

## **Atonement – for Past Sins**

**2 Samuel 21:1-14**

**By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)**

Now ever since the dramatic announcement a couple of weeks ago, I've been trying to work out how I can complete 2 Samuel by the end of May. And I've made the decision to pass over what is a story that we've heard much of its teaching before. This is 2 Samuel chapter 20. David is on his way back to Jerusalem. He's made some political gestures favoring Judah, his own tribe, which has got the northern tribes all bent out of shape and has probably sowed the seeds for the division of the northern tribes from the southern tribes, the Israel/Judah divide, which will come after Solomon. The seeds were sown, I think, right here. You remember, he had given control of his armed forces, his military, his soldiers, to Amasa, who was Absalom's commander in chief. The opposition commander is now David's commander and in so doing he has demoted Joab, who happens to be Amasa's cousin.

In the course of chapter 20, Joab has revenge and he disguises himself as an ordinary soldier and under his tunic, as he greets Amasa by pulling his beard with his right hand towards him, as though he was going to make some eastern gesture of affection, he stabs him in the stomach with one fatal blow, and his cousin is dead. And Joab resumes the leadership and pursue a man by the name of Sheba. Sheba is a rebel, yet another rebel to David's legitimate reign, and he is pursued to a city called Tel-abel. It's one of these cases where they're all locked up inside and a siege ramp has to be built, which will take months and probably a year or more to starve these people out of the city. And a woman intervenes and says the best way to end this is to have Sheba's head thrown over the wall. And by the end of chapter 20, that's precisely what has happened.

Now in order to spare you the gruesomeness of that incident in chapter 20, we're going to turn to chapter 21 and the first fourteen verses, but alas, there's more gruesome tales to come. This is a tale relating now to the Gibeonites. Before we read this passage together, let's look to God in prayer.

*Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures. They are inerrant. Every jot and tittle given by the out-breathing of God and profitable for doctrine and correction and reproof and instruction in the way or righteousness that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. Help us, by Your Spirit, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

This is God's holy and infallible Word. 2 Samuel chapter 21:

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." 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. 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?" 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?" 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, 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."

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. The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth (this is a different Mephibosheth now, you understand); and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; 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.

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. When David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, 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. 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. 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.

So far, God's holy and inerrant Word.

Now these last four chapters of 2 Samuel contain six stories, separate stories, and stories that are chronologically out of order, out of sequence. They are put here for reasons that we can only surmise were important for the original author of 2 Samuel in order to fix our attention on what is important. What are we to learn from the story of Saul and David? What are we to learn from 1 and 2 Samuel? After all the tales, after all the stories, what is it that's most important for us to learn? This particular story contains a promise given, and a promise broken, and a parent's pain.

It begins with a broken promise and you'll see it in verses 1 through 9. There's a famine. We're not sure when this was. This is not chronologically after chapter 20. This is now going back probably to the period after Mephibosheth was brought to Jerusalem, so after 2 Samuel chapter 9 and possibly before chapter 16. In that period of time, somewhere, this even that's now being spoken of, took place. There was a famine for three years. And David prays about it. He goes to the Lord about it and he asks God, "Why the famine?" Those who knew their Old Testament probably suspected that this was something to do with Deuteronomy 28. One of the curses that God threatened for covenant breaking was famine. Today of course, you'd be glued to the Weather Channel. Or you'd be talking about all the secondary causes that might explain a famine in the Middle East — confirmation of global warming, the carbon footprint, the shifts of the magnetic axis, the solar flares, the rise in the Mediterranean Sea levels, the shifting rain patterns moving northwards and southwards through North Africa and missing that part of the Middle East, and there would be all kinds of flat-screen, high-tech stuff explaining why there's a famine in the Middle East. And getting tired of all that you'd switch the channel to TBN. (laughter) And you'd have Pat Robertson on the 700 Club with a prophecy special saying, "This is God's judgment on the present administration and for twenty-five dollars you can have a famine protection shawl if you only write to this address!" (laughter)

Well, David is given a different kind of answer, the answer that we've already hinted at. This is God's judgment. This was God's judgment because Israel had broken covenant. Sometime in Saul's reign, again, an event that isn't recorded apart from here, Saul went after the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites, you remember, in Joshua chapter 9, had engaged in something of a cunning deception. When Joshua was conquering the land, the Gibeonites dressed up in old clothes and they had crumbly, moldy food, as though they had come from a distance, when in fact, they were original dwellers of Canaan and would have been under the ban and would have been annihilated. They asked for a covenant to be made between them and that covenant assured them of their protection. They would be safe. But Saul has now abandoned and forsaken that covenant. And because of something that had happened in David's past, the event of Saul might have been as much as a generation ago. This event, before the famine, might have been several decades in the past. We can't be sure, but that sin, largely forgotten in

David's time, God had not forgotten. God never forgets wrongdoing. God never forgets a sin. The holiness of God, the righteousness of God, the integrity of God, the justice of God, cries out for restitution. The covenant had been broken; His name, His honor, His integrity had been called into question.

Now people say time is a great healer, you know, but it's no substitute for repentance. It's no substitute for repentance. We may forget, but God never forgets. This massacre of the Gibeonites, it was a generation ago, but it remains a sin. And David, do you notice what he asks? He asks how, verse 3 — “How shall I make atonement that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?” He's referring to the covenant with Abraham, that the nations of the world would find themselves blessing the people of God. “What do I need to do to make atonement?” He's using the technical Old Testament words here. Sin needs to be atoned for. It was part of the ritual of worship in the Old Testament, the sacrificial system, the mercy seat. That mercy seat was called the “seat of atonement.” It was where blood was shed for the remission of sins. Sins need to be covered, justice needs to be done, and the only way that that can be done is by a sacrifice.

So they make this suggestion. Seven sons, sons and grandsons, of Saul are to be sacrificed to atone for this past sin in the time of Saul. This is not David's fault. Now David does his own faults, and perhaps part of this story is a reflection just how David's sin with Bathsheba affected the nation, so Saul's sin against the Gibeonites brought the nation to its knees. And this sin needs to be atoned for. Now I'm sorry, the children are here and this is a gruesome story. Seven people — are they children, are they teenagers, are they adults? We don't know, but they're put to death to atone for this sin. Now some Bible commentators who have no respect whatsoever for the Bible suggest that nothing like this happened at all in the days of Saul. This is only David providing justification to put those would-be pretenders to the throne and thorns in his flesh to death. Well you can only do that by showing disrespect to the Scriptures themselves. God has brought this to the attention of David.

You know, however gruesome this is, and this is gruesome — I have questions about this. I don't fully understand this. But you know, however gruesome that is, if you stood before the cross of Jesus and saw His bleeding wounds from His head and hands and feet, if you saw His back, raw from the flagellation twice over that He had received just prior to His crucifixion, and you asked yourself, “Why? Why is He being crucified?” and you hear the voice from heaven saying, “For you, sinner, because there is no other way for you to know forgiveness. There is no other way of atonement. There's no other way to cover your sin but by someone else bearing the punishment in your room and stead.” You know, we may look back at this and say, “This is primitive. How could a society put people to death?” We put millions of unborn children to death every year in this country. We're in no position to morally stand superior to these passages. Whatever moral questions you may have tonight, I think the author is trying to say that part of the significance, part of the significance of this passage is atonement.

Atonement is a bloody, gory thing. It's a revolting thing.

You know, you'd stomach it better, you'd say, if you went to the temple and you saw thousands and thousands of animals being slaughtered on the Day of Atonement. Tens of thousands of lambs would have been slaughtered on the Day of Atonement. One first century Jewish historian speaks of a river, a river of blood, pouring fourth from the corner of the temple and down into the Kidron Valley below. Atonement, it's a gory thing. You know, we sang this morning *Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted*. We sang, "Ye who think of sin so lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate." As you stand before the cross, let a broken covenant here that needs to be atoned for, and you know, perhaps the writer is saying, "You know this story, whatever the moral niceties of it, there's another broken covenant in the Garden of Eden. And the only way that that broken covenant can be atoned for is that another Adam, a second Adam should come and die and shed His blood."

There's a broken covenant, but you know, there's a kept covenant here. David spares Mephibosheth. There are two Mephibosheths in this passage. The one that he spared is Jonathan's son, David's friend, Jonathan, his son. He made a covenant with Jonathan that he would take care of Mephibosheth. Do you remember back in chapter 9? Do you remember that picture? This man who has lame feet because a nurse dropped him when Saul and Jonathan were killed on Mount Gilboa, she ran but dropped Mephibosheth and Mephibosheth has sore feet. But he's given a place at David's table in the palace in Jerusalem.

Do you remember this morning, those of you who were here this morning for the Lord's Supper, Ligon used that — that just took my breath away. That beautiful, beautiful expression. We are God's children and we can slip our feet beneath the table because this is the Lord's Table. We're part of the family of God and the communion table is a symbol that we have a place at the table. We come and eat and drink the presence of Christ, our elder brother. You know maybe that's why the author is putting this story at the end here, because he's saying that the significance of David is — for all his faults, for all his terrible, terrible faults, the author — you know he's painted a really terrible picture of David in this latter section of 2 Samuel, but don't you think he's now trying to say that there's another side to David. He's a covenant keeper. He's a covenant keeper who lets the cripples and maimed have a place at the table. I don't know, I just think the author is saying there's Gospel in what David is doing. This story, I want to keep it to the end, like preachers. You know sometimes they mess with the text because they want to end well. You know, sometimes there's something that really preaches and so you keep that to the very end and maybe that's what's happening here. This story, it belonged in David's past, but he wants to say, "You know what David did at one time? He could have given Mephibosheth to the Gibeonites but he didn't because he had made a promise." God has made a promise to us in the Gospel, and that promise is yes and amen in Christ. It is yes and amen in Christ. If the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer

sprinkles the unclean to the purifying of the conscience, how much more will the blood of Christ who, through the eternal Spirit, cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

This morning, right here, we saw visibly portrayed, pictures — signs and seals of a covenant. Jesus said before He died, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. It's a picture of the new covenant in My blood.” This covenant, this promise, can never be broken. There's a Davidic King who keeps His promise. There's a Davidic King who never breaks His covenant, who never goes back on His word. I hope I'm not stretching the text here, but it seems as though the author wants us to see at the end here, this Gospel picture. In the midst of this gore, this terrible gore of atonement, there's a promise that that atonement that Jesus is, the atonement made by the blood of Jesus, has eternal and unbreakable consequences. “The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, He'll never, no never, desert to His foes.” That's the promise.

There's a promise broken, and there's a promise kept, and then you've got this pathetic scene of Rizpah, this mother of two of the victims. And she goes to a rock with sackcloth and there she stays to ward off the birds by day and animals by night. You know some commentators suggest that barley harvest is in March/April and the rains that are spoken of are in October. She was there for six months. And this story comes back to David and he's moved by it, by her devotion. And he gets the bones of Saul and Jonathan and now these seven sons and they're all given a proper, decent burial. What's the point of this story? Why is this at the end? Is the author saying, you know, “Be like Rizpah”? No, I don't think so. I think the author is saying, look at this woman, look at how she stays there in this sad, terribly, terribly sad event.

Some of you know I love classical music. I'm sorry, but my car has XM radio. I know. I love it. I tune into that classical music station, the opera station. I was listening, driving somewhere in the past couple of weeks; I was listening to Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, the final movement. It's just before Tchaikovsky takes his life. It's very, very sad, heart-wrenching music. And I'm listening to the final chords, you know, I'm driving along listening to his final chords, and before the chords have faded away, the announcer comes in — “My name is so-and-so and this is XM radio and now a word from our sponsor.” And I yelled at him! (laughter) Too soon! You need to stop and let this sadness, this terrible sadness take effect for a minute or two.

And perhaps that's what the author is saying to us here at the end. There's a terrible sadness in this story because that's what sin does. You know, some of you are amazed at the trouble and sadness in the world. That's what sin does. It brings this terrible sadness into the world. But there is forgiveness with God and there is atonement with God and it's only in types and shadows and — like reflections on a wall here in this chapter, as though this chapter is saying, “You need to wait. You need to wait for the One who takes that sadness away — great

David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And in His death and in His resurrection and in His ascension to the right hand of God, that's where the sadness and the brokenness of this world is taken away.”

Well, what a great thing, you know, as we read this chapter, what a great thing it is to be a child of God. What a great thing it is to be a Christian. What a great thing it is to know that we have a covenant that was ordered in all things and sure, sealed by the blood of Jesus, that says that every sinner whosoever drinks of the waters of life shall never thirst again.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank You for Your Word and bless You that in the Gospel there is the answer or the remedy to the brokenness and the sadness that sin brings into the world. There in the gore of Calvary, His life for mine, His blood for mine, His death for mine, that I may go free. Teach us what it meaneth — The cross uplifted high and one, the Man of Sorrows, condemned to bleed and die — for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction and remember it's hymn number 253 and verse 5. Now receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

**Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).