

Costly Atonement and Incomplete Victory

Text: 2 Samuel 21

Introduction: Sometimes we come to the Bible, and we are reminded how inspiring it is. God has a way of using His Word to give us exactly what we need at particular times in our lives. Whether that be a word of comfort or encouragement or even correction. We read our Bibles, and we often find ourselves inspired.

Other times we come to the Bible, and we need to be reminded that it is inspired Word of God. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Today is one of those days when we need to be reminded that what we have before us is the inspired Word of God. I don't think anyone is going to be putting any verses from 2 Samuel 21 on a coffee mug or a t-shirt. If you did, someone might think it was a shirt about some horror movie they haven't yet heard of.

But every time we come to the Bible, we do so with two big, important presuppositions: 1) This is God's Word, and 2) God has something to say to us in His Word.

I would venture to say that you have probably never heard a sermon on 2 Samuel 21. We would think something seriously wrong with a preacher who woke up on Monday morning and thought, “What my people really need this Sunday is 2 Samuel 21. But you know that we are preaching through 2 Samuel, and after 2 Samuel 20 comes 2 Samuel 21.

It's one of the reasons why I preach through books of the Bible. We can't hide from the difficult texts. We have to read them. And study them. And wrestle with them. And seek to understand and apply them as best we can with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Go ahead and turn in your Bible to 2 Samuel 21 if you haven't already. It's on page 255 in the black pew Bible in front of you. If you don't own a Bible, we encourage you to take the pew Bible with you when you leave.

(Read 2 Samuel 21...Pray)

This is a really difficult chapter. And we're not going to try to resolve all of the difficulty this morning. Because that's how life in a fallen world is. Difficult. And we're not able to resolve all of the difficulty.

But what I want us to see is that **shadows of atonement and victory in 2 Samuel 21 point us to Jesus.**

The chapter is easily divided into two sections. The first addresses...

I. Atonement for Saul's sin (2 Samuel 21:1-14).

A. We're told in verse 1 that there was a famine in Israel during the reign of David that lasted for three years (vs. 1a).

1. We might initially assume that the events of chapter 21 took place after the events of chapter 20. But that is almost certainly not the case.
2. Chapters 21-24 of 2 Samuel form an epilogue to the books of Samuel. The material presented here is taken from the whole period of David's reign.
3. So, we don't know exactly when the events of chapter 21 took place. Chronology is not the author's concern.
4. We only know what the text says. The famine was during the days of David, and it lasted for three years.
5. We can imagine the hardship this brought upon God's people. Crops failed. Food was in short supply. And people were hungry.
6. Even though the famine was outside his control, perhaps David started to catch some heat from the people. That's usually what happens to leaders when things aren't going well. Regardless of whether they had anything to do with the problem in the first place or are even able to do anything to fix it.

B. So, what did David do?

1. We're told there in the middle of verse 1: "David sought the face of the LORD" (vs. 1b).
 2. And we can commend him for this. Seeking the Lord is always the right answer no matter what we're going through in life. The Lord knows. The Lord cares. And we can trust everything in His hands.
 3. We can assume that David asked God to bring an end to the famine. Knowing from Leviticus and Deuteronomy that famine can be an instrument of God's judgment, perhaps David asked the Lord if there was a particular reason for the famine.
 4. Regardless of the specifics of what David said to the Lord, we do know that the Lord spoke to David and said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death" (vs. 1c).
 5. Woah! It was something SAUL had done that caused the famine. Saul had almost certainly been dead for years at this point, but the nation was still experiencing the consequences of his actions.
 6. I wonder if David was relieved to find out that it wasn't anything he had done that caused the famine. That may indicate that the famine took place before his sin with Bathsheba in chapter 11.
- C. Understanding what Saul had done requires us to go back a ways in biblical history.
1. There's not anything in 1 Samuel about Saul putting the Gibeonites to death. So, we don't know exactly when during his reign it happened. But it certainly tracks with what we know about Saul.
 2. We also know from the book of Joshua that the Gibeonites tricked Joshua into making a covenant with them to protect them (Josh. 9). Joshua promised not to harm the Gibeonites.
 3. So, whenever it was that Saul "put the Gibeonites to death," in doing so, he broke the covenant that had been made with them many years earlier.
 4. That's why verse 2 says that "the people of Israel had sworn to spare [the Gibeonites]."
 5. But instead of sparing them, Saul struck them down. The text says, "in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah" (vs. 2). We don't know exactly what that means. What we do know is that God was not honored by Saul's nationalistic zeal at the expense of the Gibeonites.
- D. One of the things that makes this so strange is the amount of time that elapsed between Saul's sin and Israel's consequences.
1. We don't know exactly how much time, but it has been YEARS. Saul is dead. Yet, there's a famine in the land as a result of his sin.
 2. I think we have to take away from this that God's justice is unforgetting and unrelenting (Phillips, 362).
 3. You've heard it said that time heals all wounds. But it doesn't work that way with God. One commentator writes, "The passage of time and Israel's dimming memory of this event did nothing to erase the bloodguilt in the annals of God" (Phillips, 362).
 4. There is no statute of limitations with the justice of God. God is holy. He is righteous. He is just. He doesn't ignore or forget about sin. In fact, He can't. He must deal with sin. And He must deal with ALL sin.
 5. Including OUR sin. Thankfully, He dealt with our sin on the cross. He gave His Son in our place. He poured out His judgment and wrath toward our sin on Jesus. So that, if you repent of your sin, and put your complete trust in Jesus, you are forgiven your sin and made right with God.
 6. But you're not forgiven your sin because God forgot about it. Or ignored it. You're forgiven your sin because Jesus paid for it. With His life. In your place. As your substitute.
- E. In this case, in 2 Samuel 21, David wanted to know what to do, how to deal with Saul's sin.

1. Look at verse 3. (Read vs. 3)
 2. It's interesting to me that David asks the Gibeonites rather than God. He sought the Lord about the famine. But as soon as he found out that the famine was due to Saul's sin against the Gibeonites, he went straight to the Gibeonites rather than the Lord.
 3. He COULD have asked the Lord what to do to make things right. I think he SHOULD have asked the Lord what to do to make things right. After all, while Saul HAD sinned against the Gibeonites, all sin is first and foremost sin against God. And the consequences that Israel was experiencing were coming from the Lord, not from the Gibeonites.
 4. Still, the Gibeonites responded, "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" (vs. 4a).
 5. David then asked again, "What do you say that I shall do for you?" (vs. 4b).
 6. And the Gibeonites this time responded, "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" (vs. 5-6a).
 7. Woah! The Gibeonites aren't playing. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. They want retribution. Saul put the Gibeonites to death. They want seven of Saul's descendants to put to death.
 8. Now, I think we do have to wrestle with the morality of their request.
 - a. Because again, this solution came from the Gibeonites rather than the Lord.
 - b. Also, the Bible doesn't give us a clear assessment of their request here in 2 Samuel 21.
 - c. We do know from the Old Testament that there was a general expectation of life for life. Deuteronomy 19:21 says, "Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."
 - d. Numbers 35:31 says, "Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death, but he shall be put to death."
 - e. The problem here is that the murderer is already dead. And Deuteronomy 24:16 says, "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin."
 9. Now, it seems that we've already spent more time thinking about the morality of their request than David did. Because his immediate response to their request was, "I will give them" (vs. 6b).
 10. No searching the Scriptures. No seeking the Lord. Just immediate acquiescence to piling injustice on top of injustice.
 11. I think David's response must have come from desperation. He was the king. There was a famine in the land. It had lasted for three years. At this point, he was willing to do just about anything to make it stop. Desperate times call for desperate measures.
 12. But David should have allowed his desperation to continue to drive him to the Lord. Instead of seeking the Gibeonites about what to do to make things right, David should have sought the Lord.
- F. Despite what I see as David's sinful acquiescence to the request of the Gibeonites, David does still stand apart from Saul here.
1. Saul had been unwilling to keep the Israelites' oath to the Gibeonites.
 2. But look at verse 7 concerning David. (Read vs. 7)
 3. We've talked before about David's relationship with Jonathan and his care for Mephibosheth for Jonathan's sake. That shows up again here in chapter 21.
 4. Unlike Saul, David is a man of his word. David doesn't always do the right thing. He's a sinner who falls short of the glory of God.

5. But he does seem to care about honoring the Lord by doing the right thing even if he doesn't always do it.

G. The horror of the Gibeonites' request comes into clear focus beginning in verse 8.

1. David took seven of Saul's descendants and gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites (vs. 8-9a).
2. And the Gibeonites did exactly what they said they were going to do. They "hanged them on the mountain before the LORD" (vs. 9b).
3. We're not told specifically that these Gibeonites offered them up as a human sacrifice to the Lord, but that seems to be what is happening here. And let's be clear, while the pagan nations surrounding Israel practiced human sacrifice, God's people did not. In fact, God forbade it.
4. The text says that the seven of them perished together (vs. 9c). How tragic.
5. The scene that continues to unfold here is quite horrific. The mother of two of the men, Rizpah, takes sackcloth and spreads it on the rock. What is she doing? She's protecting the corpses of her dead sons and the other men from vultures and wild beasts. She was undoubtedly devastated. Her sons were dead. So, she did the only thing she could do at this point. Protect their corpses in hopes that they might be given a proper burial.
6. We're meant to feel the weight of this. Don't shrink back from it. Feel the brokenness. These were real men, hanged by the Gibeonites. Rizpah was a real mother, devastated by the gruesome deaths of her sons. Whatever we might say about the Gibeonites' request and David's acquiescence to it, there's no way to spin this as a good thing. It's tragic. Horrific. But we can't close our eyes to it. We can't look away. We're supposed to see and feel the devastation caused by sin.

H. When David heard of what Rizpah had done, he made arrangements for a proper burial for Rizpah's two sons and the five other men.

1. He retrieved the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh-gilead and buried them in the land of Benjamin in Zela (vs. 12, 14a).
2. And he also took the bones of Saul's descendants who were killed for Saul's sin and buried them there.
3. The text seems to present this action on the part of David as right and proper, even though the circumstances surrounding it trouble us greatly.
4. There's a little note at the end of verse 14 that we need to look at before moving along to the rest of the chapter. It says, "And after that God responded to the plea for the land" (vs. 14c).
 - a. The rains came. And the famine was over.
 - b. What in the world are we supposed to make of that?
 - c. I've argued that the Gibeonites' request and David's acquiescence to it were contrary to God's purposes. But now we see that God responded to the plea for the land and brought an end to the famine.
 - d. I really don't know how to resolve all of this. And I can't help but think that maybe we're not supposed to resolve it.
 - e. We're supposed to feel the weight of it all. It's a story of suffering from beginning to end. And all of it was in some way a consequence of Saul's sin. I like what Woodhouse writes here, "We do not understand the connections. It's complicated. But God has not so arranged the world that the only person who suffers when someone sins is the sinner. Others get hurt also. Perhaps we wish it were otherwise, but it is not. This is a reality we live in every day. Indeed it is difficult to think of a sin that does not in some way hurt others" (Woodhouse, 492).

We've seen an attempt at atonement for Saul's sin in the first half of the chapter. Now, let's quickly turn our attention to...

II. Victory over Israel's enemies (2 Samuel 21:15-22).

This section of the epilogue gives us four snapshots of the strength of David's kingdom.

A. In the first one, we're told that there was war again between the Philistines and Israel (vs. 15-17).

- 1. It seems that there was always war between the Philistines and Israel.**
- 2. We don't know exactly when these events took place. The text doesn't tell us. And remember, the epilogue is arranged more thematically than chronologically. The point is what took place. Not so much when it took place.**
- 3. Here we see that David went down into battle with his servants. But he grew weary. And one of the Philistines, set out to kill David. His name was Ishbi-benob. He was a descendant of the giants. He had a spear that weighed three hundred shekels of bronze and a new sword. He was a bad dude.**
- 4. And he may have gotten the best of David, except that Abishai came to David's rescue, attacked the Philistine, and killed him.**
- 5. It was then that David was told, "You shall no longer go out with us to battle" (vs. 17b).**
- 6. Notice that David is called the "lamp of Israel." This indicates an awareness of David's special status as the one anointed by the Lord to lead Israel. As the "lamp of Israel" David pointed forward to Jesus, who is the "true light, which gives light to everyone" (Jn. 1:9).**
- 7. David's vulnerability also stands out here. He was weary. He likely would have died if it weren't for Abishai. In his weariness, David reminds us that King Jesus never grows weary. He never needs anyone to come to his aid. He never needs to be told to no longer go into battle. David may be the lamp of Israel, but Jesus is the light of the world. He is so much greater than David.**

B. In the second snapshot, there was again war with the Philistines (vs. 18).

- 1. The record of this war lasts just one verse.**
- 2. The point is that Israel under David's leadership was victorious over the Philistines.**

C. The third snapshot is in verse 19. There was war again with the Philistines (vs. 19).

- 1. The threat posed by the Philistines was significant.**
- 2. But Israel was again victorious.**
- 3. There is a textual difficulty with this one. 2 Samuel refers to the man Israel defeated here as Goliath the Gittite. But of course, we know that David defeated Goliath himself in 1 Samuel 17 in a very different manner.**
- 4. 1 Chronicles 20:5 identifies the Philistine killed by Elhanan as the brother of Goliath. So, it's likely that there is a small scribal error here in verse 19 of 2 Samuel.**
- 5. This shouldn't call into question our trust in the truthfulness of the Bible. A small issue with transmission is not the same as a problem with the original text.**

D. The final snapshot is found in verses 20-21.

- 1. Again, there was war at Gath between the Israelites and the Philistines.**
- 2. This time there was another giant with six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot.**
- 3. He taunted Israel, but David's nephew Jonathan struck him down.**
- 4. And again, the point is the strength of David's kingdom. And more importantly, the faithfulness of David's God.**
- 5. Each time the Philistines came against David and his kingdom, they were struck down. Because God is faithful to His people.**

6. God is able to put all enemies under His feet. It was the Lord who gave the Philistine giants into the hands of David's servants.

Conclusion: And it is the Lord who will ultimately give us victory over our enemies of sin, death, and the evil one.

David is a shadow of Christ. He is not the Christ. But he points us to Christ. Both in his victories and in his inadequacies. In David's victories, we are reminded that we have a King who has given us victory over our enemies of sin, death, and the evil one. We know the end of the story. We know that our God reigns. We serve a risen Christ. Exalted at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. And one day returning to establish His kingdom forever.

In David's inadequacies, we are reminded that there is only one who can come and reign and make all things right. Christ Jesus. Our righteous King.

I want to come back to the theme of atonement from the first half of the chapter before we close. David's attempt to deal with the consequences of Saul's sin rightly horrifies us. And the difficulty we have in making sense of David's attempt to atone for Saul's sin should remind us of the inadequacy of David's kingdom to deal ultimately with the problem of sin and the wrath of God.

Only Jesus is able to save us from the wrath of God.

Listen to Paul in Romans 5:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

You and I are sinners deserving of God's wrath. But Jesus came, and lived, and died to make propitiation for our sin. To satisfy God's wrath toward our sin. And only Jesus could do it. David couldn't do it. No one else could do it. Only Jesus.

And for this, brothers and sisters, we give thanks.