

# **The Life of David**

## **David Avenges the Gibeonites**

*2 Samuel 21:1-14*

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### Scripture

Twenty months ago, we started a sermon series on “The Life of David.” So far, we have looked at the rise of David (1 Samuel 16-31), David’s coronation as king over Judah and Israel (2 Samuel 1:1-5:5), God’s promise to David of an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 5:6-10:19), and David’s sin, decline, and restoration (2 Samuel 11-20).

Second Samuel 21-24 is sometimes called an epilogue to David’s life. However, as commentator John Woodhouse notes, “This carefully arranged material presents us with important perspectives on the kingdom of David, the kingdom of God, and the relationship between them. These chapters look back over the whole period of David’s reign (and earlier). The text is not arranged chronologically but thematically.”<sup>1</sup>

The first episode in the epilogue probably refers to a time shortly after David took Jonathan’s crippled son, Mephibosheth, into his care. It is one of the Bible’s most difficult stories to hear. It tells of the hanging of seven of King Saul’s descendants because of Saul’s actions against the Gibeonites many years earlier.

Let’s read about David avenging the Gibeonites in 2 Samuel 21:1-14:

**<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**

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<sup>1</sup> John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 483.

them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. <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.”

<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. <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.

<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. (2 Samuel 21:1-14)**

## **Introduction**

Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission President, revealed in an interview that he keeps a book with the list of people who have crossed him in the past. I know this may sound like a joke. But seriously, one of the most senior officials in the EU walks around with a book of names of people who have been mean to him. Juncker says in the interview, “I have a little black book called ‘Le Petit Maurice’ where for the past 30 years I have noted when someone has betrayed me.” He goes on to say in the interview that the book isn’t really full “because people ‘rarely betray me.’” To defend himself, he says a little later, “I am not vengeful, but I have a good memory.” The book became so well-known during his time as the prime minister of Luxembourg that he would tell people attacking him, “Be careful. Little Maurice is waiting for you.”<sup>2</sup>

As we consider the account of David avenging the Gibeonites, it may feel as if God has a little black book called “Le Petit Maurice.” Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Nevertheless, God does not wink at sin, as we shall learn today.

## **Lesson**

Second Samuel 21:1-14 teaches us that amendment must be made for wrongdoing.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Offended Must Be Appeased (21:1-6)
2. The Guilty Must Be Punished (21:7-9)
3. The Devoted Must Be Rewarded (21:10-14)

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/01/jean-claude-juncker-keep-list-people-who-have-crossed-me>.

## I. The Offended Must Be Appeased

First, the offended must be appeased.

Verse 1a says, **“Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year.”** We don’t know exactly when this famine took place. Scholars believe it most likely took place early in David’s reign, shortly after he took Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth, into his care.

The time of this famine is not important. The point of the author of Second Samuel is the hardship that it caused all the people. For three long years, **“year after year,”** food was in short supply. People were hungry. Woodhouse writes:

It was what we call a natural disaster. Like floods, bushfires, and earthquakes, there may be prudent measures that a society can take to mitigate the suffering caused by such calamities, but there is nothing we can do to avert them altogether. We cannot control these catastrophes. This famine was certainly beyond David’s power.<sup>3</sup>

I don’t think it is a stretch to add a worldwide coronavirus pandemic to the category of “natural disaster.” In that sense, I think it important that we pay attention to the lesson of this text.

While the famine was beyond David’s power, he knew the One who had power over such things. So, we read in verse 1b, **“And David sought the face of the Lord.”** The language of the text is that of a subject seeking an audience with a sovereign. David cried out to God. He wanted to know what could be done to stop the disaster.

It is important to keep in mind that we may not always know God’s purpose for a disaster or trial or difficulty or pandemic. We learn this from Job. The reason for Job’s suffering is revealed to

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<sup>3</sup> John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come*, 485.

readers in Job 1 and 2, but Job never learns the reason for his own suffering. Just as Job learned to trust that God has his reasons for allowing trials into his life, so we too must learn to trust God when disaster or trials or difficulties or pandemics come our way.

Thankfully, the Lord did answer David. And this is where the difficulty in our story begins. In verse 1c, we read that **the Lord said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.”** The famine that had lasted now for three long years was due to something that King Saul had done many years earlier.

Then we read in verse 2a, **“So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them.”** David wanted to address the problem with the Gibeonites. God showed David that Saul had committed an atrocity against the Gibeonites that needed to be corrected. Commentator Rick Phillips makes an interesting comment about our own denomination at this point. He writes:

David’s action in this case, and God’s clear approval, counters the idea that descendants have no need to make restitution for sins committed by their ancestors. As an example, in 2002 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America issued a public apology for the complicity of their forebears in supporting the institution of race-based slavery in the United States. While the overture was overwhelmingly approved, some of those who argued against it complained that those living had not participated in such sins and thus had no obligation to apologize. The majority, however, correctly stated that since many Southern Presbyterian theologians had wrongly taught God’s Word so as to support chattel slavery—which is clearly condemned in Scripture (see 1 Tim. 1:10)—and since the modern-day denomination claims to be their legitimate theological heirs, it was right to apologize on their behalf and commit to racial reconciliation in the future.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard D. Phillips, *2 Samuel*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 364.

But before we hear about David's conversation with the Gibeonites, the author of Second Samuel gives us a bit of background information in verse 2b, **"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."** We learn more about the background of the Gibeonites in Joshua 9:3-27. About four centuries earlier, the people of Israel took over the Promised Land by defeating and driving out the local peoples. The Gibeonites pretended that they were from a far country and got Joshua and the Israelites to make a covenant with the Gibeonites not to exterminate them. A short while later, the Israelites discovered that they had been deceived. But because of the covenantal agreement between themselves and the Gibeonites, they did not exterminate them but put them to forced labor. For some unknown reason that is not stated in the Bible, Saul decided **to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.** He killed an untold number of Gibeonites. Nothing had ever been done to correct this injustice.

Although God told David that the reason for the famine was Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites, he did not tell David what to do to correct the injustice. So in verse 3, **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?"** The word that struck me is **"atonement,"** and it is used here in the sense of "making amends." David wanted to know what he could do to make amends for the injustice that had been done.

The Gibeonites did not want to operate outside the system of justice. Eventually, **they said to the king, "The man [that is, Saul] who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, 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”** (21:5-6). Here is where the account is so difficult for us. David agrees for seven of Saul’s **“sons,”** literally, Saul’s descendants, to be hanged to make atonement for Saul’s sin.

It is hard for us because we are not guilty for the sins of our parents, although we may still suffer the consequences of their sinful actions. But, in Old Testament times, the family was held as a corporate unit and the sins of the head of the family involved all the family. For example, we remember that when Achan stole some of the enemy plunder, he was put to death, *along with all his sons and daughters*, for his sin, as we read in Joshua 7:10-26.

Friends, trials or difficulties or disasters or pandemics may come into our lives because of unconfessed sin. Now, it is not true that when we face a trials or difficulties or disasters or pandemics that it must *always* be due to sin. We live in a fallen world, and sometimes difficulties come our way simply because of our fallen world. But, we should never assume that difficulties are *never* because of our sin. We should always go to the Lord in prayer and ask him if our difficulty is because of some unconfessed sin.

I have a dear senior pastor who would say when I called him and asked for counsel regarding my difficulties, “Freddy, go to the Lord in prayer. And ask him to show you what your sin may be or what you can learn from your trouble.” Good advice, indeed!

## **II. The Guilty Must Be Punished (21:7-9)**

Second, the guilty must be punished.

Before learning how the punishment was carried out, we learn how David honored an oath, unlike Saul who had violated a covenantal agreement with the Gibeonites. We read in 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.”** Jonathan

and David had pledged loyalty to each other on at least three occasions (cf. 1 Samuel 18:3; 20:16; 23:17-18). After Jonathan's death and David's accession to the throne, David took Mephibosheth into his home and cared for him (cf. 2 Samuel 9:1-13), presumably for the rest of his days.

Clearly, one lesson we are to learn from this passage is that oaths, vows, and commitments must be kept. Saul disregarded the ancient covenant and tried to annihilate the Gibeonites. God did not take kindly to Saul's disregard for the covenant that was made. Marriage vows, membership vows, even promises to children must be kept. God takes them seriously, and so should we.

The author quickly takes us back to this horrible account, as he writes in verses 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.**

It seems that David took seven of Saul's surviving descendants, two sons named **Armoni and Mephibosheth**, and five unnamed grandsons from Saul's daughter **Merab**. As an aside, it is interesting that Jonathan named one of his sons "Mephibosheth" after one of his brothers, perhaps because he thought well of him.

The author describes in some detail the execution of these seven men. Woodhouse writes:

The Gibeonites did to these seven "sons" of Saul precisely what they had proposed. We must allow this terrible event to be as terrible as it was. The narrator takes the time to tell us where they were killed ("on the mountain"), the judicial nature of the

## The Life of David

execution (it was “before the Lord”), how they died (they “perished together”), and when it was (“the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest,” v. 9). We should take time to feel the horror of it.<sup>5</sup>

The point that the author wants us to learn is that God holds the guilty accountable for sin. The guilty must be punished for their sin. It is possible that the seven who died may have been involved in the bloodguilt against the Gibeonites. They may have protested that they were acting on their father’s and grandfather’s orders, but under Old Testament solidarity laws, God held them liable.

We are no longer held guilty for the sins of our parents. We are held responsible by God for our own sins. Let us not think that God forgets about sin. He does not. He will hold us accountable for every sin we have ever committed.

### III. The Devoted Must Be Rewarded (21:10-14)

And third, the devoted must be rewarded.

One of the mothers did something extraordinary. In verse 10, we read, **“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.”** She did this for perhaps as long as six months. Can you imagine doing something like that? Can you imagine watching and protecting your sons’ and step-grandsons’ decaying bodies for six months? Her devotion magnifies the horror of this account.

When David learned what Rizpah was doing, he took down the bodies of the seven men, and also retrieved the bones of Saul

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<sup>5</sup> John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come*, 490.

and Jonathan from Jabesh-gilead. We read in verse 14, **“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 devotion shown by Rizpah was rewarded with a proper burial for her husband Saul, her sons, and her step-grandsons. It undoubtedly did not take away her grief, but David’s action bestowed dignity upon the slain.

It seems to me that we must support those who experience loss. Rizpah lost her husband Saul many years earlier and now she lost her two sons and five step-grandsons. They were guilty of sin before God, but she demonstrated her loyalty to her family. And for that she was rewarded.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, having analyzed the account of David avenging the Gibeonites in 2 Samuel 21:1-14, let us examine ourselves when trials come into our lives.

Whenever trials or difficulties or disasters or pandemics come into our lives, we ought always to examine ourselves. We need to ask if these things are happening because of some unconfessed sin.

The good news of the gospel is that our eternal punishment has been paid by Jesus Christ, David’s Greater Son. While we may still be disciplined by God and suffer the consequences for our sin, we will never endure eternal punishment for our sin.

If you have never asked Jesus to be your atonement, do so today. Ask him to pay the penalty for your sin. And then believe that he has done so. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons).
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