

## 2 Samuel 21

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[0:00] Okay, 2 Samuel 21. These are, aren't they, uncomfortable chapters.

! And I had wondered whether I could just glance over to chapter 22 and hope you didn't realize.! Which I have done in the past in different books. And one of the reasons we preach the way we do in IPC is that we wouldn't avoid them.

Because we believe that even tonight the Lord has got something to say to us through this. It's the beginning and the end of these four chapters. They're sort of the appendix to the book of 1 Samuel. Unlike the rest of the book, they're not in particular chronological order. Some of these incidents may have occurred before chapter 20 where we got to last week. But they are carefully chosen incidents from the life of King David.

They're written in a tightly structured conclusion. Certain themes of his reign will come out. But just in case you thought that tonight we were coming to the end of the kind of gory violence of the rest of the book, I need to caution that you'll have to wait until right at the end of the book for that.

[1:19] Because chapter 21 is as violently gory as any of the other parts of 2 Samuel. And so I want to look at the chapter under two headings to kind of walk through the chapter and then come to a conclusion.

And I want us to see verses 1 to 14, the blood of the Israelites. And then 15 to 22, the blood of the Philistines. We'll spend more time on the first 14 verses. Hopefully it'll be a bit shorter tonight. I want us to look at the blood of the Israelites from five different perspectives.

So first of all, as I read that story, let's look at it from a contemporary perspective. What does this section look like from a modern point of view? And I suspect the best word is distasteful.

We might even say offensive. We could say outrageous. We would certainly never condone, would we, the settling of disputes in this way. The vengeance that the Gibeonites take, it seems to be appallingly brutal.

A King David seems inexcusably complicit with it. And we're left asking, does God approve of this in some way? It is all very troubling for a modern reader of 2 Samuel 21.

[2:40] It seems so foreign to us. It seems morally questionable, to say the least. And that makes it even more important, doesn't it, when we realize that, that we look at some different perspectives.

Which will help us, I hope, make sense of what we read here. So secondly, the historical perspective. And I simply want to point you to two other Old Testament texts. Which sit in the background to 2 Samuel 21.

And I think help us to appreciate just what's going on here. So, Deuteronomy 28. That chapter is the climax to the long sermon that Moses gave to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. And in that chapter, Moses outlines what God told him about the blessings that Israel would receive in the land if they trusted and obey God.

But he also outlines what are the curses going to be that you will have to face up to Israel if you fail to trust and obey God in the land. And so let me read it to you.

[3:38] You don't have to turn it up. But Deuteronomy 28, verse 15. God says this. If you will not be careful, if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God, or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.

And then let me jump down to verse 23. And the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron, and the Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven, dust shall come down upon you until you are destroyed.

So God is warning them, isn't he, amongst other things, if you disobey drought and famine in the land. And 2 Samuel 21 opens, doesn't it, by telling you and I that at some stage in the reign of King

David, there's a famine for three successive years.

There's a cost of living crisis for three years. And David was wondering why, conscious of Deuteronomy 28, he suspected that there may be a reason.

He thought that there may be some specific sin that Israel is being punished for. In fact, 2 Samuel 21, verse 1, God confirms that that's the case, doesn't he? Israel was being punished for King Saul's bloodthirsty ways.

[ 4 : 56 ] And in particular, for his early butchering of the Gibeonites. There doesn't seem to be any record in the Old Testament of when Saul did this.

And that, David seems to be aware of it. And verse 2 confirms it. In his pro-Israelite zeal, Saul had tried to annihilate the Gibeonite people.

And you might think, if you're a good reader of the Old Testament, what's the problem with that? Hadn't God given the Canaanite religions into God's hands?

Into his people's hands? And that's why Joshua 9 is really important background. As 2 Samuel 21, 2 outlines. The Gibeonites, what are they?

They are an Amorite people. The Gibeonites were part owners of the land of Canaan before Israel overran it to claim it as their own.

[ 5 : 55 ] And the rest of their neighbors were subjugated under the Israelite commands. But an oath had been sworn. An oath, a promise had been sworn by Israel to spare the Gibeonites.

So you know Joshua 9? It records for us how that took place. The Gibeonites, they deceived Joshua. They deceived Joshua, Israel's leader.

They sent a delegation. And they dressed all in scruffy clothes that convinced him that they'd come from hundreds of thousands of miles away. That they're from a far off land rather than just next door.

Israel's nearest neighbors. And the delegation talked Joshua into making a treaty with them. And that treaty was ratified by an oath. In front of an Israelite assembly.

And so when the deception was discovered, it was too late. Israel's leaders had already taken an oath before the Lord.

[ 6 : 51 ] And that was binding on them. Without exception. And that to break that oath was to bring shame on the Lord himself.

To break that oath made before the Lord and his people would be to desecrate God's name. That name in whom the oath had been taken.

And that's why Saul's actions in seeking to destroy them are so terrible. Because what Saul is doing there is he's breaking a sacred oath.

And it was an oath taken before the Lord and in the Lord's name. And so by breaking covenant with the Gibeonites, he's actually dragging God's name through the mud.

And that doesn't just upset the Gibeonites, it upsets God. But upset the Gibeonites, the Gibeonites certainly did. And it seems the Gibeonites have been bitter about that day, that event, for years.

[ 7 : 54 ] And so we come to the third perspective in which we view these verses. And that is David. And so God has revealed to David in verse 1 that there's blood guilt.

That Saul's covenant violation against the Gibeonites, that is the reason for the famine. And so in verse 2 to 3, King David goes to the Gibeonites and he asks them, how can I put this right?

The Gibeonites say, well, we've got no right to demand anything. But David permits them to make a request. And they respond by pointing out that Saul's actions had decimated their nation.

And they did an understandable chip on their shoulder ever since. And so they suggest to David, since Saul is dead, that he should give the lives of seven of Saul's descendants.

And as we read, David follows through on this offer. The Gibeonites kill all seven. And they hang their bodies on a hill to shame Saul and his family. Just like they had been shamed by Saul and his broken oath.

[ 9 : 06 ] They're taking their vengeance. And the Gibeonites see this as nothing more and nothing less than justice. But what about David? How does he see it?

In some ways, I think that's the hardest question to answer here. No doubt, David is a very conflicted man throughout this sorry story.

On the one hand, he continues to demonstrate great respect for Saul and his family as he's always done. We see that here in the way that he responds to Risma's vigil of grief beside the dead bodies.

In verse 10 and 13, he gathers the bones of the seven men. He also exhumes the corpses of Saul and Jonathan. And he gives them a proper burial in the tomb of Saul's father, Kish. And in that action, he dignifies those who suffer for Saul's sin and even Saul himself. And no doubt, what had happened to them all and what happens here grieves him very deeply.

[10:09] You've got to be an emotional fridge, haven't you, to be any other way. But on the other hand, David not only shows respect for Saul and his family, at least in some ways, he shows respect for the Gibeonites and the wrong that had been done to them.

And he shows respect for God who points the unresolved sin out. He seeks to act with integrity. He knows that the Lord wants him to make it right. He listens carefully to the Gibeonites, what they say, and he's a man of his word.

And we mustn't miss the importance of that in the chapter. So do you remember what Saul's sin was? Saul's sin was to break an oath. By contrast, David follows through on what he said.

Saul was a covenant breaker. David is a covenant keeper. And not only with the Gibeonites, but also with Mephibosheth. Because in verse 8, because of his earlier promise to his friend Jonathan, as grim as it may be, I think David does hear what he firmly believes to be the honorable thing and the righteous thing to do.

[11:26] But was it? Was it the honorable and righteous thing to do in God's eyes? Because at the end of the day, that's the most important question, isn't it? Does it please God here?

What is the perspective of God? And of course, that's a really tricky question to resolve. But I think the answer is probably yes.

Now remember what I said the question was. Did David please God here? I'm not answering the question, did what the Gibeonites do, did that please God?

It may well be that God did not approve of the brutal way that they took their vengeance. And we can certainly say with certainty that God did not delight in that.

But if the question is, did David do right? I think the answer is yes. Let me give you a few reasons. In the first instance, it's because it was God who brought the sin to David's attention in the first place.

[12:36] And God acted mercifully at that point. God could have let the nation go on in famine permanently, indefinitely. He could have made David work out the problem for himself.

The truth is, isn't it, whenever God makes people's guilt clear to them, even to us, that is an act of kindness on his part.

It means that things can be put right. But there can be repentance. And clearly, God sought some kind of repentance here. The second reason why I think David did the right thing is because of what the Old Testament law teaches.

From the beginning of God's dealings with Israel, he made it clear that sin needs to be atoned for. It cannot just be forgotten. It can't simply be forgiven. There must be justice.

And atonement usually means blood. The animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, they made exactly that point. The principle of an eye for an eye made that point, too.

[13:40] And sometimes the law says very specifically the taking of a life needs to be paid for by the taking of a life. So let me read to you a verse from Numbers. This is Numbers 35, verse 33.

You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land. And no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. And given that Saul could not pay with his own blood, he handed over the blood of his descendants. Conscious, perhaps, of precisely these sorts of laws that have been handed down by God.

He wanted to make it right, so the ESV gets it right in a way that other translations get it wrong. Look at verse 3. David wanted to make atonement.

Do you see that word for Saul's sin? He knew that is what God's law required. My third reason for suggesting that David acted rightly is there are hints in the text that God accepted the tragic course of events as atonement for Israel.

[14:53] When Saul sinned, he wasn't just acting for himself. He was the king. He was the representative of the nation. And so when he sinned against the Gibeonites, Israel sinned against the Gibeonites.

There's no doubt, is it, the whole nation of Israel is impacted by this famine. So I think it's really significant.

At the end of the section, God chooses to answer the prayers on behalf of the land, verse 14 tells us. The implication being that the famine came to an end. Let me read it to you, verse 14. And they buried the bones of Saul on his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin and Zelia in the tomb of Kish, his father.

And they did all the king commanded. And after that, God responded to the plea for the lamp. Some people argue that what God is pleased with here is the proper burial of the bones.

And it's not until after that that God answers Israel's prayers again. I don't think that that's right because verse 1 specifically connects it, the famine, to Saul's sin, doesn't it?

[16:11] And so verse 1, it's logical to assume that once God chooses to lift the famine, the sin that was unresolved is now dealt with. It is paid for. It is now atoned for in God's eyes.

And I suspect David's deal with the Gibeonites is a significant part of that. As you go through the text, God's name is mentioned in connection with what the Gibeonites did.

Listen to what they themselves said. Look at verse 6. Let seven of his sons be given to us, that we may hang them before the Lord. Then look at verse 7.

And listen to what the narrator says in verse 9. And he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the Lord.

And so the author of 2 Samuel really wants you and I to know that this bloodshed took place before the eyes of the Lord. And as a result of what happens took place here, it seems that the famine ended, the curse is lifted.

[17:21] Gruesome though it has been, atonement has been made. I'm going to come back to what I think this text means for us.

But let me summarize for a moment. From our modern perspective, the word for this passage would be distasteful. From the point of view of history, of early Israelite history, the word would be contextual.

From the point of the Gibeonites, the word that would summarize the story is justice. From the point of view of David, the word would be integrity. And from God's own point of view, the key word is atonement.

Let's briefly look at the second half of the chapter in verses 15 to 22. And I've called it the blood of the Philistines. And so if the threat in the first half of the chapter is from within Israel, the second half is that constant threat to Israel from without the Philistines.

The sworn enemies of Israel. And there's a few key ideas in this section. The first is how God works, doesn't he, to preserve his chosen king. Verse 15 to 17 tell us of a battle.

[18:35] How David became exhausted. How he was almost killed before the faithful Abishai comes and rescues him. And from that point on, David's men insist, David, you're staying out of the battle. So that you won't be snuffed out.

God is protecting his chosen ruler. It's a key theme, isn't it, in 2 Samuel. Another theme is the interdependence of God's people. David's not a one-man band.

He's supported by many faithful helpers. Abishai, Sibakai, Elhanan, Jonathan, other unpronounceable names. And God's word honors such men for their loyalty.

And it's not unlike, I think, the end of the New Testament letters, where Paul lists his fellow workers in ways that the Bible reminds us of our need for each other.

And at these points, God is reminding us that he sees the faithful service of his people, not just their leaders. But a third theme is the faithfulness of God to his promises.

[19:32] So back in 2 Samuel 3.18, God has promised to rescue his people from the hand of his enemies, and particularly the Philistines. And this second half of 2 Samuel 21 is the author's testimony of how God did that time after time after time in David's reign.

And in the process, we are reminded that he can do that because God is the one who has ultimate power. And God is mightier than all who oppose him, and he will not be mocked forever.

Verse 25 talks about a Philistine who reminds us of Goliath, not just in his size and physical appearance, but in the way he taunts Israel, and so he derides God. And he, like Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, is decisively silenced.

2 Samuel 21 reminds us that it wasn't a one-time-only deal with Goliath, that God continued to stand up for himself with or without his people.

He continued to be the great warrior, the victor over all his enemies, his rivals. And I think these are the sort of things we've been reminded of in verses 15 to 22. But I think a key idea that's common in

both parts of the chapter, which we've seen again and again in 2 Samuel, is God does not tolerate sin.

[ 20 : 57 ] Whether it's the Philistines who were rebels against God's people and God's purposes, or whether it's the king of Israel himself, sin has a price. And where there is sin, there will be punishment.

And there will be punishment because God is just, and there must be justice. And justice is often served by the spilling of blood.

And I don't know if you've seen that, but the blood runs through this chapter like a sorry stream. The blood of Israel's own sons in the first half of the chapter, and the blood of the Philistines too.

And it's impossible, as you read this chapter and kind of get into it, not to just be slightly overwhelmed by the blood. So my conclusion is the blood-spattered reader.

The blood-spattered reader. You can't watch, can you, a really good thriller film, or I suppose a horror film, if you've watched that. You can't watch a good thriller or a horror film without being a little bit disturbed, can you?

[ 22 : 03 ] Your pulse races a little bit. As you watch it, and you can't read a chapter like this without a few specks of blood landing on you.

I mean metaphorically. But you get what I'm saying. I think we're left asking the question, why is there so much blood on the pages of the Bible? And we're left wondering, what does it all mean? And make no mistake, this is like a horror movie. I've not talked much about verses 10 to 15, but there are no verses in this chapter that bring home the grisliness of these events more potently. They are genuinely horrifying, aren't they? Of these seven men, Risba was a mother to two. She was possibly like a grandmother to the other five.

And Risba, she stays with the mutilated, decaying, dead bodies of her family 24 hours a day for weeks, maybe months. And she wants to protect their bodies from being eaten by the indignity of them being eaten by birds or wild animals.

[ 23 : 17 ] It's an expression of the most intense grief. And I'm not sure these verses serve any other purpose than to show us how gut-wrenchingly terrible the whole episode really was.

One commentator says, these verses compel us to marinate in the sadness. It's almost as if this chapter wants us to feel sick to our stomach about this.

It's almost as if the bloody mess of this chapter is done intentionally. And I think this is one of those chapters in the Bible, and there are others which are written in such a way to remind you and I just how dark sin is.

And as I reflect on this chapter, I realize that we need to do that from time to time, don't we? I think I do, and I reckon you might need to as well. Because you and I, if I can speak for myself, are terrific at convincing ourselves that sin isn't really that bad.

And we think that our little indiscretions are not that serious. And that they don't usually affect others a great deal. And we certainly think that small sins, like not keeping your word, or like breaking a promise, shouldn't be made to sound like a big deal.

[ 24 : 55 ] And even when we know that we're guilty of things, we think often, don't we, well, it can easily be forgiven, it easily can be forgotten, it's no big deal. But this chapter spatters you with blood to remind you that sin is not cheap, and sin is not light, and it's not insignificant.

There was a man called Saul who was the cause of this shocking sin. If his ghost, if his ghost hovered somewhere near, where his one-time concubine, Risba, was exposed, on that hillside to the elements, she's exhausted with sleeplessness, and sorrow in equal measure, desperately trying to keep away, lest birds swoop down, and feed on the dead bodies of her sons.

If the ghost of Saul could have seen that sight, I suspect all the forces of heaven could have heard his scream. Imagine the torture of his looking down on this bitter sin and misery.

He would have to look down, and he would know, I did this. I caused this. Blood on my hands. The relentless grief and pain were his creation, because he sinned, and sin is not cheap.

Not insignificant. It's a disaster. But I don't think this chapter is just written so that you and I are reminded how dark sin is.

[ 26 : 45 ] I suspect it's also written to tell you and I how costly atonement is. Because atonement costs those seven descendants of Saul. They pay with their lives.

But just as terrible was the cost to David and to people like Risba. And this chapter reminds us in no uncertain terms that atonement is quite literally a bloody mess. And the chapter spatters us with

blood so that we don't think atonement is cheap.

And as a Christian, it's not hard to miss this significance, is it? Because we know that many hundreds of years later there was another day of atonement.

That was incredibly costly. And someone paid with his life. And others who loved him and looked on, they were deluged with a grief like they'd never known before.

His father as much as anyone. And like this scene, it was quite literally a mess. And yet, like we do with our sin, we are very good at training our minds to forget the horror of that day.

[ 28 : 02 ] We take that day of atonement for granted. And it doesn't disturb us anymore. We see the benefits, but not the costs. And maybe, just maybe, God gives us chapters of the Bible like this one to jolt us back into seeing things more clearly.

As one writer says about 2 Samuel 21, if we've grown too used to Golgotha. Perhaps chapters like this can shock us back into the truth.

Atonement is a drippy, smelly, bloody business. And maybe it wouldn't hurt us from time to time to marinate in the sadness of that scene too.

Because when we do, we allow ourselves to be reminded of the cost. And as we're reminded of the cost, it may just well be that we will savor the benefits a little bit more.

At the sixth hour, darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.

[ 29 : 19 ] Which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

And when the centurion who stood there in front of Jesus heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, surely this man was the son of God.

Let's pray. Thank you.