

Message #35

Kurt Hedlund

Life of David

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## DAVID AND THE APPLICATION OF JUSTICE WITH MERCY

### 2 SAMUEL 21

#### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The issue of social justice has been much in the news lately. Beginning with the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis concerns have been voiced about racism in our culture and police brutality. Our personal experiences influence our view of justice. For African-Americans in our midst mistreatment in our culture often raises a question in their minds about whether skin color has something to do with how they are being treated. I worked for a black painter years ago. He avoided driving through one Connecticut suburb because that town had a reputation for pulling over every black male who drove through it. US Senator Tim Scott says that in one recent year he was pulled over by police seven times.

On the other hand I have a brother who was a police officer, and I have had parishioners who worked in law enforcement. They would point out that there were nine unarmed black individuals who were killed by police officers in 2019 and 48 police officers who were killed in the line of duty. Also the Manhattan Institute points out that it is 18.5 times more likely that a police officer will be killed by a black male than it is that an unarmed black male will be killed by a police officer.

Personal experience affects our sense of justice in regard to the current coronavirus restrictions. Should businesses and churches and schools be shut down? Older people in our midst with underlying health conditions might think that this is a wise thing. Small business owners and pastors in Nevada who are limited to fifty people in attendance and who see casinos filled with hundreds of gamblers might have a different perspective. Public school teachers who have high blood pressure and diabetes might have a different perspective on in-school learning than a single mother who has a special needs child.

Justice is the subject of our passage this morning. If we want the right perspective on justice, we need a divine standard. So we are going to see what we can glean from God's dealings with David and his people and his enemies to help us in developing our own standards for the right application of justice.

In our study of the life of David we have reached the point where he has put down a rebellion led by his son Absalom. While trying to get his own tribe of Judah in order as well as seeking to reunite the whole country, another rebellion developed. We saw last week that a guy named Sheba was unhappy with the favoritism which he perceived David to be showing toward his own tribe. His rebellion was not very well organized. Sheba ended up being surrounded by David's army led by Joab in a fortified city in northern Israel. A wise woman convinced the city that the best resolution of the problem was to give Sheba's head to Joab, which they did. So finally the kingdom seems to be getting a little more in order.

Chapter 21 begins an epilogue, or a wrap-up, of the life and reign of King David. The events described are not necessarily in chronological order. The next four chapters take the literary form of a chiasm, which I explained in my weekly YouTube video two weeks ago. Chapters 21 and 24 deal with a very similar subject. In Chapter 21 God displays His anger against Israel because of the sin of Saul. In Chapter 24 God displays His anger upon Israel because of the sin of David. Moving toward the center of these two endpoints, there are matching lists of heroes and mighty men. In the middle there is a psalm of praise.

I.

So in vv. 1-9 of 2 Samuel #21 (which is found on p. 273 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs) we deal with ROYAL JUSTICE AND THE VIOLATION OF COVENANT. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. ROYAL JUSTICE AND...) According to v. 1, **"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 bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.'"** The expression "sought the face" is usually used in the Old Testament of one who is seeking an audience with a king. Here the audience sought is that of the divine king.

Exactly how did David seek this audience with God? Perhaps he asked questions of the Lord by means of the Urim and Thummim which the chief priest possessed. Perhaps he asked his friend and prophet Nathan for help in knowing the Lord's answer for this situation. Our secular culture today doesn't consider the possibility that natural disasters might be evidence of God's displeasure about something. Of course, it is also hard to determine what the divine message might be behind disasters, especially for many of us who are skeptical about people who claim to have prophetic insight about such things.

Whatever the means of communication was, the message is clear. The famine is the result of God's displeasure over what Saul and his clan have done in killing Gibeonites. This is the first time that we learn of this incident. In Joshua #9 we were told that after the Hebrews entered the Promised Land of

Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, and after they destroyed the city of Jericho, a delegation of people from Gibeon showed up to meet them.

Gibeon (GIBEON MAP) was a few miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. It is to be distinguished from Gibeah which was a few miles away and would later be the hometown of King Saul. At the time of Joshua Gibeon was occupied by native Canaanites. When the people there learned about what the Hebrews and their God had done in destroying Jericho and Ai, they sent a delegation seeking to find some kind of protection. (JOSHUA 9:6) According to Joshua #9 v. 6, **“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.’”**

The Gibeonites made up stories about their identity and actual home. The Hebrews bought it. (JOSHUA 9:15) Thus we are told in v. 15 of Joshua 9: **“And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them.”** The Hebrews later found out that the Gibeonites lied and actually lived within the Promised Land. But the Israelites recognized a responsibility to abide by their covenant. They made a promise before God to protect these people. They now are responsible to keep that promise.

In Jeremiah #34 v. 18 (JEREMIAH 34:18) there is brief reference made to how covenants were made in the Ancient Near East. The actual verb that is used for making a covenant is “to cut” a covenant. God says in Jeremiah 34, **“And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts...”** Typically what was done with these agreements was that an animal, or animals, were literally cut in half. The two signers of the agreement would walk between these pieces, signifying that the party breaking the covenant would be subject to the death that was involved in the killing of these animals. Even though the Gibeonites lied, God’s view of justice is that the Hebrews need to keep their promise. It was perhaps their fault that they did not take the time to investigate the claims of the Gibeonites more thoroughly. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Now, some four hundred years later, Saul apparently sought to wipe out the Gibeonites. Saul and several of his sons have died. This famine happens sometime during the administration of David. So more years have gone by. But God has not forgotten. He sees an injustice that has been done to people who are not probably even followers of the true God. The people of Israel are suffering because of what an earlier king did.

This incident tells me that God regards the agreements and contracts and covenants and vows that we make as important. That has implications for our faithfulness in marriage. There is a promise that we make there, right? It has implications for business agreements and agreements that we make in taking a credit card and rental contracts and church membership and simple promises that we make to other people. So one aspect of God's sense of justice is that people are responsible to keep their promises. There could be divine consequences for failing to do that.

We read in v. 2: **“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.”** God's original charge was to wipe out the Canaanites. Perhaps Saul was claiming that command as justification to engage in ethnic cleansing and to earn favor with the God he was too often guilty of disobeying.

Verse 3: **“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?’”** “Atonement” is an important theological word. It is usually used of the satisfaction of the righteous demands of a holy God concerning sin. Here the Gibeonites are the offended party. They are not part of the people of God, but the people of God made an agreement with them, and the reputation and honor of God have been offended by the violation of this covenant.

David in his recent dealings with his family has been passive in implementing justice. But here--- whenever this happened--- he was active. The leaders of God's people should be active in promoting God's righteousness.

Look at vv. 4-6: **“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.’”**

It is fascinating to see what these Gibeonites request to have their sense of righteousness satisfied. They don't ask for monetary reparations. They don't ask for the destruction of lots of Israelites. Their request seems to be consistent with a principle of Old Testament law, which was perhaps also consistent with the sense of justice in that part of the world at that time. For in Numbers #35 vv. 33 & 34 (NUMBERS

35:33) God told His people, **“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. (NUMBERS 35:34) You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.”**

We know that other covenants from the Ancient Near East contained curses calling for the death of the descendants of leaders who violated covenants. Was it just for Saul’s sons (and grandsons) to suffer for this? Apparently in God’s eyes it was. Perhaps these sons had a part with their father in killing these Gibeonites. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We don’t know the complete reason for the request for seven of Saul’s sons to be killed. The number seven did have a symbolic meaning of fullness in the Ancient Near East. Perhaps seven leaders among the Gibeonites had been killed. Perhaps the Gibeonites believed that seven of Saul’s sons were involved in the ethnic cleansing. David agrees to their request to have these seven men hung in Gibeah, the hometown of Saul and his family, which was just a couple of miles from Gibeon.

Verse 7: **“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.”** We have seen that David has shown protection and special favor toward Mephibosheth because of his friendship and covenant with Jonathan. I have pointed out that Mephibosheth is a kind of picture of the genuine believer.

Mephibosheth was lame and had nothing to offer or to deserve a place at the king’s table. He came from a family which was at enmity with David. It was because of the gracious call of the king that he was, in effect, made part of the royal family. Now we see that Mephibosheth is protected from the curse of sin that might rightly be applied to him by virtue of his relationship with the king. In a similar way we Christians stand under the judgment and curse of sin. We were at enmity with the true God. But now our relationship with the divine king, Jesus, protects us from heavenly judgment.

Verses 8 & 9: **“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 to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; 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.”**

Merab was the oldest daughter of Saul who was originally offered as a wife to anyone who would kill Goliath. She should have gone to David, but the king broke his promise. Instead she went to a guy named Adriel. Her five sons suffer for the sins of Saul, who was their grandfather. Saul had a forty year reign as king. So it is possible that some, or all of them, could have had a part in the killing of the Gibeonites.

Death for these seven comes by hanging. (DEUTERONOMY 21:22) According to the law of God in Deuteronomy 21 vv. 22 & 23, **“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, (DEUTERONOMY 21:23) 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.”**

Saul and his family’s ethnic cleansing have brought a defilement to the land. The three year famine is evidence of this. The removal of the curse necessitated the judgment upon Saul’s family.

It was concern about not leaving the body of Jesus on the cross that prompted His removal on Good Friday. That was at the time of the Feast of Passover which also marked the beginning of the barley harvest, which is noted in our text as the time of this hanging.

The primary lesson here for us is to note the importance to the Lord of keeping covenants, of following through on promises and vows and contracts that we make with other people and with Him.

II.

Then in vv. 10-14 we encounter ROYAL MERCY AND HUMAN DIGNITY. (II. ROYAL MERCY AND HUMAN DIGNITY) Verse 10 tells us, **“Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah 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.”**

The usual cause of a famine was the lack of rain. Normally the dry season lasted from April, the time of the barley harvest, until October. Was this poor mother hanging around here for all these months, or did the Lord bring rain sooner, signifying His satisfaction over the removal of this curse by this sacrifice?

The author seems to want us readers to contemplate the grief of this Rizpah. Back in 2 Samuel #3 v. 7 (2 SAMUEL 3:7) we were told, **“Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. And Ish-bosheth said to Abner, ‘Why have you gone in to my father’s concubine?’”** So Rizpah was originally a secondary wife of Saul. We don’t know how many wives and concubines whom Saul had. But presumably she suffered grief when Saul, the father of her five children, died.

Rizpah became part of the harem inherited by Saul’s son Ish-bosheth. (PROJECTOR OFF) If Ish-bosheth followed the law of God, he should not have taken his father’s wives as his own. But in this verse from 2 Samuel 3 we learn that General Abner took Rizpah as his woman. Whether she was brought to his house and officially married, we don’t know. But soon after this, General Joab murdered Abner. Probably this meant more sadness and grief for Rizpah.

Imagine her circumstances now. The Gibeonites were pagans and obviously did not feel compelled to take down the bodies of Rizpah’s five sons so that they would not stay on the tree for the whole night. Instead they want to see the humiliation of having these bodies deteriorate and be eaten by wild animals and vultures. So day in and day out this mother fights off the birds and the animals. She endures the sight and the smell of bodily oozings and deterioration. She lays on sackcloth in the heat and the cold. Perhaps at times she uses the sackcloth as a covering. She endures the spiritual and psychological pain of a grieving mother for day after day. She remains steadfast in her horrible perseverance.

In Psalm 90 v. 11 (PSALM 90:11) King David later wrote, **“Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?”** Such was the wrath of God that this poor mother witnessed. Perhaps we should be reminded here of the grief of a later mother who would witness a similar hanging-- this time of a sinless son who likewise was subject to the curse of God. Part of the takeaway from all of this is that we need to remember the seriousness of sin before a holy God.

In Galatians #3 v. 13 (GALATIANS 3:13) the Apostle Paul wrote, **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree...’”** This is the royal mercy of the divine king who died in our place, suffering the curse of God so that we might have eternal life through faith in Him.

According to vv. 11 & 12 back in our passage, **“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 Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa.”** (PROJECTOR OFF) The report about this mother’s devotion to her sons touches David. He is prompted to exhibit a royal mercy.

The last we heard about the men of Jabesh-Gilead they took the remains of Saul and his sons, who were killed in battle against the Philistines at Mount Gilboa, from their embarrassing perch on the walls of Beth-shan and took them back to their city. Saul and the rest of his clan, with the exception of Jonathan, had pursued David, trying to kill him, for years. But David is moved into action here by a feeling of mercy and a concern for human dignity.

Verses 13 & 14: **“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 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.”**

Not only did David and his family suffer from the physical and psychological and spiritual stress from the pursuit of Saul and his family and his army for a period of perhaps ten years, but now also his country has suffered from a famine for three years because of what Saul and his administration and family had done in breaking a sacred covenant in trying to kill all of the people of Gibeon. Yet David shows a royal mercy here, partly because of the devotion of a grieving mother, and perhaps partly because of an awareness of the divine mercy that he has received in spite of his own terrible sins.

It is now that God’s wrath against the people of Israel for violation of their covenant is satisfied. Notice the last sentence of that verse. Some scholars translate the original Hebrew as “God was moved by prayer.” Certainly this judgment of human death had something to do with the removal of the curse and the famine. But also there is mention of this plea and this prayer. Whose prayer was it? Was it King David’s prayer? Was it the prayer of others?

The Gibeonites wanted justice. They deserved it. We also want justice in the unjust world in which we live. Yet in the eyes of our Creator who is holy, we are all unjust creatures. We are sinners. If God was totally just with us, we would be in a heap of trouble. What we really need is mercy.

In Jesus Christ justice and mercy meet. God's justice demands a payment for our sins. Because Jesus Christ was both God and man, He qualified to serve as our substitute. On the cross he bore the wrath of a just God for the penalty of sin. We enter into the benefits of that sacrifice if and when we put our trust in this Jesus. As His followers in this world, we are responsible to promote justice, but we are also responsible to promote mercy.

III.

In vv. 15-22 we come to ROYAL JUSTICE AND THE HEROES OF WAR AGAINST GOD'S ENEMIES. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE HEROES OF WAR...) We read in vv. 15-17, **"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 Ishbi-benob, 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 Zeruiah 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.'"**

The application of justice sometimes requires war. Evil nations can threaten peace and justice. The Philistines had been long time enemies of Israel. They were idolatrous and pagan. They fought against God's people and God's purposes.

How the events in this section fit into the chronology of David's reign is unclear. There are four incidents described which all involve conflict between the Hebrew leaders and Philistine giants from a family with roots in Gath. In this first incident Ishi-benob is described literally as a descendant of Rapha, whose clan is called Rephaim.

Ishbi-benob has a spear, or spear head, weighing 300 shekels and a new "something." The meaning of the word is uncertain. It is the only time it appears in the Old Testament. The spear, or spear head, is about 7 ½ pounds, which is half of the weight of the spear which Goliath earlier carried. David needs help in fighting against this giant. His nephew and Joab's brother helps David kill this guy.

As a result of this battle the military leaders convince David that he needs to stay away from the front lines. He has become too valuable to lose in battle. Perhaps he is also getting older and losing some of his youthful vigor. The other leaders are probably aware of divine promises which have been made

concerning David. I wonder if this incident has anything to do why David did not go to battle against the Ammonites in #11 when he got into trouble with Bathsheba.

Verse 18: **“After this there was again war with the Philistines at Gob. Then Sibbecai the Hushathite struck down Saph, who was one of the descendants of the giants.”** We learn elsewhere that Sibbecai was one of the members of Israel’s elite officer corps. In 1 Chronicles #20 v. 4 we are told that this incident happened at the famous ancient city of Gezer. Perhaps Gob was another name for Gezer. Perhaps it was a town in the suburbs of Gezer.

Verse 19: **“And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob, and Elhanan the son of Jaare-oregim, the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.”** There is uncertainty about the original text here. The early copies do not all agree. Many scholars suspect that the original text says that Elhanan killed Lahmi the brother of Goliath.

Verses 20 & 21: **“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. And when he taunted Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimei, David's brother, struck him down.”** This is the fourth Philistine giant who is killed, this time by another of David’s nephews.

Verse 22: **“These four were descended from the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.”** They fell by David in the sense that they were killed by men under his command.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are responsible to promote justice in our family, our church, our school, our work, and our world. We do it imperfectly. Jesus is our model. The Bible is our manual. We do this task imperfectly, recognizing that we must also promote mercy.

In issues currently riling our nation it is often difficult to know exactly how to promote justice and mercy. But I see one example where Christians have successfully done that in our area. Most of you are probably familiar with Hope for Prisoners. This is a Christian group which was established by a former felon who was converted to Christ. It is involved in helping ex-cons reintegrate into society. In one report which I saw there are 70 Metro officers involved in the program. Many of them are Christians. Some of them teach classes to these ex-offenders. Some of them serve as mentors to them. One of our

elders has served as a Bible study teacher for the group. Others from among us have served as mentors. As you know, we have had other volunteers who have led Bible studies and corrected Bible correspondence courses for prisoners. Two of our members have served as prison chaplains. There are eight prisoners from around the state who request copies of my sermons. This is the kind of concrete opportunity which we have to promote Biblical justice and mercy. Our obligation as Christians is not just to complain and to point out injustice, but to look for opportunities to promote justice--- and mercy.

Justice this side of heaven will always be imperfect. Some of us have been, or will be, subjected to incidents where we are victims of great injustice. Yet as Christians we always know that we have become the objects of great mercy. We can also be assured that Jesus is coming back some day, and everything will be set right. In the meantime we live in this unjust world, and we must seek to promote both justice and mercy.