Community Group Discussion Guide

September 7, 2025

1 Kings 21:17-29 | A Divided Response

MOTIVATE

⇒ *Starter Question: How is God's justice different from our sense of justice? How is God's mercy different from our mercy?*

DISCUSS

After Elijah's victorious showdown on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal, God sent torrential rain on Israel for the first time in over three years. Ahab told his wife, Jezebel, that Elijah had slaughtered her false prophets. She swore an oath that she would kill Elijah. Jezebel was the daughter of the king of the Sidonians (1 Kings 16:31). Jezebel, like her father, incorporated her worship of Baal and Ashtoreth (or Asherah) in her political ambitions. Scripture attributes Ahab's many sins in Israel to her in fluence (1 Kings 21:25).

At some point, Ahab wanted a vineyard near his royal residence that belonged to a man named Naboth. Ahab wanted to buy it from him, but Naboth, obeying the law of the Lord (Leviticus 25:23), was unwilling to give his ancestral inheritance to the king for any price. Because of that, Ahab sulked. Jezebel, Ahab's wicked wife, came up with a scheme to have Naboth falsely accused and stoned to death. Not only was Naboth murdered, but his heirs also were slaughtered so they could not lay claim to the land. After Naboth was killed, Jezebel told Ahab to take what he had wanted (1 Kings 21:1-16). While Ahab and Jezebel thought they could get away with false witness, murder, and theft, their actions incurred the wrath of God. Yet, in 1 Kings 21:17-29, after Elijah spoke God's proclamation of judgment to Ahab, the king's humble response brought God's mercy.

⇒ *Why is a story like this one important in the biblical narrative? How does it point us to Jesus?*

1. Those who participate in injustice will be judged.

1 Kings 21:17-19: ***17*** *Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,****18*** *"Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession.****19*** *And you shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Have you killed and also taken possession?"' And you shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood."'"*

At the word of the Lord, Elijah appeared for a final encounter with Ahab. God instructed Elijah to meet up with Ahab in the very place over which Naboth had been killed—his vineyard. Elijah was told to announce the Lord's judgment upon Ahab for his wickedness and his injustices.

Elijah was to ask, "Have you killed and also taken possession?" Ahab indeed had taken possession of Naboth's vineyard, though technically it was Jezebel who had ordered Naboth's murder. She was the one who wrote the letters, signed and sealed them in the king's name, and sent them to the elders and nobles of Jezreel ordering Naboth's murder (1 Kings 21:8-11).

But God justly held Ahab responsible for Naboth's murder. The king was complicit in the wicked deeds perpetrated, even though he didn't order them himself. He was culpable before God as the king over Israel, the husband of Jezebel, the ruler and judge over Naboth's unjust execution, and he

clearly had no scruples about profiting off of Naboth's murder. Through the actions of Jezebel, Ahab caused innocent blood to be shed, thus his blood in turn would be shed.

⇒ *Why are those allowed in leadership by God held to a higher standard?*

Elijah was to then pronounce God's judgment on Ahab: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood." In the ancient Near East, dogs were not house pets but scavengers that lived on refuse. In fulfillment of this prophetic judgment, King Ahab, in spite of disguising himself as an ordinary soldier, would be killed in battle by a seemingly stray arrow (1 Kings 22:29-38). Ahab's body would be taken back to Samaria and buried, but when his bloody chariot was washed out, "the dogs licked up his blood."

⇒ *What does the story of Ahab reveal about God?*

1 Kings 21:20-26: ***20*** *Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord.* ***21*** *Behold, I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel.* ***22*** *And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin.* ***23*** *And of Jezebel the Lord also said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel.'* ***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 shall eat."* ***25*** *(There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited.* ***26*** *He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.)*

When Ahab saw Elijah, he called him "my enemy," recalling the curt way Ahab greeted the prophet in 1 Kings 18:17 before the face-off on Mount Carmel: "Is that you, the one ruining Israel?" Ahab added, "You've found me, haven't you?" Elijah replied, "I have found you because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord."

⇒ *In what ways do we "sell ourselves" to do what is evil in God's eyes?*

Ahab, Elijah said, had "given himself over to" or "sold himself" to do evil, and because of this, the all-knowing God sent His prophet to the exact place Ahab would be in order to hear the Lord's condemnation. Announcing the second wave of God's judgment in verses 21-24, Elijah said God would wipe out all of the house of Ahab, putting an end to his dynasty and making it end like the previous dynasties of Jeroboam and Baasha, two early kings of Israel (1 Kings 14:9-11; 16:1-4). But as bad as those kings were, they had nothing on Ahab, who was notable for all the wrong reasons. The Lord had sent His people into the promised land to conquer it, in part, to judge the current inhabitants because of their extreme wickedness. Ahab led Israel in that same type of wickedness.

⇒ *Why are we often accepting of God's judgment on others but not on ourselves?*

God's judgment came about because Ahab angered the Lord and led Israel to sin. When the Lord announced, "I will bring disaster upon you and will eradicate your descendants," the Hebrew uses a present participle. Even though the fulfillment of the prophecy would come in the future, it was so certain to happen that it could be spoken of in the present tense.

- ⇒ *How are you challenged and comforted by the truth that God sees and will judge all injustice?*
- ⇒ *Is God's coming justice so certain we can speak of it today in the present tense? Explain your answer.*

Elijah also delivered God's words concerning Jezebel: "The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel." Elijah further prophesied: "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 shall eat." An exposed, unburied corpse was a shameful, horrifying, disgraceful punishment in Israelite culture, not only because it would be eaten by dogs and scavenger birds but because it was a sign of God's punishment.

The fulfillment of the prophecy about Jezebel came to fruition in 2 Kings 9:30-37 when Jehu ordered her to be thrown down from an upper window "and some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled on her." After pausing for a meal, Jehu ordered that Jezebel's body be buried, but when they went to get it, "they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands." The dogs ate Jezebel's flesh and turned her corpse into "dung on the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel."

- ⇒ *What kind of reputation does Jezebel continue to have throughout Scripture (see Revelation 2:19-21) and even today? Why is she a cautionary tale?*
- ⇒ *How does the story of Ahab and Jezebel demonstrate God's providential sovereignty?*

The pronouncement that Ahab's blood would be licked up by dogs and that Jezebel's body would be eaten by dogs signified that there would be no honor in death for anyone connected to Ahab. Jezebel had unjustly set up
Naboth to be stoned to death, and dogs licked up his blood outside the city. God's punishment for Ahab and Jezebel would be poetic justice for what they had done to the innocent man.

First Kings 21:25 reiterates that Ahab devoted himself to do what was evil in the Lord's sight, specifically citing his wife Jezebel's inducement. Ahab allowed his pagan wife to influence him so that he could get what he wanted, and she incited him and the people of Israel to commit the most detestable acts by following idols as the Amorites had. Elijah pronounced a stark message of judgment against the power couple—death, disgrace, and destruction to their house and descendants—making it clear that those who participate in injustice will be judged by the Lord.

- ⇒ *Proverbs 13:20 says, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." What qualities should we look for when deciding who influences us?*

2. God shows mercy when sinners humble themselves.

1 Kings 21:27-29: ***27*** *And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly.* ***28*** *And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,* ***29*** *"Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? 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."*

Receiving word of a punishing famine upon the land didn't faze Ahab. Seeing the Lord light up a sacrifice from the sky, followed by the execution of his favored prophets, didn't sway him. But to

Elijah's message of judgment for his injustice against Naboth, Ahab reacted with heartfelt humility and prolonged marks of repentance. This was not a pretend act of manipulation. Ahab demonstrated his internal, genuine repentance in the traditional outward ways:

a. He tore his clothes: Tearing clothes was an outward sign associated with grief, loss, and mourning. Clothing was a valuable commodity as everything was handmade and the garments one possessed were limited.

b. He put on sackcloth: Sackcloth was a course, scratchy, uncomfortable material made from goat or camel hair, a stark contrast to the clothing of a king. Wearing sackcloth symbolized outwardly the pain and discomfort one was feeling inside. Sackcloth was worn as a sign of mourning for the dead, of mourning over national disaster, and of repentance over sin. Sometimes only a sash or band of sackcloth was tied around the waist, but normally it was worn against one's skin and kept on even at night.

c. He fasted: Fasting was going without food for a time to show God that the petition or repentance was more important than daily nourishment. Ahab would have had unlimited food and drink at his beck and call, but he refused those to help communicate the state of his heart. Fasting was designed to express penitence. "To fast" literally refers to "afflict one's soul." It was an act of self-denial. Thus, it was an outward act intended to reflect an internal condition of grief. The prophets declared that fasting without the corresponding right conduct was in vain (Isaiah 58:3-12; Jeremiah 14:11-12; Zechariah 8:18 -19), which is probably the reason verse 27 states that Ahab walked around subdued and dejected, showing his contrition and reflecting an inward change in his demeanor. The words "walked around," or "went around," describe not merely his gait but his behavior.

- ⇒ *Why must we take our sin very seriously?*
- ⇒ *What are some ways we might display repentance for our sin before God?*
- ⇒ *Why are Psalm 51:17 and 1 John 1:9 both such beautiful promises?*

God had told Ahab that he and his whole family and dynasty would be wiped out. But in response to Ahab's humility, God showed him mercy. God would delay the disaster for a few years to fall upon Ahab's sons. God's patience and mercy make no sense from a human mind-set. Ahab was the worst and most wicked king of Israel, and yet, because he responded to the Lord with humility, God had mercy on him.

- ⇒ *Discuss this statement: To humble oneself involves putting aside ego and admitting one's own flaws and shortcomings. Humbling oneself outwardly before others is one thing, but Ahab humbled himself before the Lord, and that made all the difference.*
- ⇒ *Complete these two sentences:*
  Ahab deserved judgment because . . .
  Ahab received mercy because . . .
- ⇒ *Do you have a hard time accepting God's mercy toward Ahab? Explain your answer.*
- ⇒ *Do you have a hard time accepting God's mercy toward someone from your own life? Why?*

Ahab, a thief, a murderer, and one of the most wicked kings in Israel's history, had earned God's judgment, yet he humbled himself before the Lord, and God mercifully delayed that judgment—but judgement still came. Fourteen years after Ahab died, 2 Kings 9-10 says disaster came on his dynasty, when Ahab's son Joram reigned as king of Israel.

Ahab's offenses against God were egregious. We aren't any more holy than Ahab on our own, so we are just as deserving of God's judgment. Like Ahab, we all have earned death as the wages for our sin, but those who humble themselves before the Lord, who repent of their sin and believe in Jesus, will never be condemned and will receive God's gift of eternal life with Him.

Such mercy doesn't make sense until we recognize that all of us are "the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15-16). God is perfect in His justice—sin will be judged—yet He loves to shows mercy when sinners humble themselves and believe in Him. We see a picture of this in God's response to Ahab's humility, but we see the fullness of God's underserved mercy and grace in His gospel to save sinners who repent and believe in Jesus.

⇒ *Complete these two sentences:*
I deserved judgment because . . .
I received mercy because . . .
⇒ *Do you have a hard time accepting God's mercy toward you?*
⇒ *How does God's mercy extended to Ahab help you to grasp the gospel of Jesus?*

TRANSFORM
Ahab was complicit in lies, murder, and theft amongst other sins. Our sins may differ by degree but are no less offensive to God. God will not ignore injustice among His people, nor will He ignore injustice from any of His image-bearers, and we are all guilty of sin and injustice against Him and others.

Yet, God is also merciful. In His mercy, God responds to the humble and broken hearts of sinners. Ahab received a reprieve, a postponement of his judgment. Under no circumstances could we say he deserved this from God. But even greater, through the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, taking upon Himself the judgment we deserve, those who believe in Him and repent of their sins are graced with forgiveness and eternal life. In Christ, the justice and mercy of God meet and are satisfied.

1. HEAD: In Exodus 20:13-17, the Lord says, "Do not murder. . . . Do not steal. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor. Do not covet your neighbor's house . . . or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Ahab and Jezebel broke God's law and earned God's just judgment, but for his humility, Ahab also received a measure of mercy.

⇒ *How do you reconcile God's perfect justice and His perfect mercy?*

2. HEART: Ahab was the worst king of Israel, having done more evil to anger the Lord than any before him. Yet a change of thinking led to a change of heart, and thus, he humbled himself before the Lord, for which he received mercy.

⇒ *How does it feel to know that mercy is found just by repenting and turning to the Lord?*

3. HANDS: It is easy to look at others who may live in open sin as being "the worst" or unworthy of God's mercy. But as a common phrase says, "You bring nothing to your salvation except the sin that made it necessary." All of us are the worst of sinners; we all need to trust Jesus for salvation.

⇒ *How will you reach out to unbelievers, knowing that the Lord delights in showing mercy to all*

who repent?

The Gospel Project®: Adult Commentary

The Gospel Project® for Adults
Leader Guide, Unit 13, Session 4