

2 Samuel 21:1-22 | “Famine & Philistines”  
*Preached on November 20, 2022 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Please turn in your Bibles to 2 Samuel chapter 21 this morning. *[pause]*

The remaining chapters of 2 Samuel are unique.

In the previous chapters, things typically progressed chronologically, but not chapters 21 through 24. *[pause]*

In the final chapters of 2 Samuel, the writer adds in some additional details and stories about David’s kingship that happened at various times in his reign.

And what we will find is that David and Israel face two issues: famine and Philistines. *[pauseeee]*

We all face issues in our lives that need resolving.

On some days, we feel like all we do is face issue after issue that needs resolved...

Someone is out sick at work, so now you have to figure out how to get the extra work done, which is now on your plate.

Your son or daughter got in trouble at school, so now you have to talk to the teacher.

Your car started acting up, and now you have to figure out what to do.

Your spouse is upset with you about something, and you need to deal with that issue, too. *[pause]*

Issues that need resolving.

You must resolve them or else the issues grow.

They aren’t fun, but they need our attention.

Well as we look at 2 Samuel 21, we see David and Israel first face the issue of famine.

Let’s READ verses 1-9. [READ VERSES 1-9](#)

David and Israel are just going along, and all of a sudden they face a famine that goes on for three years. *[pause]*

The first year or two, David probably thought that this was just a bad year, but once he goes into year 3, he knows that something is amiss.

He perceives that this is punishment for sin, for in the Law, God said that one of the punishments for disobedience was that the land would not yield increase or fruit.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Leviticus 26:20 & Deuteronomy 28:18.

So this leads David to seek the Lord to make it right. *[pauseee]*

Anytime that there are issues in our lives, we should be seeking the Lord.

It's so easy to think, "I got this. I'll figure something out," and to push God to the side.

It's so easy to think, "Well if God is disciplining me, then I need to move away from Him," yet that would be a mistake.

In our trials, we are to go to God, laying it all at His feet. *[pauseeee]*

In response to David's inquiry, the Lord tells him that the reason for the famine is a past sinful act of Saul.

There was bloodguilt on Saul and his household, for he had put the Gibeonites to death. *[pause]*

Now to understand what happened here, we need a little Biblical history lesson from the time of Joshua.

In Joshua 9, we find that Israel is defeating nation after nation, and taking over the land promised to them. *[pause]*

So in fear, the Gibeonites, who are non-Israelites from a nearby town, deceive Israel into believing that they are from a distant land and need protection.

So what happens is that Joshua and the elders of Israel are tricked into making a covenant with the Gibeonites, declaring that they wouldn't kill them.

They even make this oath in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, and couldn't break it, lest wrath be upon them. *[pause]*

They had made a binding covenant with the Gibeonites.

And in cutting a covenant, an animal was cut in two, and those making the covenant would walk between the pieces.

In doing this, they were saying, "may we be cut up if we do not keep this oath."<sup>2</sup> *[pause]*

So to break a covenant oath is a big deal not only because you are bringing the curses of the covenant upon yourself, but you are making it seem like the Lord's name can be used flippantly. *[pauseeee]*

Now go back to our story - we find that Saul put the Gibeonites to death.

He had broken the covenant oath, and now the wrath of God was upon him and his household.

---

<sup>2</sup> Davis, D. R. (2002). *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (p. 267). Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

Isn't it amazing that God was bringing judgment upon Israel for something that was done to a non-Israelite group?

It reminds us that God truly does care about justice.

He will someday make all things right. *[pauseeee]*

But why did Saul try to wipe out the Gibeonites?

We are told that it was in his "zeal for the people of Israel and Judah." *[pause]*

"Well what's wrong with that?" You might ask.

We are confronted with this reality once again: zeal can be misguided, if it's not according to truth.<sup>3</sup>

Someone can be passionate about the things of God, and still do things wrong, if they don't do it according to how God wants.

We worship God "in spirit *and* truth".<sup>4</sup> *[pause]*

Zeal for the things of God doesn't automatically make you godly.

It must be done according to how God wants. *[pause]*

We certainly do things for the Lord with zeal, but we must also seek out what He wants in His Word.

Are you both passionate about the Lord, and passionate about what He says to do? *[pause]*

So now that we know the reason for the famine, what's the resolution?

David gets the Gibeonites together, and asks how he can make things right in order to relieve Israel from this famine. *[pause]*

They say that money won't do it, and that they have no right to kill anyone on their own.

So David inquires further, and they say that since Saul did it, then let 7 of his sons be given over to them, and they will hang them before the Lord. *[pause]*

David consents to this, and then chooses the 7 sons to be given over.

Amazingly, David keeps his covenant with Jonathan by sparing Mephibosheth, showing that David was better than Saul.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See Romans 10:2.

<sup>4</sup> John 4:23 (italics mine).

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Samuel 20:14-17.

The Gibeonites then take the 7 sons and put them to death. *[pauseeee]*

So what happens after this? Let's continue on in verse 10. *[READ VERSES 10-14]*.

A sad ending to Saul's house, isn't it?

Rizpah, who lost two sons in the killings, goes to where the men were killed and protects the bodies from wild animals.

She does this so that the bodies of her sons and relatives aren't dishonored, but protected.

*[pause]*

David hears about this, admires her devotion, and decides to show care and concern for the house of Saul.

He has Saul and Jonathan's bones brought, as well as those who were hanged, and has them properly buried.

Finally, we are told that God responds by giving rain. *[pauseeee]*

This section is hard to take, as we see the bloodiness of atonement, and the sad results of covenant breaking.

*And through what's described here, we are pushed to remember that...*

### **I. We are covenant-breakers, who need atonement.**

The Bible shows us that we are all like Israel.

We have each sinned and broken the Law.

Saul's sin affected all of Israel because he represented them, so also, Adam's sin as our representative brought sin into the world and death spread to all men.<sup>6</sup> *[pause]*

Rizpah trying to protect her sons' dead bodies from animals reminds us of the sad results of sin.

Death is what is deserved for those who are guilty before God. *[pauseeee]*

The truth is: we are all guilty before God, deserving of that same punishment.

Sin can't just be let go when it's committed against the holy, just, and perfect God or else He wouldn't be just.

Atonement *needs to be made!* *[pauseeee]*

But in all of this, isn't it amazing that in God's mercy, He told David what was wrong.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Romans 5:12.

He didn't let David wonder forever what caused the famine, but showed where the guilt lay.

And in God's mercy, He tells us that we are guilty and why we are guilty, so that we aren't in darkness, wondering what we did and why we are guilty. *[pause]*

We aren't in the dark, not knowing why the world is the way it is.

We weren't left wondering why we couldn't measure up to the standard of perfection.

But we have a merciful God, who is willing to tell us where we missed the mark of His standard.

And not only that, but he provides the way to make atonement. *[pauseeee]*

For Israel, atonement was made through 7 of Saul's sons who paid the price, thereby removing the curse of famine.

For us, instead of 7 men dying to remove a famine - one man, Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God died once for all to remove the wrath of God that was against us. *[pauseeeee]*

You see, this story reminds us that atonement *is* bloody, it *is* gruesome, it *is* costly.

The gruesome, bloody nature of what happened back then points us to the amazing sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross! *[pause]*

We must not forget what Jesus actually went through for us.

Remember the pain he felt as the crown of thorns was pressed into his skull.

Remember the long and hard trudge, carrying the heavy cross to the place of his death.

Remember the blood as it dripped down the wood of the Cross.

Remember the anguish that Jesus felt, the abandonment he felt from His Father, as he became a curse for us, so that we could be redeemed from the curse of the law.<sup>7</sup> *[pause]*

Unless you feel the weight of your sin against God and what it deserved, you will never see the love and lengths that Jesus took to make atonement for your sin! *[pauseeeeeee]*

Some people want to avoid talk of sin.

They want to remove the Cross of its nails, its blood, and its violence.

They want a Disneyfied Cross that's nice and neat, and doesn't cause you shock or for your eyes to open wide.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Galatians 3:13.

But by doing this, they are emptying the Cross of its power,<sup>8</sup> for people wonder, “Why is the Cross even necessary?”

They think, “I don’t need that. I don’t need Christ. I just need these 7 tips to a happier and more fulfilled life.” *[pause]*

Never downplay the bloody, gruesome, costly nature of what Jesus did because it reminds us of what we deserved, and the costly price that was lovingly paid by Jesus for us.

We broke God’s law - He made atonement for our law-breaking by giving His own life. *[pause]*

Like David, he was the mediator, who sought to atone for our sins.

But unlike David, he actually atoned for our sins by giving his own life.

For us who trust in what He has done for us, we don’t become one of the 7 sons of Saul hanging on the tree.

Rather, we become like Mephibosheth, spared from death only because the King has promised us life. *[pauseeeee]*

We are covenant-breakers, who need atonement, just like Israel did.

Thankfully, God tells us the problem, and provides the solution.

The solution to our covenant-breaking is Christ, who atones for our sin.

As Peter says, we were ransomed “not with perishable things...but with the precious blood of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> *[pauseeeee]*

If you have never trusted in what Jesus Christ did for you on the Cross, then turn in faith today and be saved.

If you do trust Him, then never forget or devalue the price He paid and the love displayed on that bloody, gruesome, costly Cross. *[pauseeeee]*

So in the first half of this chapter, David and Israel faced the issue of famine.

But now in the second half they face another issue: Philistines. *[pause]*

In verses 15-22, there’s a recounting of some battles that Israel faced during David’s reign, and they are pretty amazing.

There are four different wars described.

---

<sup>8</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:17.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 1:18-19.

Each involves the Philistines, each involves a Philistine who was descended from the giants, and each involves an Israelite soldier killing them.

Let's read verses 15-17. *[READ VERSES 15-17]*

In this battle, David is there fighting with his men, and he grows weary from the fighting.

One Philistine named Ishbi-benob takes advantage of his weariness. *[pause]*

This guy is a descendent of the giants, he has a spear that is over 7 pounds, and even a brand new sword.

He probably wants to use his snazzy new sword, and who better to use it on than the king of Israel?

But good old Abishai comes to David's rescue and kills him. *[pause]*

Remember, Abishai is the brother of Joab, who kept wanting to kill Shimei for his cursing and rock throwing.<sup>10</sup>

Well now Abishai gets to kill someone, and good thing, too, for it saved David's life. *[pause]*

This is a simple reminder that as humans, we have limits.

We become weak and weary, for we do not have unlimited energy and strength.

One person can only take so much, reminding us that we are dependent people. *[pause]*

We need God, of course, but we also need others.

That's the beauty of the church, for it's not just the pastor, it's not just one faithful member, but it's a whole church of people who are working together for the glory of God. *[pause]*

If ministry was only on my shoulders, it wouldn't go well because I'm a limited person, just like you.

But in ministry, we are all dependent on each other, supposed to be working together like different body parts doing their job for the body to function well.<sup>11</sup>

Remember that you are limited, but on the flip side, remember that you are needed here. *[pauseeee]*

It's after this incident of David almost being killed that the men decide that it's not worth it having David along, fighting in the battles.

He's too important to the kingdom, so why risk his life?

<sup>10</sup> See 2 Samuel 16:9; 19:21.

<sup>11</sup> A reference to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

So David gets forced into military retirement, honorably discharged, of course. *[pauseeeee]*

The next three wars are recounted, starting in verse 18. *[READ VERSES 18-22]*

Here we see more descendents of the giants, who David's mighty warriors slay.

One man is named Jonathan, and he's the nephew of David.

He killed a guy who was tall, and had six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot.

Now that would be interesting to watch. *[pause]*

So as we think about these interesting stories of slaying giants, what do we discern?

*Well in the last section, we saw that Israel was under a famine for breaking a covenant, but in this section, we see that...*

## **II. God is the covenant-keeper, who continually comes through.**

There's no coincidence that right after the recounting of these battles, we hear of David's praise of God for his deliverance in the next chapter.

So even though the giants fell by the hand of David and his servants - they ultimately fell by the hand of God. *[pause]*

The repeating refrain was, "there was war again with the Philistines," but there was always triumph on the other side.

Though there kept being another giant adversary, there was always a savior.

No matter how intimidating they were, no matter how heavy the spear, or how tall, or how many fingers and toes, God gave His people the victory. *[pauseeeee]*

These stories even remind us of David's killing of Goliath, as even one of the men taunts Israel, just like Goliath did.<sup>12</sup> *[pause]*

God was teaching Israel that just like he did with Goliath, he would win the victory, no matter who the enemy was.

He wouldn't break the covenant He made with them, even though they did. *[pause]*

In fact, if you think about it, God taking their covenant breaking so seriously in the previous section just emphasizes that He will always value the covenants *He* has made.

He will never, no never break His covenant! *[pause]*

---

<sup>12</sup> See 1 Samuel 17.



He has promised to be merciful to us and remember our sins no more in the New Covenant, so we can rest assured of this!<sup>13</sup>

He will not hold us accountable for the sins that Jesus has paid for by His blood!

Since He says we are forgiven, we are truly forgiven!

We don't have to live in guilt or shame, but we can live in the freedom of forgiveness. *[pause]*

He has also promised to give us the Spirit to empower us to live for Him and obey, so we can know that this is true!

We aren't on our own in the Christian life, but we have been given all that we need.

God never breaks His covenants. *[pauseeee]*

God's covenant keeping was also seen in how He preserved David's life, even as David was weary and in the sights of a giant's offspring.

Since God promised that one of David's descendents was to have an everlasting kingdom,<sup>14</sup> then God wouldn't go back on His promise. *[pause]*

For the Philistines to kill David would have "quenched the lamp of Israel" and God wouldn't have that.

God had promised to give a lamp to David and his sons forever, and he wouldn't let anything quench that light.<sup>15</sup>

That lamp came shining brightly and perfectly in Jesus, who was the true light of the world.<sup>16</sup>

God had come through on His promise, and preserved the life of Jesus, all the way to the Cross, so that we could be forgiven and given victory over death because of His resurrection. *[pause]*

God continually comes through when it comes to His promises!

Do you remember this in your daily life?

Do you remember that you can trust His promises?

Do you actually *trust* His promises? *[pauseeee]*

*These stories in 2 Samuel 21 push us to remember that...*

**As covenant-breakers, we are dependent on God's covenant-keeping grace through Jesus.**

---

<sup>13</sup> See Hebrews 8:8-12.

<sup>14</sup> See 2 Samuel 7:11-16.

<sup>15</sup> See 2 Kings 8:19.

<sup>16</sup> See John 1:9.

God is a God of justice.

Though others wince at the sound of that, we proclaim it boldly because it means that God is not unjust.

Since God is just then it means justice *will* be done, and we all long for justice.

As Abraham says, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”<sup>17</sup> *[pause]*

Israel had broken a covenant that they made, and they were held accountable for it, even when they broke it against a non-Israelite people.

Justice needed to be done; atonement needed to be made. *[pause]*

So also, each of us has sinned against God, and we are accountable to God for it.

And since God is just, we each deserve the punishment, which is eternal death.

But although God is just, He isn't *only* just, for God is loving and merciful. *[pause]*

Atonement needed to be made, but because of Jesus, we don't have to pay it.

Instead, Jesus paid the penalty that we deserved, taking our sin upon himself, and bearing the wrath of God.

Even though He was sinless, he took our sin onto His account, and then we received His perfect righteousness to ours. *[pause]*

Atonement was made at Calvary, punishment was meted out, and justice was done.

And through this, love and mercy emanated from the Cross, and power was displayed as He rose from the dead, showing that it was completely accepted. *[pauseeee]*

What great news that though we have broken the covenant, God always comes through on His end!

He will uphold His Word, He will do what's right, He will give us victory over death, for He promised it. *[pause]*

Our greatest issue was resolved in Christ, so will you trust Him for every smaller issue along the way?

---

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 18:25.