father turns his face away. As wounds which mar the chosen one. Bring many sons to glory. Behold the man upon the cross.

My sin upon his shoulders. Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.

It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life. I know that it is finished.

[33 : 28] I will not boast in anything. No gifts, no power, no wisdom. But I will boast in Jesus Christ.

His death and resurrection. Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer. But this I know with all my heart.

His wounds have paid my ransom.