

2 Samuel 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 September 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 2 Samuel chapter 21 Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year, and 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, 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.

[1 : 18] The king took the two sons of Rizpah, the daughter of Ea, whom she bore to Saul, Ammoni and Mephibosheth, and the five sons of Merab, the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel, the son of Barzillai, the Meholothite.

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.

Then Rizpah, the daughter of Ea, took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of 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 Ea, 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 Jabesh-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, in Zillah, in the tomb of Kish his father.

[2 : 30] 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 together with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines.

And David grew weary, and Ish-bibinab, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, and who was armed with a new sword, thought to kill David.

But Abishai the son of Zerariah came to his aid, and attacked the Philistine and killed him. 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 Sivakai 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 Jeorah Aragam 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, twenty-four in number, and he also was descended from the giants.

[3 : 36] 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.

2 Samuel chapter 21 begins the concluding section of the book. It is out of chronological sequence in all likelihood. The story raises troubling questions as well, as the sons of Saul are killed on account of his sin against the Gibeonites.

David is having here to deal with the legacy of Saul's sin, the guilt of which lies upon the nation. The Gibeonites were of the remnant of the Ammonites, a remaining people of the land.

They were to be wiped out in the conquest, but they had been spared on account of the treaty that they made with Joshua, a treaty made under deceptive conditions in Joshua chapter 9. In verses 3 to 6 of that chapter we read, But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they on their part acted with cunning, and went and made ready provisions, and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn out and torn and mended, with worn-out patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes, and all their provisions were dry and crumbly.

And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us. They successfully persuaded Joshua and the Israelites that they were from a far country.

[4 : 59] They made a covenant and swore an oath before discovering three days later that they were inhabitants of the land. However, having made a covenant, they were not allowed to destroy their cities. As a result of their covenant, they were spared, but they were made woodcutters and drawers of water for the congregation, servants of the tabernacle.

They then came under the protection of God, as they were devoted to his service, as his possession. Consequently, anyone who attacked them committed a particularly serious offence.

They were attacking the people that had been claimed by the Lord. There is no biblical account of Saul's attack upon the Gibeonites. However, the war between David and Ish-bosheth began at Gibeon.

Gibeon, in Joshua chapter 10 verse 2, was described as being a great city, like one of the royal cities. We learn in 1 Chronicles chapter 21 verse 29, that the tabernacle, minus the Ark of the Covenant, was based at Gibeon.

The Gibeonites were the servants of the Lord's house, so it was not surprising that the tabernacle would end up being based in their city. Gibeon was also in the territory of Benjamin, so one can readily imagine that there were tensions between the Benjaminites, who felt that the Gibeonites' cities were theirs by right, and the Gibeonites, who had been spared to live in them.

[6 : 10] In chapter 4 verses 2 to 3, we discover that the Bearethites, men of the city of Beareth, also in Benjamin's wider territory, had fled. Beareth was another city of the Gibeonites, so it seems likely that during Saul's reign, there had been some attempt to drive the Gibeonites out, even though they were under the Lord's special protection.

It is not unlikely that Saul wanted Gibeon to be his royal city, the site of his throne and of the tabernacle. That the conflict between David as the king of Judah and Ish-bosheth as the king of Israel began at Gibeon was possibly a sign that this was a more determined purpose on the part of the Saulite dynasty.

The judgment is not just against Saul as well, it's also against his house. It seems as though wiping out the Gibeonites had not merely been the action of Saul, but was also the action of the people around him.

The Gibeonites had been under the Herem ban in the original conquest, though they had been spared. The Amalekites had also been placed under the ban, and Saul had failed to bring God's judgment upon them.

Maybe Saul is trying to recover himself from the judgment that fell upon him. Saul has also wiped out the priests who served the tabernacle. The Gibeonites were their servants. Perhaps he sought to exterminate the Gibeonites at the same time.

[7 : 22] We don't know why exactly Saul attacked the Gibeonites, but doing so was a very serious offense, and the Lord brought a famine upon the land for three years in the days of David on account of it.

After David sought the face of the Lord, the Lord told him that it was on account of the sin of Saul concerning the Gibeonites. The whole of the nation is suffering on account of the sin of their representative, even their former representative.

We might also recall the example of Achan's sin here. The whole congregation suffered defeated Ai, and the threat of losing their stake in the land as a result of Achan's sin concerning the devoted things.

Here the whole nation is suffering because Saul killed the devoted persons. Unless David deals with the national guilt somehow, they will all suffer most severely. Achan was judged for his sin by being killed with himself and his whole household.

It is difficult to understand why Saul's sons would be put to death for his sin without considering the way that the ban works. This isn't a regular criminal punishment taking place here.

[8 : 22] In such cases, a son must not be put to death for the sin of his father, even though he may suffer the consequences of his father's sin. However, when Achan took the devoted things, the whole congregation came under the ban until they cut off Achan himself.

As Achan took the devoted things, his entire family became the object of the ban themselves, and they were all destroyed. Saul's sin was of a similar type. This wasn't just a regular act of murder.

When God put his mark upon Cain, the person who killed Cain would suffer sevenfold judgment. The Gibeonites are devoted to God. They have his mark on them, as it were.

So they are avenged sevenfold upon the house of Saul. Again, we should consider that Saul's action wasn't just an action of Saul himself, but was seemingly an action within which his wider house was involved.

When David talks to the Gibeonites, they say that silver and gold won't solve the problem. Financial restitution cannot atone for murder. They aren't in a position to put anyone to death in Israel.

[9 : 20] David promises to act on their behalf, though. At the Gibeonites' request, David gives them seven of Saul's sons, who were killed and then hung up as a sign of the curse upon them. David spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, but delivered the five sons of Merab and the two sons of Risper, another one of whom was called Mephibosheth.

As we see in Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 22 to 23, hanging was a serious symbolic act. And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.

You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. However, it seems that the Gibeonites want to bring the fuller measure of the curse upon the sons of Saul. This is described in Deuteronomy chapter 28, verse 26.

And your dead body shall be food for all the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away. They were hanged on public display on the mountain before the Lord at the beginning of the barley harvest, and were to be left there until rain fell upon them, which would be a sign that the drought that was presumably causing the famine that had come upon the land was over.

The expected rain might well have been an unseasonal sign, as Saul's sons were killed at the beginning of the barley harvest, around the time of Passover, and the regular rains wouldn't be expected until much later in the year.

[10 : 46] Being hung on the mountain before the Lord was probably on the mountain opposite the tabernacle at Gibeon. All of this might make us think of Christ, who was hung on the mountain before the Lord, as the one bearing the curse upon the people, so that the rain of the Holy Spirit might finally come upon once parched land.

However, while leaving them on display before the rains might have been the initial plan, the commendable actions of the pitiable Rizpah towards her son's corpses seems to have led to a change of plans.

Rizpah was Saul's concubine, previously mentioned when Ish-bosheth accused Abner of going into her in chapter 4. Rizpah prevented the full curse from coming upon Saul's sons, and arrested the grisly spectacle.

David recovered the bones of Saul and Jonathan, which had been taken by the men of Jabesh-gilead from the Philistines, who had displayed their bodies in a similar manner, and buried them, along with the bones of the hanged sons of Saul, in the tomb of Saul's father Kish in Benjamin.

Then God finally responded to the pleas for rain, and restored the land after the famine. Behind all of this, David is dealing with the bitter legacy of Saul's sins, and atonement is occurring for the whole nation.

[11 : 55] Even though Saul has died and been judged, the nation itself bears the guilt and the consequences of his crimes, and until they are properly dealt with, the nation cannot move on. The story of David began with giant killing, and here, toward the end of David's story, giants appear again.

We read of four of David's men who struck down giants. David, their leader, was a giant killer, and they follow in his footsteps. A problem is raised by the character of Elhanan, who strikes down Goliath the Gittite.

Elhanan is presumably the same as the member of David's 30 mighty men, mentioned in chapter 23, verse 24. However, the real problem is the claim that he killed Goliath.

Many suggestions have been made here. Perhaps Goliath was a common name, or a name used for certain giants more generally. More likely, however, the actual name of the giant was dropped out in the transmission of the text, and the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles, chapter 20, verse 5, gives us the proper sense here.

And there was again war with the Philistines. And Elhanan the son of Jehor struck down Lammai, the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

[13 : 06] A question to consider. How might careful consideration of the judgment upon the sin of Saul concerning the Gibeonites help us to think about the notion of corporate guilt? How might it help us better to understand the judgment upon Adam's sin, and to understand Christ's atonement?

How many

