

Land Appropriation

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Date: 09 April 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everybody. Good to be back again with you and thanks for that reading. Well, we're back in the Old Testament, aren't we? And we've got ourselves another pretty graphic story, don't we? Last week we had Ehud the Left-Handed and today we've got the story about land appropriation. So that's going to be my title for today, Land Appropriation.

As we look at this fascinating story of Naboth's Vineyard. By the way, on Sunday, on Easter Sunday, I'm going to be dealing with a topic of can I be certain about the facts of the Christian faith? Can I be certain, for example, of the resurrection? And how can I be certain?

So you might know some folk who don't normally come to church or come along and hear a talk on that particular topic. So come along on Easter Sunday and Easter Friday as well and hopefully we'll have something challenging not only for the believer but also for the unbeliever. So invite all your unbelieving friends. All right, land appropriation and we're looking at the story here in 1 Kings 21 from verse 1 to verse 29. So I do encourage you to have your Bible open there in front of you. Now as we start and as we look at the account in front of us, we do know, of course, that the issue of property and land appropriation is a current one and, of course, it's quite a contentious one in our country right now. And, in fact, as read out to us, our Bible story today is about land appropriation. And we're a little bit later on now in the story in the Bible story. So Nick's been dealing with Joshua, which has been a great background for us. Last time we moved along a little bit and we came to a story in Judges where we looked at Ehud the left-handed and the fat man. Now we're moving on a couple of hundred years a bit more. We're coming into the time of the kings of Israel. So we're a little bit later on in the Old

Testament and we're looking at the story of land appropriation. In fact, it's a story of a corrupt government official. In fact, the most senior government official in the country, the king himself, a man by the name of Ahab, who appropriates or perhaps more accurately steals the vineyard of Naboth, his everyday Israelite, probably peasant neighbor for himself. But it's not so much about the question of whether or not a modern government should or should not appropriate land from its citizens.

I know, like much of the Bible, it ponders something deeper. It ponders rather the question of where true wealth is to be found. But as always, if we can understand what's going on in our story, we've first got to get a little bit of context. So let's first put things into context.

[3 : 0 9] Now, 1 and 2 Kings are historical books. And what they do is they explore the lives and the acts of the kings of Judah and Israel. After the time of Judges, we have the rise of the office of the king in Israel in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. And 1 and 2 Kings tell us about these kings.

They tell us about the reigns of David and Solomon. And then through to the rather tragic decline of the monarchy until finally you come to 2 Kings 25, where because all of these kings, other than a few bright spots on the horizon, turned out to be pretty much dirty, rotten scoundrels, God invoked his judgment and the curses of the covenant upon his people and they went off tragically into exile.

So it's a sad story because I suppose it is the story of the kings of Judah and the kings of Israel and how the nation ultimately failed to produce a good godly king to save God's people.

Now, of course, as New Testament folk, we know that that king is still to come and his name is the Lord Jesus Christ. And we'll look at the Lord Jesus a little bit later on. But in today's dramatic story, and it's just as dramatic, I suspect, as last week's story. If you were with us, you will know what I mean. We've essentially got four characters interacting with each other. We'll spend most of our time looking at three out of four. First of all, you've got Ahab. He's the king of Israel. Then you've got his wife, Jezebel. Everybody's heard about Jezebel, even folk who don't know the Bible.

She's probably the worst woman that the Bible ever produced, I suspect. She's really a bad lady. Then you've got Naboth, this poor Israelite. And then finally, later on, you've got Elijah, who is the prophet. He represents the voice of God's judgment, as was read out to us a minute ago.

[5 : 06] He represents the voice of God's judgment into the situation. But we'll focus mostly on Naboth and Jezebel and Ahab himself in the first few verses. So let's introduce, therefore, our first character in our plot. Again, our writer is a master storyteller. He knows exactly what he's doing, and he builds up his story for us, and our first character is Ahab. Ahab is the king.

He is the king in the north. You know your Bible story. You'll know that shortly after Israel, a couple of hundred years or so after Israel came into the land, the land split because of conflict. It's a great tragedy into Israel in the north and then Judah in the south. Ahab is the king of the north. And as he comes into our story at this point in 1 Kings 21, we know as readers of 1 Kings that he has the judgment of God on his house. We read that in 1 Kings 16 and verse 30. Ahab, son of Omri, did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.

Now, as king, he's actually supposed to ensure that Israel remains true to the covenant. But instead, this man, as the leader, worships idols. Now, something else rather interesting about the king. In the Old Testament, the king of Israel or the king of Judah, they were called the anointed of the Lord. Now, what's fascinating about that is that in the Greek, anointed of the Lord means Christ. In the Hebrew, Messiah. In other words, all the kings of the Old Testament in Israel and in Judah, in a sense, were messiahs. This man is supposedly the Christ of God, God's Christ in the Old Testament sense of that word. But the Christ turns out to be the Antichrist.

He turns out to be everything that the Christ shouldn't be. He's an idolater. His behavior here reveals him not to be God's true king, but as I've said, the Antichrist. And if you know anything about Ahab and you read the story, you discover that he's a little bit like Saul, his predecessor.

Like Saul, he covets things that don't belong to him. He's driven by his appetites. And tragically, well, this means bad news for his neighbor because his neighbor, a man by the name of Naboth, lives next door and he's got a vineyard. And Ahab the king has got his greedy eye on his neighbor's vineyard. But again, the story is only superficially about a land dispute. It's much more powerful than this. As we saw last time, often the Old Testament can be read in a superficial way, but we're always encouraged to dig a little bit below the surface to see if we can't learn more about deep spiritual concerns. And that's exactly the case here in our account and in our tale.

[8 : 21] And we see that, as we saw last time, for those of us who were here last time with Ehud, the left-handed, we see that with the careful use of our writer, the careful use of certain words and certain expressions that are rich with meaning, especially if you know the Old Testament story of Israel. So once again, sometimes the Bible tells what appears to be a straightforward story, but as we look deeper, we realize that there is tremendous spiritual depth and that's exactly what's going on here.

So we've introduced ourselves to the first character. His name is Ahab. He's the king. He should be concerned about his citizens, but he isn't. He's greedy. He's a land grabber. Now let's pick up on some of these key words and expressions that'll help us to understand the story. We'll get back to the story in a moment. We'll introduce you to Naboth and Jezebel in a minute, but let's have a look at some of these key ideas that crop up in our story. First of all, we've got the importance of Israel's inheritance.

This word in the Old Testament, this idea of Israel having an inheritance is very important, no doubt, as Nick pointed out to you when we looked at the book of Joshua together. You see, Naboth states that his vineyard is his inheritance. And again, originally we know the promised land was God's inheritance promised to Abraham and his descendants. In other words, Israel's land had deep spiritual or what we in the New Testament would call gospel significance. It is God's inheritance to Naboth, and it represents his share in the kingdom of God, his share in the covenant. We could even say his share in the Old Testament understanding of the gospel. It's God's inheritance. In other words, what made Israel's land special, this idea of inheriting land, what made it special wasn't so much that it was beautiful or that it was fertile or that it was flowing with milk and honey. No, it was special because it was the place where God would dwell with his people, where God would commune with his people. To live in the land is just another way of knowing God. To have your piece of the land, to have your inheritance would be to invest in the knowledge of the gospel. Of course, ultimately the land, although given to Israel, belonged to God. God alone could give the land. We read that, for example, in Leviticus chapter 25 and verse 23, where we read, the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine.

For you are strangers and sojourners with me. Our great possession as the people of God would be God himself, not material things, you see. And so because of this, there were all kinds of elaborate regulations in the Old Testament law respecting the land. And these regulations were there for a reason.

They were designed to ensure that the rich would not be allowed to exploit the poor and permanently take their land for themselves. So in the book of Numbers, chapter 36 and verse 9, we read, no inheritance may pass from one tribe to another, for every Israelite tribe is to keep the land in the land it inherits. And it was the king's responsibility to look after these affairs, to protect the land rights of his citizens. Now, as we've already seen in those days, the biblical writers had no highlight pens and neither did they underline things to catch our attention. Instead, they draw our attention to key themes. And of course, they draw our attention with repetition. They repeat ideas and they repeat words so that we can understand what they're trying to say. So for example, Naboth, the poor guy, has his vineyard stolen from him. He is mentioned 17 times in the story, including six times after he dies. And every single time he's named, he's called the Jezreelite. The Jezreelite. Over and over again, the Jezreelite. And the reason for that is, of course, because Jezreel is his inheritance. It's the place where his land is. And so our subtle writer reminds us of his inheritance, his ancestral inheritance that's going to be stolen by the king and his terrible wife Jezreelite. And also, whenever Naboth refers to his vineyard in the story, he always refers to it as the inheritance of my ancestors. Always. Because he will not allow us as readers to view his land other than from the perspective of the gospel or from its spiritual significance. However, the corrupt Ahab and Jezebel, when they refer to his land, they just speak about the vineyard.

[13 : 46] The vineyard. That's all they call it. Eight times. The vineyard. Just a vineyard. So they've got a very, very different view of Naboth's vineyard. They see it nothing more than something to buy. It's a tradable commodity. In other words, our story really is about two approaches to God's inheritance.

Or again, as New Testament people, we might say, two approaches to the riches of the gospel. So the first key idea or the first key word or notion in the story is this idea of inheritance.

Our inheritance is God's people. The second interesting idea is this notion of possession. It's very strong in the original. Now, it's important for us to remember that God gave Israel the land as her possession. Deuteronomy 1 and verse 8 and in many, many other Old Testament passages, including, of course, the book of Joshua. Now, when we look at the story, we read that Naboth possesses his inheritance, the land given by Yahweh. But then Jezebel commands Ahab to possess Naboth's vineyard, all the same word. So we've got this idea of possessing, possessing God's inheritance.

Then, thirdly, we've got another interesting idea, and that is the notion of giving or give. It's very strong in our story, especially in the original. So, for example, Ahab commands Naboth illegally to give his land. Jezebel asserts that she can give the land to Ahab. You pick it up there in your version of the Bible. You can see it there. But Naboth, the story tells us, will not give the land.

And then later on, God's judgment against Ahab and his house for taking Naboth's land gives his house over to destruction. So we've got all these interesting ideas that are floating around in our story. So now let's come to the plot itself. And it all starts in verse 2 with the offer. Ahab is the king. He's, in a sense, if you were here last week, he's the sort of the Egton of our story.

[16 : 35] He's the boss. He's the king. And he's got two palaces. He's got one in Samaria and he's got one here in Jezreel. And it all starts, no doubt, with him, perhaps on a Saturday morning, making himself a cup of coffee, getting up and going over to the window of his palace. And he looks out and he sees this wonderful vineyard of his next door neighbor. And he looks out over Naboth's property with hungry eyes and he decides he wants it for himself. He then makes Naboth an offer. Now study the offer with me in your Bible very carefully from verse 1 to verse 2. Let me have your vineyard, he says, to use for a vegetable garden. Since it is close to my palace, in exchange, I'll give you a better vineyard. Or if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it's worth. Now that seems reasonable, doesn't it? If you take the spiritual element associated with the land out, it makes a lot of sense. It's a reasonable offer.

I'll give you a better vineyard if you want, or I'll give you a very good, a very, very fair price. I think this seems to be pretty reasonable. But of course, if we know our Old Testament and we understand the true significance of the story, we know that that in actual fact is not what's going on. What Ahab is doing is wicked and godless. How does Naboth reply? Verse 3. He refuses.

Wow. He's a man of courage, isn't he? Here we're introduced to Naboth, and he is clearly a godly man. He's a godly gospel Israelite who puts his hope in the promises and the kingdom of God tied up in the meaning of his land. You see? Look at verse 3. But Naboth said to Ahab, the Lord forbid. You see? The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance. See that word inheritance? Inheritance of my fathers. So for Naboth to sell his land would be tantamount to cutting his successes off from a relationship with God.

Because the land is God's sacred gift to Israel. We might not necessarily understand that so much today because our properties are not tied up with the gospel. But that was not the case in the days of the Old Testament.

We've seen that the land had a very deep symbolism to the godly Israelite. It represented the kingdom of God. It represented his participation in the church, you see?

[19 : 20] But what about this king? Well, he is corrupt. For him, property is nothing more than something to be bought and sold. And he is supposed to be the Messiah.

He is supposed to be God's king. Encouraging Israel to be true to the covenant. And he is just a godless man. He thinks to himself, I'm the king. I'm the boss. This is what I want.

He's essentially pragmatic. This is what I want. I'll give you five million rand and that sorts it out. But he's like so many materialists, like so many unbelievers. He's pragmatic and, of course, he is a materialist.

Material things are just about fulfilling my desires, giving me what I want. They've got nothing to do with God. You know, he reminds me a little bit of Esau, doesn't he? You remember Esau?

Esau comes out of the forest one day. He's been hunting and he hasn't got anything and he's starving. And he sees Jacob preparing this delicious bowl of curry, briyani or whatever, and he smells this bowl of curry.

[20 : 34] And he says, who cares about my future? Who cares about future fulfillment? I need my fulfillment now. Gratification now. Gratification now. And he sells his inheritance. Can you believe it? He sells his inheritance for a single meal, according to Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 16.

I think Ahab's like that. This corrupt leader, this politician, he's a little bit like that. And, of course, his wife, well, I mean, she's even worse. She is the devil. I mean, look at her. From verse 5 to verse 6, now she comes into the story.

And what a real nasty woman she is. Naboth says, I won't sell you my land. I won't sell you my vineyard. It symbolizes my relationship with the gospel.

Ahab is furious. And he storms back home and he, you know, he sulks. You look at the story, he sulks like a child. You know, he reminds me of the premier, the president of North Korea.

Have you ever seen photographs of the president of North Korea? He's this fat little man and he's got this petulant sulk on his face all the time. I don't know if you've ever seen photographs of him. He reminds me of a teenager who's got far too much power and money.

[21 : 44] That's good for him. Now, that's the picture that I get of Ahab here. He sulks like a child. And when you read the story of Ahab and his reign in 1 Kings, you also discover that he's passive.

He doesn't have much initiative. His wife runs him and everybody else runs him and tells him what to do. So Jezebel, we read there, from 5 to 6, comes to him and said to him, Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?

And he said to her, Because I spoke to Naboth, the Jezreelite, and I said to him, Give me your vineyard for money or else, if it please you, I'll give you another vineyard for it. And he answered, I'll not give you my vineyard.

Now, that's interesting. You look at how Ahab answers his wife. How he repeats the conversation between himself and Naboth, you'll observe that he leaves out all the spiritual significance.

This is the land of my ancestors. This is my God-given inheritance. I can't sell you my land. No. No. Ahab conveniently leaves all of that out.

[22 : 56] And you notice how he paints Naboth? He paints Naboth as this rather rude, uncooperative fellow. He twists the whole situation.

The Christ here is definitely the Antichrist. Jezebel, well, she's just a pagan. I mean, she's the daughter of a Baal-worshipping family. And when she hears about Ahab's account of the problem, she says, well, who's the boss around here?

Who's the king? You or Naboth, stop whining. Use your power to get what you want. Don't worry. And this is very, very disturbing. Don't worry, she says. I will give you the vineyard.

You see, she's taking the role of God in the story. And then she hatches this diabolical plan. We won't go into any great detail because of time.

But it really is a diabolical plan. She says, let's call a fast. Now, a fast is an occasion where everybody seeks out God and repents.

[24 : 04] Can you believe it? That's what a fast is for. She says, let's call a fast. But she calls in some scared elders. I'd be terrified of her if I was one of Israel's leaders.

She calls in a couple of senior Israelite leaders and says, call a fast. Invite Naboth. And then I want you to find two dirty scoundrels for me. Literally in the original language, go and find two sons of the devil.

Go and find two sons of Belial. Find two scoundrels. And then in this fast, while everybody's there, what I want you to do is get these two scoundrels to stand up and say, Naboth, he cursed God and he cursed the king.

And then organized to have Naboth taken out and stoned to death. And that's what they did. So what starts out as covetousness leads to defamation of character, theft, and finally murder.

It's a very, very disturbing story, isn't it? We look at the story and as we come to a conclusion and as we try to apply some of these things for us today, we can't help but ask the question, well, what is God saying to us in the day and the age of the New Testament?

[25 : 20] How does the story speak to us? Especially in the light of what we're witnessing right now in our own country. Because there are certain themes in the story, are there not, that resonate with what's happening in South Africa right now?

There are quite a few things that are worrying us a little bit. Some of us are concerned about recent events in the last week or so. I mean, we've got, for example, the firing of Gordon. And we've got the dropping of our country economically to junk status.

Some of us know about that. That's a worry. Especially for those of us who are perhaps in business or those of us who've got funds invested in our country. It's a concern.

Many of us are worried about our future. We've got folk taking to the streets on Friday calling for the resignation of our president.

I mean, that's also a little bit concerning. What's good about it is that we live in a democracy, though. I think it's quite amazing that we're actually allowed to do that legally.

[26 : 21] So it's not all bad news. It's great that we can live in a country where we can actually peacefully protest. I think that's a good thing. But it is concerning, isn't it?

People are worried about our government. We need to be honest with that. People are worried about our president. People are worried about corruption.

I read on iAfrica.com, I think it was on Thursday, of a government official in KZN who embezzled 5 billion rand, according to the Hawks, 5 billion rand of public taxpayers' money.

I had this photograph of his garage, more like a warehouse with these Mercs and these Range Rovers. It is a worry, isn't it?

If we're Christian people, we look at all of this and we say, well, how does the gospel speak to all of this stuff? I mean, here we are. We're in South Africa. We're trying to live a godly life.

[27 : 24] How does all of this speak to our current situation? We've got people, politicians who are corrupt, like Ahab. There are quite a few neighbors, I suspect, in our country, in a sense, as well.

People who feel that they are also the victims of corruption. So how does the Bible, how does the gospel speak into our own current situation in our country?

In the light of what we've learned from our story today, and of course, what we know about the gospel. Well, I want to give you four very quick reminders as we come to a halt and as we end.

First reminder, the gospel calls us to keep the right perspective. You read the story of Ahab in the Old Testament, which took place hundreds of years ago.

We shouldn't be surprised if we find ourselves living in a society with corrupt leaders. It is distressing, sure, it is a worrisome thing, but we shouldn't be overly surprised at the corruption of worldly leaders who come to be served rather than to serve.

[28 : 28] We should not be overly stressed by that because the scriptures and the Bible have been warning us of these things right from the start.

Such is the nature of the world. We shouldn't be all that surprised. It's not new. And of course, through that, we also need to be reminded that we shouldn't pull all of our hope and our trust in worldly leaders and in political parties.

Those South Africans who do put all of their faith and all of their hope and their trust in political parties and worldly leaders are going to be let down. Now, I'm not saying we've got to bail on our country.

I'm not saying that we stop praying for our government and praying for those in authority. Of course not. We continue to be salt and light. We continue to seek to change the world for the gospel.

Of course we do. But we don't put our ultimate faith and our ultimate hope in worldly leaders. Because if we do, we will be disappointed.

[29 : 34] Thank God we have Jesus Christ. We put our faith and our trust in him. Now, we might be citizens of South Africa and that's an important thing.

Why do you think you're alive? Why do you think you are alive at this particular time in history in this country living in this part of South Africa? Why is it that you're not dead?

Why aren't you in heaven already? Well, the answer, of course, is that God has got something for you to do. We've all got work to do and that is to serve the gospel. But we have dual citizenship.

We're not only South African citizens, but the Bible tells us if we're Christian people, our true citizenship is in heaven. So Paul writes in Philippians chapter 3 and verse 20 that our citizenship is in heaven.

And we eagerly await a savior from there, our Lord Jesus Christ. That is where our citizenship lies. And therefore, it's good, first of all, for all of us to be reminded that we need to keep the right perspective.

[30 : 37] We shouldn't be overly surprised at what's going on around us. Now, second quick reminder, the gospel reminds us, of course, also of who our true king is, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And thank God, our true politician and our true leader and our true king is not like Ahab. He's not like a corrupt politician. He's the Lord Jesus Christ who came to serve and not to be served.

Mark 10 verse 45. He's not like Ahab, thank God. Thank God the Lord God didn't call Ahab to be our Messiah. Wow, what a relief. Can you imagine having Ahab and his wife to be our leaders?

But no, they are not our leaders. We put our faith and our hope ultimately in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thirdly, the gospel reminds us, third reminder, that God remains in charge.

God remains in charge. It doesn't matter what we think. It doesn't matter how we feel. God is always in charge.

[31 : 42] And if you listen to the reading read out to us a little bit earlier, you'll remember that Elijah came to Ahab and Jezebel and said that the justice of God will fall upon your household. And that's exactly what happened.

God sees everything. Do you know what the Bible says about worldly politicians in Isaiah chapter 40 from verse 22? This is what the Bible says about worldly politicians.

He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

To whom will you compare me, says the Lord? Or who is my equal, says the Holy One? Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? See, that's what we ought to do.

We've got to do that today. We look at all the concerning circumstances around us. We must not forget, thirdly, that God is in charge. And when he's ready to change a regime or to change a government, he'll do that.

[32 : 45] I remember the Soviet Union in the 1970s and the 1980s, the scariest empire the world had ever seen with all these atomic bombs. Everybody was so afraid of the Russians and the Cold War.

And I think, how long did it take for the Soviet Union to split up? Three years, it was gone. Gone. You see, the Lord in his own timing brings princes to naught when it suits him.

He raises up a government and when it suits him, he reduces them to nothing. And then let's have a look at our fourth and our final reminder as I do conclude. And that is, the Gospel reminds us that our inheritance is safe.

Our inheritance is safe, thank God. We read that in 1 Peter chapter 1 from verse 3 to verse 5. Let me read it out to you. Praise be to the God and Father, writes the Apostle Peter.

Of our Lord Jesus Christ, in his great mercy, has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

[33 : 47] In other words, nobody can take it away from you. It doesn't matter who's in charge. It doesn't matter who the president is. Peter goes on, he says, this inheritance is kept in heaven. Not a piece of real estate somewhere in Somerset West or here in Plumstead.

This inheritance is kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Isn't that wonderful? Thank God that despite the many so-called aabs out there in the world today, nobody can steal your inheritance. If you're a Christian person, your true inheritance, more important than land, more important than material things is the gospel.

It's Jesus Christ. It's eternal life with the Lord Jesus and we must be grateful for that. No matter what happens, nobody can take your inheritance away.

It's kept for you safe in heaven if you're trusting in Jesus today. And so if that's true, if as Christians we've got nothing to worry about, when it comes to our inheritance, what should we be doing now?

[34 : 57] Why are we alive here in Plumstead? In the 21st century, what should our focus on earth be? In the light of what we know, in the light of the comfort that the gospel brings, well, of course, we should be spreading the gospel.

That's what we should be doing. In the light of the fact that we're living in the end times, perhaps the Lord has allowed all of these things to happen to our country right now to challenge us to rethink our own priorities and where we stand with the priorities of the gospel.

So let me close with a verse from 1 Corinthians 15, verse 58. I'm going to close with this verse and then we're going to pray. Amen.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for the encouragement of your word this morning. We want to pray for those in authority.

We thank you for our government, Lord. We thank you for our country. We love South Africa. We know, Lord, that the government has a tough task ahead of itself in the next few days, Lord, so we just pray for the president.

[36 : 24] We pray for wisdom on the part of the ANC and those in opposition. But, Lord, we also pray for us. Lord, remind us this morning that our inheritance is kept in heaven. And that you protect your children.

And that you're with us. And that you've called us at this wonderful time in history to roll up our sleeves. And in the light of the hope and the promises we have in the gospel, to get on out there into our community and to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen.