Who Has Your Ear?

1 Kings 20-21

In 2015, Lee, Tom, and I went with David Dahl to a church planting conference together. I don't remember much about the conference, but I do remember that J.D. Greear, pastor of The Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina, gave an excellent talk on a vision for churches that send people out. I think J.D.'s talk at that conference played a formative role in the vision that we have developed here at Cornerstone of training and sending out pastors and planters, as well as church members who will join them in the task of extending the gospel to the ends of the earth. At one point I remember J.D. pointing to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 and showing how the man who buried his talent just to protect it, instead of taking a risk and investing it, was addressed by his master in verse 26 as "you wicked and slothful servant." To that point J.D. said, "There is more than one way to be wicked." That stuck with me. We often think of wickedness as running headlong into some vice. You are wicked if you actively do bad things. But it's also possible to be wicked by failing to do what you are supposed to do. The wicked, slothful servant of Matthew 25 simply failed to be a good steward of what belonged to his master.

The same is true of King Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel. In chapters 20 and 21 of 1 Kings, Ahab fails twice to be a faithful steward of what the Lord had entrusted to him. Although the two chapters are in two different settings and have two very different stories, they seem to be connected to each other. Toward the end of chapter 21, a prophet confronts Ahab for his failure, and verse 43 tells us that in response the king "went to his house vexed and sullen," that is, sulking and resentful. Then, the same two words are used of the king after his interaction with Naboth in chapter 21, followed by another prophetic confrontation, which ties the two chapters together this way:

A An unnamed prophet confronts Ahab (20:35-42)
  B Ahab goes to his house vexed and sullen (20:43)
  B' Ahab goes to his house vexed and sullen (21:4)
A' The prophet Elijah confronts Ahab (21:17-24)

The two stories revolve around Ahab's failed stewardships, words of rebuke from the Lord through his prophets, and Ahab's responses to those words. It shows, once again, that the Word of God is the supreme power in Israel, not the unfaithful king. These stories impress on us the absolute necessity of listening to the Word of God, letting it expose the sin in our hearts, and guiding us in the way of repentance and faith. All around us there are voices coming from all directions, and each one seeking to tell us how to interpret the world, and consequently how to order our lives in it. Those voices come from podcasters, pundits, politicians, professors, and peers, and if any of those voices are at odds with Scripture, we must have the discernment to see that and reject what they have to say. But unless our delight is in the Law of the Lord as we meditate on it day and night (Psalm 1), we will either lack the discernment to hear God's voice in all the noise, or we will lack the will to obey his voice when we hear it, or both. In these two chapters, Ahab too quickly listens to other voices instead of the Word of the Lord, and it leads him into disaster. May we heed the warnings of his story.

Let's put these two stories together this morning and note what they teach us about the importance of listening to the Word of God. First, note that in both stories we see

1. The weakness of a king

Ahab's wickedness is rooted in his weakness in both chapters 20 and 21. Twice he fails to carry out his duty as a steward of what belongs to God. We will look first at the events of chapter 20. Here we have a story of two times when King Ben-hadad of Syria led attacks on Israel, and both times the Lord miraculously delivered Israel from what otherwise would have been certain doom. Verse 1 informs us that Ben-hadad had an alliance with thirty-two kings, vassals of Syria, making his army a massive alliance of forces, complete with the best military technology of that time: horses and chariots. With this overwhelming force, Ben-hadad laid siege to Samaria. Then he presented his terms to Ahab: "Give me your silver, your gold, your wives, and your children." Ahab agreed. But that wasn't enough for Ben-hadad, so he demanded more: "Let my servants search your house and the houses of your servants and take all that they desire." At this point, King Ahab balked and said, "No, I will not go that far." So Ben-hadad responded as you might expect in verse 10: "Ben-hadad sent to him and said, 'The gods do so to me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people who follow me.'" What that means is, "There's not enough dust in Samaria to give every man in my army a handful. That's how much we're about to overwhelm you and destroy you."

And then, out of nowhere, an unnamed prophet intervenes. Verse 13 reads, "And behold, a prophet came near to Ahab king of Israel and said, 'Thus says the LORD, "Have you seen all this great multitude? Behold, I will give it into your hand this day, and you shall know that I am the LORD."'" And then he directed Ahab to send out first to battle the "servants of the governors of the districts," who seem to be the most unlikely leaders of a military effort. Although some scholars think they were an elite unit, it seems possible to me they were not even military men at all. And yet, they led Israel's forces out and won a decisive victory against Syria, just as the Lord predicted. In the aftermath of the battle, the prophet told Ahab to get ready for the spring, when Ben-hadad would attack again, and it tells us that Ben-hadad's servants interpreted their defeat as an indication that Israel's gods were gods of the hills, so if they could engage in a future battle on a plain, they would be victorious. Round one was over, and, through the ministry of his prophetic word, the Lord delivered Israel. It's amazing how the Word of God invades our lives when we believe we are in dire straits and completely changes our perspective on reality.

Then round two began the next spring, and once again Ben-hadad had an overwhelming force. Note how verse 27 describes it: "And the people of Israel were mustered and were provisioned and went against them. The people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats, but the Syrians filled the country." And again, an unnamed prophet intervened in verse 28: "And a man of God came near and said to the king of Israel, 'Thus says the LORD, "Because the Syrians have said, 'The LORD is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys,' therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD."'" And once again it happened, this time with a description of battle that sounded a lot like Israel's victory at Jericho, with the Israelites attacking on the seventh day, routing the Syrian forces, and the wall of the city of Aphek falling down miraculously and killing even more of them (vv. 29-30). Round two was over, and once again the Lord delivered Israel.

All of that is a setup to what happens next, which is the heart of the story of chapter 20. After the Syrians were routed for the second time, what happened to their king, Ben-hadad? Look at the end of verse 30 and following: "Ben-hadad also fled and entered an inner chamber in the city.

And his servants said to him, 'Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings. Let us put sackcloth around our waists and ropes on our heads and go out to the king of Israel. Perhaps he will spare your life.' So they tied sackcloth around their waists and put ropes on their heads and went to the king of Israel and said, 'Your servant Ben-hadad says, "Please, let me live."'" At this point Ahab has a choice: kill this enemy of Israel and of the Lord, or let him live. The rest of verse 32 through verse 34 shows what happened: "And he [Ahab] said, 'Does he still live? He is my brother.' Now the men were watching for a sign, and they quickly took it up from him and said, 'Yes, your brother Ben-hadad.' Then he said, 'Go and bring him.' Then Ben-hadad came out to him, and he caused him to come up into the chariot. And Ben-hadad said to him, 'The cities that my father took from your father I will restore, and you may establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.' And Ahab said, 'I will let you go on these terms.' So he made a covenant with him and let him go." Instead of putting the Lord's enemy to death, King Ahab called him "brother" and made a covenant with him for the sake of political expediency. It was a moment of weakness in which he failed to carry out his duty, much like King Saul had failed to do when the Lord commanded him to annihilate the Amalekites, and yet he kept King Agag alive in 1 Samuel 15. Although it may seem that King Ahab acted honorably by showing mercy to Ben-hadad, in reality he failed in his duty to protect Israel and to execute a just sentence of death on this king who had blasphemed the Lord and made himself an enemy of his people. He failed due to his weakness.

Chapter 21 is a very different story, and yet the theme of Ahab's weakness shows up there as well. Back at his royal residence in Jezreel, Ahab lays eyes on a vineyard that belongs to his neighbor Naboth, and he wants it for himself to have as a vegetable garden next to his palace. So he approaches Naboth and makes him an offer: "Let me have your vineyard. I will compensate you with a better vineyard, or I will gladly pay you a fair price for it." But Naboth understands the principle laid out in the books of Moses that the land has been given to each family from the Lord himself, and each family was supposed to keep their land within the family, unless they were in dire financial straits, but even then selling the land was still temporary until the Year of Jubilee, which came around every 50 years (Leviticus 25). Naboth will not dishonor the Lord by selling the land that the Lord had given to him and his family. So Ahab went back home "vexed and sullen," and he went to his room and refused to eat.

The story could have ended there, with Ahab pouting until he got over it, but then his pagan wife Jezebel came into the picture again to inquire about his sour mood. When he explained Naboth's refusal to her, notice how she responded in 21:7: "And Jezebel his wife said to him, 'Do you now govern Israel? Arise and eat bread and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.'" Her words reveal her view of what it means to be king, and it means you get whatever you want, no matter what. In Jezebel's pagan mind, there are no restraints on royal power. Might makes right, so feel free to use your power in whatever way benefits you. And since she has long been the real power behind Ahab's throne, she moves into action with the promise, "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." And then, in verses 8-14, Ahab becomes a passive bystander as his wife writes letters in his name, sealed with his royal seal, directing the elders of Jezreel to proclaim a public fast and arrange for two worthless men to falsely accuse Naboth of blaspheming the Lord and the king. Her every command is carried out, and Naboth is stoned to death for blasphemy on the basis of false testimony. Jezebel committed

an atrocious act of murder, just to give her husband the vineyard he wanted. When she delivered the news to Ahab, he promptly went to take possession of his new vineyard.

Now, you could point to the fact that Ahab himself did not come up with the plan to murder Naboth, did not write letters commanding it to be done, did not falsely accuse Naboth, and did not throw the stones that killed him. And yet, Ahab let it all happen under the seal of his royal authority. The moment Jezebel promised to give him the vineyard, Ahab could have stopped her, using his royal authority to defend his subject Naboth from the plot of his wife. But he did no such thing. Although he eagerly extended protection to Israel's enemy, Ben-hadad, he gave no protection at all to a faithful Israelite, Naboth. In both cases, his sheer weakness was the root of his wickedness.

Notice that in both chapters, Ahab is quick to listen to other voices, but not the Word of the Lord. In chapter 20, he quickly listens to the voices of Ben-hadad's servants begging for his life. In chapter 21, he quickly listens to the voice of his wife. In neither chapter does he exhibit the same eagerness to listen to the Word of God. His wickedness is the natural outgrowth of this condition of his heart. The same is true for us. The voices of this world will tell you to be passive and make peace with sin. If you experience sinful sexual desires, the world will tell you that's your authentic self striving to come out, so embrace those desires. If you're a husband and father who knows you need to address matters pertaining to the ordering of your home and family, the world will tell you that you're being an oppressive tyrant, so don't you dare try to wield any real authority, especially if doing so upsets your wife. If you know you need to confront a brother or sister in the church about some unrepentant sin in his or her life, the voices of this world will say, "Who are you to judge? Leave it alone and just keep the peace." And if you listen you will fail in your covenantal responsibility as a member of this church. In any number of scenarios, failing to do what you know you are commanded to do, even if it's hard, is not just weakness. It is wickedness.

But God does not remain silent in the face of Ahab's sins. So let's note, second,

2. The words of the prophets

Again, we will note what happens in the story of chapter 20, and then do the same for the story of chapter 21. In chapter 20, after Ahab spares King Ben-hadad of Syria, we encounter a third unnamed prophet in the story, starting in verses 35-36: "And a certain man of the sons of the prophets said to his fellow at the command of the Lord, 'Strike me, please.' But the man refused to strike him. Then he said to him, 'Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, behold, as soon as you have gone from me, a lion shall strike you down.' And as soon as he had departed from him, a lion met him and struck him down." Well, that's a crazy story! The point of it is to prove that this man truly speaks for God, because what he predicted came true, much like the account in 1 Kings 13. So, once his prophetic credentials are clearly established, he tries again.

Verses 37-38 read, "Then he found another man and said, 'Strike me, please.' And the man struck him—struck him and wounded him. So the prophet departed and waited for the king by the way, disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes." The reason he needed a man to strike him was so that he could disguise himself as a soldier coming from the battle, and King Ahab would not recognize him, since he had apparently prophesied to the king before and would have been recognized otherwise. Then he engages with Ahab in verses 39-40: "And as the king

passed, he cried to the king and said, 'Your servant went out into the midst of the battle, and behold, a soldier turned and brought a man to me and said, "Guard this man; if by any means he is missing, your life shall be for his life, or else you shall pay a talent of silver." And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone.' The king of Israel said to him, 'So shall your judgment be; you yourself have decided it.'" Hopefully you can see the strategy here. It's the same strategy the prophet Nathan had with David when confronting him: tell a story to get the offender to condemn himself, and then confront him in his sin. Ahab was quick to condemn the imaginary soldier who failed in his duty to guard an enemy combatant. So the prophet exposes the truth in verses 41-42: "Then he hurried to take the bandage away from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. And he said to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people."'" The Lord, by the mouth of his prophet, makes it abundantly clear: King Ahab, you failed to execute the man I had devoted to destruction. Therefore, Ahab's life will be taken, and his people will be punished for his sin.

Then after the Naboth story in chapter 21, none other than the prophet Elijah reenters the story after his meeting with God in chapter 19 at Mount Horeb, and he confronts king Ahab with even stronger words of coming judgment. In verses 17-24, Elijah does not merely say that Ahab will die. He prophesies that the dogs will lick up Ahab's blood, and that Ahab's entire house will go the way of the houses of Jeroboam and Baasha before him, two royal houses in Israel that were completely obliterated. When God's judgment falls on Ahab's house, his descendants will not even receive a proper burial. Their carcasses will be exposed to open shame as those who die in the city are devoured by dogs, and those who die in the country are devoured by birds. And perhaps most shocking of all, the same fate will fall upon Ahab's wife, Queen Jezebel. In verse 23 Elijah predicts that the dogs will eat here body within the walls of Jezreel. Naboth's blood cries out for vengeance, and the Lord will certainly bring it. The warning is utterly brutal.

The most famous sermon ever preached by a Southern Baptist pastor was on the story of Naboth's vineyard. R.G. Lee, pastor of the historic Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis from 1927 to 1960, preached a sermon on this text likely over 1,000 times during several decades of his ministry. The title of that sermon was "Payday Someday," and it was a vivid account of the fact that God's judgment (payday) *will certainly come*, even if it seems delayed now (someday). Of course, one of the reasons that sermon resonated with so many people was because of Lee's gifts as a storyteller. But I also think it resonated because, deep in our hearts, there is a longing for justice. We look at the world around us, and we see that so often wicked people have power to oppress and trample over the weak, and there is seemingly no accountability. This is one of the angles on the perplexing philosophical question known as the "problem of evil." If God is all-powerful, then he is fully capable of stopping evil from happening. If God is completely good, you would think he would *want* to stop evil from happening. So If God has both the will and the ability to stop evil, why does it still happen? And why does it seem to go on for so long with no accountability? The Bible does not give us a complete answer to that question, but one thing it does promise is that there is a future day coming when all the scales of justice will be balanced, and when God's justice will be fully vindicated. One day, all the Ahabs, and all the Jezebels, will answer for every single crime they have committed against the Naboths of this world. Payday will come, someday. Elijah's prophetic word is a testimony to that truth.

What should that truth mean for our lives as believers in Christ? Revelation 6:9-11 gives us some insight here: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been." The certainty that God's judgment will come on God's timetable summons us to patience. We can patiently endure suffering in this world, even oppression and persecution, without resorting to panic and without assuming that it's our job to bring wrath against our enemies. Patience is a virtue that testifies to our faith that God is God, and we don't have to do his job for him. Let the prophetic certainty of a coming judgment give you a profound sense of peace, and an ability to be patient with wickedness of this world. God has it all in his hands. Payday is coming.

But there is one final word from God in this story that we need to ponder, and it comes at the end of chapter 21. It is a word that reveals to us, third,

3. The heart of God

After two chapters of Ahab's weakness and wickedness, followed by prophetic confrontations that declare a brutal judgment against him and his house, out of nowhere we come to the last two paragraphs of chapter 21. Notice first what verses 25-26 tell us as a parenthetical aside on Ahab: "(There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, who the LORD cast out before the people of Israel.)" So far, everything tracks. Ahab was the worst king in Israel's history. Why? Because he let his wife lead him into the worship of false gods, and from the rotten root of false worship there came the rotten fruit of the injustice of his rule as king. Israel under his rule became like the Amorites, pagan people who lived in the land before Israel and whom the Israelites were commanded to wipe out. Although God had chosen Israel and given them his Law, setting them apart from the nations to be his holy people, under Ahab the northern kingdom had become indistinguishable from the pagan peoples they were meant to replace in the land.

But then the narrative picks back up in verses 27-29: "And when Ahab heard those words [from Elijah], he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, '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." When you first read that as a conclusion to chapters 20-21, you think, "I'm sorry…what?" It doesn't seem to fit well into the story to this point. What are we to make of Ahab's self-humbling and the Lord's response?

I don't think the text leads us to conclude that Ahab is truly repentant here. It never mentions that he took decisive action to undo all the terrible things he had done as king. And on top of that, in the next chapter (his final appearance in the book), we see Ahab once again rejecting the words of the Lord's prophet. So there is no true, lasting repentance, and so it makes sense that the Lord does not withdraw his judgment from Ahab's house. He only delays it to the next generation.

So Ahab is not repentant here, but he is remorseful, and that is clear by his actions. Finally, a prophetic word moves him at least enough to humble himself in the moment. And while mere remorse is not full repentance, it may be the flickering sparks that have the potential to catch fire and blaze into true repentance in time. In his remorse, Ahab has come to a moment of decision: will he continue down the path of humility, find true brokenness for his sin, and turn from it? Or will his remorse only be temporary before he goes right back to his old ways?

We know where the story ultimately goes, but that doesn't change the fact that in this moment of decision, the Lord is ready to pounce with mercy. Notice how eager the Lord is to point out Ahab's remorse to Elijah in verse 29: "*Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?*" The delay in judgment is another astounding display of grace from the Lord to Ahab, inviting him to follow the course of his remorse all the way to repentance. What do these last few verses tell us about the heart of God? They tell us that God's heart is one of mercy. Although he will vindicate his name through judgment on his enemies, Lamentations 3:33 tells us "he does not afflict from his heart, or grieve the children of men." Ezekiel 18:32 says, "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." And Micah 7:18 tells us, "He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love." Payday will come. Make no mistake about that. But until it does, God's heart is to pour out mercy on all who will humble themselves and repent. Even the most wicked king in Israel's history is given yet another opportunity to repent, because our God is a God who is always ready to pounce with his grace.

Last Sunday night Ross Douthat's interview with President Trump aired on *60 Minutes*. At one point Douthat asked the president that if he died and stood at the gates of Heaven, and the only thing required of him to enter was that he forgive his enemies, could he do it. President Trump said he wanted to answer honestly, and that his answer was no. "I do hate some of my enemies, and I always will," he said. It seems to me that one of the reasons God gave us this story of Ahab's self-humbling and God's response to it is to keep us from developing a heart like that. It's the same heart the prophet Jonah exhibited when, at his warning, the people of Ninevah repented of their sins and found God's mercy, he got angry about it. Jonah wanted them to be judged because he hated them. Yes, as believers we must recognize that God's coming judgment is a good thing, and we should delight in it. But we must never let that delight in God's coming judgment become distorted into a merciless thirst to see our enemies destroyed. If you lose all sense of mercy and grace from your heart, losing the ability to love your enemies and so desire their repentance and salvation, your heart has gone far from the heart of God. In an age of coarsening rhetoric over politics and the culture wars, one temptation we face is to think that merciless hatred of our cultural enemies is morally right. Social media pushes us to divide the world into tribes of "friends" and "enemies," making us willing to excuse any and every vice on one side and to desire nothing but vengeance for other side. Against the push of social media, I urge you to listen to the Word of God and see here into God's heart, and then imitate his character by loving your enemies. If Ahab was not beyond the reach of grace, they aren't either.

So we have in chapters 20-21 two stories about a king whose weakness leads to wickedness. He does not listen the Word of the Lord, but instead to other voices: the servants of Ben-hadad in chapter 20, and his wife Jezebel in chapter 21. Consequently, he does precisely the opposite of what he is supposed to do in both chapters: he protects the enemy king Ben-hadad, an enemy of

God and of Israel, and he fails to protect his own subject Naboth, and honorable man who seeks to honor the Lord with his vineyard. The Word of the Lord comes in two forms in these stories: as law it declares certain judgment on Ahab and his house. As gospel it announces a delay of judgment while showing God's heart of mercy for those who repent.

Those same two words, the law and the gospel, come to us today. The law condemns us in our sin, showing us the holiness of God and our complete inability do what he has commanded. The voice of the law that imprisons us under sin and condemnation is what led Paul to cry out in distress in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" And the voice of the gospel answers in the next verse: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Indeed, thanks be to God for the law that kills and the gospel that makes alive. Above all other voices in this world, may we listen to these two words from God. Amen.