

The Sad Consequences of a Broken Covenant

2 Samuel 21

"Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, "It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites." ² So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; the children of Israel had sworn protection to them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah.

³ *Therefore David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And with what shall I make atonement, that you may bless the inheritance of the LORD?" ⁴ And the Gibeonites said to him, "We will have no silver or gold from Saul or from his house, nor shall you kill any man in Israel for us." So he said, "Whatever you say, I will do for you." ⁵ Then they answered the king, "As for the man who consumed us and plotted against us, that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the territories of Israel, ⁶ let seven men of his descendants be delivered to us, and we will hang them before the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, whom the LORD chose." And the king said, "I will give them."*

⁷ *But the king spared Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of the LORD's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. ⁸ So the king took Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, and the five sons of Michal [Merab] the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; ⁹ and he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the hill before the LORD. So they fell, all seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest.*

¹⁰ *Now Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until the late rains poured on them from heaven. And she did not allow the birds of the air to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night.*

¹¹ *And David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done. ¹² Then David went and took the bones of Saul, and the bones of Jonathan his son, from the men of Jabesh Gilead who had stolen them from the street of Beth Shan where the Philistines had hung them up, after the Philistines had struck down Saul in Gilboa. ¹³ So he brought up the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from there; and they*

gathered the bones of those who had been hanged. ¹⁴ They buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the tomb of Kish his father. So they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God heeded the prayer for the land.

¹⁵ When the Philistines were at war again with Israel, David and his servants with him went down and fought against the Philistines; and David grew faint.

¹⁶ Then Ishbi-Benob, who was one of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose bronze spear was three hundred shekels, who was bearing a new sword, thought he could kill David. ¹⁷ But Abishai the son of Zeruiah came to his aid, and struck the Philistine and killed him. Then the men of David swore to him, saying, "You shall go out no more with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel."

¹⁸ Now it happened afterward that there was again a battle with the Philistines at Gob. Then Sibbechai the Hushathite killed Saph, who was one of the sons of the giant. ¹⁹ Again there was war at Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaare-Oregim the Bethlehemite killed [the brother of] Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

²⁰ Yet again there was 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 born to the giant. ²¹ So when he defied Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimea, David's brother, killed him. ²² These four were born to the giant in Gath, and fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants."

Background Notes

2 Samuel 21 certainly isn't the most pleasant chapter in the Bible. It's horrible to even think about Rizpah camping out by the exposed dead bodies of her sons that were left hanging in the hot Middle Eastern sun. We know that God sent the famine on the land because Saul had broken the covenant that Israel had made with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9). Did David do the right thing in asking the Gibeonites what he should do? Maybe he should have asked the Lord what to do! David picked seven "innocent" descendants of Saul to be hanged. This decision certainly seems to go against God's Law of Deuteronomy 24:16, which said, "*Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin.*"

However, it could be argued that these descendants of Saul were not innocent, but (along with Saul) had been directly or indirectly involved in breaking the covenant by killing some Gibeonites. The Gibeonites lived in the tribal area of Benjamin, so it looks like Saul and probably his sons may have been involved in the sin of ethnic

cleansing. Execution of these descendants of Saul was certainly in line with the well-known law of Exodus 21, that says *"An eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, and life for life."* In Numbers 35:33, the Mosaic Law clearly said, *"So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it."* We don't know for sure, but these descendants of Saul were possibly involved in Saul's sin of breaking Israel's covenant with the Gibeonites. By the way, the Mephibosheth who was executed (v8) was not the son of Jonathan (v7).

Another area of difficulty is verse 14. Was God moved by prayer for the land because the killing of the Gibeonites had been avenged, and God's Law was satisfied? Or was it because the bodies of Saul and Jonathan and those who had been hanged were properly buried? Or did the famine end because God once again began to answer the prayers of the farmers and shepherds of Israel? Most likely it was some combination of the above, but the fact that rain poured down on the bodies may indicate that the drought (likely the cause of the famine) was ended because God's righteous Law was satisfied. There are some unanswered questions in this chapter that make proper understanding difficult, but one thing we can say for sure, and it's captured in our first doctrinal point: *It is important to keep covenants that are made before the Lord.*

Doctrinal Points

1. It is important to keep covenants made before God.

Numbers 30:2 - *"If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."* This was true for individuals, and it was true for the nation as well. Even though Israel was tricked into making the covenant with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9), they had made that covenant of peace before the Lord, and it had to be honored.

Notice in Joshua 10 that God considered this covenant so important that He stopped the sun in the sky to help Israel honor the covenant! And in 2 Samuel 21, we see that God considered that covenant so important that He brought famine on the land for three years because it had been broken. And apparently the famine would have gone on longer, if David hadn't finally inquired of the Lord!

The teaching is obvious, isn't it? It is important to keep covenants made before God! Have you made any covenants before God? What about your marriage vows? Are you honoring your marriage vows to love and be faithful? What about those covenants you made years ago to study God's Word, and to sacrifice some of your time for Christian service? Are you

experiencing a famine in your life as a Christian? If there's "spiritual famine" in our lives, we need to go before the Lord as David did. We need to ask why, and examine our lives for shortcomings. It is important to keep covenants made before God.

2. It is important to have agreement in the Word of God.

Question: Who killed the giant Goliath? Answer: David, the son of Jesse, right? But verse 19 says that Elhanan, son of Jair, killed Goliath! Now how are we going to resolve this apparent disagreement in the Bible? After all, if the Bible is God's Word, so it must agree with itself. The Bible can't lie! There are three possible solutions:

1. It's possible that Elhanan was another name for David - other Bible characters have more than one name. However, the father's name is different, so this explanation is unlikely.
2. It's possible that there was more than one man named Goliath.
3. Most likely this is a copyist's error, because 1 Chronicles 20:5 says that Elhanan killed the *brother* of Goliath. The information in 2 Samuel 21 is very similar to the information in 1 Chronicles 20, so likely a copyist unintentionally omitted the words "the brother of."

So a copyist's error is probably the way to resolve this *apparent* "disagreement" in the Bible. For another example of a probable copyist's error, look at the name "Michal" in verse 8. Although most ancient manuscripts have "Michal," many other ancient manuscripts have "Merab." We believe Merab is the inspired text, because it is in agreement with 1 Samuel 18:19, that says that Merab was married to Adriel.

Maybe we should have made a doctrinal point about fighting giants from this passage. As David and his mighty men had to fight the Philistine giants, including one with twelve fingers and twelve toes, so we must fight all kinds of enemy giants today. There's a spiritual lesson here. Believers are to fight spiritual giants like doubt, unbelief, secret sins, and more. By *faith* these giants *can* be defeated, so that lesson is certainly contained in this chapter. However, harmonizing Scripture is important too. It is important to have agreement in the Word of God.

Practical Application

Let's be like Rizpah in times of great loss.

Think of the grief Rizpah experienced during the ordeal of losing two sons. Rizpah had a love that was stronger than death. Rizpah did what she could, guarding the

bodies of her sons - even though it was an exhausting and unpleasant task, and even though her ordeal went on for months. Can you imagine her feelings as she saw that Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, was spared? Can you imagine her questions when Merab didn't help her with this gruesome task? Can you imagine her frustration when the government wouldn't allow the bodies be buried - for months? But there is no record that she complained or demanded anything from the king. Rizpah's love was strong, and it was rewarded in the end.

Can we be like Rizpah in time of great loss? Can we rise to the occasion? Can we do what we can without complaining, or finding fault, or demanding justice, or becoming bitter? Let's be like Rizpah in times of great loss!