

Lesson 8 - I Kings 21

Objective: This week we will study the story of Naboth's vineyard. We will see how Ahab's coveting of a field leads to the sins of betrayal, lying, murder. We will see Jezebel and Ahab take advantage of the system that is set up and destroy an innocent family. We will discuss how wanting more can affect lives today and how coveting can be idolatry. We will discuss our own choices in dealing with the powerless. In the end, we will see that God's grace and mercy is always present - even for Ahab.

Review: Last week, we saw Ahab as a shrewd politician and a capable leader in battle (especially when the Lord fought the battle for him!). However, this week we will see a different Ahab - a clueless Ahab. If last week's lesson was about Ahab's foreign policy, then this week's lesson is about Ahab's domestic policy.

In our study so far, Ahab often does what he is told. In the beginning of chapter 18, Elijah tells him to summon the prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mt. Carmel, and he does. At the end of chapter 18, Ahab eats and drinks when Elijah tells him to; he goes home when Elijah tells him to. In chapter 19, Ahab goes and tells Jezebel what Elijah had done, and we see Jezebel take action - not Ahab. In chapter 20, he goes into battle doing exactly what the prophets tell him to do - although, of course, he misses a critical thing that God wants him to do. He is not able to understand because his heart and mind are not open to God. This week, we see a clearer picture of a king who has

closed his heart to God but seems incapable of acting on his own, needing his wife to take action.

What does the prophet tell Ahab at the end of chapter 20? How does Ahab react?

The prophet tells Ahab that he has set free a man that God had determined should die - so it is Ahab's life for his life, Ahab's people for Ben-Hadad's people. Ahab goes back to his palace sullen and angry.

Read I Kings 21:1-2

"Some time later" - we have no idea how much later this incident happened.

Notice where the vineyard is that Ahab wants - he wants a vineyard in Jezreel close to his winter palace. The narrator reminds us that Ahab is the "king of Samaria" possibly to emphasize that his primary residence is in Samaria - not in Jezreel (Keck, et al, 1999). Jezreel is a wide and fertile valley at a lower elevation than Samaria, making it warmer and a good site for a winter palace - maybe going to Jezreel for the winter was his version of going to Florida for the winter (or our version of going to the mountains in the summer!). Ahab wants the vineyard that is next to his winter home - not next to his primary home but his "vacation home". Ahab already has one place in Samaria, one place in Jezreel, now he wants more.

This desire of Ahab's brings to mind a verse from Isaiah, "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field til no space is left and you live alone in the land." (Isaiah 5:8, NIV)

What problems can be caused by wanting more?

What does Ahab say that he wants the land for?

Ahab wants the land for a vegetable garden. Now, it may be possible that there was no good spot for a vegetable garden on his land, and he really wanted the other land to grow vegetables on. Or, the narrator may be trying to tell us something else.

The only other time that the expression "vegetable garden" occurs in the Hebrew Bible is in Deuteronomy 11:10 "The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden." (NIV) In contrast to a vegetable garden in Egypt that must be irrigated, vineyards in the promised land as described as places that thrive naturally, "When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you - a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant - then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Deut. 6:10-12) (NIV). There are many other references in the Old Testament to vineyards and vines, usually viewed as a sign of God's blessings. (Keck, et al, 1999)

It could be that more is at stake than a private real estate transaction - is this a trading of the promised land for the land of slavery? Does it signify a return to the ways of Egypt? Ahab seems to desire more the ways of the world than the ways of God - he wants land and wealth more than he wants God.

Read I Kings 21:3-4

What was the significance of ancestral inheritance (NRSV)/inherited land (NIV) in Israel?

Israel had a different view on land than those of us in the Western world have. They believed that land belongs to God and that He allocates the land to people for them to serve it, to use it. In Joshua, as the descendants of freed Israelite slaves enter Canaan, Yahweh, the true owner of the land, gives them an inheritance of land (Joshua 13, 14). The Israelites become stewards of this land, so a plot of land should remain within a family. (Foster, et al, 2005)

Some specific instructions on the land:

Deuteronomy 19:14 "Do not move your neighbor's boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess." (NIV)

Leviticus 25:23-25 "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. If one of your

fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold.”

Numbers 27:8-11 “Say to the Israelites, ‘If a man dies and leaves no son, give his inheritance to his daughter. If he has no daughter, give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. If his father had no brothers, give his inheritance to the nearest relative in his clan, that he may possess it. This is to have the force of law for the Israelites, as the Lord commanded Moses.’”

So, when Naboth refuses to sell the land to Ahab - even for a fair price, even for better land somewhere else, he is not doing it for sentimental reasons. He is keeping his family land because that is what the Lord commanded.

Again we see that Ahab is not in tune with what God wants. However, he knows enough of the law that when Naboth refuses to sell to him, instead of making him sell, he goes home.

What is Ahab’s attitude when he goes home?

He goes home sullen and angry; he lays on his bed sulking, refusing to eat.

Ahab has had a rough time! He “tries” to be a good king for his country in battles against the Arameans, but he completely misses the fact that he is involved in a holy war. He almost seems like a sulky teenager at the end of chapter 20, going home sullen and angry because the prophet told him his consequence for not doing what God wanted him to do. (Can you hear him whine, “How was I supposed to know?”) Now, we

see the behavior of a child who doesn't get what he wants. Ahab's pattern of childlike behavior does not seem like the behavior of a king of Israel.

It may be easy for us to feel self-righteous at this point - Ahab certainly makes most of us look good. But it might be good for us to examine our own behavior, our own hearts.

Have we ever felt sullen or angry or sulked over something that we wanted but could not have?

Read I Kings 21:5-7

Ahab must have really been sulking and not eating for Jezebel to notice.

Describe Jezebel's reaction to Ahab's problem.

We are not surprised to see Jezebel say that she can do something about this problem. After all, she tried to kill of Yahweh's prophets, including Elijah. And, while Elijah appeared to have no fear of Ahab, he is terrified of Jezebel. She provided for at least 850 prophets of Baal's and Asherah's. She is a woman of action!

She also has no knowledge that in Israel, Yahweh's law supersedes the king's law and desires (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). She tells Ahab that she will get the vineyard for him. He does not explain to her what God's law says - he does nothing to stop her.

Read I Kings 21:8-14

What does Jezebel do?

In essence, Jezebel takes over Ahab's authority, writing letters in his name and sealing them with his seal. She sends them to the local leadership telling them to proclaim a fast. A public fast would usually either be for a special need, such as: when the community faces great distress, when there is a sin that threatens the whole community, or when the community is repenting (Keck, et al, 1999). She tells the leadership to place Naboth in the front of the assembly (where he would probably think he was going to be honored). She tells them to seat two "scoundrels" across from him to charge him with cursing God and the king. Then, she tells them to stone him to death.

What does Jezebel understand about Israelite law?

Jezebel understands and uses the law to her advantage in this situation. She knows that she needs two witnesses (Duet. 17:6: On the testimony of two or three witnesses a person is to be put to death, but no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.) She knows that if Naboth is charged with blasphemy, he will be put to death. (Leviticus 24:14-16)

Jezebel uses the law for her own power, for Ahab's gain. Her orders are followed completely and Naboth is stoned.

What do you think of the local leadership? Could they have done anything differently?

Are there situations might we find ourselves in today where we are called to stand up for people who have no power against those with power? What consequences might we face?

Is it possible for religious and legal institutions today to manipulate religion or the law in a way that takes advantage of those that have few resources? What can we do to help?

What are the implications of Jezebel taking charge and manipulating the law?

The obvious consequence is the death of Naboth. However, we also see that Jezebel, a foreigner who does not follow Yahweh, has usurped the office of the king of Israel and corrupted it with the king's consent. Neighbor turns against neighbor. People who have been entrusted with the responsibility of upholding justice have instead perverted it, allowing perjury and murder after a sham trial. (Keck, et al, 1999)

Read I Kings 21:15-16

Naboth is killed, and the reader learns later that his body is left unburied. Jezebel tells Ahab that he can take possession of the vineyard, so Ahab does. (According to 2 Kings 9:26, Naboth's sons are also killed.)

We saw in I Kings 18 that Ahab was more concerned with his horses than he was with the prophets of God and the people of Israel. In I Kings 20, Ahab showed mercy on a foreign king whom he had defeated in a holy war. In I Kings 21, he allows his wife to massacre a family of innocent Israelites. He shows no concern for the Israelite citizens, no mercy for the innocent. He takes a vineyard that is not his to take.

The prophets speak out against this behavior of the wealthy against the poor. One example is in Micah 2:1, 2 “Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning’s light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, and they rob them of their inheritance” (NIV)

Read I Kings 21:17-26

God tells Elijah to “Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth’s vineyard....” Is it possible the narrator wants to remind us that Ahab is not where he is supposed to be, not doing the work that God has called him to do? Instead of being in Samaria and acting as king, Ahab is taking possession of Naboth’s land.

What does God tell Elijah to tell Ahab? What does he accuse Ahab of doing?

Even though it was indirect and Jezebel was the schemer, Ahab is still accused of murdering Naboth and seizing (stealing) his property. In some ways, Ahab may have hoped to stay above the fray, but he may have been subtly manipulating Jezebel to do what he wanted her to do. In any case, he is not innocent. At the very least, he could have stopped her.

What does Ahab call Elijah?

How do you think Ahab has “sold himself to do evil”?

Ahab wanted that vineyard so badly that he was willing to do anything to get it. His sin starts with coveting - he desperately wants Naboth's vineyard. His greed leads others into betrayal and deceit; coveting leads to lying and murder (violating the 10th commandment leads to violating the 9th and 6th). According to Paul, covetousness is a form of idolatry (which makes violating the 10th commandment also lead to violating the first and second). He writes in Ephesians 5:5 “Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” (NRSV)

How do you think coveting can be a form of idolatry? Does this change the way you think about greed?

Covetousness places priorities and desires before God, it elevates material things to the status of God. Ahab shows that he loves to possess Naboth's property more than he loves the Lord. (Keck, et al, 1999)

Do you believe coveting/greed can have the same kind of implications today?

What are the consequences for Ahab and for Jezebel?

There is a poetic justice to the judgment that God announces for Ahab. Ahab's blood will be shed where Naboth's blood was shed. This judgment is not random - he has sinned like kings of Israel before him such as Jeroboam and Baasha, so he will receive a punishment similar to them: (Goldingay, 2005)

I Kings 14:11, the prophet Ahijah says: "Dogs will eat those belonging to Jeroboam who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country. The Lord has spoken!"

I Kings 16:4, the Lord says: "Dogs will eat those belonging to Baasha who die in the city, and birds will feed on those who die in the country."

However, there is also punishment for Jezebel, which is unusual.

Why do you think God has a word of judgment for Jezebel, a foreign woman?

Jezebel urged Ahab on in his evil...she encouraged him in his idolatry and manipulated the Jewish law to be able to get Ahab what he wanted.

Read I Kings 21:27-29

Wait! What has happened here? This is not what we expect.

What shocks you about this passage? Are you more shocked by Ahab's behavior or God's mercy?

God, don't you remember that "there was never anyone like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord?" This is shocking grace, shocking mercy.

What does this section tell you about God?

He is ready to accept us, no matter how bad our sins are, when we show any kind of repentance.

What does this section tell you about prophecy?

Even when God says that something is going to happen, it can change depending on how people respond. In some ways, Elijah's words bring Ahab to his senses, giving God the excuse to be merciful, which seems to always be God's preference (Goldingay, 2005).

Based on your reading of verse 29, what do think would have changed for Israel's royal family IF Ahab had turned from his evil ways forever and his children had also humbled themselves and turned their hearts toward God?

Conclusion:

In I Kings 21, we see Ahab and Jezebel at their worst. We see people who have turned away from God and turned towards sin allow themselves to be completely captivated by sin, completely given over to sin. It is difficult to imagine that depth of depravity that brings someone to kill someone else so they can have what that person has. Not only do they sin, but they lead others into sin - they corrupt an entire system, an entire town. Yet, there is a warning for us in this also. How hard can our hearts become when we set our eyes - our minds - on something that we cannot have? There is also an overwhelming message of grace in this passage when we see God postpone his judgement on Ahab after he sees Ahab's repentance. There is a message of hope for us that when we truly repent, we are forgiven. God's grace is overwhelming.

(Note: We will see next week that Ahab's repentance is short-lived, and his punishment comes to him after all. God was willing to forgive but Ahab was not able (or did not desire) to continue turning away from sin and towards God.)