

2nd Samuel 21:1-14

Entreating God for the Land

And after that God was intreated for the land – v. 14

This chapter in 2nd Samuel is undoubtedly one of the chapters that critics of the Bible love. There's a harshness to the chapter that on the surface of it hardly seems compatible to Christianity as well as a number of seeming contradictions to Old Testament law. How is it, for example, that seven descendents of Saul can be put to death for Saul's sins? And how is it that these seven descendents of Saul can be left to hang for such a prolonged period of time when Deut. 21:23 called for bodies that were hung to be buried the same day? And hadn't David pledged to Saul that he would not cut off his seed?

These are the kinds of difficulties that make good commentaries valuable and should you desire to find explanations for the various difficulties of this chapter I recommend Matthew Henry's commentary to you. It might be good for us to begin this study with a review of the Gibeonites. Though we don't have the narrative account of it, evidently during his reign Saul sought to exterminate them. By his action Saul demonstrated that he had no consideration or concern for the fact that generations earlier Joshua and the elders of Israel had pledged to the Gibeonites that they would not be slain.

If you know the book of Joshua then you know that the Gibeonites tricked Joshua and the elders of Israel into making them think that the Gibeonites were from a distant country when in fact they were near at hand during the days that Joshua and the armies of Israel were conquering the land of Canaan. So we read in Josh 9:17-20:

And the children of Israel journeyed, and came unto their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, and Chephirah, and Beeroth, and Kirjathjearim. 18 And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes. 19 But all the princes said unto all the congregation, We have sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them. 20 This we will do to them; we will even let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath which we sware unto them.

Saul, during his days, evidently felt that such a covenant was no longer binding so he tried to do what Joshua and the Israelites could not do because of the oath they had taken regarding the Gibeonites. And as a result of Saul's actions God's wrath did come upon the land in the form of a famine that had gone on for 3 consecutive years. Could I pause here just long enough to make a point? God doesn't change – neither do His laws change, especially His moral laws. And our obligations to God don't change. How often do you hear it suggested even in Christian circles that the things God said a long time ago only pertained to the people of a long time ago. That's evidently the way Saul reasoned and yet as this chapter clearly shows us Saul's reasoning led to the very wrath that Joshua and the elders of that generation feared.

And so Saul's breaking of that covenant with the Gibeonites, a covenant that was made with an oath to God put David in a very awkward situation. David, you see, had gone to the Lord in prayer and had learned from God what the cause of the famine was traceable to. *It is for Saul*, the Lord says to David and v. 1 *and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.*

And so justice was due to the Gibeonites because of the injustice that was done to them. And this is what leads to the hanging of 7 of Saul's descendents. It's a very solemn chapter and yet it's not a graceless chapter. And when viewed spiritually it becomes a very instructive and challenging chapter. At the very end of this narrative event we're told in v. 14 that *God was entreated for the land*. Another version reads this way: *And after that God responded to the plea for the land*. Still another version reads like this: *and after that God was moved by prayer for the land*.

He was entreated; He responded to the plea; He was moved by prayer. This, I say, holds out to us instruction and a challenge. And this is what I want to focus on this morning – this theme of Entreating God for the Land. And what I want to do based on this somewhat perplexing story is to draw what are very clearly a few simple and clear observations from it by raising and then answering the question:

How Should We Entreat God for the Land?

Consider with me first of all that if you would entreat God for the land:

I. You Must See and Feel the Need

Note again the words of v. 1 *Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD.*

There is some speculation among commentators as to when this famine took place. Commentators are split as to whether this 21st chapter of 2nd Samuel is chronological and comes after the rebellion of Sheba in chp. 20 or whether these last 4 chapters of 2nd Samuel make up a sort of appendix for the book and refer to earlier events in David's reign. Good arguments can be made in either direction with regard to this 21st chapter but at any rate the thing that this verse makes clear is that this was a prolonged famine.

Notice how the author of the book is not content to simply designate the duration of the famine as a 3 year famine but this was a famine that was *for three years, year after year*. In other words this was a famine that seemed to drag on and on to the point that David and the Israelites must have wondered when it would ever end until at last it occurred to David to seek the Lord for the cause.

I'm reminded of another kind of famine that is recorded in 1st Samuel. 1Sam. 7:2 *And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjathjearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.* And even before this event you can go back to when Samuel was a boy and abode in the temple with Eli the

priest. We read in 1Sam. 3:1 *And the child Samuel ministered unto the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision.*

The fact that the author of 1st and 2nd Samuel can refer to such periods of spiritual desolation could make you wonder whether or not it's not this same kind of famine that's in view in 2nd Samuel 21. I suppose the fact that the seven sons of Saul were hung *until it rained on them from the sky* (v. 10) could indicate that this was a famine that took place because of a drought. Notwithstanding the physical nature of this famine we can certainly draw the application of a spiritual famine in our day.

So we read in Am 8:11 *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.* Such famines whether they be physical or spiritual or both can be traced to the same cause which is sin. And in David's case the Lord showed him that it was the sin of Saul and his bloody house in particular.

When I consider the sin that is here attributed to the house of Saul and then think of our own day and age I can't deny that I find it totally amazing that our nation has received as much as a drop of rain over the last 40 years. The point I want to make, however, is that when famine came to Israel, David prayed. *Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD.*

And certainly there's something in this verse that we can relate to. Can it not be said of our day that we have gone year after year after year with spiritual famine? In 1st Samuel the waiting time is marked as twenty years. *The time was long* it says in 1Sam. 7:2 *for it was twenty years: and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.*

Where is this kind of lamentation today? Where is the self examination? Where is the inquiring of the Lord? I'm afraid that after so long a time what's come to pass in our day is that we more or less accept spiritual famine. We've come to accept a lack of power in Christianity. I can remember from a number of years ago (I think it was in a chapel message at BJ) where a preacher told the story of how he led a soul to Christ when that soul was on his death bed. As the preacher shared with the other members of the family the wonderful news that he had led this soul to Christ, he followed up by saying that the family members should not expect much in terms of the spiritual fruit they might see in the man's life should he be spared from death.

What? Not expect much? Now I'll grant you that sanctification is a gradual process. Saved souls are babes in Christ to be sure and there is a great deal of carnality and worldliness that has to be overcome, as the saints in Corinth prove to us – but don't expect much? Don't expect that a man who has seen his sin and seen that he's on his way to hell and then seen how Christ died for his sin and rescued him from hell – don't expect that such a man will know any life transforming power?

Paul writes to Timothy that in the last days perilous times would come and he goes on in chp. 3 to describe the wickedness of men and near the end of that description he says in v. 5 that they *Have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof:* It seems that in our day

we're taught not to even expect a form of godliness. And so the point I want to make and emphasize is that before the Lord will ever be entreated for the land, the need for the Lord to be entreated must be seen and must be felt. Do you see the need today? Do you feel the need in your own life?

I had the privilege of submitting another article for the next publication of our "Current" magazine in which my assignment was to write on the topic of praying for revival. In that article I make the following statement: "No Christian can be content to go for a long period of time in a state of spiritual apathy and coldness. He longs for that closer walk with God that he use to know. And no Christian can look around him and see abounding sin and wickedness without heaving a sigh toward heaven that begs God to pour forth His Spirit and turn back the flood tide of iniquity through revival."

There's famine in our land today, brothers and sisters in Christ. And it should compel us to pray. It should compel us to lament after the Lord. It should, frankly, compel us to come out to prayer meeting. When it says back in 1Sam. 3:1 that *the word of God was precious in those days; there was no open vision* then it means that the power of the word was rare and hearts were closed and hard to the vision of God's glory.

How, then, do we entreat the Lord? We must first see the need for such entreaty. But would you consider with me next that not only must you see the need but:

II. You Must Plead God's Justice

Look at the words of vv. 5,6 *And they (the Gibeonites) answered the king, The man that consumed us, and that devised against us (or: who planned to exterminate us – NAS) that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel, 6 Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, whom the LORD did choose. And the king said, I will give them*

These are the verses that strike us as harsh. And yet as I thought on these words and especially in the reference to Saul consuming and exterminating the Gibeonites another scene of consuming and exterminating came to mind. We know of a brutal dictator, don't we, in more recent days who sought to exterminate the Jews. I hope you know about the Jewish holocaust. Now Adolf Hitler never had children. He was never married until the day before he committed suicide. But could you envision him having children and the Jews that were consumed and exterminated by him receiving restitution by the execution of 7 of his sons? The thing to note in the narrative before us is that this sin is not merely attributed to Saul alone but *to his bloody house* in v. 1. Doesn't that at least imply that his sons were complicit in spirit if not in action in his sinful action against the Gibeonites?

And so two sons, the sons of Rizpah were committed to the Gibeonites. I might point out that this is not the first mention of Rizpah, Saul's concubine. This is the same Rizpah that Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul who ruled after Saul for a time, accused Abner, the commander of his armies – Ish-bosheth accused him of entering into intimacy with Rizpah. So the sons mentioned here were sons that she bore to Saul. The other 5 sons were

actually grandsons to Saul. So in v. 8 we read of *the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite*. This is a verse that poses problems for Bible critics also. Some commentators take the reference to Michal as being a copyist error since it was Merab, not Michal who was given in marriage to Adriel the son of Barzillai according to 1Sam. 18:19. In my opinion copyist errors are too often made the excuse for our lack of understanding. There's a simpler solution to this seeming dilemma which comes by interpreting the verse the way the KJ translators interpreted it which is by translating the verse not to mean that Michal bore these children but that she brought them up. This leads some commentators to suggest with the support of Jewish tradition that Merab had died and these were sons that Michal adopted and raised.

And though the passage does seem to present moral difficulties to our time and culture the thing that must be noted is that following the death and eventual burial of these sons of Saul the Lord was entreated for the land. Satisfaction was made. The famine was ended and the rain descended. This punishment, however, harsh or unfair it might seem to us, was accepted by God. The thing we must ever keep in mind here is that as unfair as the hanging of these sons of Saul may seem to us, they point us to a death that is beyond doubt unfair and in a very real sense unjust and cruel.

I'm referring, of course, to the Lord Jesus Christ who did no sin and knew no sin and was that holy, harmless, lamb of God. He is the only One who has ever walked this earth of whom it can truly be said that He didn't deserve to die. The wages of sin is death. The reason all men die is because all men receive their wages for sin. But Christ never sinned. Christ is the only One who has ever kept the law of God perfectly in thought, word, deed, and motives.

And yet He was taken and by wicked men was crucified and slain (Acts 2:23). And in His death He provided satisfaction to God's justice so that those that place their faith in Him can be said to have the issue of the satisfaction of justice settled once and for all. This is where our assurance of salvation comes from – in knowing that God's justice has been satisfied by the death of Christ.

And this satisfaction by Christ provides us with the plea we must ever take to God's throne in prayer. This is why we must make much of Christ in our praying. We're not, like the self-righteous Pharisee in Lk. 18 to make much of ourselves. You know his prayer: *God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican*. With only a slight adjustment that prayer can actually be turned into a very good prayer. All we need do is pray it this way: *God, I thank thee, that Christ is not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as I am*.

Christ's life and death gives us a very good and prevailing plea to bring to God's throne that our land may be entreated. I referred a moment ago to the article I submitted on the topic of praying for revival. In that article I also reference the belief of some that the nation is too far gone for God to be entreated. I certainly understand the mindset more and more with the passing of time. We do live in evil days. Sin everywhere abounds. Sin in the

world and sin in the church; sin in the pew and sin in the pulpit; sin among liberals and sin among conservatives. Iniquity has certainly come in like a flood and it might be easy to throw up our hands in despair and conclude God could never be entreated for this land. I can't, however, allow myself to come to that conclusion if I look to Christ. I will never concede that sin of this generation or of all generations combined outweigh and out value the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

John writes in his first epistle 2:2 *And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.* Doesn't that verse speak directly to the issue of what is more weighty and valuable and compelling before God? Paul makes it a point of emphasis in his epistle to the Romans that God's saving grace abounds much more than sinful men's sin especially in Romans chp. 5. You should think of this chapter as the "much more" chapter:

Ro 5:15 *But not as the offence, so also [is] the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, [which is] by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many.*

Ro 5:17 *For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.)*

Ro 5:20 *Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.*

We have, then, a case to bring to God's throne. Spurgeon, in one of his sermons on prayer says that the believer, like a lawyer, should make his case before God. And we have a case. Our case is what Christ has done; our case is what Christ deserves; our case is that Christ has satisfied justice by dying on Calvary's cross. When God looks to Christ in answer to our prayers, then, He can be entreated for the land.

How, then, do you entreat God for the land? You do so by seeing the need and you do so by pleading for justice, even the justice that was satisfied by Christ's death. It means for us to consider that if you would entreat God for the land:

III. You Must be Earnest and you Must Persevere

This point brings us to a closer look at Rizpah, the concubine of Saul. Look at v. 10: *And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night.*

Here indeed is a mother in distress and understandably so. Her sons were taken from her and were hanged. What an impressive example of a mother's love and devotion. Basically what she did was to set up a tent of sorts made out of sackcloth, the material of mourning, something to protect her from the hot sun of the day by providing a little shade for her. And from that station she would devote herself to the protection of the carcasses of the sons of Saul by shooing away the birds and driving away the beasts of the field.

It's another difficulty of the chapter to try to figure out just how long a period this was in which she occupied her station in her sackcloth tent. A number of commentators suggest that based on the words of the text that say she did this until *water dropped upon them out of heaven* that her mission of protection went on for 5 to 6 months the normal interval between the barley harvest and the seasonal rains. Others, thinking that such an extended period of time is just too unrealistic to fathom, think that the period was shorter and that God intervened and sent rain to relieve the drought before the usual seasonal rains.

In either case her devotion was impressive – impressive enough to eventually move David so that once he learned of the way she watched and persevered and refused to give up her station he was so moved he felt compelled to arrange for a dignified burial and for the time of shame and humiliation to end. So there's a real sense in which Rizpah had a part to play in God being entreated for the land. It was on account of her devotion that David took note and gathered the bones of Saul and Jonathan along with the bones of those that were hung and had them buried in the land of Benjamin in the sepulchre of Kish, Saul's father. And it was not until this burial that sprung from Rizpah's devotion that we can read in v. 14 that *God was intreated for the land*.

Commentators express the view that during this period of watching and protecting that Rizpah herself would have been engaged in prayer, praying for the rain to come, praying for the famine to end, praying for God to be entreated. I listened to a sermon with a striking title from this chapter. The name of the sermon was: Watch Til Shame is Removed.

Doesn't that hold out a challenge to you and me? Watching is very similar to praying. Peter writes in 1Pe 4:7 *But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer*. James tells us that it is the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man that avails much (James 5:16). Oh that the people of God would take their stations these days. If ever a time was needed for God to be entreated it is these days. How can we go through such days as these and not be continually given to prayer? Do we accept the famine? Do we accept the sin behind the famine? Have we given up on God and on Christ?

Christ Himself asks in Lk 18:8 *when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?* Oh that the Lord would compel us to seek Him as never before. There's a verse in Isaiah that vividly holds this challenge to the people of God. With this I close – the words of Isa. 62:6,7 *I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, 7 And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.*