

LESSON 21

Justice, Mercy, and the Cost of Sin

2 Samuel 21

“There was a famine in the days of David for three successive years, so David sought the Lord.”

2 Samuel 21:1

Class Overview: Second Samuel 21 shifts from the rebellion narrative to a series of events that reveal how past sins continue to affect the present. A famine strikes the land for three years, and when David seeks the Lord, he learns the reason: Saul had broken a covenant with the **Gibeonites** by putting them to death. To make things right, David asks the Gibeonites what should be done. They request that seven of Saul’s descendants be handed over. The men are executed, and the famine is lifted. The chapter also records the moving account of **Rizpah**, who guards the bodies of her sons, showing deep grief and loyalty.

The chapter closes with brief accounts of battles against the Philistines, reminding us that conflict still surrounds the kingdom. Second Samuel 21 teaches that sin has consequences that can extend far beyond the moment. It also shows the seriousness of honoring commitments and the role of justice in restoring what has been broken.

Class Objectives:

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Explain the cause of the famine and its connection to Saul’s actions.
 2. Understand the agreement between Israel and the Gibeonites.
 3. Describe Rizpah’s actions and what they reveal about grief and loyalty.
 4. Recognize how past sins can affect future generations.
 5. Reflect on the balance between justice, mercy, and covenant faithfulness.
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Introduction:

Second Samuel 21 is not arranged in strict chronological order. It steps back to address events that highlight deeper spiritual issues within the kingdom. The chapter opens with a famine that lasts for three years. This is not a passing hardship. It is prolonged and severe. David recognizes that something is wrong and seeks the Lord for an answer.

The Lord reveals that the famine is connected to Saul’s past actions against the Gibeonites. Years earlier, Israel had made a covenant with them, promising to let them live. Saul violated that agreement and attempted to destroy them. Now the consequences of that sin have surfaced. The current generation is dealing with the effects of a broken covenant from the past.

This chapter forces us to wrestle with a difficult reality. Sin does not always stay contained. It can ripple forward, affecting others in ways that are not immediately visible. At the same time, the chapter shows that God takes covenant faithfulness seriously. What was done in the past still matters, and it must be addressed.

The Famine and the Broken Covenant (21:1-2)

The chapter begins with a prolonged crisis. A famine strikes the land and lasts for three years. This is not a short-term hardship. It is sustained and severe, affecting the entire nation. David recognizes that something deeper is going on, so he seeks the Lord for an answer. God reveals the cause: the famine is connected to **Saul's actions against the Gibeonites**. Saul had tried to wipe them out, even though Israel had sworn an oath to protect them.

That covenant goes all the way back to Joshua 9. The Gibeonites had secured a treaty with Israel, and though the agreement was made under deceptive circumstances, it was still binding. Israel had sworn by the Lord to let them live. That promise mattered. Saul, in his zeal for Israel, broke that covenant. He attempted to destroy the Gibeonites, violating an oath made in the name of God. The text suggests he did this out of national pride, trying to strengthen Israel at the expense of those who had been granted protection.

Now, years later, the consequences surface.

This moment teaches something important about God's view of covenant faithfulness. Promises made in His name are not temporary. They are not erased by time or leadership changes. What Saul did was not just political. It was a violation of a sacred agreement. The famine shows that sin can have delayed consequences. The people living in David's time were not the ones who made the decision, yet they are experiencing the effects of it.

David's response also matters. He does not ignore the problem or try to solve it on his own. He seeks the Lord. Before acting, he wants to understand what is really happening. This section sets the stage for everything that follows. The issue is not simply hunger. It is a broken covenant that must be addressed.

The Gibeonites' Request for Justice (21:3-6)

Once David understands the cause of the famine, he takes the next step. He goes directly to the **Gibeonites** and asks a clear question:

"What should I do for you? How can I make atonement so that you will bless the Lord's inheritance?"

David recognizes that the issue is not just between Israel and God. It also involves the Gibeonites who were wronged. If the covenant was broken against them, then reconciliation must include them. The Gibeonites respond carefully. They do not ask for money or material compensation. They are not interested in silver or gold. They also make it clear that they do not have the authority to execute anyone themselves.

Instead, they request that **seven male descendants of Saul** be handed over to them. These men are to be executed before the Lord at Gibeah, Saul's hometown. This request is difficult. It brings the

consequences of Saul's sin directly onto his family. The Gibeonites are seeking justice for what was done to them. They are not acting out of greed, but out of a desire to address a wrong that has never been made right.

David agrees to their request.

This moment raises serious questions. Why must others suffer for Saul's actions? Why does justice take this form? The text does not answer every question directly, but it does make one thing clear: the covenant had been violated, and the offense was serious. At the same time, David's approach shows something important about leadership. He does not ignore the past or try to bypass the issue. He seeks a resolution that will restore what has been broken.

Reconciliation often requires confronting hard realities. When wrong has been done, it must be addressed honestly. Ignoring it does not bring healing.

The Execution and the Cost of Justice (21:7-9)

David now carries out the agreement. But before doing so, the text makes an important note. He **sparing Mephibosheth**, the son of Jonathan, because of the oath he had made to Jonathan before the Lord. Even in this difficult moment, David honors a covenant. One promise will not be broken to correct another.

Seven descendants of Saul are chosen and handed over to the Gibeonites. They are executed "before the Lord" on the mountain. The act is public and solemn. It is not treated lightly. This is about addressing a wrong that had gone unresolved. The timing is also noted. The executions take place at the beginning of the barley harvest. That detail reminds us that this moment is tied to the land itself. The famine has affected the people's ability to live, and now the issue is being addressed at the very time when the land should be producing.

This is a heavy section. It forces us to see the seriousness of sin and broken promises. Saul's actions were not isolated. They had consequences that reached beyond his lifetime. At the same time, we see that David does not act carelessly. He preserves his covenant with Jonathan while dealing with the covenant that was broken with the Gibeonites. He is navigating a situation where multiple responsibilities intersect.

Justice is not always simple. It can involve painful decisions and lasting consequences. When wrong is not addressed, it does not disappear. Eventually, it must be faced. The execution brings the issue into the open. What had been hidden in the past is now dealt with publicly. The cost is high, but the wrong is finally being acknowledged.

Rizpah's Grief and Loyalty (21:10-14)

After the execution, the scene shifts from justice to grief. **Rizpah**, the mother of two of the men who were killed, refuses to leave the bodies. She spreads sackcloth on a rock and remains there from the beginning of the harvest until the rains come. Day and night, she guards the bodies. She keeps birds away during the day and wild animals at night. This is not a short act of mourning. It continues for an extended period of time.

Her actions are striking. She cannot change what has happened, but she refuses to abandon her sons. Her grief is quiet, persistent, and deeply personal. In a moment where justice has been carried out publicly, Rizpah's response reminds us of the human cost behind it. Word of her actions reaches David. When he hears what Rizpah has done, he responds. He goes and retrieves the bones of Saul and Jonathan, along with the remains of those who were executed. He gathers them and gives them a proper burial in the family tomb.

This was important. It brings dignity and closure where there had been exposure and loss. It honors the dead and acknowledges the weight of what has taken place. Then the text gives an important note:

“After this, God responded to prayers for the land.”

The famine is lifted.

While justice had to be carried out, compassion still has a place. Rizpah's faithfulness moves David to act, and her quiet endurance becomes part of the restoration. It reminds us that behind every act of justice, there are real lives and real grief. And even in difficult situations, mercy and dignity should not be forgotten.

Ongoing Battles and God's Continued Help (21:15-22)

The chapter closes by shifting from the famine to a series of battles with the **Philistines**. These accounts remind us that even after internal issues are addressed, external threats remain. The kingdom is still under pressure.

In one battle, David grows weary while fighting, and a Philistine warrior moves in to strike him down. At that moment, **Abishai** steps in and saves David's life. Afterward, the men insist that David no longer go out into battle. They recognize that the king's life is too important to risk. David is described as the “lamp of Israel,” and they do not want that light to be extinguished. The remaining verses describe additional victories over Philistine warriors, including descendants of the giants. These enemies had once been a major threat, but now they are defeated one by one by David's men.

This section shows that God continues to provide strength and support through others. David is no longer fighting alone. Those around him step up and carry the responsibility forward.

It also highlights a shift. David, once the young warrior who faced Goliath, is now aging. The work of leadership and protection is being shared with others. The kingdom continues, but the roles are changing. These final battles remind us that while one issue may be resolved, challenges do not disappear. Faithfulness requires endurance over time, and God often works through a team of people to accomplish His purposes.

Practical Application

Sin does not always stay in the past. Saul's actions against the Gibeonites happened years earlier, yet the consequences showed up later in David's time. That should make us think carefully about our own choices. What we do can affect others long after the moment has passed. We also see the importance of taking responsibility when something is wrong. David did not ignore the famine or try to explain it away.

He sought the Lord and then addressed the issue directly. When something is broken, it has to be dealt with honestly. Avoiding it only prolongs the problem.

At the same time, this chapter shows that justice and compassion are not opposites. Justice had to be carried out, but Rizpah's actions remind us that there is always a human side to every situation. Her grief moved David to show dignity and care even after the decision had been made. It is possible to deal with what is right while still remembering the people affected by it.

We also learn the importance of keeping our commitments. The covenant with the Gibeonites had been violated, and it mattered to God. Promises are not temporary. They carry weight, especially when they are made before the Lord.

Finally, the closing battles remind us that we are not meant to carry everything alone. David needed others to step in and help. There are seasons where we lead, and there are seasons where others must stand alongside us. God often provides strength through people who are willing to step forward at the right time.

Conclusion

Second Samuel 21 forces us to slow down and face something we often want to avoid. The past is not always finished just because time has passed. What was done in Saul's day had not been forgotten. It still mattered, and it had to be addressed.

God is serious about what we promise. A covenant was broken, and it brought consequences on the land. That reminds us that our words carry weight. What we commit to, especially before God, is not something we can treat lightly.


At the same time, the chapter does not read like a cold record of justice. Rizpah's grief brings a human voice into the middle of it. Her presence reminds us that behind every decision are real lives and real loss. David's response to her shows that even in hard moments, dignity and care still matter.


The chapter closes with battles still being fought, but with others stepping in to carry the load. The kingdom moves forward, but not without scars. This is a sobering chapter. It reminds us that sin has a cost, that faithfulness matters, and that even when things are made right, the effects can still be felt for a long time.


For Discussion

1. What does the famine teach us about how past actions can affect future situations?

2. Why was it important for David to seek the Lord before responding to the crisis?


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3. How do we understand the Gibeonites' request and David's decision in light of justice and covenant faithfulness?

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4. What stands out to you about Rizpah's actions, and what do they teach us about grief and loyalty?


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5. What do the closing battles show us about the need for others to step in and share responsibility over time?

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