

2 Samuel 21

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[0 : 0 0] And David said to the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you, and how shall I make atonement that you may bless the heritage of the Lord? The Gibeonites said to him, It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house, neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel.

And he said, What do you say that I shall do for you? They said to the king, The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us so that we may hang them before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord.

And the king said, I will give them. But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, because of the oath of the Lord that was between them, between David and Jonathan, the son of Saul.

The king took the two sons of Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth, and the five sons of Merab, the daughter of Saul, whom she bore at Adriel, the son of Barzillai, the Meholahite.

And he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the Lord. And the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

[1 : 1 9] Then Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock from the beginning of the harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day or the beasts of the field by night.

When David was told what Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Yabesh-Gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Bethshan, where the Philistines had hanged them on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa.

And he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan, and they gathered the bones of those who were hanged, and they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin and Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father.

And they did all that the king commanded, and after that, God responded to the plea for the land. There was war again between the Philistines and Israel, and David went down with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines, and David grew wary.

And Yishib ben-nob, one of the descendants of the giants whose spear weighed 300 shekels of bronze and who was armed with a new sword, thought to kill David. But Abishai, the son of Zeruiah, came to his aid and attacked the Philistine and killed him.

[2 : 3 9] Then David's men swore to him, You shall no longer go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel. After this, there was again war with the Philistines at Gob.

Then Sibakai, the Hushethite, struck down Saph, who was one of the descendants of the giants. And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob, and Elhanan, the son of Yair or Gim, the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath, the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

And there was again war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, 24 in number, and he also was descended from the giants.

And when he taunted Israel, Jonathan, the son of Shimei, David's brother, struck him down. These four were descended from the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning.

[3 : 52] Good morning. It's great to be back from a week of vacation and to be in the saddle and getting ready for the fall together.

For any modern reader, the passage just read has its problems.

It opens with God's displeasure as the source of a three-year famine, literally wrecking the lives of thousands of ordinary citizens.

And it ends in continual war and all the signs of incompleteness. Through verse 14, which is where our preaching will take us to today, there's a lifting at last of the drought.

And at first glance, it would appear that the only difference between the beginning, the displeasure of God, and the onset of famine, and the ending, the lifting of famine, is this sadistic satisfaction that God appears to get from what to us looks like an arbitrary seizure and subsequent violent death meted out against seven seemingly innocent men.

[5 : 22] Yes, the passage has its problems. And let me tell you, on account of those things, how it plays out in the world.

If this is the Bible's portrayal of God, then who needs Him? In fact, who needs the Bible, for that matter? We are done with the notion of a God of wrath.

The view is increasingly held by citizen and churchgoer alike. Just yesterday, in a St. Louis newspaper, we have a case in point.

I'll read from it. Some of you might be familiar with the hymn, In Christ Alone. Well, there's a committee that's putting together a new hymnal for the PCUSA, the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America.

They've dropped that popular hymn, In Christ Alone, because the song's authors refused to change a phrase about the wrath of God.

[6 : 27] The original lyrics say that on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. And the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song wanted to substitute the words, the love of God was magnified.

The authors said, No, we're not changing it. And they voted 9-6 to drop it. It's received some criticism.

Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, is likewise quoted in a newspaper article yesterday. And he worries that the committee dropped the song because the idea of God's wrath has become unpopular.

Quote, I don't see this as an isolated case. It fits into a wider pattern of downplaying parts of Christian doctrine that are offensive. And our text is offensive.

But what do we do with it? I've come to believe that it's a text like this that will either move you out these doors today and on your way into a life that is more and more settled to reject not just Christianity, but any sense of divine God as the Bible would portray him.

[7 : 59] Or it's a text like this that in a strange way might actually lead you to come back week by week and consider the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

Is there a way to look at a text like 2 Samuel 21, particularly 1 through 14, and get God off the hook? I think it's going to take all three divisions of the narrative.

Each aspect has something to offer, although not all questions will be answered, certainly not in 25 minutes. The text divides by typical narrative fashion.

A setting, verses 1 to 3, and then the scene played out in verses 4, really through the first half of verse 14, and then the ultimate resolution with the final line there in verse 14.

Take a look at the setting. The first thing we notice is it opens at a time of famine. It reads, Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year.

[9 : 20] Gordon Wenham, an Old Testament scholar, has written an article called The Bible and the Environment, and he outlines how through historical and archaeological and geographical studies, we get a pretty clear view of what ordinary life looked like for the Israelite in this time period.

You know, well a thousand years before the great rise of the Roman Empire and the coming of Christ. He says, By and large, the Old Testament paints a rosy picture of life in the land.

Canaan is a land flowing with milk and honey. Unlike Egypt, which depended on human irrigation with the foot, Canaan is fed by rain from heaven. Grapes grow in clusters so huge that they need two men to carry them.

The patriarch's flocks flourished in the land while the psalmist rejoices that the valleys stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing. That's a portrayal of ordinary life in the promised land when they entered.

But, Wenham goes on, it was a precarious existence. Though the average winter rainfall of Israel is adequate 20 plus inches a year. It is variable in its timing and quantity.

[10 : 41] Many a year, it's 30% below average, which before modern irrigation would mean failure of many crops. And if that happened for two or three consecutive years, as it may well do, the average Israelite family would go bust or starve if they did not emigrate or find a wealthy neighbor or relative to bail them out.

Even in a year of average rainfall, if the rain started late or ended early, crops could be poor and without deep wells and sprinklers, nothing humanly could be done to remedy the situation.

Prayer, emigration, or death are the only options when the stores run out. in our text, we have that very situation.

Year after year after year. And interestingly, God is the source of the famine. We see that in verses 2 and 3.

But it's not this arbitrary, capricious God who's bent on wrecking the lives of thousands of people. people. It lists him not only as the source, but it unfolds the cause.

[11 : 56] Take a look. David sought the face of the Lord and the Lord said, there is blood guilt on Saul and on his house because he put the Gibeonites to death. So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them.

Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.

And David said to the Gibeonites, what shall I do for you? How shall I make atonement that you may bless the heritage of the Lord? The famine is the consequence of the failure of God's leader and his people to respect oaths taken on behalf of others.

In other words, what we learn about God at the opening of this problematic chapter is that he hates sin. There's divine displeasure that finds its way into the natural outworking of life in the world when there are horrific acts of injustice being carried out by human despots, by, in this case, an aggressor nation, even Israel.

The mistreatment of the marginalized by those in power has effect. God sees.

[13 : 39] God acts. And while you and I may say, where was God when this terrible situation came into my life or the lives of thousands of people?

And we put God on the hook for it, the text seems to indicate that he's aware and he works. And his displeasure is meted out in many ways.

Not alleviating all evil in the world at that point in time, but holding to account even through the hand of nature.

I think of the Gibeonites, if you're not a reader of the Bible, they appear really early in the Old Testament narrative in Joshua chapter 9.

Freshly after Israel enters the land, they of course had been instructed to annihilate all the ungodly people within it and not participate.

[14 : 43] And the Gibeonites are some of my favorite people in all the Bible. They're these shrewd Chicago-like kids who put really poor clothing on and get bread crumbs that look like they had been out left, even the birds had passed it by, and they walk into Joshua's camp and say, we're from really far away.

And we're hoping that we can make a deal with you where you will save our lives. And the Israelites buy it. And they make an oath.

You're good with us. Three days later they find out these guys live five miles down the road. And they were the very ones they were to destroy.

What do we do? They kept their oath. By God's grace, you will dwell within our land and not be subject to death.

And then along comes Saul, all those many years later. And Saul takes a look at this, evidently, according to verses 2 and 3. And he begins to pillage and produces an unprovoked attack.

[15 : 58] And he instigates a murderous march. We know that the Gibeonites dwelt in four different cities. Whether it was a timed attack or sequential, we do not know.

And he walks in through the gates with his army ready and begins to savagely kill the Gibeonites.

Probably hundreds, perhaps thousands of people slain in the streets, human warfare because of this evil perpetrator.

Swords thrust. You've got to understand that when you read this text. Innocent blood shed, countless lives lost, and the blood of the Gibeonites settling into the ground and rising up before God asking for justice.

David, now the new head of state and the upholder of justice is told by God, this is why famine is there, because I hate sin and the mistreatment of the marginalized by those in power, and until there is something done about that, it's the way it's going to be for God's people.

[17 : 30] He knows that atonement must be made. Do you see the word there, right there in verse three? What shall I do, and how shall I make atonement? Or how do I wipe away this incredible injustice?

How do I cover what has been done against you? What am I to do? I saw just the other day a bumper sticker.

I love Hyde Park because we love bumper stickers, and sometimes I almost have to stop, and I wish the red lights were longer where I could read them all on one particular car. This one had a line that said that the day of non-judgment is coming.

judgment is coming. What were they indicating? I think rightly so, they're fed up with the mistreatment of the marginalized, and they're wondering when are things going to be put back, and they're wondering when do people stop judging people inappropriately.

And there's an element of that where I'm like, you know, just plaster that thing on there, and rub your knuckles on it until it won't come off. But there's another end. who's going to be held accountable for all the injustice that's been done?

[18 : 56] And what kind of God would it be, he, she, or it, who would dwell in the heavens and allow the innocent slaughter of hundreds or thousands, and pronounce at the end of the day, no judgment for any.

David's aware that atonement has to be made. There has to be a writing of wrong. The question is, what writes this wrong? That's where you get the scene.

You move from setting to the scene. The scene unfolds in verses 4, really through the first half of 14, and it divides into two halves. Let me give it to you in two words.

death and burial. Death, verses 4 through 9. Burial, verses 10 through the first part of 14.

According to the text, this is the covering, the wiping away, the just payment for the slaughter of many.

[20 : 11] of course, the idea of killing human beings that in some way would gain the approval of God is the most troubling aspect of the text.

Let me give you three different things here because I don't want you to read your Bible wrong and then give up on God altogether. answer. The Bible is consistently against any cultic or religious act to win God's favor through what's this kind of human sacrifice.

Deuteronomy! Deuteronomy 12, 29 to 31 indicates very clearly that God is not for the slaughter of life.

It's an appalling and ungodly act. Take a look at the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah has an interesting moment in chapter 19 where God is speaking.

Verse 3, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah, inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place that the ears of!

[21 : 55] says God, that you would start offering lives like that, as to somehow appease me. Therefore, it says, verse 6, days are coming when this place shall be no more called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hanan, but the valley of slaughter.

And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

That's what God says concerning this cultic belief that the God of the Bible holds that you appease him through human sacrifice.

That's an abomination to the scriptures teaching. There's another way that we need to differentiate what happens in this text. misunderstanding.

Certainly there was human sacrifice outside the scriptures in the ancient Near East all the way up into Greco-Roman times that dealt with not a cultic act to win God's favor, but it was a committed act of ongoing service to a departed master.

[23 : 14] I mean archaeologists have actually found some stunning things. I've been reading this week about the prime archaeological example of human sacrifice in the ancient Near East in the early dynastic royal cemetery at Ur.

It was an archaeological dig early 20th century led by Leonard Woolley. And he finds really a cemetery that contains 16 royal graves and death pits with human sacrificial victims.

In one of the royal tombs, not only was the royal ruler who had died buried, but with him at least 16 others, all the way down to an arrangement of men in armor laid out before carts with oxen slaughtered and servants attending behind even musicians.

That kind of thing actually took place. He theorizes that when the leader or the master died, he had a belief that those who were under his jurisdiction were to come with him to serve him in the coming land.

And so the live individuals are marched down into the tomb and by some means killed and then the earth thrown back over them. Human sacrifices have taken place not only to appease God, which the scriptures call an abomination, temptation, but also as some kind of strange committed act to a departed master.

[24 : 49] That's not what's going on here in the text. This seems to be most closely approximating a capital act of punishment in judicial matters.

Now the legal principle was laid down in Genesis 9 at the time of Noah, that the shedding of blood required the shedding of blood and if by a man a life was taken, that man's life would be held accountable.

In other words though, it was judicial, legal, capital, and it was an act of justice. Now, don't get this confused with you have to therefore believe in capital punishment to become a Christian.

There are plenty of reasons to not believe in capital punishment. not the least of which is a lot of the wrong people actually get killed.

But there seems to be room in our mind or in the mind of the scriptures that God holds human life so dear.

[26 : 00] In fact, in Genesis 9, the rationale is for in the image of God, He created him. That because human life was so precious in His own image, that it would actually require the life of one who took it.

Of those three types of sacrifices, our text most closely approximate that rendering of court and law.

David the anointed, not only the king and the ruler, but the eternal general, one who must make right and exercise justice and righteousness and hold people to account.

And so He says, what do I do in this case? I love what the Gibeonites say. This is beautiful. Another reason to love these guys.

Look what they respond to him in verse 4. It's not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house, neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel. Now, get the importance of what they're saying there.

[27 : 11] They're saying, we know justice has to be done, but you can't buy us off. No amount of reparations financially driven will buy back what Saul did to our people.

So it's not a matter of money, they say. But then look what they say the second half. Neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel. It's not a matter of vigilante justice.

They actually are people who have restraint. They will not take law into their own hands. This is the problem in our city. Not that there isn't recourse for justice, but that everyone becomes their own justifier.

And revenge is meted out individual by individual regardless of the wake and the consequences. And the scriptures are clear. There is a role in government given a scepter to reign in evil and to prosecute injustice.

And the Gibeonites seem to get this. I won't be paid off for this. It would be inadequate. But I will not lift my own hand as an individual to make it right.

[28 : 33] And so they plead to the king. And then they make a suggestion. verse 5 They said to the king, the man who consumed us, who planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the Lord and Gebeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord.

And the king said, I will give them. Now if the story stopped here, it would seem!

even to us woefully unjust. For there is an element of injustice in it all. Not only is the judgment carried out not against Saul, but against a future generation that we do not have any indication that they were actually responsible for the killing.

In other words, for my reading of the text, they are seven genuinely, seemingly innocent men who happen to be in the wrong family. Yet, the Bible is teaching here that God in His own economy holds to a substitutionary penal element by way of payment that will satisfy His just demand.

Now, all through the Old Testament, you have that through the animal sacrificial system. Here you have it meted out actually at a human level in one of the more frightening ways possible.

[30 : 28] Seven men up to the mountain impaled, hanging on wood. Perhaps that's why the text doesn't end there.

It doesn't just have their death and then God says, good, here comes the rain, famine over, that's good. No.

The scene moves from death to burial in one of the most riveting of all moments in the Old Testament. The mother of two of the seven, Ritzpah, taking sackcloth and spreading it before herself on the rock from the beginning of harvest until the rain fell upon them from the heavens, not allowing the birds of the air to come upon them by day or the beasts of the field by night.

The mother's persistent, insistent need for burial.

It's interesting, this phrase here, do you see it? The birds of the air or the beasts of the field. This action just takes on the full meaning of a pathos of a mother who has determined that her son's lives were not given up in vain, that her son's lives had more to do with the world than simply meting out wrath.

[32 : 20] And in the prophetic and apocalyptic portions of the Bible, like later Jewish literature, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field become these apocalyptic symbols of wrath without mercy.

Think of Ezekiel 37. Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel 39 perhaps.

Verse 17 As for you, son of man, thus says the Lord God, speak to the birds of every sort and to all the beasts of the field, assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood, you shall eat the flesh of the mighty, drink the blood of the princes of the earth, of rams, of lambs, of he goats, of bulls, all of them, fat beasts of Bashan, and you shall eat fat till you're filled and drink blood till you're drunk at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, and you shall be filled at my table with horsemen and chariots, with mighty men and all kinds of warriors, declares the Lord.

Why? This apocalyptic like vision of the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, are the ultimate sign that you are cursed.

And Ritzpah says, not my son. That would not be right. I understand the need for justice.

[34 : 12] But there he is, and she puts sackcloth on the mount, and depending upon the commentator you read, is there for between days to what could be two or three months, chasing the birds off, my boy.

and the beasts off his torso. Because she's insistent that death for my son, merely to satisfy wrath without hope, is an abomination.

salvation. And interestingly, from heaven, there's been no relenting of famine until her prayers are answered.

You know, there are Sumerian myths that depict like these war birds like Anzu who work against God, destroying the flesh of men.

Later, Sophocles with his plays Antigone, give us one whose brothers, two brothers have been killed at the hands of King Crayon and Thebes.

[35 : 53] And the decree went forth from Crayon that one of the brothers would get burial and the other would get the birds. And Antigone defies the edict of burial for her brother, even knowing that the penalty would be stoning.

Sophocles puts it this way, she has Antigone speaking to her sister, and does not Crayon treat our brothers twain, one with rights of burial, one with shame?

Iteocles, so they say, he interred fitly with wanted rights as one held meat to pass with honor to the gloom below, but for the corpse of Polyneses slain so piteously, they say, he's proclaimed to all the citizens that none should be given his body burial or bewail his fate.

But leave it still unsepulchered, unwept, a prize full rich for birds that sent afar their sweet repast.

She's going to bury her brother, and she does. without proper burial of the magnitude that we're seeing take place in this chapter, death would be merely an indiscriminate sign of a capricious God who is meeting out wrath, or it would be as close as you can get to curse it as he who hangs upon a tree.

[37 : 33] the strange thing about the text is that somehow in God's economy, not only does he believe that substitution penal judgment can be put into play, but that the innocent can at times die for the guilty.

I think of Mary, mother of Jesus, on the rock, and the women waiting until the body is taken down and put in a tomb, lest all we see in the Christian message is God meeting out wrath, and the birds, and the beasts, indicating eternal displeasure.

David finally gets word, hey man, they're still up. you've got bodies rotting, decaying, slain, dishonorable, all wrath, no measure of their actual life.

Where's the honor? Where's the burial? And when he hears that, he thinks not only of them, he thinks of Jonathan and even Saul, his enemy, and he takes their bones, and he takes them off the tree, and he puts them in a ground, and I'm sure Ritzvah finally has rest.

My son was not subject to this apocalyptic indication that he died without purpose, without hope, without intention.

[39 : 44] God's And then the text ends. And after that, God responded to the plea for the land.

The Christian gospel, at a macro level, kind of has its way into this text at a micro look, the displeasure of God against our sin, against one another and him, not honoring him or giving thanks, but also this indiscriminate hatred that we spew forth toward one another.

And he's displeased, and we're under his wrath. And the Christian message is almost as if David would have said, you know, what's to be done here? And they're like, well, take seven of his sons.

It almost amplifies it even in a more unjust way as if David would have said, nah, that's not right. I'm going.

The anointed one. The one who's to be the justifier in the land. I'm going to make it just.

[41 : 03] My life. That's what the Christian message says God does. That is incredibly unjust.

So be careful as you read these texts. You throw away God on a surface reading because of your elevated understanding of justice.

Be careful. for with you there is no mercy. Could it be that God in his infinite wisdom decided to execute his eternal understanding of justice by meeting out his wrath on his only son as a means of providing mercy to as many as who would be willing to come?

that's the Christian message. And you don't get them. You can't have it both ways.

You can't have Jesus thank God he died for me and reject a God of justice. like I said at the outset these ancient texts they work a weird power.

[42 : 36] You're either going to walk through these doors and be further thinking not for me or perhaps drawn to return and say and can it be that thou my God should die for me.

There's problems with that but there's grace to be found. Our Heavenly Father may we wrestle with these texts in ways that help us really come face to face with the truth of the most extraordinary message of all that in Christ alone my hope is found.

The innocent for the guilty strengthen us to hold on to him with thanksgiving in Christ's name. Amen.