
Biblical Justice & Worldly Injustice

DAVE BAST

We encounter, and are involved in, injustice every day. Sometimes it is obvious things that cannot be missed, like being fired because of your gender or skin color, but usually it is a little more complicated than that. For example, what if you buy clothes that are inexpensive and nice looking, but they are made in some sweat shop in the Third World; or what about the landlord who squeezes every dime out of his tenants with substandard housing? Well, today's *Groundwork* is going to explore what the Bible says about justice and injustice. Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. You know, Bob, there is so much going on in our society today that makes us angry; the things where people are being taken advantage of, scams and Ponzi schemes that bilk little people out of their income or their savings; politicians going off on corporate junkets and having all this money coming in for special interests.

BOB HEERSPINK

You think of Wall Street, people making millions and millions of dollars even after their companies have had to be bailed out by the government to the tune of billions.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and meanwhile, the little guy is being foreclosed on or is losing his job or has no health insurance, or you know, the list goes on and on.

BOB HEERSPINK

I think that is one of the real struggles that is going on, at least here in America; people wrestling with what is happening economically. What is fairness?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Where is justice? It seems like the rich get richer, the poor struggle more and more. Even the middle class feels pressured. What does it mean to live in a world of economic justice? What is fairness?

DAVE BAST

Well, and the worst thing of all, to me anyway, is when it seems like the rich or the powerful get away with it. They do in the little person – the powerless – the weak – and you know, they don't have to pay. They get off free.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is the cynicism, I think, that I see growing in society today; that if you have the money, if you can hire the lawyers, you can justify what is not justifiable. You can get away with economic murder.

DAVE BAST

So, does it really happen that if you are rich enough or powerful enough or influential enough you can get away with murder? Let's look at what the Bible says, because there is a story that makes exactly this point, and it is found in the Old Testament, in the book of 1 Kings Chapter 21. It is the story of Ahab and Jezebel, the king and queen of Israel, and a man named Naboth. Let me just read the beginning of that:

¹Sometime later, there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria. ²Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange, I will give you a better vineyard; or if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." ³But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors." ⁴So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors." He lay on his bed, sulking, and refused to eat.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Ahab was king in the northern kingdom. Sometimes we call that Samaria; and this was during a very, very economically prosperous time in the northern kingdom; probably the most prosperous time that Israel was to experience.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is roughly the mid 9th Century BC. It is about 850 BC. It is probably a hundred years or so after David and Solomon and the division of the kingdom; and Ahab was among the most wealthy and powerful of all the leaders of that northern kingdom. He had married a woman named Jezebel...

BOB HEERSPINK

One of the most famous women that you find in scripture, and not for positive reasons.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well; infamous maybe would be a better word. She was a Phoenician princess; and so this is typical of that age and era, and really, of royal politics in any era, it is a marriage alliance.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, Ahab of Israel – Ahab of Samaria – marries Jezebel of Tyre, and they form this kind of union that is political and social and everything else together.

BOB HEERSPINK

And in the ancient world, sealing an alliance was not just a matter of politics. It was also a matter of religion. In Tyre and Sidon, the worship was of Baal, which was a fertility religion...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And she basically packed up her gods and goddesses, took down the idols that she had become accustomed to, and introduced them into the worship of Israel, and that is where a lot of problems are going to begin.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; introduced is maybe too mild a term because she was a fierce and fanatical worshipper of Baal; and this is also the time of Elijah, the great prophet in Israel. So, that is some of the background; these wonderful stories of the confrontation between Elijah, the prophet of the Lord, and Jezebel and her prophets of Baal.

BOB HEERSPINK

And all of this is going to center now on this little guy who has a vineyard that is very, very desirable to the king.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; it is right adjacent to the summer palace. Ahab is this powerful king. He wants the grounds and the estate to show that, to reflect his status; and so he makes what seems like a reasonable offer, you know, to Naboth: here, look; I need your land. It is a nice vineyard, but I need to expand my garden...

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, interestingly, he right now is still playing by the rules of what it means to be a king that recognizes the God of Israel, because he is not claiming it. He understands he has limitations to what he can do. He is not going to go to Naboth and say: hey, by the laws of eminent domain, this is mine... He makes an offer.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; today the government would just take it, wouldn't they? They would condemn the land and say we need it for this, that, or the other thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

And so he ends up, when Naboth turns him down, doing a very unkingly thing. He sits on his bed – he is laying on his bed – and he is throwing a tantrum. He is basically crying in his pillow because he didn't get his way.

DAVE BAST

I have a hunch the biblical writer means for us to kind of laugh at him at that point. It is a little silly, isn't it, for a great king to be sulking in his bedroom because he cannot get his way.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, justice would be done if that was the end of the story; but it is not the end of the story, is it?

DAVE BAST

No, it is just the beginning.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

We will follow where this story leads in just a moment; but first, listeners like you make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures. There, we continue to reflect on today's theme about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations that listeners have begun about scripture and how it interacts with their lives; and we would also like you to help us think about upcoming programs. One of the topics we are going to be talking about in a future series is the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. So, we are wondering, what are some of the ways that the living Christ has met you on your road? Share your thoughts on that and other upcoming questions. Finding us is easy. Just visit our website, groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay, Dave, we have been talking about Ahab and Naboth, and this little deal that Ahab is trying to pull off with Naboth; his unwillingness to sell the land, and so far, there doesn't seem to be much injustice here. Ahab has made an offer and Naboth has turned it down, but I think one question is why would Naboth turn down what must have been a fantastically lucrative offer from the king?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; you know, if it was you or me in that position...

BOB HEERSPINK

We would take the money and run!

DAVE BAST

Probably, you know; why doesn't he just retire, sell the farm, and go move to Arizona or someplace, or Florida or the Caribbean; take an island spot?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, it is an interesting thing because when he turns down the king he has this statement where he says: Far be it from me to be disobedient to God...

DAVE BAST

Yes, even stronger.

BOB HEERSPINK

He even ties this in with who he is.

DAVE BAST

Yes, even stronger: The Lord forbid...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is translated: That I should sell the inheritance of my fathers.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, for Naboth, the land was actually an expression of his future hope as a part of the people of Israel.

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; we need to dig into that idea a little bit deeper, I think, and go back to the exodus and the entry into the Promised Land under Joshua, way back before the time of the Judges; and the book of Joshua explains how the land – the individual plots – fields and estates – were given by lot to the various tribes of Israel. So, this was really, literally, an inheritance, not just from his fathers, but from God himself. This was the gift given to Naboth's family that was tied to the promises of God, going all the way back to Abraham: I will give you the land – the Promised Land, they called it. Think of the psalmist in Psalm 16: The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. I have a beautiful inheritance. That is another allusion to that original division of the land, right from the hand of God, to each of these families.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, at this point, Naboth then is really being confronted with a test of faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes; right, exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

If he holds to the land, he holds to the promises. If he sells the land, he really sells out – sells out his faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes; this is not a real estate transaction...

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

This is not a commercial deal. This is all about his faith in the Lord, and the Lord's covenant promises; because even the land, we learn from the Bible, was a symbol of something more – of heaven – of our heavenly inheritance. So, for the Old Testament Israelite, nothing was closer to his personal faith in God than holding onto that land. That is why they had the law of jubilee, where the land would revert, even if it was sold because of poverty or whatever, it was supposed to go back to the original owner, to that family.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, in comes, now, Jezebel...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And she finds her husband sulking in his bedroom, and she says: That whole understanding of the land... You are the king, you can just throw it right out the door and go with a whole different plan.

DAVE BAST

Right; she couldn't care less about the Lord or his promises. She is the dragon lady, and she says, in effect: hey, no problem, Ahab. I will take care of it for you.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, she comes in, she has a plan, and the plan is to eliminate Naboth; and let me just share a few verses which talk about how she is going to pull that off.

⁸Jezebel wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and leaders who lived with Naboth in his city; ⁹and she wrote in the letters: Proclaim a fast and set Naboth at the head of the people; ¹⁰and set two worthless men opposite him and let them bring a charge against him, saying, "You have cursed God and the king." Then take him out and stone him to death.

Well, that is how she is going to pull this off.

DAVE BAST

You know, to me, this reads like the plot of a modern crime drama, you know. Here she is not only going to get rid of Naboth, but she is going to use the law to do it, and she is going to distance Ahab the king from any involvement by making sure that it is the local officials who condemn Naboth to death. So, she forges letters, she puts Ahab's seal on it so it seems to be coming from him; and she says to these local leaders: Hire a couple of false witnesses – a couple of worthless people who will lie – and have them testify that Naboth actually cursed God and the king. So, not only is Naboth's life going to be taken and his land taken away from him, but his reputation – his name. He is going to be held up publically as a blasphemer, as a traitor, and on the testimony of these two witnesses, they are going to...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; it is all going to happen in the courts. It is all going to seem legal.

DAVE BAST

It is all legal; right; legal murder.

BOB HEERSPINK

Legal murder.

DAVE BAST

Legal murder.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know what is so tragic, what is so shocking is that not only is Naboth taken out and stoned, but we know from later on in the scriptures that his sons are taken out and killed as well; and of course, that had to happen because if Naboth was killed and the land was there, his sons would inherit. What Ahab has to do is make sure that everyone who would stand to gain from Naboth's death is eliminated so he can step in and grab the land.

DAVE BAST

I don't think I knew that. Does that come later, about the sons?

BOB HEERSPINK

It talks about the fact that the blood from that field cries out; Naboth's blood, but also his sons' blood.

DAVE BAST

Yes; when Jezebel is condemned later on.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right, exactly.

DAVE BAST

Yes, wow. So, that makes it all the worse.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you just see the way injustice has to heap upon itself. You follow a road toward injustice and it is just not one act. You have to keep on with injustice to get what you really want.

DAVE BAST

So, here is the question, because at this point in the story, you know, Jezebel receives the report in due time from the crooked politicians there in Jezreel, and they tell her: Okay, it is all taken care of. Naboth and his sons are dead; and Jezebel comes into Ahab and says: hey, Honey; guess what?

BOB HEERSPINK

You've got the land.

DAVE BAST

Problem solved. Go take possession of your field. End of story. Who is going to complain? Who is going to charge the king and the queen with anything?

BOB HEERSPINK

Even the legal system has been co-opted.

DAVE BAST

Right; certainly not those officials. Their hands are bloody, too. So, end of story; and meanwhile, it is the way the world goes, doesn't it? The rich and the powerful win their way and the poor and the powerless are ground under; the Naboths of the world are swept away, and nobody and nothing can do anything about it.

BOB HEERSPINK

But there was one thing that Jezebel forgot, and that is what we really have to look at next.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into the scripture as the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, Bob; we return to our question: Who is going to respond to the great injustice caused by Jezebel and Ahab? Is anyone even aware of it? Does anyone know? Is anyone in a position to challenge? And the answer is: Yes, because there is a one more great character in this story, who is also the main character in every bible story, and that is the Lord himself. He knows, he has seen, and he will respond; and this is how it happens. I am picking up the reading again from 1 Kings 21:17:

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, the Tishbite, ¹⁸“Go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. ¹⁹Say to him, ‘This is what the Lord says: “Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?”’ Then say to him, “This is what the Lord says, ‘In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood, yes, yours.’” ²³And also concerning Jezebel, the Lord says, “Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.”

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, it seems like Ahab and Jezebel forgot that there was still a greater king in Israel, and that means that in spite of all the legalities that Ahab and Jezebel were able to handle in terms of Naboth's elimination, there is a morality – there is a justice – that overarches all things; and not just for Israel, but for us, too. There is still this great king to whom all people are called to respond with lives of justice, fairness, and equity.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is a difference, a basic difference, between what is legal and what is just; and Ahab and Jezebel have gamed the system, as we say, to get what they want, but God is not going to let them get away with it. I mean, this tremendous revelation in this Old Testament narrative of the basic justice of God; it takes your breath away. This gruesome judgment, but isn't it fitting? It is a punishment that fits the crime. I mean, there are all these overtones as you read this passage. “Go down there,” God says to Elijah, “go down there to Ahab, who rules in Samaria.” No, he doesn't really rule in Samaria; God rules in Samaria...

BOB HEERSPINK

God does.

DAVE BAST

And everywhere else; and he is in Naboth's vineyard. He thinks it is his, but no, that vineyard was Naboth's, and where the dogs licked up Naboth's blood, unjustly shed, they will also do the same for Ahab and his wife.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, that sounds so shocking that a lot of people would take it to be bad news, but actually, that is good news. It is good news that there is a God who is going to vindicate the Naboths of this world. There is a God who is going to shed light where there is incredible darkness.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; I mean, imagine if we lived in a world where the Ahabs and the Jezebels got away with it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

But that is why in the end there will be a final judgment, when everything will be revealed. There will be no more secrets, no more dark things hidden in a corner, but all will be made known, to the glory of a righteous God.

BOB HEERSPINK

As I think of this story, Dave, and what it means for us today, where do we find ourselves in this story? Where do we find ourselves in the picture?

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is always the question, isn't it, of any biblical passage? So what? What does that mean for me? Maybe one thing that we could say is that it would be too easy just to identify with Naboth.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is where we want to go. We want to say we are the little guy; we are oppressed. The big corporations are messing with us, but...

DAVE BAST

And they are going to get theirs.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

But what about Ahab? I find that is where I need to do some identification to really make this passage come home.

DAVE BAST

Sometimes we are the little guy who is done to, and sometimes we are the powerful person who does the doing, if I can put it that way. You know, I look at my pension as it kind of grows, and sometimes I wonder...I wonder, what about the corporations that that is put in; I don't even know where it goes, you know, I just see this number that has gone down and I want it to go up; but what if I personally am involved, at least at some distance, in oppressing the poor? You know, it could be.

BOB HEERSPINK

In the decisions that those companies you invest in make.

DAVE BAST

It could be. It is such a complicated society, and we can be involved on the side of the Ahabs without even realizing it; so what do we do?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, we have to seek mercy. That is really where we have to start, and that means we need to go to the cross.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

The cross is where the justice of God and the law of the mercy of God come together.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And we are not going to escape the injustice that we experience in our world, even that we are sucked into...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Without God's love and mercy operative in our own lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, throw yourself on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ and that mercy covers our sins; right, but that is only the first step.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that mercy also frees. You know, it is interesting to me that, really, it is the love of God that compels the justice of God. It would be an unloving god who would allow injustice to stand.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is a good point. Justice is a function of God's love. It is that part of his character. It is not his harsh...only his harsh, stern judgmental side.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and if we are going to become justice seekers ourselves, we have to get in tune with the love of God.

DAVE BAST

So, we experience God's grace – God's forgiveness for ourselves; we claim mercy for all of our sins, known and unknown, but that then sets us free, yes, to be merciful people, but also justice seekers.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because so much of our injustice is driven by selfishness, and that love of God can break us out of those bonds to really become those who speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

DAVE BAST

Speak for the Naboths of the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

For the Naboths.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; and to have the courage to stand up to the Jezebels and the Ahabs when we see that happening as well.

BOB HEERSPINK

But by the grace of God, we are able to love mercy and work for justice.

DAVE BAST

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So, tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. You can visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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