

# Standing on God's Justice

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'd like to begin with a few questions. How do you feel when you see videos of Russian missiles striking cities in Ukraine?

How do you feel when you see refugees standing in the cold with what little possessions they could salvage from their homes? How do you feel when you see the bodies of men, women, and children who have died as a result of Putin's deranged warmongering?

How did you feel when you heard about the murder of Sarah Everard and the fact that her killer was a police officer? How do you feel when you remember the terrible abuses that mark all of human history?

The Nazi concentration camps, the slave trade? How do you feel when you hear of tragedies closer to home? Abandonment, domestic abuse, rape?

And how do you feel when the perpetrators of terrible crimes such as these never face the consequences for what they've done?

[ 1 : 06 ] If you're anything like me, you'll feel anger. Anger that injustice is so prevalent. We all have a desire for justice. It's an inbuilt predisposition that we all have.

We know that we're not perfect, but when we look at it in the world, we hate to see the absence of justice. We all sense, no matter where we're coming from on the question of faith or belief, that there is some kind of natural order where the victims of actions that break that order ought to have justice.

And when we find that it doesn't seem to be there, well, we know that something isn't right. There should, in an ideal system, be justice. Injustice is unjust.

And so it's with some sympathy, I think, that we should approach those who, when they see injustice in their own lives or in the lives of others, ask, where is God? Because that question really touches on the heart of the issue of injustice for the Christian.

The Christian, and also many of those who don't believe, know that God ought to be just. It's an intrinsic part of his character. It's because God is just that we ourselves have an innate concept of justice.

[ 2 : 39 ] And so, as we return to our series in Elijah after a brief hiatus, as we think again about what it means to say, Here I stand, the title of our series, we want to think about what it means to stand on God's justice.

Because the problem of injustice in this broken and fallen world is the one that preoccupies this story in the life of Elijah. We have two points. The first one is the problem.

The problem is injustice and evil. And point to God's response, which is justice and mercy. So we'll look at the problem first, injustice and evil.

The story which we read in 1 Kings 21 is a story of injustice. And the setting at the center of it is a vineyard. The story begins, sometime 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. So after a season of war, Ahab, king of Israel, has decided he wants a vineyard.

[ 3 : 51 ] Vineyards are somewhat symbolic when they appear in the Bible. In both Psalm 80, which we sang earlier, and Isaiah 5, we see Israel compared to a vineyard.

Isaiah writes, The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice but saw bloodshed, for righteousness but heard cries of distress.

Now, not every vineyard in the Bible is necessarily a metaphor for God's people. But here in this story, I think there's a strong sense that Naboth's vineyard captures the sickness and the decline of

Israel.

Because Ahab says to Naboth, Let me have your vineyard for use as a vegetable garden. Seems innocuous on the surface. But it's interesting that Ahab asks this.

Because the only other time that the word for vegetable garden is used in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy, where it refers to Egypt, the land where God's people were enslaved.

[ 4 : 56 ] So essentially, what Ahab wants to do to Naboth's vineyard is what he's already doing to Israel. Turning it away from God and making it like Canaan and Egypt.

Giving it over to Baal and making it captive to a worldview and a morality that is directly opposed to God. And here really is the heart of injustice.

Turning away from God breeds injustice. When cultures wander from God, injustice thrives. When people turn from God, injustice grows.

When Christians neglect God, injustice creeps in. And now injustice had not just crept into Israel under Ahab, it was now endemic.

And Ahab acquires the vineyard through an act of injustice. Because Naboth refuses to sell it. We don't know that much about Naboth, but we do know one crucial fact.

[ 5 : 59 ] He knows God's law and he aspires to keep it. The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors, says Naboth. God forbids it, so Ahab isn't getting it.

Israelites could sell their land in certain circumstances, but those circumstances don't apply here. And God's law fiercely protected the land and the belongings of families so that the rich wouldn't buy up the whole land, as tends to be the practice everywhere else in the world.

And so Naboth stands on this law. And Ahab, well, his response is to sulk rather pathetically.

Jezebel, his queen, sees Ahab as weak.

Her father, the king of Sidon, would never have let anything get in the way of what he wanted. And nor will Jezebel. 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. So Ahab lets Jezebel enact her evil plan. Ahab's is a passive evil.

[ 7 : 06 ] He lifts no finger, and yet letters are written in his name in order to get him what he wants. He may not even know what is being enacted. Ignorance is bliss after all.

But that's no excuse. As we read the story, we see that pathetic Ahab is evil in his passivity and in his no-questions-asked policy.

He has blood on his hands by letting Jezebel do as she wishes. And Jezebel, well, her evil is unmistakable. She concocts this plan to have Naboth killed.

False witnesses will bring their false accusations, and Naboth will be condemned by those who know him best from his town, his neighbors, his friends he would have drunk wine with, maybe his own family.

And they will stone him, and he will die. And the elders of Jezreel themselves, they are guilty too. Who knows exactly their motivations, but probably fear.

[ 8 : 06 ] Their evil is the evil of just following orders. But their blind following caused an innocent man to die with their knowledge, consent, and orchestration.

And then, of course, there are the scoundrels who tell the lies which will get Naboth killed, which means that those who do the actual killing are in the dark and truly believe that they are putting a bad man to death.

The whole thing is an absolute travesty. The whole thing makes a mockery of justice. And as we read this, well, it should stoke the fires of our anger because it is so, so wrong.

In verse 16, we're told, When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard. Jezebel's perfect plan has paid off for Ahab, it seems.

He didn't even have to lift a finger. Now, Naboth is dead and there's no obstacles in his way. He takes the vineyard, the fruit of injustice. And we as readers, as we read this story, we're left feeling the moral vacuum at the heart of Israel.

[ 9 : 18 ] This people living in this land are supposed to reflect the holiness of God, the goodness of God, the compassion of God, and the justice of God.

Israel should be like a beautiful vineyard. But instead, it's like a wasteland. Its fruits have withered, its ground is torn up, the trees are ashen and dead.

And ultimately, well, this is where rejecting God and his righteousness gets us. The hollow rain of injustice. And we see injustice throughout the Bible story.

And God is concerned about all injustice that plagues his good creation that he made. But he's especially concerned, as we read through the Bible story, about the injustices visited upon his people.

Like Ahab's killing of Naboth, the lawbreaker killing the lawkeeper. And there are very strong similarities to some of the things we see in the New Testament, especially when the early Christians died at the hands of those who should have followed them.

[10:26] Stephen, he was brought before the high priest. Like Naboth, he was a godly man. Like Naboth, he stood his ground for the truth which God had revealed.

Like Naboth, he was falsely accused of blasphemy. And like Naboth, he was stoned to death. The injustice is sickening.

And in Revelation, the Apostle John is given a vision that supplements what we see in Stephen's death. An image that captures the cries of injustice from God's people throughout the ages.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, How long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

But awful, as the cries of the martyrs are, as they echo throughout the turning of the centuries. And they are awful. They are an aberration. Well, nothing compares to the awfulness and injustice of the cross.

[11:43] Naboth died, though he committed no crime, at the hands of those who had authority amongst God's people, the king, the queen, the elders. Well, Jesus was the king. And no one was more innocent than he.

He was like a lamb without spot or blemish. And his own people bade for his blood as they cried out, Crucify him. Now, Jesus knew he would die at the hands of his own people.

Before he did, he told a parable about a vineyard. And I'm sure you can see the connection there. This vineyard was run by tenants. When the owner sent messengers to them, they were beaten or killed.

So one day he sent his son. Surely they would respect the son. But the tenants said to one another, This is the heir. Come, let's kill him.

And the inheritance will be ours. So they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. Jesus is, of course, the son.

[12:48] The vineyard is Israel and all the blessings that come with being God's people. Jesus came to earth and his own people rejected him and killed him.

He was crucified on false charges and injustice surrounded his death. God himself, in the person of the eternal son, was subjected to the inhumane injustices of the world.

God knows exactly what it means to taste injustice. We'll return later on to Christ and his cross. Because the injustice of the cross is actually where we learn most clearly about God's response to injustice.

But before we go any further, it's worth noting, as we did at the beginning of our time, that injustice remains a deep problem woven into the fabric of fallen humanity.

We see abuses of secular power all the time. In our workplaces, perhaps. Amongst politicians. Amongst the police. Amongst the leaders of the world.

[13:56] In the practices of big tech and global corporations. Ahab and Jezebel, regrettably, are not outliers. They reflect the world.

And they reflect the way in which power often breeds injustice. And though the church is called to reflect Christ and his righteousness. Well, it's made of sinners.

And sometimes it too reflects the injustice of the world instead. The past few years has brought many injustices within the church to light. Perpetrated by various influential church leaders.

Men who were well known not just in the church, but also globally well known as ambassadors for Christ. And many of us may know of elders and ministers who have abused their position and been guilty of small-scale injustices.

And abused their power and position in Christ's church. These things are not the norm in the church, but they do happen. Injustice creeps in just as it crept into Israel.

[15:01] The spirit of Ahab can still be found. Our reflections so far have been fairly bleak. And I make no apology because this is a bleak story of corruption, injustice, and murder.

The story is wanting us to recognize that injustice in the world and in the church is a terrible thing and a pernicious problem. But this isn't a story without light.

For even the bleakest night must turn to morning. And even the cloudiest skies cannot hide the sun forever. God is active. In response to injustice.

His response is justice on the one hand and mercy on the other. And this is our second point. And this all comes through the prophet we've been following, Elijah.

Who proclaims firstly to Ahab God's justice. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite. Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel who rules in Samaria.

[16:05] He is now in Naboth's vineyard where he is gone. To take possession of it. So Elijah, he goes down. He confronts Ahab in the vineyard. And given what we've already said about the symbolism of the vineyard.

And given its centrality to this narrative of injustice. It's a fitting place for the confrontation. This is what the Lord says.

Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? Says Elijah. Here's the accusation. Ahab is a murderer and he is a thief. But the accusation goes deeper.

God also says through Elijah in verse 20. You have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord.

And then in verse 22. You have aroused my anger and have caused Israel to sin.

And then the narrator adds in verses 25 and 26. There was never anyone like Ahab. Who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. Urged on by Jezebel his wife.

[17:08] He behaved in the vilest manner. By going after idols. Like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel. The vineyard incident is in many ways merely a reflection and outworking of Ahab's evil.

And the way in which he had led Israel. He sold himself to evil. And to idols. And by doing this he made Israel like the very nations that they were supposed to be different from.

Jesus' church is not supposed to look like the world. The world is where we find idols and injustice.

The church is supposed to be where Christ and his salvation is found.

The church, God's people, are supposed to show the world the goodness, the justice, and the perfect holiness of its creator. But Ahab had made God's people look more and more like the world.

He had defaced Israel. It's a bit like if a security guard at the Louvre was challenged to take a can of spray paint to the Mona Lisa. Ahab was supposed to guard Israel.

[18:22] But goaded on by Jezebel, he has made a mess and a mockery of God's sacred charge that he's been given. And both of them would face his justice.

Naboth and the countless others whom they had destroyed in their pursuit of the world and its idols would have justice. For God is a God of justice.

What God says captures the extent of their crime. That yearning for justice that we feel is met by God. Elijah says to Ahab, That is, Ahab's line will end.

Just like previous dynasties in Israel because of their evil. And we mustn't flinch from the language that Elijah goes on to use. Because we mustn't forget the depth of Ahab and Jezebel's evil.

This is what the Lord says, says Elijah. In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood. Yes, yours.

[19:43] And then later, 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. And this is what happens. Ahab dies in battle in the very next chapter. And his descendants die.

And their blood is licked up by the dogs in Jezreel. And Jezebel, she's pushed from a window by her own eunuchs. And the dogs devour her before anyone can even bury her body.

We can struggle with bits of the Bible that are so graphic. But we don't tend to struggle when the villains in films we watch or the books we read die and face justice.

Now, obviously, what happens to Ahab and Jezebel is dark and deeply unsettling. But sin begets judgment and justice. Evil generates a need for retribution.

[20:45] Injustice cries out for justice. But combined with Elijah's proclamation of justice, notice also the end of this story.

God gave Ahab a second chance.

Because he recognized, to a degree, the wrong he had done and the punishment that that had incurred. Though Ahab would revert to his old ways and ignore God, God shows that whilst he is

just, he is also merciful.

And this is the Bible story. The world cries out for justice. And God very often grants mercy. The scandalous thing about the gospel is that it offers God's mercy to the very worst of us.

Take the Apostle Paul. Before he followed Jesus, he was the one who was holding the coats as Stephen was stoned. Paul deserved God's judgment.

[ 22 : 13 ] Paul was an evil man. But Christ came and offered him mercy. We said we'd return to the cross and so we do now. On the cross, Jesus, the perfectly righteous and perfectly innocent Son of God, died.

Why? Because he was offering us his mercy. Because we are all under God's judgment. And we all deserve to be the objects of his justice.

We want justice for ourselves and others. And rightly so. As we said, there's that innate desire in us for justice. But we're also part of the problem.

Because it's our sin. The sin of those around us that create this world culture where injustice reigns and has a foothold.

And this is why we need the cross. This is why we need Jesus. This is why the innocent subjected himself to the injustice of the crucifixion.

[ 23 : 23 ] To save us from his own justice and offer us his mercy. The American poet Robert Frost once wrote this.

Nothing can make injustice just but mercy. What he meant was that God's unchangeable character is just but it is also merciful. And whilst his justice makes restitution for injustice.

It is his mercy that brings restoration in the wake of injustice. And makes things right. Makes things whole. Or as the Apostle James would say, mercy triumphs over judgment.

But of course not all accept or receive the gift of mercy. Justice must still be done. About the cross, Christ took the just punishment for the injustices of all who believe in him and are united to him by faith.

That union with Christ means our debt has been paid. But God will show justice to those who are not in Christ when Christ himself returns. In light of what we've seen in this story.

[ 24 : 40 ] What that means is that the men who got away in this life with rape and abuse will face the justice of God. Those who cheated the poor out of their scant resources and got away with it will face the justice of God.

Those who killed and were never discovered for their crimes will face the justice of God. And those in Russia responsible for this war in Ukraine.

Putin and his allies. If they don't repent and find Christ's mercy. They will one day face the justice of God. Jesus is coming again.

And when he does, he will judge the living and the dead. So as we close, bringing everything together. What does all this mean for us today?

Well, it means that we can stand on God's justice. Elijah is very clearly not the focus of this story. But his posture captures, I think, the core of what this story is seeking to teach us.

[ 25 : 50 ] Elijah brings God's message of justice and of mercy to Ahab in the wake of his crimes. And in a world of injustice, we must place our hope in the fact that Christ will bring justice for those who have been lacerated by the barbs of injustice.

We must know deep in our hearts that justice will be done. And that no evil deed will escape it.

And that's a truth that our world is desperately longing for. Because we live in a world that desperately longs for justice. And on God's justice, we can stand in hope and faith and the longing expectation of Jesus Christ's return.

Justice will triumph over injustice and evil. But we will also be able to stand, if we are in Christ, on his mercy.

The blood of the innocent Christ was shed on the cross so that we could be united to him forever. Have our sins dealt with forever.

[ 27 : 07 ] And experience his mercy and his grace and an eternal union with Christ. And that's what we're going to do as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together in just a minute.

It's more than just an act of memory. It's an outworking of the Christian's spiritual union with Jesus. And the mercy that he has shown to those of us who have put our hope in him.

As we eat the bread, his body, and drink the wine, his blood. We express our faith that Jesus Christ died for us sinners. The innocent for the guilty.

The just for the unjust. He became the man of sorrows to show us mercy. To unite us to him. And to give us everlasting life.  
Add the age of a soul. The love.