

We are considering the stories in which Elijah is an important figure. Last time we look at the call of Elisha which can still rightly be considered as part of Elijah's ministry because Elijah was the one whom God tasked with the call of Elisha. Further, the call of Elisha was part of God's answer to Elijah's discouragement because it meant that God was still going to be working out his purposes in Israel into the future beyond Elijah's time on earth. In that connection we considered the importance of interpreting the individual parts of the biblical story in the light of the whole story of the unfolding of God's plan for the renewal of the world.

I want to say a little more about that in the introduction to this sermon. Last time when I spoke of God's plan for the history of the world, I spoke of his plan to undo the curse of sin and bring into being a renewed creation. That is the hope of the biblical message. We see the horrific consequences of sin in our own lives and in the world in general and one aspect of the hope that the Bible gives us is that God is working throughout the history of the world to bring about a world without sin – a world populated by a people who have been delivered from both the penalty and the power of sin. As believers in Jesus Christ we are part of that larger picture of the unfolding of God's plan for the renewal of all things.

I want to say a little more about Israel's role in God's plan. That is important for us for a number of reasons. One, as the church of Jesus Christ we are the continuation of Israel, so we get insights into our purpose as God's people by understanding Israel's purpose. There is continuity between us and OT Israel. But secondly, it will help us to see the significance of this text for us. We are going to be looking at the story of Naboth's Vineyard and to understand this story we must have a clear understanding of how Israel was supposed to function in God's plan for the world.

I have referred many times to the promises God made to Abram which are recorded in Genesis 12 and particularly the part of the promise that said that God was planning to bless the world through Abram's offspring which was Israel. I want to say a little more about how Israel was to be a blessing to the world. One of the key ways that Israel was to be a blessing to the world was to be a witness to God in the midst of the nations. Israel's role in God's purposes was to show and tell the nations of the world of the greatness of God and in that way be a blessing to them. God had identified himself with Israel by declaring himself to be their God and choosing them to be his people. Their task was to demonstrate to the world how great God is and how great it is to belong to him as his people.

A key passage here is Deuteronomy 4:6-7. Moses has been urging the people to keep the Lord's commands and he continues in verse 6, "Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' Verse 7, 'For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?'"

The way that God was eventually going to bless all the nations is by drawing them to himself through the life and witness of his people. There is throughout the OT this awareness that Israel existed to demonstrate to the nations the greatness of God and the blessedness of belonging to him and following his commands. What this means is that being the people of God was a good thing for Israel so that if she obeyed the Lord she would be greatly blessed. But Israel's blessedness was not an end in itself – it was a means to a greater end to demonstrate to the nations how wonderful, wise and generous God is so that they might be attracted to him.

This thought is behind the imagery of light when it is applied to Israel. Isaiah 60:1-3, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And the nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." This is a prophecy concerning Israel's future which is fulfilled in Jesus and through him in the new Israel, the NT church, but the language is OT language and it helps us to understand how God intended Israel to function in his plan that they should be a blessing to the nations. The key to Israel's role in God's purposes to be a blessing to all the nations of the world had to do with being the witnesses through whom God revealed himself to the nations. A huge part of that had to do with how she lived before the nations as the people of God. But another important part of that was that through Israel God gave the written word which we call the OT which reveals God and his plan for the whole world.

It is in the light of this overall perspective that we must understand our text. What we see in this text is the very opposite of what God intended for Israel, but it is still, in a roundabout way, a revelation of the glory of God because it shows the truth about the implication of the worship of idols, in this case the idol called Baal. Israel was to demonstrate the kind of just and compassionate society that resulted when they honored God as their God and followed his commands. What this story shows is the kind of society that results when idols are worshipped instead of God. This story demonstrates the kind of people who are produced when Baal is their God. And as we consider this story, think of the relationship in our own society between the idols which are worshipped and the kind of society which results from idol worship. That is how this passage speaks to our day.

It is a story of gross injustice. Ahab, the king of Samaria, is a Baal worshipper who is egged along in that direction by his wife Jezebel who had been raised as a Baal worshipper as a daughter of Ethbaal - who was the priest-king of Tyre and Sidon. Her father was a priest of Baal and Jezebel was fanatically zealous for the worship of Baal. This story illustrates what rulers do to their people when the rulers are worshippers of Baal.

Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard. Naboth did not want to sell it. He did not want to sell it because he wanted to obey God who had set up a system of land ownership in which the land stayed in the family from generation to generation. There were certain situations in which the land could be leased temporarily if a

family was in dire financial straits, but the ideal was that the land stayed in the family. And that is why Naboth would not sell to Ahab. His answer to Ahab is recorded in verse 3, “The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.”

Two things to notice about Naboth here. He is the weak person in the situation, and he is the godly person in the situation. He is weak, not in his character, but in power. Ahab was the powerful man in the situation. This is the kind of situation where justice is particularly important. And under God’s laws, there are safeguards that protect the weak from the strong.

God had revealed himself to Israel as a God of perfect justice. Deuteronomy 32:4 says, “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.” God is a God of justice and one of the ways that Israel was to be a blessing to the nations was to demonstrate a just society which reflected the justice of their God. The laws that God had given to Israel to live by included many that were designed to protect the weak from the strong. There were many laws that required that the poor and the weak be treated fairly. In Deuteronomy 27:19 we read, “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” We see here a concern for the weak and vulnerable.

That concern for justice was to be demonstrated by the king. In Deuteronomy 17:18-20 we read, “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them....” We see this concern for just rule by the king in Psalm 72:1-2,4, “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice! ... May he defend the cause of the poor people, and give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor!”

The result of worshipping the Lord and keeping his laws was to be a just and caring society and the purpose of that in the plan of God was to be a foretaste of what God was working towards in his plan to overcome sin in the world. Israel was to show to the world the blessedness of living under God’s rule so that the nations might be attracted to the God of Israel.

The story of Naboth’s vineyard shows how the followers of Baal treated the weak who got in their way. When Naboth refused Ahab’s attempt to buy his land, Ahab pouted and became sullen, but Jezebel was not willing to let a concern for justice stand in the way of the king. She asked Ahab, “Do you now govern Israel?” The implication was that, in her view, kings got what they wanted and if that meant trampling the rights of the weak so be it. Where she came from, kings do not let justice get in the way of getting what they wanted. And so she cooked up and executed a plan to get Naboth’s vineyard for Ahab.

She instructed the leaders of Naboth's city to have Naboth falsely accused of cursing God and the king and then execute him. Once Naboth was out of the way, Ahab could take possession of Naboth's vineyard. And so it happened. Verse 16, "And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it."

This story shows what kind of society results when the worshippers of idols are in control. It shows the fruit of idolatry. Just as Israel was supposed to demonstrate the connection between worshipping God and a just compassionate society, this story shows what Israel became when she turned away from God and turned to the worship of idols. The purpose of this story is to show where idol worship leads.

There is plenty of evidence of this in the history of the world. The world has always been a bloody place. The history of the world is largely the history of bloodshed motivated by greed and hatred. Think of the many millions of people who were killed in the 20th century at the hands of those who in various ways worshipped the human self. Think of the greed and corruption that is rife in the world today. Think of the persecution of Christians at the hands of those who worship other gods. Think of the many injustices that the powerful perpetuate against the powerless.

In the west, religion is banished from the public square. It is believed that the way to social harmony is to organize society on the basis of non-religious common ground. It is naively thought that there is a place of neutrality upon which a just society can be built. It is naively thought that secularism is neutral – that it is not a religion. The truth is that having ultimate commitments which are religious in nature is inescapable. From a biblical perspective secularism is a form of idolatry no less than Baalism was idolatry. It is a form of worshipping humanity. It is placing one's highest trust in the human race rather than in God. And what this passage says to our society is that social justice is impossible apart from the worship of God.

This is not to say that society was perfectly just when Christianity was more influential. In this life, Christians are sinners too and so their implementation of Christian principles will always be flawed. But on the other hand the degree to which western society practices justice is rooted in its Christian past. The whole idea of human rights comes from the biblical teaching that mankind is made in the image of God. There is no basis in the philosophy of secularism or materialism for the idea of human rights. Our governments respect human rights for now, but human rights are vulnerable in our society because they are based on the decreasing influence of the Christian worldview and as the influence of Christianity wanes, so does any rationale for human rights. Evolution teaches the survival of the fittest. And eventually the logic of that basic conviction will assert itself. And we are beginning to see that in our society with the mob mentality of leftist progressivism which shouts down any alternative perspectives and seeks to use government power to accomplish its goals.

We still have it good as far as the protection of the weak is concerned, but what we are seeing in the developments in our society to suppress Christianity is a manifestation of the principle of our text that there is a connection between the worship of idols and the oppression of the weak. The progressive left makes all kinds of noise about social justice, but so does the Marxism in which it is rooted. In the end social justice cannot survive when idols are worshipped. That is the point of this text and the truth of that is seen in the oppression that is seen all through history and all through the world in our time.

Romans 1:18-32 makes this point in a striking way. Verse 25 describes the world who reject God as people who “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” That is idolatry. And then verse 28-30 continues, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish faithless, heartless and ruthless.” This is the biblical teaching about the way of life that results from idolatry. And Ahab’s and Jezebel’s behaviour in our text is a story that makes that point.

But the rest of the chapter gives one aspect of the biblical hope in the light of this story of injustice which we see reflected in all kinds of ways in the world in which we are living. What is the good news here? It is the justice of God. God sees and God knows. And God punishes the perpetrators of injustice. So, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah and tells him pay a visit to Ahab as he is inspecting his new piece of property which was obtained by the murder of Naboth. And Elijah is to pronounce upon Ahab the judgment of God. The judgment was severe but appropriate. “Thus says the LORD: In the place where gods licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood.” And further God was going to cut off Ahab’s dynasty and Jezebel would be eaten by dogs as well. Verse 24, “Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens will eat.”

Now when Ahab heard this judgment, he went into mourning. The text says that he tore his cloths and put on sackcloth. And the Lord responded by delaying his judgment, but not by removing it. God says, “Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster upon his house.”

This delay shows how ready God is to show mercy. Ahab’s response was not repentance, but even the expression of sorrow that Ahab expressed resulted in a temporary expression of mercy. Perhaps the Lord was giving Ahab the opportunity to truly repent of his sins and turn to the Lord. We are reminded of 2 Peter 3:9 which says that the Lord “is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” But Ahab did not truly repent, and the judgment of God did come upon him and his house.

But we have to understand that the judgment of God upon those who do things like Ahab and Jezebel did to Naboth belongs to the good news of the biblical story. The good news is that God is working in history to undo the curse of sin and bring about a world of peace and blessedness in the presence of God. According to the biblical story God is pursuing that goal in two ways – judgment and salvation.

Part of the good news of this story is that Ahab and Jezebel did not get away with what they did to Naboth. They got what they deserved. And we must understand that part of the good news of the Bible is that God is a God of justice and those who do not repent and turn to the Lord will get what they deserve. What this means is that evil will not triumph in the end. God will judge the wicked. Those who have oppressed the weak and vulnerable will get what they deserve. Psalm 37:28 says, “For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his saints. They are preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.”

This is part of the biblical picture of the way to the renewed creation in which righteousness dwells. That picture requires the judgment of the wicked. This belongs to the coming of God’s kingdom. In Revelation 11:16-18, the 24 elders worship God and sing, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for the destroying the destroyer of the earth.”

Part of the good news is that all the oppressors who have not repented will receive the punishment that they deserve. When we pray, “Your Kingdom come,” part of what we are praying for is that God will destroy the wicked and maintain justice on the earth. According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, praying, “Your Kingdom come” includes the prayer that “the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed.” And one of the proof texts for that is Psalm 68:1, which says “God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him.”

So we look at the story of Naboth’s Vineyard in the light of the whole biblical story and we see it as part of the message of Scripture that all the injustices of the world will be rectified. At the end of the day the Ahab’s and the Jezebel’s of this world will get their due and the Naboth’s of this world will be vindicated. In Revelation 2:10 Jesus says to his people, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Naboth was faithful unto death and he has received the crown of life.

Now we know that we are not essentially different from Ahab and Jezebel when it comes to our natural sinful condition. We probably have not murdered someone for his vineyard, but as Jesus teaches us if we are angry with our brother, we are liable to judgment. When we think about God’s judgment upon the wicked as part of the biblical hope, we must keep in mind that if we are trusting in Jesus we are forgiven on the basis of what

Jesus has done on our behalf and in no way because of any superiority in us. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, it is because of God's grace and not because we have in any way merited God's favor.

And from that perspective, we see our own calling in the story of Naboth's vineyard. If we are in Christ, we are the new Israel and it is our calling to be a blessing to the world by being lights that reflect the glory of God and the blessedness of his ways in our lives. The story of Naboth's vineyard shows the kind of society that results when idols are worshipped. But it's calling for we who follow Jesus is to show the kind of society that results when God is worshipped. And so instead of being oppressors of the weak and vulnerable we are to reflect God's compassion and care for the weak and vulnerable. We are to reflect God's concern for justice in the world and his hatred of injustice.

Isaiah 1:17 says to Israel and to us, "[L]earn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and please the widow's cause."

But what is that to look like in our lives? Well it means that we must scrupulous about treating people fairly. It means not taking advantage of someone when we are in a position of strength. And it means in some way seeking to be an influence towards justice in this world of injustice. This is largely done through Christians working together in organizations – organizations like VOM, ProLife groups, and others which seek for justice in a world that is full of oppression and injustice. We may sometimes shy away from justice issues because so much of the talk of justice in our time is associated with cultural Marxism and radical leftism. But we must not ignore the emphasis that the Bible gives to matters of justice in the world. It is our calling as the people of God to bless the world by demonstrating the kind of society that results when God is loved, and his way of life implemented. It is a beginning when we treat each other fairly, but we must also go beyond that and seek in some way to contribute what God's people are doing to reflect God's care for the weak and the vulnerable. Supporting VOM is one way that we can do that.

And our motivation for this is not to gain God's love but rather to reflect God's love. We are called to be part of what God is doing as he works towards a world of peace and love. By God's grace we have been included in the people of God, rescued from our sins and adopted into God's family, but part of what that means is that we are to be exhibits to the world of what God is working towards. May we be motivated in this not by guilt but by enthusiasm for what God is up to as he works towards the goal of a world of peace and harmony and love which is rooted in his love and his presence.