

---

# The King's Disturbing Justice

2 Samuel 21:1-14<sup>22</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Our secular world has almost no tools to truly understand what is going in nature and history.

What does the devastation of the great hurricanes and floods in the last two decades mean? The events are used to push a climate change theory or to hammer political opponents for slowness to respond.

In a modern technological world, how do you explain the spreading cancer of the false religion of Islam? Since most of the civilized world are now very oriented toward peace and acceptance of all, how to explain the brutal barbarianism of Muslim sects, peoples and even nations? After all, why can't we all just get along?

What happened to the utopian dreams of America and the European Union? When all was so amazingly good with Mr. Obama, how is it possible that, barring some unforeseen events, the next president will be Mrs. Clinton or Mr. Trump? Really?

Unfortunately, the Christian world sometimes seems little better. We so easily forget we live in nature and history that is under God's control. This world is not merely a complex machine. History is not the successive unfolding of people's decisions.

In our text, we find David, King of Israel, thinks very differently. He does live in God's world. All that is happening is flowing out of God's purposes, plans and providences. Nothing is "just happening". There are consequences and judgements that are taking place in nature and history. We need to ask the "In what way is this from or by God?"

So we are faced with the fact that the arm of the Lord reaches out to vindicate his justice and call the guilty to account. But it is the same arm that is not shortened so that it cannot save.

---

<sup>22</sup> Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

## The Serious Problem (v. 1-2)

King David and all of Israel are experiencing a serious problem.

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the Lord. And the Lord said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." <sup>2</sup> So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. 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.

### *The Situation (v. 1)*

We are not sure when in David's reign this occurred. It may be chronological, but it is more likely it is placed here by our chronicler for thematic reasons. Over the last few chapters we have been seeing how David responds to the former followers and supports of Saul. All through those narratives, God has orchestrated the circumstances so that David had to make both just and merciful decisions. We saw that with Shimei and with Mephibosheth.

The problem is that there was a widespread famine. It had lasted for three years. This was unusual in Israel. When they had famines in their history, they were normally not this long or this drastic. A similar famine is what sent the tribes of Israel down into Egypt.

### *The Inquiry (v. 1)*

David asks God why Israel is being punished by a famine. A famine in the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, is not just a naturally occurring event. Nor is it merely a providence of God to be submitted to. No, David seeks to know why this is occurring. He is asking the Lord for an explanation.

Now it is appropriate for us to ask, "Why did it take to so long?" Why allow the suffering and deprivation to go before actually asking the Lord? The text does not tell us. Three years seems a very long time to wait. There could be many reasons. Whatever was going on in David's heart, finally he came to the point to seek the Lord's face.

As Christians, we must understand that the natural disasters are never merely 'natural'. They do not just "happen." They are consistently related to the sinful human condition and are a part of the fall. They are surely one part of the dealings of God with people. Maybe the long wait was part of David's patience and submission to God. He did not jump to conclusions about why this was happening. He did not speculate as to the reasons. He did not seek to blame others or look for scapegoats. He enquired of the Lord by the prescribed means and the answer was revealed to him.

### ***The Answer (v. 2)***

The Lord responds. David is told that this famine is because Saul tried to wipe out the Gibeonites.

The Gibeonites were an Amorite people who had occupied the land of Canaan going back to the days of Abraham. They had not been annihilated when Israel entered the land. Pretending to be weary travelers from far away, this group of them from Gibeon had negotiated and obtained a treaty of peace with Israel (Joshua 9:3–15). Even after the Israelites discovered that they had been tricked, they nevertheless honored their oath. Saul had violated this covenant when he attempted to exterminate the Gibeonites (1 Samuel 21:2). The sin was compounded by Saul's failure to annihilate the Amalekites, which God had commanded (1 Samuel 15:3). God had given no such orders against the Gibeonites in respect to the covenant Israel had made. Years had passed since the crime. But God had not forgotten what Saul had done. The famine was the initial impact of the Lord's justice. [Adapted from Keddie, p. 193]

### **The Just Penalty (v. 3–9)**

David follows up with what the Lord has shown him and approaches the Gibeonites.

<sup>3</sup> And David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?" <sup>4</sup> The Gibeonites said to him, "It is not a matter of silver or gold between us *and* Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel." And he said, "What do you say that I shall do for you?" <sup>5</sup> They said to the king, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, <sup>6</sup> let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord." And the king said, "I will give them."

### ***David's Meeting (v. 3–6)***

This is extraordinary and seems unjust to our ears. David meets with the representatives of the Gibeonites. He wants to know what would atone, that is, cover or satisfy the demands for justice. Under the terms of the covenant with Gibeonites and under the Mosaic Law, justice was served by eye for eye, tooth for tooth and life for life. If a murderer was caught and convicted under the Law, it was the victim's family who carried out the punishment. If the murder was accidental, the murderer could flee to a city of refuge and hide there the rest of his life. But if he left the city, he could be caught and executed by the family. So the terms of what would satisfy justice as being set by the Gibeonites, it just cannot exceed the limits set by the Law.

The Gibeonites recognize that reparations – the payment of money – is not an appropriate justice. They also recognize that they are not authorized to execute anyone without the proper authority of Law. In this case, it is the king's prerogative. The purpose in this is to honor the Lord's name, the covenant that had been made and to bring God's blessing. God's blessings come through grace and mercy. But they do not come

at the expense of justice. This what the death of Jesus did. It satisfied justice so as to make all that God does through His grace and mercy, just.

In the demand they make, they clearly raise the charge against Saul. He had planned to destroy them and to leave them no heritage or inheritance in Israel. Instead of dealing with the Amalekites as the Lord commanded him, Saul had done this against the relatively weak Gibeonites who lived peacefully among the Israelis. It was an attempted act of covenant breaking, treachery, genocide and rebellion against God. The sins of the father are about to be visited upon the children even down through generations.

### ***David's Mercy (v. 7)***

<sup>7</sup> 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.

Unlike Saul, David will honor the covenant he has made. He made a promise to Jonathan, Saul's son to do good for his descendants and to protect their lives. Therefore, David protects the life of Mephibosheth. He will not be handed over even though he is a grandson of Saul. What justice would be served for a broken covenant by breaking another one? Would this not invite further withholding of blessings and judgement from God?

David is being shown to be the true king. Even in the granting of a dreadful justice, he is faithful to keep the word of his covenant. He executes the justice of God against a covenant breaker who brought destruction and death. AT the same time, in love and mercy he keeps His covenant and protects the life of a helpless, cripple.

For the eyes of Israel, their king is shown to be authentic and authorized. He is great. He is worthy of the praise and loyalty that is his due.

For the eyes of all of God's people, here is the great and true and final King, King Jesus. He too has executed the justice of God and borne God's great wrath against covenant breakers and sinners. And in doing so, He has extended His mercy and grace and brought life to those who believe and are in the New Covenant. The Lord Jesus is worthy of the praise and the loyalty He is due.

So, David grants their just demand, but he does not allow Jonathan's son Mephibosheth to be taken. He condemns seven descendants of Saul to death and protects the life of Jonathans' son.

### ***David's Measure (v. 8-9)***

<sup>8</sup> The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; <sup>9</sup> and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the Lord, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

Only the king's authority could bring these seven condemned men to their fate. We are only told that he took them and gave them. I cannot imagine the shock and grief. Even if these men were evil like their grandfather Saul, they would not have expected such a thing. Yet we are not to imagine that in some way this is unfair or unjust. Unlike the Gibeonites slaughtered on one dreadful day years ago, they could expect no safe and secure life. The hard knock on the door on this day was the king. It was day of reckoning. There stood the king and who would question the justice of God? And neither should we.

Gorden Keddie has well written, "When justice is done, it needs to be seen to be done, so that people may understand that God is not mocked. So David chose seven of Saul's house. He handed over the two sons of Saul by Rizpah and five grandsons, the sons of Saul's daughter Merab, taking care to exclude Mephibosheth, because of his covenant '**before the Lord**' with Jonathan, Saul's son (2 Samuel 21:7)." [Keddie, p. 196].

The Gibeonites take these seven men to the hometown of Saul in Gibeah. There on the mountain nearby, they hang them in public view. There was a sense of bringing everything full circle. Saul had massacred the Gibeonites in their home town. But now, justice and vindication would be wrought in Saul's home town. The Gibeonites are appeased and the Lord is satisfied. Now He can and does withdraw His chastening hand upon the people of Israel. His blessings may now return.

The chronicler has recorded this in the final step of showing David to be the rightful king of Israel. King David has acted with justice and with mercy. He has not wiped out Saul's household. Those who swear loyalty and kept faith with him, he has treated well. But the Gibeonites had a clear cause and case against Saul's household. So the execution of these grandsons of Saul is allowed by King David, but the accusation and actions are by those who had the legal right to do so.

Some commentators try to deal with this by smoothing it over as "culture". Primitive peoples would have acted like this. We know that this is wrong because only the perpetrator of the crimes can be held accountable. So we trump the Bible with our western humanistic legal system so as to assuage our squeamish sensibilities. What is lost then is the sense that *God was at work and was behind all of this*. God sent the famine even when He knew that Saul was dead. He seems to approve of David's decisions and the Gibeonites actions. Though it is a justice being carried out in their cultural context, it is nevertheless God's righteous justice that is being carried out.

Listen to one writer's helpful comment:

It is a myth, although a very popular one, that 'Time' is 'a great healer'. 'Time' is no substitute for repentance and changing our ways. People may forget our past sins and the receding of reproach may seem like healing, but God never forgets because he will perfectly vindicate his law and those who have been wronged. For Israel, the Gibeonite massacre was at most a half-forgotten tragedy; for God, it was a reckoning that only waited for his sounding of the trumpet! This is the very nature of the true justice of the eternal God. No injustice will slip past him. When men seem to get away with things for a certain time, they feel they are in the

clear—things have ‘blown over’ or ‘cooled off’. But from the Lord’s perspective nothing merely ‘blows over’. There is no ‘statute of limitations’ with the justice of God. He will judge the world with righteousness. [Keddie, p.196]

## **The Final Internment (v. 10–14)**

This final scene is full of heartbreak and greatness...

<sup>10</sup> 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. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day, or the beasts of the field by night. <sup>11</sup> When David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, <sup>12</sup> David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. <sup>13</sup> And he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who were hanged. <sup>14</sup> And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father. And they did all that the king commanded. And after that God responded to the plea for the land.

### ***The Protective Mother (v. 10)***

Rizpah, whose two sons were among those executed, faithfully remains by their bodies for many weeks, protecting them from being eaten by wild animals and vultures. Deuteronomy 21:22–23 prescribed burial of a body before nightfall so that “the land” would not be “desecrated”. This is among a cluster of laws that grounded the prohibition in not polluting the land. Leaving these bodies exposed was a problem. Our chronicler does not solve it for us. We are left to surmise that either this was an exception to the Law. More likely, this was a demonstration of the finality of the judgment. The land had already been cursed as was evident from the famine. But now, this judgment reversed lifted the curse for soon the rains came once again.

Rizpah continued her vigil for that whole period. She grieved over the sin that had taken her sons from her. She mourned until their remains could be buried properly. As she stayed near, she prevented their corpses from becoming carrion for wild animals. Once again we struck by the wide consequences of sin and the great devotion of this woman to her sons.

### ***The Proper Burial (v. 11-14)***

When David heard of this, he was moved to gather the bones of Saul and his sons. He also gathered the remains of the seven. He buried them all in the tomb of their father Kish. This marked the definitive settlement of God’s controversy with Israel over the Gibeonites’ massacre. God’s grace once again blessed the crops of his people. David brings the bones of Saul and Jonathan, along with the bodies of the executed, and gives them a proper burial.

---

## Reflect and Respond

Always remember that you live in God's world. This is not just a theological affirmation; it is a personal and practical reality that includes horrible accidents, unexpected sicknesses and howling hurricanes. So when God's providences bring unexpected troubles we should be asking, "What is God doing? How should I respond to it?"

God will always execute His justice. This is a great comfort to victims of crimes and a great caution to those who having committed crimes think all is well.

Thank God for our King Jesus who has brought both justice and mercy for His people.

---

## Notes