

Glorious Truth from a Troubling Text

2 Samuel 21:1-14

My guess is that reading this passage has raised some unanswered questions for you and left you puzzled, or possibly even offended. Like the account of the Lord striking down Uzzah for touching the ark of the covenant to keep it from falling, or commanding Israel to annihilate the Canaanites, or sending fire to consume Nadab and Abihu, this story can rub us the wrong way. But we must not shy away from difficult passages. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable to us, and difficult passages can be especially profitable because they present special opportunities. When a passage of Scripture rubs you the wrong way, that very well may indicate that it is pushing against some underlying assumptions in your thinking that simply are not true. Difficult passages have a way of forcing us to examine those assumptions and evaluate them in the light of truth. And sometimes, difficult passages, if we submit ourselves to them, can force a paradigm shift in the way we think about God. My hope is that encountering this difficult passage today will do that in us wherever it is needed. You can't really understand the Bible until you first stand under it.

We have come to the final section of the books of 1-2 Samuel. The author has given us an overview of the reign of King David, including both highs and lows. Here in 2 Samuel 21-24 his purpose is not to give a chronological account of events, but rather a series of snapshots from the reign of David that highlight God's faithfulness to his covenant with David. These four chapters include six sections that are clearly arranged as a chiasm:

- A. David ends a famine by atoning for Saul's sin, 21:1-14
- B. David's giant-slaying men, 21:15-22
- C. David's song of deliverance, 22:1-21
- C.' David's last words, 23:1-7
- B.' David's mighty men, 23:8-39
- A.' David ends a plague by atoning for his own sin, 24:1-25

As you can see, this story (21:1-14) parallels the last story in the book, since both stories are about atonement for sin. Atonement is at the heart of the Bible. It's the purpose for which God the Son became a man. And it is important that we think about atonement correctly, based on the Bible's own categories, rather than the ideas we might want to impose on the Bible.

There is a continental divide in theology between those who place God at the center of all things and those who place man at the center of all things. A man-centered theology will resist or modify the Bible's teaching about atonement. It is too offensive to our sensibilities to make sense. But if you start with the biblical teaching about the absolute supremacy of God over all else, everything the Bible teaches us about atonement makes sense. May this passage reorient us

to a God-centered perspective that awakens us to the gravity of our sin and the wonder of our redemption in Christ.

As we walk through this story, I want to draw out three truths about the biblical doctrine of atonement. First,

1. Atonement is necessary because God is holy.

This story begins with a note that sometime during David's reign there was a three-year famine in Israel. One year of lighter than average rain is not necessarily unexpected. A period of two consecutive years of light rain starts to draw some attention. But three years in a row without a good crop yield caused David to realize that something was wrong, so in verse 1 we read that he "sought the face of the LORD," probably by inquiring of a prophet. And the Lord's response is given at the end of verse 1: "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." Graciously, the Lord disclosed to David the cause of the famine so that David could address it.

We cannot understand the sin of Saul to which the Lord referred if we don't understand the story of the Gibeonites, and that is a story that takes us back to the time of Joshua. When Israel came into the land of Canaan, they were commanded to annihilate all the various Canaanite peoples who were living there. One of those people groups was the Gibeonites. Once Israel started wiping out enemies, the Gibeonites realized their turn would come at some point, so they came up with a plan to deceive the Israelites into thinking they were not natives of the land but rather had traveled into the land from a distance. Israel was not commanded to annihilate any nations outside the land of Canaan; they could freely enter into treaties with them. So the Gibeonites, having deceived the Israelites about themselves, proposed an alliance with Israel. Foolishly, the leaders of Israel agreed to this alliance without seeking to hear from the Lord. According to Joshua 9:15, "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." Israel took an oath in the name of the Lord, and they presumably cut animal carcasses in two, laid them out opposite each other, and passed between them with the Gibeonites as a way of declaring, "If we do not keep this covenant, may the Lord do to us what we have done to these animals." An oath in the name of the Lord is not to be taken lightly. If, in a solemn covenant ceremony, you call down the wrath of the Lord upon yourself should you break your covenant, and then you go on to break your covenant, what does it say about God if he does not bring wrath? It shows that his name is empty, that he is willing to deny himself. In short, it would say that God is not holy. But God is holy, and thus the covenant made with the Gibeonites was a weighty matter.

Generations later, when King Saul ruled over Israel, he made light of Israel's covenant with the Gibeonites by attacking them and seeking to annihilate them. We don't have that event recorded anywhere in Scripture; all we have is the report at the end of verse 2 that it had happened: "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." This fits perfectly with what we know of Saul's character. He often showed himself willing to disobey the Lord to advance his own political interests. In this case, he had great zeal for his own nation, wanting to extend their territory over the people of the land of Canaan. But in his zeal he completely disregarded the binding covenant that Israel had made in the name of the Lord with the Gibeonites, effectively taking the Lord's

name in vain by treating it lightly and presumptuously. Saul had no regard for the holiness of God.

Now you might say, “Okay, Saul broke the covenant with the Gibeonites. But the Lord took him down on Mount Gilboa in battle with the Philistines. Problem solved, right?” Wrong. When Saul stood in the office of King of Israel and broke covenant with the Gibeonites, he acted on behalf of the whole nation. Because of Saul’s actions, it wasn’t just Saul who broke covenant. It was the nation of Israel. This is an important biblical principle known as “federal headship.” The word “federal” simply means “covenantal.” As covenant head of the nation, the actions of the king of Israel affect the nation as a whole, and thus the nation of Israel was now suffering the consequences of the broken covenant even well after Saul was gone from the scene. The Law of Moses had made it clear that the blood of unresolved murder pollutes the land. Numbers 35:33 reads, “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.” Because of the broken covenant and the principle of federal headship, the guilt of Saul’s sin now hangs over David’s kingdom. God’s name has been treated as unholy, and by afflicting Israel with a prolonged famine, God is defending the holiness of his name.

We are not Israelites living under a king, but the principle of federal headship applies to us as well. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul tells us that in Adam, all die. What does it mean to be “in Adam”? It means to be joined to Adam as our federal head. God has so ordered the human race that the first man, Adam, stood as our representative in the Garden of Eden. Because of Adam’s federal headship, the guilt of Adam’s sin is shared by all who are descended from Adam by ordinary generation. We are born into this world guilty, alienated from God, and therefore corrupted and directed toward sin. And God is holy. Our sin tells a lie about him. Sin declares that God is not God, that he is not the supreme good, that he is not Lord over all. And in his holiness he must answer that lie with a resounding reaffirmation of the truth about himself. By exercising wrath against sin, God shows that he is resolutely opposed to everything that defies him. And this is the predicament that we are in that requires atonement. God is not going to let our guilt slide. He is not going to leave our sin unanswered. In his holiness, God is always true to himself.

So we see that some form of atonement is necessary to release David’s kingdom from the guilt of Saul’s house. And that is what brings us to the part of the story we find most puzzling, or even troubling. This story shows us, second,

2. Atonement is appalling because sin is weighty.

Think about what the average Israelite would have learned about sin growing up in a nation regulated by the Law of Moses. He would have seen the bloody mess of animal sacrifices offered day-by-day and year-by-year at the tabernacle. He would have seen priests slit the throats of lambs, drain out their blood, cut up their flesh, and burn it on the alter. He would have seen the bloodstained hands and garments that accompanied service in the holy place, and he would have been trained from childhood to recognize that all this blood and death was necessary for God to continue to dwell with Israel. Atonement is not pretty.

And what we see unfold in this story is not pretty. What we read strikes us as appalling. First, we note that, when King David asked the Gibeonites what they wanted him to do for them, they

responded by asking that he hand over seven descendants of King Saul to them to be executed. Some commentators see this demand as unjust, and thus they see David as unjust in granting it. But I don't think the text permits us to conclude that. Notice the Lord's words to David in verse 1: "There is bloodguilt on Saul *and on his house*, because he put the Gibeonites to death." Notice what the Gibeonites say in verse 4: "It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul *or his house*." When the Gibeonites speak of a claim against Saul's house (not merely Saul himself), they are echoing God's own words to David.

So does that mean that we can apply guilt intergenerationally? One of the main tenets of the current "woke" movement is the idea that certain groups are automatically guilty of oppression simply because of their demographics. Some of our European ancestors mistreated the Native Americans. Some of them owned slaves from Africa. Does that mean that if we are of European descent today, we bear guilt handed down from our ancestors? No, that is not what this text is saying. This story is not "woke." It is speaking about the breaking of a particular covenant made in the name of the Lord by one who held a divinely appointed office in Israel. The guilt on Saul's house is tied to his federal headship; it is not something we can apply to all white people, or to whatever group the media want to frame as oppressors. If we follow the tenets of woke ideology, we are setting ourselves up to be manipulated by whatever cause our leftist institutions want to push at any given time.

But what this story does show us, in continuity with the wider story of 1-2 Samuel, is that Saul and his house have been rejected by the Lord. David now stands in the role of the king who must separate Israel from the house of Saul and take the side of the Gibeonites in their just claim against the king who tried to annihilate them. By handing over seven descendants of Saul, two sons of Saul's concubine Rizpah and five sons of Saul's daughter Merab, David acknowledged that the Gibeonites had a legitimate grievance, and that God was offended by the light treatment that Saul had given to his name. As appalling as the execution of seven men sounds to us, it was, nevertheless, a just claim.

But we also note in the story that these men were not merely executed. They were hanged, or possibly impaled, "before the LORD," according to verses 6 and 9 at the town of Gibeah, Saul's hometown. That phrase "before the LORD" indicates that they were publicly executed, and their bodies were left exposed, as a religious act. And with their bodies left hanging, we read the moving story of Rizpah, mother to two of the men, who set up a tent near the bodies so that she could keep vigil over them and prevent birds and beasts from devouring them. As I read verse 10, the image that comes to my mind is the most appalling element of this story. I cannot fathom the pain of a grieving mother who has not only lost her sons, but who personally witnesses the daily decomposition of their bodies as she keeps vigil over them. It is simply heart-wrenching. Atonement is ugly because death is ugly, and the wages of sin is death.

In a 2013 article, *USA Today* reported that the hymn "In Christ Alone" had been removed from a forthcoming hymnal for the Presbyterian Church USA.¹ Why did the committee remove it? Because they did not agree with the line in the hymn that says, "'Til on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied," and the authors of the hymn were not willing to allow a change to the lyrics. Reverend Chris Joiner of First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, TN, was quoted as saying, "That lyric comes close to saying that God killed Jesus. The cross is not an instrument of

God's wrath." Sadly, Reverend Joiner expressed an opinion that is not an uncommon one. Many today who claim the name of Christ are simply appalled at the idea that Jesus suffered the wrath of God on the cross. What they seem to be repulsed by is the notion of divine wrath itself. They have remade God in their own image and are not willing to allow the Bible to tell them who God is. But the horrifying concept of God's wrath flows naturally from the biblical teaching about his holiness. If God is holy, then what must we conclude about sin? Sin is defiance of God, disregard of his holiness, an offense against his infinite dignity. Therefore, sin is infinitely damnable and abhorrent. It seeks to rob God of the honor that is properly due to him. Sin is a matter of infinite weight, and that is why atonement for sin cannot be a light matter, or an easy matter. It can't be pretty. It must be as ugly and abhorrent as the death that our sin merits. We get a taste of the gravity of sin by reading this heart-wrenching story.

Golgotha, the place of the skull where Jesus was hanged on a cross and suffocated to death, is not a pretty place. It is hell on earth, and I mean that literally. Our sin demands nothing less. Those who would be appalled at the notion that God killed Jesus should listen more closely to Scripture. Isaiah said, "It was the will of the LORD to crush him" (Isa. 53:10). Paul wrote that God put forward Christ as a propitiation in order to demonstrate his righteousness (Rom. 3:25) and that "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). We boast in the cross, an instrument of bloody torture, suffering, and death, because we see very clearly that the cross of Christ, in all its appalling ugliness, was an act of God.

But the ugliness and horror of atonement is not the last word we have to say about it. It's all for a greater purpose, and that brings us to a third and final truth:

3. Atonement is effective because God is gracious.

The bloodiness of atonement is not pretty, but it is not an end in itself. It serves the greater purpose of satisfying the wrath of God and thus removing it from his people. This is what happens in the story. Notice again verse 10: "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.*" Some commentators take this as a reference to a time period from the beginning of harvest in April to the onset of the normal rainy season in October. If so, Rizpah spent about six months keeping vigil over her sons' bodies. But I don't read the text that way. I don't think it is referring to normal rains. The Hebrew word used here normally indicates a downpour, and it seems that the Lord, in response to the atoning acts of David and Gibeonites, responded perhaps days or weeks after the execution with an extraordinary downpour of rain that signaled that the famine was over. The end of verse 14 tells us, "And after that God responded to the plea for the land." The curse of the broken covenant has been removed, the wrath of God has been assuaged, and God's favor rests upon David's kingdom because of this act of atonement.

But we also see the effectiveness of the atonement in another way in this passage. Verses 11-14 tell us that when David heard about Rizpah's vigil over her son's bodies, he was evidently moved by that act of motherly devotion, and he decided to bring the bones of Saul and his house to their final resting place. According to 1 Samuel 31, after the Philistines got hold of Saul's body and those of his sons, they fastened them to the wall of their city Beth-shan. But brave men from Jabesh-gilead went and stole the bodies of Saul and his sons and buried them in the Israelite city of Jabesh. David went and retrieved these bones from Jabesh and brought them to the tomb

of Saul's father Kish among the people of Benjamin. And he also had servants bring down the bodies of the seven descendants of Saul who had been hanged and had them buried in the same tomb, thus providing a dignified burial to Saul and his house. Why does this detail in the story matter? It matters because it shows that David, throughout this episode, is not at all motivated by personal vengeance against Saul. Remember that Saul, in a fit of jealousy, had tried to kill David. And then when David went on the run, Saul had given David's wife Michal to another man. David had plenty of reason to want to get back at Saul, his foremost enemy, and allowing the Gibeonites to leave the bodies of Saul's descendants publicly exposed indefinitely would have been one way to exact as much vengeance as he could. But David honored the house of Saul with a dignified burial. Why? Because his highest concern was not for his own honor, but for God's. As far as David was concerned, this whole incident was about the honor of God's name. With the execution of Saul's descendants, God's name had been vindicated, and thus the matter was ended. There was no need for David to try to exact any additional vengeance for himself.

Our theology of atonement is what enables us to release offenses committed against us to the Lord. Are you holding on to bitterness and resentment against someone for some offense committed against you? Your anger is a response to the injustice you perceive. If atonement shows us anything, it is that God is just. He will not allow the sin committed against you to go unanswered, whether it is answered at the cross of Christ or at the final judgment. Either way, it's not your business to pursue vengeance. Let God be God, and release that matter to him. One of the reasons the woke movement is characterized by perpetual resentment of some groups of people against others is because it has no means for atonement. Certain groups of people are perpetually guilty, and there is nothing they can do about it. And thus the cycle of resentment simply continues, builds, and metastasizes as this anti-gospel spreads. The biblical doctrine of atonement puts an end to all that. But it also puts an end the grudges you hold on to, the bitterness and resentment you nurture, and the anger you stew in against other people.

And there is one more detail in this story that I have not yet mentioned. Let's go back to 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." Although one of Saul's sons who died was named Mephibosheth (apparently it was a popular name), the Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan, to whom David had granted a seat at his own table, was protected. Why? Because David had made a covenant with Jonathan, and under the protection of David's covenant loyalty, Mephibosheth was spared from death.

And here we have a picture of the biblical truth that if you who are born in Adam are then reborn under the federal headship of Jesus Christ, you come under the protection of the new covenant. The covenant faithfulness of Christ protects you from the wrath of God. In the words of John Newton,

"Let us wonder grace and justice join and point to mercy's store.
When through grace in Christ our trust is justice smiles and asks no more."

In 1521, Martin Luther wrote a letter to his friend and colleague Philip Melancthon in which he said, famously, "Sin boldly." When you hear that phrase by itself, it sounds terrible. But if you hear it in context, it takes on a whole new meaning. Here it is in its wider context: "If you are a

preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world...Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner.”²

Do you hear what Luther is actually saying? “Sin boldly” doesn’t mean, “Go out and sin!” It means, “Be honest about your sin. Don’t excuse it, minimize it, or downplay it. Look straight at it in all its ugliness. Boldly accept the reality that your sin is abhorrent to God. And then believe in Christ even more boldly. Christ didn’t die for the imaginary sins you wish you would have committed. He died for the real sins that you have committed, and his death has atoned fully for them all.” And so may we too sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly. Amen.

¹ Bob Smietana, “‘In Christ Alone’ Dropped from Presbyterian Church Hymnal Over Lyric Dispute and Scriptural Debate,” *USA Today* (Aug. 7, 2013); available from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/in-christ-alone-dropped_n_3719253

² *Luther’s Works*, vol. 48, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan.