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## Mercy Extended

### I Kings 21:1-29

**Intro:** We are looking at 3 chapters at the end of I Kings that provide us with some insight into the character – or lack of character – of King Ahab. More importantly though, as we make our way through these chapters, the author will, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reveal to us in greater detail the inexplicable character of the God we serve. In **ch20** we saw Yahweh extend glorious grace towards Ahab and Israel despite the fact that His covenant had been ignored and slighted by both for quite some time. The text teaches that the provision of Yahweh's grace was to show Ahab and Israel just Who their covenant God really is; and it demanded a response from them. Sadly, though the grace of Yahweh was unasked for and undeserved – it was also unacknowledged, at least on Ahab's part.

**Ch21** repeats the process, revealing yet another ugly character flaw of King Ahab and another wonderful aspect of the character of God.

**1-16** – Ben-hadad the Syrian was a man that Ahab should have executed, but he let him go free. As one of his own subjects, Naboth was a man Ahab should have protected but he allowed him to be murdered. Understand, all of this drama took place because of a little plot of land; a vineyard that Ahab wanted to convert to a vegetable garden – nobody likes vegetables that much! Clearly, this goes way beyond a love for cucumbers and leeks. But, the focus of the text is not on horticulture but theology. It speaks more about Yahweh's justice than about Naboth's vineyard. It shows us that God, our God, is a God who sees that His people get justice. Jesus says as much in **Luke 18:7**.

Ahab, as most kings do, had a second home in Jezreel, besides the royal residence in Samaria. One day the king wakes up and thinks, "I need a garden." Maybe all his property was already in use: guard shacks, servant quarters, Baal shrines..."What to do? Old Naboth has a vineyard right next door, maybe he'll sell it to me or swap for it!" Ahab makes a fair offer but Naboth wants nothing to do with it: The Lord forbid... Strong words...no deal!

Was Naboth just being obnoxious? Was he holding out for a better deal? More likely, his thinking was shaped by the teachings of [Lev 25:23-28](#) and [Num 36:7-9](#). His rejection was rooted in the ancient Israelite concept of the land. They believed that the land was an inheritance from God, divided up between individual tribes and families according to His will. Thus, the land was never really sold, only leased – and then only under the most dire of circumstances. Real Estate offices in ancient Israel didn't do very much business.

This wasn't just Naboth being a hard sell; this was the cultural mindset of the Jewish people. Because the land represented the fruit of the nation's redemption from Egypt, God commanded that it remain in the hands of the families in which it was originally given. The land had been provided by God as part of His grace towards Israel; therefore, no one was to take the land of another away from him. The law provided that the land could be leased for a period of time, but it could never be sold outright.

Again, there was no absolute prohibition against leasing the land under certain emergency circumstances but these conditions didn't apply in Naboth's case. He wasn't suffering from any grinding poverty or other necessity so, if he need not sell, then he should not sell! This is why he refused. He treasures Yahweh's gift of the land passed from his ancestors more than making money or placating kings. He wasn't being mean, crotchety or a hard sell. He had a perfect right to refuse Ahab's offer and he did so because his thinking along covenant lines, not being pragmatic. In his reply, he identifies himself as a man that is subject to Yahweh and cares about His law.

Ahab wasn't concerned with Yahweh's law or impressed with Naboth's adherence to it. All he heard was a big, fat "No!" as you might expect, people who hold positions of absolute authority aren't used to hearing that word, at least not from their subjects. Ahab was no different. This insensitive refusal was enough to send him home pouting and off the feed bag. All this for a silly vineyard!

Well, in comes Jezebel, wanting to know what all the fuss was about. Ahab recounts his discussion with Naboth and his subsequent refusal; conveniently leaving out Naboth's valid theological reasons for his refusal. Either Ahab didn't think Jezebel would grasp the intricacies of Yahweh's

covenant with His people or she just wouldn't care. Clearly, the only thing Jezebel couldn't grasp was why Ahab considered this to be such a problem. "Get a hold of yourself man! You're the king! No peon grape-picker is going to stand in the way of this regime! Your problem is you still think a king is subject to the law. You need to come to grips with the fact that what the king wants is the law!"

This was the Phoenician world view. Ahab's actions here simply baffled Jezebel. She'd never seen her daddy put up with this kind of resistance from one of his subjects. If people resist your will, you just run them over. "Get up and eat your supper. You really want that vineyard? Let me show you how it's done" So Ahab saunters off to the cafeteria while Jezebel storms over to the office, muttering as she goes. She types up an official letter, on Ahab's letterhead and sends it off to the elders of the city. The letter is short on detail concerning the problem but long on solution.

As Jezebel expected, the local leaders carried out her plan to the "T." They proclaimed a city wide "Day of Prayer." This may be a gross injustice but it will be a religious injustice. Apparently, that part of the country was under some sort of a scourge and the day of fasting was to discover the reason for it. This may be an injustice, but it will be a legal injustice. Jezebel insisted on 2 witnesses, just as the Law required. The scoundrels gave their false testimony and the scoundrels in charge executed their judgment and the pulverized pile of meat outside the city was a quiet testimony of what happens to those who won't play ball with the government of King Ahab.

This entire disgusting scene serves to reveal the depths of lawlessness and contempt for Yahweh of King Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel. Consider the sins they committed and the commandments they disobeyed. They had already disdained the first 2 commandments as they were the driving force behind the introduction of Baal worship in Israel. The opening scene of our text displays the covetousness living in Ahab's heart. The first 9 commandments focus on forbidden outward conduct but the command against covetousness deals with the hidden desires of the heart. A covetous heart often leads us to disobey all the other commandments. Next, we see false witnesses, murder and stealing, as Ahab gleefully takes possession of this newly vacant property right next to his palace.

Note that v15-16 read as though all well that ends well. The nasty Naboth

problem has been dealt with and the king can now claim the vineyard. Jezebel has been thorough: [II Kings 9:26](#) says that Naboth's sons were also executed, most likely to eliminate any family interference over their inheritance. The problem is solved quickly and completely and all it cost was the price of a stamp. It all seems so heartless and matter-of-fact but what does it say to us?

The first thing we need to realize is that this is the true lot of God's people in this world. As foreign as it may seem to us living in western societies, this is the sort of treatment believers can expect from the rulers of this age. Again, we might find this to be distasteful and unfamiliar but for the majority of Christians around the world, it's an every day occurrence. The fact that this truth may not have touched your life yet is due more to God's grace than society's good graces. Peter warns us about it ([I Pt 4:12](#)) and Jesus said it would be the case ([Mk 13:9](#)). It's hard for us in the West to grasp this because we're constantly being bombarded with the nonsense that God has promised to heal us of every ailment and we should be living our best life now!

I don't mean to be a Debbie-downer but that concept doesn't line up with what the Bible teaches. Naboth was clearly a Yahweh worshipping and fearing man and a kangaroo court convicted him and a bunch of cowardly knuckleheads executed him outside of the city. The Bible's portrayal of the believer's lot in this world is refreshing because it is based on sober realism, a realism that has been shamefully removed from the word of faith gospel.

How can this truth be considered refreshing? When this reality comes our way, we have a Naboth who understands. There is a Naboth in the NT. You can't read [ch21](#) and Matthew's account of the crucifixion without seeing how Jesus stood in the same position as Naboth. The injustice brought against Jesus was carefully crafted to be both religious and legal, though in truth, it was neither. He was arrested on trumped up charges, illegally tried, falsely accused and mercilessly executed. Jesus walked where Naboth walked. What if it comes to you? If you are to suffer in a similar way, you will not be alone in it. [Heb 4:15](#) tells us we have a High Priest Who sympathizes with our weaknesses. Our text teaches us that we also have a Naboth who sympathizes with the injustices we may suffer.

[17-26](#) – At the end of [v16](#), everything seemed to be sewed up tight...no

loose ends. All legal eventualities had been addressed and dealt with. Jezebel congratulated herself on a job well done and Ahab ran off to take possession of his brand new toy. Everything was right in the Ahab's world and nothing and nobody was going to rain on his parade.

It is at this point in the narrative that the Word of God intervenes and proceeds to disturb Ahab's hard-won peace. Instead of enjoying his new vineyard, Ahab runs into the prophet of God.

Yahweh directed Elijah to do what few men in Israel had the courage to do – confront this wicked, brutal and amoral king and queen of Israel. He pointedly charges them with the dual crimes of murder and theft. But, this wasn't Elijah speaking here – he's merely acting as the mouthpiece of Yahweh. Is this presumption on Elijah's part? Not at all – the principle on display here is the simple fact that no one is exempt from the scrutiny and judgment of God's word. In Israel, like it or not, the prophet as bearer of God's Word stands above and over the king and queen. No one, no matter his status or her success, can wiggle squirm or run beyond the boundaries of that jurisdiction.

This truth is as true today as it was in Elijah's day. Some people think that because they are powerful, wealthy, educated, successful or "morally superior" they can live their lives by their own dictates without fear of consequences or judgment. Sadly, there are also plenty of people who aren't any of those things who believe the same way. But, it doesn't matter what you feel or believe, no amount of success or rebellion will free you from the constraints of God's Word. The comforting truth presented here is that God will intervene to bring justice to His wronged people.

Now, you might say that God's justice comes a little late for Naboth but it's the death of Naboth that supplies the necessity of judgment. But, we can clearly see that God has taken the murder of Naboth personally. Even after his death, Naboth's name appears 6 more times in the text. He haunts the scene like a ghost that will not be laid to rest. More importantly, Yahweh presents Himself as Naboth's defender. We may wonder about the timing but this truth is an immense comfort in the life of God's people who have been beaten down and left for dead along life's way.

The text provides no guarantee of immunity from trouble. The guarantee is only that justice will be served; not necessarily tomorrow or next October,

but it will come and the Bible is very clear on that promise ([II Thess 1:6-7](#)). We have the story in [ch21](#) and the doctrine in [II Thess](#). God will intervene to bring justice to His wronged people. All throughout the OT, God is constantly seen taking the side of the oppressed and taking direct action against their enemies. The justice of God is a true consolation for a fragile church in a brutal world. It is also a big reason why we should remember to pray for our enemies. It may be hard to do but consider what they have to look forward to!

[27-29](#) – The last time Ahab “heard” something, it was about Naboth’s death (16a) and he responded by grabbing up his vineyard. But here, when Ahab “heard” what Elijah had to say, namely Yahweh’s judgments with his name on them, Ahab reacted quite differently ([27b](#)). That’s kind of surprising, knowing the wretched character of the man. But, what’s even more surprising is God’s response to Ahab’s response ([29](#)). There seems to be a mixture of delight and excitement in Yahweh’s words. It’s almost as if the Almighty nudges Elijah in the ribs and says, “Did you see that?”

Surprising? Yes! So much so that we may wonder if Yahweh was being naïve, is that gullible or just going soft. His judgments in [17-24](#) are dead on; He’s got Ahab dead to rights so why should He cut this sleaze ball from Samaria any slack? Surely He doesn’t mistake Ahab’s torn clothes and drooping head for genuine repentance, does He? What are we to make of all this?

First off, we need to understand the difference between postponement and cancellation. Elijah has just declared the end of Ahab’s dynasty; but in response to Ahab’s apparent repentance, He has postponed that judgment against Ahab’s household for a later date, but He does not cancel it. He changes the timetable but He doesn’t remove it from the agenda.

Sometimes Yahweh, in response to human repentance, will delay the arrival of His judgment. We see it time and again in the OT. That’s what God is doing here, in light of Ahab’s response. God will not obliterate Ahab’s whole household as soon as He had threatened to. He will still do it ([II Kings 9-10](#)) but not right now. Now is a merciful moment of opportunity granted to Ahab.

Was Ahab’s repentance sincere? His response in [v27](#) seems to imply that God’s word of judgment made quite an impression on him. He doesn’t seem to just be acting – faking drama doesn’t seem to be his thing. All his drama

is real! Certainly, if anyone could see the true condition of Ahab's heart, it would be God and He accepts it as being real enough to alter the timetable of His judgment.

If that is the case, and it is, why does something still feel a bit off with this? Maybe the problem lies in our perception of Ahab's repentance. We balk at the sincerity of it while God clearly accepts it. Could it be that Ahab's repentance was sincere at that moment but it was not a lasting repentance? Yes, it was serious but it was also temporary. No where does Ahab offer any further proof (or fruit) of repentance. He doesn't relinquish his claim to Naboth's vineyard; he doesn't reprove the murderous inclinations of his evil wife and yet, he is still profoundly moved by God's threat. We might even say that God responded to Ahab's temporary repentance with a temporary deliverance because in the very next chapter, Ahab is back to being his old selfish self again and within 3 years he will be dead under God's judgment

Where does all this lead us? Hopefully, it leads us to recognize the wonderful truth that God delights to exercise mercy even while imposing His justice. God honored Ahab's initiative of remorse, even if it was shallow and fleeting. This shows the power of both prayer and humble repentance. If Ahab hadn't humbled himself in this way, the judgment would have come in his life time. This shows that God gave the prophecy of judgment as an invitation to repentance and God then opened the door of mercy when Ahab properly responded to that invitation. The repentant heart always catches the merciful eye of God. Repentance is highly esteemed by the Father of compassion, even if it is shallow and short-lived.

Where does all this lead us? Back to God, hopefully! Can you see the merciful character of God here? You can see His enthusiasm for mercy in His question to Elijah in [v29](#). You can see His readiness to postpone His just judgment. Don't complain about Ahab's shoddy repentance - most of ours isn't much better. Notice how God's mercy itself is an invitation to Ahab to press on into a deeper repentance. How's that? If God responded so mercifully to Ahab's initial expression of repentance; how much more mercy would he have found if he had continued in that repentance?

Ahab didn't deserve any of God's mercy but that's just the character of God's mercy – it's given to the undeserving. By nature, the innocent don't need mercy – but who is really innocent. Ahab was a great sinner and he

won great mercy in this life through humble repentance. The worst sinner could not disqualify themselves from receiving God's mercy if that sinner would only approach God in humble repentance. Our God has a penchant for mercy and that mercy never changes. Or else, why does Jesus continue to hang around Laodicia, knocking on doors? ([Rev 3:20](#)). 😊