

**“THE COST OF COVENANT-BREAKING”**

**I. Introduction**

A. We completed our study of the main body of 1 and 2 Samuel last week.

1. The last four chapters of 2 Samuel form a sort of epilogue.
2. The things related here are not presented in chronological order, though they have been arranged in a purposeful way.
3. In these chapters we are given a series of snapshots from David’s reign to complete the picture of what his kingdom was like.

B. In the verses that we have just read, we are told about an episode involving the Gibeonites, one of the Canaanite peoples who lived in the Promised Land before Israel’s conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua.

1. David’s handling of this matter shows that his reign, imperfect though it was, was characterized by both justice and covenant faithfulness.
2. That being the case, this text points us to the justice and covenant faithfulness of God.

**II. Discovering a Broken Treaty**

A. Our passage begins by referring to a three year period of famine that Israel experienced at one point during David’s reign.

1. We sometimes forget what a serious matter famine is in agrarian societies, especially in the ancient world.
2. It was not like these people could simply go to the store or order food online and have it delivered to them.

3. No rain meant no crops.
  4. To experience this for three straight years, as was the case in this instance, would be a significant hardship.
- B. Famine was one of the curses that God had threatened if his people broke the terms of his covenant.
1. That being the case, this three year famine eventually prompted David to inquire of the Lord about the matter.
  2. When he did so, God answered and told him that the famine was caused by an act of covenant unfaithfulness on the part of Saul, Israel's first king.
  3. Though this is not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, we learn here of an occasion when Saul tried to exterminate the Gibeonites.
  4. The reason why this brought bloodguilt upon Saul and his house was because Israel had entered into a treaty with the Gibeonites.
  5. We are told about this in Joshua 9, where it says that when the Gibeonites heard about Israel's conquest of the other Canaanite peoples, they deceived God's people into making a covenant with them.
  6. They dressed themselves up in old clothes, they took worn-out wineskins, and they brought dry and crumbly bread and told the Israelites that they were travelers from a distant country.
  7. God had forbidden his people from entering into a covenant with any of the Canaanite peoples, but instead of inquiring about this before the Lord the Israelites simply took the Gibeonites at their word and made a treaty with them.
  8. Even though this treaty was brought about through trickery on the Gibeonites' part, God expected his people to honor their word.

- C. Saul broke that treaty and tried to wipe the Gibeonites out in his nationalistic zeal for Israel.
  - 1. In doing this, Saul disgraced the name of the Lord, by whom Israel had sworn in this covenant.
  - 2. To swear an oath in God's name is to ask him to bring his curses upon you if you fail to keep your word.
  - 3. This is why it is a serious thing to break an oath.
  - 4. Saul's covenant-breaking brought three years of famine upon an entire nation.
  - 5. Israel's king had violated a covenant oath that Israel had made with another nation.

### III. Making Atonement

- A. When David learned about this broken covenant, he went to the Gibeonites and asked them how atonement could be made for this offense.
  - 1. The reason why David speaks of need for atonement in this matter is because this was not a personal offense.
  - 2. It was a matter of covenant breaking by Israel's king, who represented the entire nation.
  - 3. In order for the wrath of God to be turned away from his people, atonement had to be made.
- B. The Gibeonites tell David that this is not a matter that could be settled through the payment of any sum of money.
  - 1. Instead, they ask David to hand over seven of Saul's sons so that they can put them to death before the Lord.

2. Two factors make it clear that this was not an act of vengeance on their part.
  3. First, Saul had killed far more than just seven Gibeonites.
  4. They only asked for seven of his sons, doing so because seven is the number that symbolizes completeness.
  5. Second, they planned to put these sons to death “before the LORD.”
  6. That is, they understood that this was a matter of making atonement for Saul’s covenant-breaking.
- C. David complied with the Gibeonites’ request by giving them two sons who were born to Saul by his concubine Rizpah, along with five sons born to Saul’s daughter Merab.
1. David spared Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth because of the oath that he had made with Jonathan.
  2. Notice that there are two Mephibosheths in the passage.
  3. One was Saul’s son through Rizpah, while the other was Saul’s grandson, the son of Jonathan.
  4. David’s sparing of Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth provides us with a picture of the safety that a covenant can provide.
  5. David made good on his promise to protect Jonathan’s son.
  6. In the same way, Jesus makes good on his promise to save all of those whom the Father has given to him.
  7. As Jesus said in John 6, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last

day.” (John 6:37–39 ESV)

- D. Some might wonder how the Gibeonites’ request, and David’s granting of it, was not a violation of Deuteronomy 24:16, where it says: “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.” (Deut 24:16 ESV)
1. The reason why the actions taken in our text are not in conflict with that teaching from Deuteronomy is because Saul acted as Israel’s king when he tried to wipe out the Gibeonites.
  2. His actions were carried out on behalf of the entire nation.
  3. As one commentator explains, “the covenant with Gibeon (Josh. 9) was sworn by Israel’s leaders on behalf of the whole people. Should the covenant be broken all Israel would be liable for it.” [Davis, 268]
  4. This is the same reason why the whole human race fell under the curse when Adam sinned.
- E. The action that was necessary in order to make atonement in this case of covenant-breaking was terrible, and that is just the point.
1. Sin cannot be atoned for without the payment of a costly price.
  2. The Israelites were reminded of this by the bloody rituals of their sacrificial system.
  3. They understood that their sins could only be forgiven by the death of a substitute.
  4. In the words of Dale Ralph Davis, “The stench of death hangs heavy wherever the wrath of God has been quenched.” [Davis, 269]

#### IV. Seeing the Heartbreak of Covenant-Breaking

- A. Once the seven members of Saul's house were put to death, their bodies were left exposed until the drought was ended.
1. This means they remained there throughout the entire harvest, a period of several months.
  2. While this seems pretty gruesome, it served as a graphic reminder of what it means to be under the divine curse.
  3. All Israel deserved the fate that had befallen those seven men.
  4. They deserved it not only because of Saul's covenant-breaking, but also because of their own desecration of God's name through the sins that they themselves committed.
  5. We too deserve that curse, and we would still be under it were it not for the fact that Jesus suffered the curse on our behalf by being hung on a tree.
  6. As S.D. DeGraaf puts it in his great work *Promise and Deliverance*, "In our place He was publicly displayed on the cross as the accursed One." [184]
- B. The text says that Rizpah kept vigil over the bodies from the time of the barley harvest, which was in May, until the time when it rained.
1. Rizpah did this to protect the bodies of her sons and these other relatives from scavengers.
  2. It is a very sad picture, and we are intended to be saddened by it.
  3. It calls our attention to the heartbreak that is brought about by covenant-breaking.
  4. David saw this, and his heart was moved to pity.
  5. When he learned of Rizpah's actions, he honored the dead by arranging for the burial of Saul's and Jonathan's bones alongside of

those who had been hanged.

6. Thus we see that David's actions in this matter displayed both justice and mercy.
  7. The fact that Mephibosheth had been spared meant that Saul's line was not completely extinguished in Israel.
  8. The fact that David treated the dead honorably meant that Saul's line was not abandoned to a state of disgrace.
- C. When the rains finally came, God's people were assured that the curse had been lifted.
1. The lack of rain meant that food was becoming increasingly scarce.
  2. If the drought continued, it would eventually lead to death.
  3. But because God's wrath was propitiated, the rains came, the crops grew, and the people had food to eat.
  4. Israel was restored to life.
  5. This is a picture of what God has done for us in Christ.
  6. As Paul says in Galatians 3, "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' — so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." (Gal. 3:13-14)