

2nd SAMUEL

Week 32, chapter 21

We'll pick up today with 2nd Samuel chapter 21 that begins by explaining that at some point in David's reign he dealt with a severe famine that lasted for 3 years. Let me remind you that chapters 21 through the end of 2nd Samuel form a kind of Appendix to the Book of Samuel that lumps together several bits and pieces of information about David and about Israel that the ancient editors of Samuel apparently couldn't find an appropriate place to include in the main body of the book. So we need to understand that what we're studying today did NOT occur in chronological order right after the short lived rebellion led by Sheva, as we read about in Chapter 20.

Let me also recall for you that especially as concerns this famine and the narrative about the execution of 7 members of Saul's household as a sort of solution to the drought that caused the famine, is that the proceedings and decisions by David and by the Gibeonites were a deadly and dubious mixture of Torah Law, Middle Eastern customs of the day, and pagan beliefs. I have mentioned in lessons past that by the time of David knowledge of the Torah was already on the decline in Israel. The Priesthood was fractured and hobbling along ineffective, underfunded, and it barely mattered. Saul had decimated the Priesthood at Nob, and David maintained 2 High Priests as a matter of political expediency. It was the Priesthood that was charged with teaching the people of Israel the Torah; and it wasn't happening.

Since the time of Saul (Israel's first king) attention had steadily moved away from the High Priest as Israel's moral authority and towards the king and his government. It might be too strong to say that the Priesthood was by now only a figurehead organization, but it is apparent that rather than the King taking his cue from the Priesthood (which is how it was intended to be) the Priesthood took their marching orders from the King.

Thus a few centuries later the Bible reports the story of Josiah who discovered a copy of the Torah (something that by then had become virtually obsolete in Israel), and after reading it realized how far away Israel was from God and His commandments and the way of life Israel

was supposed to be living. Josiah instituted radical reforms throughout his Kingdom to try and restore the rule of God's Law before God acted in His destructive wrath. I tell you this because while that wasn't quite the case, yet, in David's day the slide down the slippery slope of manmade ordinances substituting for, and overriding in some cases, God's commandments (and of course claiming that these ordinances were in accordance with Scripture) was well underway. And that is why we see this sickening scenario presented to us in the story of the famine and the Gibeonites' revenge.

Although we read it last week, this is a fascinating story and we're going to re-read it so as to have it fresh in our minds to examine today.

RE-READ 2ND SAMUEL CHAPTER 21 all

The key to this story is that when David consults God about the cause of the famine (the 3 year drought) the Lord says that it is because of Saul and his household, and it centers on blood-guilt committed by the House of Saul. And this is due to Saul and his household putting certain people of the city of Gibeon to death, unjustly.

We are also given the information that these particular Gibeonites were Amorites, not Israelites, and that part of the problem was that the Israelites had long ago sworn a peace treaty with these Amorites and had now violated that treaty. Last week we looked back to the days of Joshua when the ancestors of this population of Amorites at Gibeon deceived Joshua into believing that they lived far away, in a land outside of Canaan. They feared Israel and so came to Joshua wanting to avoid war. But in reality, living in Canaan, they were subject to God's instructions to Moses that all the Canaanite tribes were to be driven from the land or exterminated if they refused to go.

Joshua and Israel's elders were foolish and did not consult Yehoveh about this matter. Instead they rashly entered into a peace treaty, invoking Yehoveh's name as the guarantor of this covenant of peace. Thus when Joshua found out the Amorites had lied and were in fact people who lived in Canaan, it was too late.

Nearly 4 centuries passed and Saul became King of Israel; the descendants of these Amorites were apparently still living peacefully among the Israelites in the Benjamite city of Gibeon. Get the picture: as an illustration of the substantial amount of time that had passed the timing would equate to the Amorites making a treaty with the Pilgrims who came ashore at Plymouth Rock in the early 1600's. And now, in the year 2011 after many generations have come and gone, these Amorite descendants (who have maintained a separate Amorite identity) are suddenly regarded as an enemy by Saul and many of them are killed simply because of their heritage. It is clear from the story that the Amorites were victims and had not rebelled or created any kind of disturbance that needed to be put down. Rather we're only told that it was Saul's zeal for the people of Israel and Judah that he had them massacred.

There are various scholarly opinions on just what ***Sha'ul's*** "zeal for the people" meant. Some Rabbis think that because these Amorites of Gibeon had become the suppliers of wood for the Tabernacle altar fire, and water carriers for the vast amounts of water that would be used for purification rites at the Sanctuary of Yehoveh, that they had become dependent on the Sanctuary and priesthood for their livelihood (just as were the Levites). So when Saul slaughtered the Priesthood at Nob, some of the Amorites were also killed and so now bad blood existed between the Amorites and the House of Saul not only because of the deaths but because the Amorites lost their expected source of sustenance.

The more plain meaning of the text, and the lack of any history to explain any bad blood, was that the carnal and devious Saul was probably thinking that he could get back onto his people's and onto God's good side by coming against the pagan Amorites of Gibeah in a public demonstration of concern for God and country. It is usual and customary with pragmatic politicians of every form of government and in every era to pick a fight with some currently unpopular group as a means of showing their unity and sympathy with their constituents. Scholars such as Alfred Edersheim agree with this as the probable cause of Saul's genocidal actions against the Amorites.

Thus Saul wreaked havoc among these particular Gibeonites of Amorite descent, killing many, and thus greatly weakening their ethnic community (our story says his intent was complete extermination, at which he failed). And while the creation of blood guilt upon the land (from the unjustifiable mass homicide) was one result the worse part of it was that it happened as a direct violation of an oath in which God was the guarantor. Joshua's oath still held and King Saul knew about it and blatantly violated it. God's holiness was now tarnished and His holy land smeared with the blood of not-so-much innocents, but rather of those who were protected by an oath bearing God's holy name.

David (now understanding the source of the problem for the drought) calls for some of the surviving Amorites from Gibeon to come before him so that he could try and mitigate their complaint, which God has just made clear **is** a just complaint. And this is where things start to become very convoluted in this story, because all Yehoveh has said to David is that the cause of the famine is blood guilt upon Saul's household; no precise remedy was ordained. Whatever follows is devised between a King who seems to have precious little knowledge of the Law, and these pagan Amorites.

Let me interject another important feature as we move along; indeed these Amorites were pagans. They were not Israelite citizens, but rather permanent resident aliens. We know this because they retain their Amorite identities. A foreigner who becomes a citizen of Israel can only do so by becoming a worshiper of the God of Israel. And a worshiper of the God of Israel becomes a national Hebrew. Thus there is no such thing as an Amorite Hebrew; you maintain one identity or the other. Had an Amorite become a Hebrew he was no longer referred to as an Amorite. This also means that even though they continued to worship their own gods, these Amorites of Gibeon had a good knowledge of Israel's god and His name. They would have long ago accepted Yehoveh as a legitimate god and treated Him accordingly.

This is why in verse 4 (as these Gibeonites stand before David) they say that they have no rights to put anyone to death. This is a reference to the Torah Law concerning the rights of the **go'el hadam**, the blood avenger. Certain of Saul's household (no doubt led by his sons) had committed this atrocity but it was not upon Hebrews. Had this homicidal attack been upon Israelites then the Torah Law allowing blood revenge would have been in effect and an aggrieved family member could have rightfully hunted down and killed some of the killers. But since these were resident aliens that had been murdered their families had no such automatic rights. And of course this was the King's family who had perpetrated this slaughter so every avenue of blood revenge was closed.

Probably around 30 – 40 years have passed between the time of this mass murder and when the famine is occurring. Saul is dead, as are his sons (who would have been the prime participants and leaders in this infamous attack). No doubt some more youthful members of the king's family also participated, and several were likely still alive now; but most of his living descendants were not even born at the time of the atrocity and some would have been very young children (such as Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, Saul's grandson).

Thus in verse 3 David wants to know what he can do for the Gibeonites to essentially forgive Israel of this terrible act (of 30-40 years ago), and enable them to stop being bitter towards Israel and instead start to bless them (that is what is meant by David asking what it would take

for the Amorites to be able to bless God's heritage). What would "the blessing" be? It would be that the Amorites would petition God (presumably in prayer) to forgive Israel for the blood guilt. Take note: David is well of the mark in asking such a thing from the Gibeonites. It is just fraught with all sorts of superstitions, humanistic and cultural ideas and is not the way God asks us to proceed. And not surprisingly these Gibeonites say that their blood vengeance will be satisfied if David will turn over to them 7 of Saul's descendants, at random, for execution.

It is also noteworthy that these Amorites (please observe that I'm switching back and forth between calling these men Gibeonites and Amorites because most Biblical texts do the same) told David that they would execute these 7 men and hang them "before (or unto) YHWH", and this is because Saul had been chosen by YHWH. What this means is that in Gibeon there was some kind of a **bemah**, a high place that served as a sacred worship site dedicated to the God of Israel. Even though this was expressly against the Torah, the Scriptures tell us that many of these unauthorized places existed in Israel (and a number of them have been discovered by archeologists).

So the idea was that these 7 members of the tribe of Benjamin, who were descendants of Saul, would be executed and hung at this sacred place. Why hang them there? Because Yehoveh was Saul's god and David made it clear that this same god was angry and causing the drought, so the Amorites would present these corpses to Saul's god in this sacred place as proof of proper atonement for the blood guilt. Let me say again: what we have here is straightforward Bible history, not God's instructions. This is merely something that happened, and we are given some of the thought processes of some of the men involved. So we have no need to apologize for God who did not direct this procedure.

Now the Gibeonites' goal was to do to the remaining House of Saul what Saul had intended to do with the Gibeonites: exterminate them. But David was not about to allow the extinction of all of Saul's relatives, and one of the people who he refused to include among those who would be sacrificed was Mephibosheth. David's reason for this was because he had made an oath, with Yehoveh as the guarantor, that he would be kind to Jonathan's offspring. David has been living-out what happens when a vow invoking the divine name of the Creator is intentionally broken (the 3 year famine) so he was not about to turn over Mephibosheth and risk more confrontation with God.

Verse 8 makes it clear that the King himself decided who would be turned over to the Amorites for execution and first on the list was 2 sons of **Rizpah**, a concubine of King Saul. **Rizpah** was now part of David's harem as the previous king's harem was always inherited by the new king. **Rizpah** was a most revered woman and in an act that will become famous and spoken of

with the greatest admiration right up to our day, proved that she was of highest courage and merit (we'll get to that shortly). One of her sons was **Armoni** and the other **Mephibosheth** (this is a different Mephibosheth than Jonathon's son). Then we are told that the other 5 who marked for death were born to Michal, daughter of Saul. This is a bad translation and is partly the result of a copyist error. This is not David's wife **Michal** (daughter of Saul) but rather it is **Merab**, eldest daughter of Saul. This is verified by 1st Samuel 18 that explains:

(1Sa 18:17-19 CJB)

17 Sha'ul said to David, "Here is my older daughter Merav. I will give her to you as your wife; only continue displaying your courage for me, and fight ADONAI's battles." Sha'ul was thinking, "I don't dare touch him, so let the P'lishtim do away with him."

18 David's response to Sha'ul was, "Who am I, that I should become the king's son-in-law? I don't have any kind of a life, and my father's family has no rank in Isra'el."

19 However, when it was time for Merav Sha'ul's daughter to be given to David, she was given to Adri'el the Mecholati as his wife.

And of course the last words of 2nd Samuel 21:8 say that this woman was the wife of **Adr'el the Mecholati**.

So what we have is 2 direct sons of Saul still living (proving that even though we are told in other places in Scripture that **all** the sons of Saul were killed in battle and only **Ishbosheth** had survived, it really was only referring to those who were highly placed in the monarchy and were old enough to serve in the military). These two sons whose mother was **Rizpah** were undoubtedly small children when the attempt to exterminate the Amorites occurred. And in addition we have 5 grandchildren of Saul's, through his daughter **Merav**, who are going to lose their lives. And this almost certainly means that they weren't even born yet at the time of the killing of the Gibeonites.

Verse 9 gets right to the point: the 7 were handed over to the Gibeonites and they were hanged on the hill (the high place, the **bemah**, dedicated to YHWH). Understand that while almost every illustration and painting of this gruesome event is of men hanging on crosses, crucified, that is not what happened. Crosses were not in use in the Middle East; that was a

much later invention and it came from the north. Most scholars credit the invention of execution by means of crucifixion to the Persians, around 300 B.C. Rather “to hang” meant “to impale”. They did not use rope to hang criminals by the neck, nor did they nail them to crosses in David’s day. Rather the condemned were killed FIRST (by stoning or by sword) and then the dead bodies were impaled on stakes usually as a warning to others. But even then the bodies were only displayed for a day. But here the bodies were literally being presented to the God of Israel almost as a sacrifice (let me say again, this was because of men’s carnal thoughts, it was nothing that the Lord sought or wanted) and were not taken down.

We’re also told something else quite interesting; this presentation of the 7 dead corpses “before Yehoveh” was done at the beginning of the barley harvest. The beginning of the barley harvest is officially celebrated by a Biblical Feast that is called **Bikkurim**, or Firstfruits. That’s right; the Firstfruits celebration that immediately follows the Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. I’m not saying with certainty that it happened on Firstfruits, but the implication of the narrative even mentioning this particular timing must have meaning. And it is quite conceivable (and fits very well within the context of the story) that in the twisted minds of these pagans (who thought themselves to be appeasing the God of Israel) that killing these 7 men and presenting them on a Biblical Feast day would be all the more powerful atonement.

Rizpah, the mother of 2 of the executed men, went to the place of their impalement and camped out there. She brought sackcloth (the traditional sign of mourning) to use as a ground cover. Her purpose was a most grizzly one: she would stay near the corpses day and night to shoo away birds and jackals from ravaging the dead bodies. By Torah Law those bodies should not have stayed exposed beyond nightfall. But the Amorites intended for them to stay there indefinitely and David turned a blind eye to it all.

The meaning of this terrible treatment of the corpses is that in Middle Eastern culture to deny a person a proper burial not only was an act of deepest disrespect, but it was thought that the person could not enter into an afterlife if the body was not buried generally intact. But there is more. Oddly we are told that **Rizpah** remained there on guard until the seasonal rains began, a period from approximately early April to August according to our modern calendars. What could be the purpose for her doing that?

Recall that this entire unsavory episode began as an inquiry of God by King David, and then ended in a hoped for remedy to a 3 year drought. **Rizpah** would guard those bodies for all those months while waiting for the sure sign that God has accepted these members of Saul’s household as proper atonement for the blood guilt that was upon the land of Canaan. And the sure sign of that acceptance was relief from the drought.

Rambam (Maimonides) explains that Israel was not culpable for the sin of allowing the bodies to hang exposed for so long, because neither David nor the court sanctioned it. David turned the 7 men over to the Gibeonites and it was they who committed the desecration of the bodies. Other Rabbis fancy other ideas to take any onus off of David for this infamous incident because they cannot allow David to ever take on a sin as he is their perfect model for a Messiah, even going so far as to rationalize matters by saying that if God allowed it, it was because God sanctioned it. And to that I say, nonsense. This is how far leaders from Judaism and at times Christianity will go to uphold a doctrine that is obviously flawed but serves their purposes. And we must all be on guard for such instances.

So to **Rizpah**, David, and the people of Israel in general it was thought that now that the rains came it was because of all that had happened with those 7 descendants of Saul. When David heard what **Rizpah** had done, it so impressed him that he ordered that the bones of Sha'ul and Jonathan, along with the bones of the 7 men of Saul's household, be gathered together and buried in the tomb of Saul's father Kish. The place of burial, **Zela**, was in Saul's tribal territory of Benjamin, so this was seen a great kindness on David's part.

Let me insert here that the term "the bones of" someone is only a general Biblical term that refers to the remains of a body. Usually it was bones, but other times it was ashes as in the case of Sha'ul and Y'honatan.

Our story ends with the words that only after this happened was God prevailed on to show mercy to the land. But all of this leaves us with a burning question: was the blood-guilt on the land paid for by the deaths of these 7 men who as far anything can be ascertained by this story had no part whatsoever in the atrocity of the attack upon the Amorites of Gibeon? And my answer is: perhaps, but probably not.

Now I'm going to tell you immediately that what I'm about to offer you is my opinion and many would reasonably disagree. First I think that those who take at face value that the blood-guilt caused by Saul and his household, the execution of the 7 descendants of Saul, and that God thus accepted this as atonement for blood guilt are jumping to some conclusions and not reading the text very closely.

As I said earlier, when David asked what the cause of the drought was God merely said it was

the blood-guilt on the land caused by Saul and his household who murdered those Amorites. God did NOT prescribe the death of those 7 men, nor did He prescribe them to be impaled at an unauthorized cult site that purported to be dedicated to Him. He didn't even suggest that the 7 men of Saul's household be turned over to the Amorites. This was all something that David, his court, and the Amorites concocted.

Second, all parties had something to gain beyond divine appeasement and the ending of a famine. Much of Saul's family was still living and that represented a very real and ongoing danger to David's monarchy and dynasty. The reason that new kings sometimes killed the entire family of former kings was not due to unwarranted paranoia; it was that it was almost inevitable that sooner or later some family member or descendant of the ex-king would gain a hunger for power and want to use his ancestor's former position as proof that he had rights to the throne. Then the new king's life (and that of his offspring) would be in constant danger as the former king's family plotted and planned how to regain what they still figured was theirs.

Third, these Amorites had been living with a bitter hatred of the House of Saul for almost 2 generations as a result of Saul's unwarranted attempt to commit genocide upon them. But as resident aliens living in Israel any attempt to get revenge on the House of Saul would not be seen as legal, but rather as foreigners attacking Israelites and so their blood vengeance couldn't be satisfied. Time did nothing but to allow this hatred to fester, so when David actually gave them a chance for their revenge, they leapt at it and performed it in the most horrific, dishonoring, hateful way they could. But as I said a moment ago, it also had the beneficial effect for David of greatly reducing the danger of Saul's family ever again trying to regain the throne.

Fourth, the statement at the end of verse 14 that concludes this episode does NOT say that as a result of the 7 executions that God accepted this as proper blood atonement and thus the land was cleansed. Rather it merely says that after all this happened was God prevailed upon (probably by the Priesthood) to show mercy to the land. In other words, the timing of when God accepted Israel's petition for the drought to end was after the bones of Saul, Jonathan, and all the 7 bodies were properly buried. And this is why many Rabbis say that the issue of God hearing Israel's plea and relenting had to have something to do with Saul and Jonathan not getting a proper burial, as opposed to the land being cleansed of blood guilt by the deaths of the 7 descendants of Saul.

Finally, it has always been a Biblical principle that a man is only responsible for his own behavioral sins (and certainly not for the behavioral sins of his dead ancestors).

(Deut 24:16 CJB)

¹⁶ "Fathers are not to be executed for the children, nor are children to be executed for the fathers; every person will be executed for his own sin.

Yet as I have illustrated for you on a number of occasions, the iniquities of our ancestors can have a negative effect upon us.

^{NAS} **Exodus 20:5 *for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,***

Modern Christians sometimes apply the term “generational curses” to this reality. It is NOT that the new generation bears the responsibility for the sins of previous one; rather it is that often the new generation will bear the BURDEN of the sins of the committed the previous generation.

Bottom line: I do not accept (and outright reject) that the story of the famine as told in 2nd Samuel 21 explains that these 7 descendants of Saul (who had nothing to do with the crime) provided a God-ordained blood payment to satisfy God’s curse of the land on account of blood-guilt committed by a previous generation of their family.

Rather it is that eventually God allowed rain to fall again in Israel because of His divine mercy, and timing-wise it happened AFTER Saul and his family was buried, NOT as a direct cause and effect of the executions or the burials. There is not a nation of people on earth (including modern day Israel) that do not live with blood-guilt upon their land. If God didn’t show His marvelous mercy to people who lived on land soaked in blood-guilt, this entire planet would have had no rain fall upon it for thousands of years and mankind would have long ago been wiped out. That such mercy is given to us doesn’t relieve us from the responsibility of doing what is right in God’s eyes. At the same time we can’t go about inventing ways, or twisting Biblical regulations, to suit our fancies and clear our consciences (as did David in conjunction with the Amorites) and then assume that when the Lord shows us mercy that we have done right.

We'll finish this chapter and move into chapter 22 next week.