

5. God's Word Brings Justice

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Date: 15 February 2009

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] That's page 303 and we'll have a moment of prayer. God our Father, we are hungry.

Hungry for the living word that alone can change us and build us up. We pray that from your hand we will receive that today. That through the word of scripture, spoken by the Holy Spirit, those many centuries ago, and yet a living word for today, that you will lead us to the Lord Christ, the living word himself, in whose name we pray. Amen.

I wonder what kind of God you think a world like ours needs. What do suffering, oppressed, bereaved, tormented people need to hear?

Now naturally, we would think they need to hear about the love of God, and that's absolutely true.

People whose hearts are grieving, people whose lives are torn, need to know that God, the Lord, the ruler of heaven and earth, the God who made heaven and earth, cares for them and loves them.

But I think beyond that, we need a God who is powerful, a God who is a God of justice. If we simply have a God of love, then we're not sure whether he can actually deliver the goods.

[1 : 37] Is he capable of dealing with the giant evils of the world? Is he someone who can look down on the oppression, on the hardship, and do something about it?

Is he able to stand up to the great forces that sweep through history, those chilling winds that sometimes sweep down the corridors of history and leave us completely baffled?

We need a God who, as Amos says, can roar like a lion. That's the kind of God we need, because unless he is like that, then his love is going to be weak and ineffective.

And so today, in this Elijah story, we're going to look at the word of God which brings justice.

Throughout the Elijah stories, we've looked at how this prophet Elijah brings the living word of God into the idolatrous situation of Ahab and Israel.

We're now almost at the end of Ahab's reign, and this is the last public confrontation between Elijah and Ahab. First of all, you might think it's a fuss about not very much.

[2 : 49] If you look at the first few verses, Ahab seems extremely reasonable. I'll give you another vineyard, he says. Or if you don't want another vineyard, I'll give you money. And we might well feel, as some people have felt, for example, at the beginning of Luke or Daniel, that Daniel makes an awful lot of fuss about food.

But as we'll see, there are great issues underlying this. This is not a trivial issue about whether you have a vineyard or whether you have a vegetable garden.

This passage is passionately concerned with the question, is there a God of justice? Is there a God who cares about how people behave?

In particular, who cares about how rulers and those in authority behave? In many ways, a good comment on this is the words in Luke 18, verse 7.

Luke 18, verse 7, that's the end of the so-called parable of the unjust judge. And Luke writes, or rather, the Lord Jesus himself says, Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

[3 : 59] Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

Because once again, we have the confrontation of the king and the prophet.

Now, many people would prefer if the Bible were confined within the walls of the church, if its writ only ran in religious buildings and among church-going people.

And this is an idea which is very popular and it's very dangerous. Because once we do that, then we have a domestic God, don't we, whose only concern is for my well-being, for my comfort, and so on.

Remember, in the days when I was in Durham, we were having a series of sermons on the Old Testament prophets Nahum and Zephaniah with their passionate concern about God and the nations, particularly about the great Assyrian Empire and how it seemed to be totally and utterly unrestrained by any power at all in heaven or on earth.

Remember some of the students saying afterwards, You know, I never thought there was a God like that. I always thought God was about prayers and about churches and about being nice and about being good.

[5 : 20] And that began, for some people, their journey of faith because they realized this God actually cared. This God was not a God who was indifferent. This God was not a God who simply allowed evil and suffering and violence without caring about it.

And this is the kind of God that people need to hear about. It's the kind of God we need to preach. A God who cares. A God who judges. Because ultimately, that's what the story is about.

We believe in a God who will create a new heaven and a new earth. And what does Peter say about that new heaven and new earth? In which righteousness, in which justice dwells.

That is the kind of, that's the kind of circumstance that's going to mark the new creation. There will be no injustice. There will be no, there will be no bribes, there will be no treachery, there will be no oppression.

A new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. So let's look at the story then. And I want to look at it in two, there are two broad parts to the story.

[6 : 30] Verses 1 to 16, which I'm going to call God seems to allow injustice to triumph. Verses 1 to 16, God seems to allow injustice to triumph.

And then verses 17 to the end, verses 17 to 29, God always judges injustice. Let's look first of all then, that God always seems to allow, God, sorry, God seems to allow injustice to triumph.

This is a note that's often heard in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms. Listen to Psalm 73. I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

That whole psalm develops that. And then, the psalm that we just sung a moment or two ago, Arise, O God, and judged the earth. Now, God's people suffer as do other people suffer from unjust regimes.

God's people suffer when there is oppression. God's people suffer as do other people in places like Zimbabwe. And they cry out, how long? How long, O Lord?

[7 : 46] Why do you not judge the earth? And throughout history, the wicked have seemed to prosper. So first of all then, let's look at what's at stake here.

What's actually happening? Because as I say, it may seem a great fuss about nothing Ahab comes across as very reasonable and unlike Jezebel, doesn't instantly resort to authority.

Give me your vineyard, verse 2, 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 I will give you its value in money.

Now that seems very fair, very reasonable. Why on earth all the fuss? Now it wasn't absolutely forbidden to Israelites to sell the land, especially if they were selling it to help the poor.

Indeed, that was the whole idea behind the Jubilee year of Leviticus 25, that every 50 years there was to be a Jubilee year when the poor were to be released from their debts and when the land was to be fairly distributed.

[8 : 52] It may be said that that Jubilee year was largely ignored throughout the history of Israel and therefore there was so much oppression and injustice.

But the essence of what's happening here is that the land belonged to the Lord, that people were only tenants. Look at what Naboth says, verse 3, The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.

It's that word inheritance that's important. This is the word that's used to Joshua when he enters the land to possess it. This land is the inheritance.

Promised long ago to Abraham, the promise is repeated to the other patriarchs and now it's been given as your inheritance. And a vineyard is something which requires long and careful cultivation. But more importantly, in the Old Testament, Israel is the vine whom God brought out of Egypt and planted in the promised land.

[9 : 57] Messages like Isaiah 3, for example. I brought my vine out of Egypt and planted it in the promised land. When the Lord Jesus says, I am the true vine in John 15, he's meaning, I'm the vine that Israel fails to be.

I am the true Israel. So, the vineyard has much more than there seems at first sight. The vineyard, while it's a real literal vineyard which belongs to this guy Naboth, is nevertheless a picture of God's inheritance, the whole land itself.

Whereas, in Deuteronomy 11, verse 10, Egypt is described as a vegetable garden. See what Naboth and Ahab is saying.

Give me your vineyard. Thou may have it for a vegetable garden. This is a king, in other words, who wants to make Israel like Egypt. Who wants to turn Israel into an idolatrous land.

A king who despises God's inheritance, who despises God's gifts. It must be said there are many people today, including in the church, who do despise God's inheritance.

[11:10] Now, I'm not talking about dead traditionalism. dead traditionalism is better forgotten about. What I'm talking about is despising God's living word, behaving as if God had not said.

Saying that God's word is not sufficient for life and for salvation. Look at that again this evening when we come to the next story of Elijah. when God's word is ignored, what happens?

It does not produce freedom. It produces injustice. It produces tyranny. So many people think we kick off the traces of God's word and we're free.

But it's exactly the opposite that happens. Jesus said you will know the truth and the truth will make you free. Not if you're free you'll be truthful but it is the truth and the truth alone which makes you free.

So what's at stake there? At stake there is the whole identity of the people of Israel as the people of God and so often in so many ways that's what's at stake in the debates today.

[12:18] Often being mentioned in this pulpit that situation in the Presbytery of Aberdeen where some people want to establish a godless and totally unbiblical way of life.

That's what happens when people turn their back on the living word of God. What's at stake is the whole identity of God's people and their obedience to his word.

And of course the other thing that happens here is the establishment hits back. Verse 4 Ahab goes to Sulk refuses to come down to dinner.

Now if you just glance back at the end of chapter 20 the king of Israel went to his house vexed and sullen and came to Samaria this is obviously a habit with Ahab.

When Ahab doesn't get his own way he behaves like a spoiled child he runs up to bed shuts the door won't come down for his meal and sulk. And this shows the kind of man he is doesn't it?

[13:19] He's essentially an ineffective man. And Jezebel as so often is far more vigorous. Notice her ruthlessness in verse 5 in verse 7 sorry Jezebel's wife said you now govern Israel arise and eat bread and let your heart be cheerful.

Now Jezebel knows perfectly well that back where she comes from Ephbaal her dad wouldn't put up with this sort of thing and she of course is coming saying look you're a king aren't you?

Kings don't give way to commoners. Kings are not kings get their own way at least that's what happens back you could imagine she's probably often compared Ahab unfavorably with her dad and my dad would never never have let this guy get away with that.

And notice how Ahab plays into her hands verse 6 give me your vineyard for money and he answered I will not give you my vineyard there's no word here about the inheritance of my fathers no word here about if you like the theology behind it because that kind of thinking doesn't doesn't cut any ice with Jezebel and the court does it?

But what's so disheartening is the way the story develops there are wicked people like Jezebel in the world today as in other days there are people who are oppressive who are tyrants who bully their way and who crush anyone like a juggernaut who happens to stand in front of them but the trouble is there are many weak and wimpish people who let them get away with it you can be pretty certain that you can be pretty certain for example Ahab agreed she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal she couldn't do that without his permission and once again the people the people of the city simply go along with Jezebel that's why Romans 1 ends the way it does look it up later Romans 1 gives a denunciation of human sin and then says and then not only attacks those who practice those sins but says give approval to those who practice them that's what causes most of the suffering in the world not tyrants but those who let them get away with it those who succumb weakly to the tyrant and that's what's happening here and we must surely remember another time and another place when someone else was accused by false witnesses when our Lord

[16:00] Jesus Christ himself at his trial was accused by false witnesses and Naboth stands here and he's simply condemned to death now that's very well but where's the God of justice in verse 16

as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead Ahab rose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite to take possession of it after all the establishment has won evil and conniving of evil has triumphed you see as someone said all that it needs for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing and so much of that is happening here so God often appears not to judge injustice it has to be said many people are facing that situation today many people are facing it on a big scale countries like Zimbabwe unjust regimes many people are facing it in their own personal lives perhaps they work for a company that's unjust perhaps they're in a situation where there's unfairness and discrimination and lack of integrity and God appears to be doing nothing how long oh Lord these are the words aren't they of the psalmist and these are the words of God's people throughout the ages so let's come on to the second part

God judges injustice now the previous verses as we've so often noticed in the Elijah stories have been dominated by words by the sulky words of Ahab and by the vindictive words of Jezebel but now another word is going to speak then the word of Yahweh came to Elijah the Tishbite thus says the Lord this was a way back in chapter 17 Elijah's first appearance to Ahab and just and just as then he's bringing the message the uncomfortable unwelcome message and notice how the writer here is showing us what happens verse 7 look back at verse 7 Jezebel said do you now govern Israel arise and eat bread I will give you the vineyard of Naboth Jezreelite there's the juggernaut of the establishment there's the word of Jezebel and look at verse 18 the Lord says arise go down to meet

Ahab king of Israel who is in Samaria arise Naboth Ahab sorry go down take Naboth vineyard arise Elijah go down and confront Ahab with another word now this word judges everyone including the king of Israel who is in Samaria the trouble about Ahab is Ahab regarded himself as above the law and above the word of God and notice this word notice the precision of what the Lord thus says the Lord have you killed and also taken possession now clearly the Lord is revealing this to Elijah probably most people had no idea what was happening although you know about Naboth being condemned but very probably in the court case the vineyard wasn't even mentioned notice it says he cursed God and the king perhaps God here should not be given a capital letter probably what Jezebel said was he cursed the gods and the king and people would have no idea this incident about the vineyard and yet the Lord saw the Lord knew so he had killed notice

Ahab is as guilty as Jezebel you have killed doesn't say Jezebel has killed he says you have killed don't imagine you can hide behind her you are guilty just as Adam was guilty once again we're really back in the garden of Eden aren't we Ahab might have said the woman you gave me she was responsible Ahab says no you have killed and you have taken possession of something you have no right to have you see how God keeps a record of everything God sees and God knows and when the time comes he will judge the tyrants and the oppressors you shall say to him thus says the Lord in the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood it's a violent story but it's an illustration isn't it how violence breeds violence and how oppressive regimes inevitably breed violence overthrows and so on if you read on in the story you come to 2nd Kings 9 and 10 you find how Ahab's house was eliminated by

Jehu warlord who took over the throne and got rid of Baal worship and got rid of the house of Ahab that was the instrument that God used to carry out his word so God's word governs the future doesn't it and you can see the you can see in fact I will bring disaster upon you I will cut off from Ahab every male bond that's free in Israel and I will make your house like those other rebellious houses now of course it still leaves the mystery of God's providence doesn't it Naboth is dead and so today many Naboths have died and will die but surely the prophetic word is looking beyond that time to the certainty that God will one day bring about justice he notices everything he records everything one of the Psalms talks about the tears of

[21 : 57] God's people being kept in his bottle every tear that falls every injustice that is committed God sees and God knows and the fact that he doesn't act immediately doesn't mean he's not going to act that's why I read that Psalm 72 in his days will the righteous flourish and peace will abound at the very heart of this story is the conviction that God will create a new heaven and a new earth see it's not just about a vineyard and a vegetable garden it's about whether God's people are destined for a world which is like the vineyard and not like the vegetable garden remember I said the vegetable garden stands for Egypt the vineyard for God's own people kings pass away nations pass away empires fall indeed heaven and earth will pass away but God's word will not pass away that's what this story is telling us we can't take this story to the oppressed to the afflicted and

bereaved and say

God will act tomorrow what we can do is say this is the kind of God that God is everything that has happened he notices every injury every cry every tear is recorded and one day will be answered now what about this little section at the end called they have repentance 25 to 29 now this means that God can if he chooses postpone judgment God is merciful God is always trying to bring people to repentance and surely no one had greater and more frequent opportunities to repent than Ahab did this is where it's so stupid when people say Elijah was grim Elijah was terrifying Elijah we don't need Elijah's ministry today we need gentle soothing kind ministry now the point about prophetic ministry of judgment is that that shows

God's mercy when the preaching of judgment ceases that means that God is about to judge because God's call God's call to repentance in the preaching of judgment is a sign he is still willing now was this genuine repentance on Ahab's part or was it simply remorse verse 27 he tore his clothes put sack cloth lay in sack cloth and went about dejectedly my own feeling is it's probably remorse rather than genuine repentance because the word dejectedly recalls the word sullen and vexed and Ahab as he so often was inclined to make the meal of this and like King Claudius in Hamlet he wants to be pardoned and retain the offense no intention of trying to compensate and indeed later on in 2 Kings 9 we read about Jesus wiping out of Ahab's dynasty we read that Ahab's sons were killed as well it was a ruthless massacre it wasn't just

Naboth the point is the judgment is postponed it's not cancelled but the Lord does delight in mercy and even to the vilest offender like Ahab there is a chance to repent he humbled himself I will not bring disaster in his days there's God's mercy but in his son's days I will bring disaster on his house in other words this injustice is not simply going to be overlooked now you see here the fairness and the righteousness of God if he had simply said oh fine Ahab you've repented everything's alright how does that help Naboth and other Naboths on the other hand if he said oh Ahab I don't care whether you repent or not you see how God's justice and mercy always go together so as we finish we finish this morning we have here a word which brings salvation and which brings judgment and it cannot be avoided may not happen instantly may not even happen in our lifetime but that word of justice and righteousness will prevail and heaven and earth will be filled with righteousness and justice as a king reigns in righteousness and justice but also how we hear that word whether we hear it as the word of judgment or the word of mercy will depend on our response as C.S.

Lewis said we will all ultimately do God's will but it will make a huge difference to us whether we do it as John did it or as Judas did it God's word will bring justice God's word will prevail let's pray God of justice and of mercy we praise you for the way that you record that you note that you remember every act of injustice and oppression and every broken heart and every tear filled eye that one day you will wipe away all tears but we pray we may not be complacent we may indeed respond to that word and that we may know it's liberating and cleansing power in our lives in Jesus name Amen you need to need it to go to