



I think we'd all agree to have some kind of home to live in is a basic necessity of life. It goes with things like food and clothing as among those things we need to exist. But for those of us who live here on the SF Peninsula having a roof over your head isn't always a given. We live in an area where rents are sky high and housing prices are off the charts. Young families with a dream of home ownership have to seriously adjust their expectations of living here. For some, that's a hard dream to let go of. I've seen people willing to endure a two-hour commute just to fulfill that dream. I've seen couples move across the country, leaving their family, church and community just to fulfill that desire. I've seen people willing to lie and cheat to get into the house they want.

This kind of obsession isn't reserved for those with limited finances. The desire for more can overtake those who already have way more than enough. In fact, many first time buyers are being "aced out" by wealthy investors whose cash offers trump their bids. Prices are driven up by these cash offers and hard-working people can't compete. I wonder what God thinks about all of this? Does he even care? Does God care about things like real estate transactions?

This morning we come to a story that reveals God does care about real estate. He cares about real estate because he's a God of justice. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "*Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land*" (Isaiah 5:8). Micah wrote, "*Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds...They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance*" (Micah 2:1-2).

1 Kings 21 is a story about how this God of justice deals with the injustice of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, and it all started with the desire for a little more land.

The Beginning of Injustice

Let's pick up the story in verses 1-2.

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. 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 normally resided in Samaria, but he had a second house in Jezreel, which was about 20 miles northeast of Samaria. A man named Naboth owned a vineyard next to the royal estate. Somehow Ahab got it in his mind to expand a bit. Maybe he had a

landscape architect who made a comment about Naboth's land: "Wow! That would be perfect for a vegetable garden!" Ahab began to think, "You know, I could use a vegetable garden. In fact, I **need** a vegetable garden!" So he decides to make Naboth a solid offer. He could either swap his vineyard for a better one, or he could just give him full cash value. It's all above board, right?

But look at Naboth's response in verse 3.

But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors."

Why was he so adamant in his refusal? Well, Naboth's thinking was shaped by God's word. In Leviticus 25:23 God says, "*The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.*" Then in Numbers 36:7 God says, "*No inheritance in Israel is to pass from one tribe to another, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal inheritance of their ancestors.*" Only in cases of an extreme emergency could land be sold and even then provision was made for it to be returned to its original family. Naboth is clearly a man of integrity; a man of God's word. That's why he says, "The Lord forbid I should do this." He's a man more concerned about pleasing the Lord than getting ahead or even placating the King.

How do you think Ahab handled that? Look at verse 4.

So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

He goes off and sulks. Remember, this is a grown man, the King of Israel, but he acts like a child and runs into his room. He slams the door, lays on his bed, stuffs his head into his pillow and pouts. Don't you feel bad for him? You know, it wasn't wrong for him to want a vegetable garden, but now that desire has turned into an obsession, and that is wrong. As we move through this story, we're going to see several of the Ten Commandments violated, but the first one to go is the last of the Ten: "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house...or anything that belongs to your neighbor*" (Exodus 20:17).

This is often how injustice begins. This is how all relational conflict starts. James says, "*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight*" (James 4:1-2). Injustice is hatched in covetous hearts; hearts obsessed not with God's word but with getting what we want. I've seen grown men become sullen and vexed just like Ahab when they don't get

what they want. I've done it myself. "Honey, are you okay?" my wife asks. I shoot back, "I'm fine." No, you're not; you're pouting. And in your pouting, you're trying to manipulate those around you. That's exactly what happens next.

The Carrying Out of Injustice

Enter Jezebel. I have a strong hunch Ahab knew his wife would notice his pouting.

His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?"

He answered her, "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.'"

Jezebel his wife said, "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" (verses 5–7).

Ahab says, "I made a perfectly reasonable request to Naboth and he wouldn't budge." Notice he doesn't tell her everything Naboth said. He leaves out the part about this land being "the Lord forbid that I should give up the inheritance of my ancestors." This is called the "spinning" the truth. He made it sound like Naboth was just unreasonable and stubborn rather than acting on Godly principle. It didn't really matter, though, because Jezebel didn't have any principles. Her response is classic. Let me paraphrase: "Hey, last time I checked, sweetie, you're the King around here. Where I'm from, Kings get what they want. Stop being such a wimp and watch me show that little grape picker next door who is boss." So Ahab orders some room service and Jezebel strides off to the Oval Office. She moves quickly.

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. In those letters she wrote:

"Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them bring charges that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."

So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people. Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. Then they sent word to Jezebel: "Naboth has been stoned to death (verses 8–14).

She uses Ahab's letterhead and scratches out an official letter to the elders and nobles of Naboth's city. She makes it all seem very religious. It's like she proclaims a day of prayer and fasting. She also makes it seem legal because she orders up two witnesses, which the law required, as well as the appropriate penalty. And everything is carried out exactly as she wanted. By the way, it

doesn't say it here but 2 Kings 9:26 tells us his sons were also killed, otherwise his sons would have inherited his land. Now to coveting we can add bearing false witness and murder. Stealing comes next.

Word is sent to Jezebel that the deed is done and she gives her husband an early birthday present.

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard (verses 15–16).

The writer conveys all of this in very stark terms. It's all very matter of fact. It's all wrapped up and tied with a nice little bow. It only cost Jezebel a postage stamp. But one thing to notice is the frequency with which the writer uses Naboth's name throughout this story. Over and over he talks about "Naboth the Jezreelite." Already in this story his name has appeared almost 20 times. Even after his death his name is mentioned six times. One writer says he haunts the scene like a ghost that will not be laid to rest (Jerome T. Walsh). It's like Naboth may be dead, but not to God.

There are several things we learn here about injustice. We learn injustice is often about power. Whether it's a schoolyard bully stealing a weaker child's lunch, or a husband beating up a wife, it's about power. Here it's the power of the government via a passive King and a vicious Queen. It's the power of compliant nobles and elders who should have stood up to them and even warned Naboth of what was coming down. They knew it was a set-up, but they just did what they were told. No doubt they were afraid. They had wives and children and jobs that were at stake. "Don't ask any questions. Just do what you're told." We know government does have a God-ordained role to play and we should respect that, but throughout history governing authorities have often used their power to oppress the weak. The genocide in Rwanda is one example that took place just 20 years ago. Hutus were incited by the government to kill their own Tutsi neighbors and fellow church members. They were lied to. They were told the Tutsis were out to kill them. Over the next 100 days some 800,000 Tutsis were slaughtered with machetes.

There's something else we learn: God's servants may suffer injustice for doing what's right. Naboth paid the ultimate price for his refusal to sell his land. We might think he should have just done it to save his own skin, but he stood firm for what was right. We might think God should have protected such a man. We might think God would never let a man like that die, but that's not the way life works. It's true there are times when God intervenes and saves a man like Naboth. Moses was saved from Pharaoh's plan to kill the Hebrew newborns. Daniel was saved from being devoured by the lion. The toddler Jesus was saved from Herod's massacre of Bethlehem's little ones. But even though he **can** and **does** sometimes protect his servants, he doesn't always do it, at least in a way that preserves their life on earth. There's a mystery

here. We don't always understand God's ways. Why were James and Stephen allowed to be killed while Peter was set free from jail? If you have a theology that doesn't allow for that, your faith won't survive.

Finally, we learn that in this world, it may seem injustice is rewarded. Ahab got what he wanted. He takes possession of Naboth's land. He's got his vegetable garden. Jezebel's happy because her husband is no longer moping around the house in his pajamas. Sometimes that's just the way it is in this world, and sometimes we just wonder, how long? How long, O Lord, will you allow the bullies to win? How long will you allow the wicked to prosper? As Abraham asked, *"Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"* (Genesis 18:25) It's a good question.

God Judges Injustice

This story answers that question. Enter Elijah. He's been on the sidelines for a bit. While Ahab is checking out his plans for a new garden, God is speaking to Elijah.

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: "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. Say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' 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!'" (verses 17–19).

Even though it seemed like the perfect crime had been committed and no one knew, God knew and God saw. At that very moment he saw Ahab strolling through his new garden. Notice how he'd accuse Ahab of murder, even though it was really his wife who pulled it off. Ahab knew Jezebel and he knew what she'd do. He was just as guilty as she was, and he would pay the price. Elijah knew a message like this could get him into some serious trouble, but he obeyed the Lord and went straight to Ahab.

Ahab said to Elijah, "So you have found me, my enemy!"

"I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. 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. 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 also concerning Jezebel the Lord says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.'

"Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country" (verses 20–24).

Ahab isn't exactly happy to see Elijah. No wonder. Elijah stands before him and pokes his long, boney finger into Ahab's chest and says, "Enough! It's time for judgment. You will die, and so will your wife and so will every last descendent. Your name will be

wiped out." Ahab must have broken out in a cold sweat. God had spoken. Hell was near. Then the writer adds this short epitaph.

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

You've heard of the Hall of Fame; well, these two were just inducted into the Hall of Shame. They outdid themselves in doing evil. They broke all the records. The Naboth thing was just the tip of the iceberg. The root of it all wasn't their social behavior, it was how they went after idols. The main problem wasn't horizontal, it was vertical.

What does this teach us? Sooner or later, God will intervene to bring justice to his wronged people. There is an end to God's patience. Joseph Alexander put it this way,

There is a line, by us unseen,
That crosses every path;
The hidden boundary between
God's patience and his wrath.

That's a scary prospect for those who like to walk on that line. But for those who are on the other side, for those who are like Naboth, that's a comforting prospect.

Chris Wright tells a story of a man from India who was led to Christ by reading the Old Testament. At the time he taught engineering at the local university. But he'd grown up among the despised Dalit (outcast) community in his village, and his whole family had suffered greatly at the hands of the high-caste Hindus in the village—all kinds of harassment, violence and injustice. He had a great thirst for revenge against his oppressors. He worked hard at school to get into the university so he could get a job with some influence and power, and then turn the tables on his enemies. The day he arrived at the university, he found a Bible translated into Telugu (his state language) in his room. He'd never read the Bible, though he knew it was the Christians' holy book. He opened it at random and started reading this story of Naboth in 1 Kings. The story had so many familiar elements. "This was my story," he said. Like Naboth his family had experienced theft of land, false accusations, murders, the brutality of the powerful against ordinary people.

But then he read on and was amazed to read about another man called Elijah, who, in the name of some God of the Bible, denounced King Ahab, and said he'd be judged and punished by this God. This was astounding. He had millions of gods within Hinduism to choose from, but he'd never heard of a god who took the side of the suffering and condemned the government and the powerful for their wicked deeds. "I never knew such a God existed" were his exact words. As this man continued to read the Bible, he learned about Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. But his road to conversion started by meeting the God who stands with the oppressed.

He's the God of justice. "I never knew such a God existed!" That's a great line and a great response to this story, but that's not the end of this story. There's more. There's something even more surprising.

In Judgment, God Remembers Mercy

Look what happens next in verse 27.

When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

This is the second time we've seen Ahab in a funk. Last time he was pouting over Naboth's refusal, but this time his response is appropriate, and it surprises us. We thought Ahab was a lost cause. But what may surprise you more is how God responded. Look at verses 28–29.

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: "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."

I seem to detect some pleasure in what God tells Elijah here. It's like God says to Elijah, "Did you see that? That's pretty impressive!" I'm not sure Elijah was quite so impressed. With all he'd been through with Ahab he probably thought, "Is God really buying this? Is he that gullible? Has God gone soft? Is he really going to forgive that scuzzball?" One thing to notice here is God didn't take away the judgment, he just postponed it. Payday is still on its way, but the timing has changed. It will still happen. You can read about it in 2 Kings 9-10. But it won't happen now. At the very least we could say that even in judgment God remembers mercy.

We might wonder if Ahab's repentance was sincere. There's a difference between genuine repentance and feeling bad about having to suffer the consequences of our choices. His repentance was more like remorse. It was sincere to a point, but it wasn't very deep and it wasn't lasting. If it was deep and lasting, there'd have been change. He'd give up Naboth's vineyard. He'd tear down the idols. He'd deal with Jezebel.

And maybe that's how we should think as we close this story. We've seen that our God is a God of justice and he'll see to it his people get justice. It may not come as soon as we'd like, but it will come. Meanwhile, we have to ask where we might find ourselves in this story.

Maybe you identify with Naboth. You're waiting for justice. You've been the victim of injustice. If that's you, you're in good company. You're not left alone. You have a God who gets it. You see, we have our own Naboth. How can we read this story without thinking of Jesus? The Bible says, "*The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against*

Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward..." (Matthew 26:59–61). Same story: false witnesses; an innocent man is set up and killed. And we're left wondering, how long, O Lord? He gets it. The good news of this story is justice will come. You may or may not see it this side of heaven, but it will come.

Or maybe you find yourself in this story somewhere on the side of Ahab, the elders and nobles, or even the two false witnesses. It seems to me at any time one of them could have stopped it all. Ahab could have stopped pouting and just accepted God's "No." One of the elders or nobles or even one of the false witnesses could have just said, "I can't do it. I won't set this innocent man up. Let the chips fall where they may." I believe that's the challenge this story leaves with us: to stand for God on the side of justice. To speak up. To do something.

In Gary Haugan's book, *Just Courage* he tells the story of a young missionary intern who stood up against the vast and violent business of rape for profit that brutalized tens of thousands of women and girls in San Francisco. Born in 1869, Donaldina Cameron grew up in a loving Christian home on rugged ranches in the wild west of California in the decades following the gold rush. By the 1880s she'd enrolled in a teacher's college in Oakland but was forced to abandon her education when her father died. Donaldina had hoped to get married and raise children on a ranch, but one day a missionary friend began sharing shocking stories of the illicit commercial sex trade operating in the alleys of Chinatown in San Francisco. Tens of thousands of girls were being shipped in from China and sold as slaves to feed the appetites of the overwhelmingly male population. The youngest girls were sold as house servants and teenage girls were sold into prostitution, a trade so vicious that most died within five years. The horrors were unspeakable.

Donaldina found herself seized by the plight of the Chinese girls who were being brutalized as sex slaves, and when her friend asked her if she'd be willing to intern with a small mission outpost that was trying to rescue and restore the girls, the 25-year-old Donaldina accepted the offer. Within a few months of her arrival in the dark epicenter of this brutal sex trade, the leader of the mission fell ill, and Donaldina eventually found herself managing the mission. She never left. Over the next 45 years she endured death threats, assaults and corrupt authorities. She rescued and restored more than 3,000 girls from sex slavery through daring nighttime raids in which she, along with the police, wielded ax and sledgehammer. In her lifetime Donaldina would see the end of the notorious "yellow slave trade" in her community.

By the way, human trafficking generates \$9.5 billion yearly in the United States. San Francisco is still among the top jurisdictions in the country for this. God is the God of justice and he'll get justice for his people. In the meantime, who will we stand with? Will we just go with the flow or will we stand with the God of justice?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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