

2 SAMUEL—WEEK 14

HOLY PURPOSES



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Bathing Bathsheba by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 – 1656)
On display in the Neues Palais in Potsdam, Germany*

A famine triggers some serious reassessment on David's part, and he makes a deal with the Gibeonites to sacrifice seven of Saul's sons, but one of the mothers shames David into doing the right thing.

David is still learning and growing as he retires from battle to a career in writing.

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2 Samuel, Week 14 — Holy Purposes

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1 2 Samuel 21:1–6

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, “It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites.” So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; the children of Israel had sworn protection to them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah.

Therefore David said to the Gibeonites, “What shall I do for you? And with what shall I make atonement, that you may bless the inheritance of the LORD?”

And the Gibeonites said to him, “We will have no silver or gold from Saul or from his house, nor shall you kill any man in Israel for us.”

So he said, “Whatever you say, I will do for you.”

Then they answered the king, “As for the man who consumed us and plotted against us, that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the territories of Israel, let seven men of his descendants be delivered to us, and we will hang them before the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, whom the LORD chose.”

And the king said, “I will give them.”

The Gibeonites are the descendants of the people who made a covenant of peace with Joshua four hundred years earlier. (See chapter 9 of Joshua.) Saul failed to respect that covenant. This offended the LORD, which led to Him withholding rain. That triggered a famine. (Famine is virtually synonymous with drought in the Bible.)

This is an important lesson in covenants. The Gibeonites tricked Joshua into making this covenant. Thus, Saul might have felt that he didn’t need to keep it, even though it had been honored for centuries.

But Saul was wrong—catastrophically so. Joshua 9:18 mentions that the Israelite leaders swore, “*to them by the LORD God of Israel.*” The LORD is not going to let Saul just blow that off.

Covenants in the name of the LORD are an absolute. They’re the record of our relationship with Him.

The Gibeonites demanding the deaths of seven of Saul’s descendants is also wrong.

“Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin.” — Deuteronomy 24:16

But the Gibeonites aren’t subject to the laws of Deuteronomy. They aren’t covenant people (for that covenant, anyway).

Horrible as this is, the LORD is using it to make a point.

2 2 Samuel 21:7–14

But the king spared Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of the Lord's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. So the king took Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; and he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the hill before the LORD. So they fell, all seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest.

Now Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until the late rains poured on them from heaven. And she did not allow the birds of the air to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night.

And David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done. Then David went and took the bones of Saul, and the bones of Jonathan his son, from the men of Jabesh Gilead who had stolen them from the street of Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung them up, after the Philistines had struck down Saul in Gilboa. So he brought up the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from there; and they gathered the bones of those who had been hanged. They buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the tomb of Kish his father. So they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God heeded the prayer for the land.

David picks seven “sons” (male descendants) of Saul to deliver to the Gibeonites, sparing Mephibosheth.

What happens next needs cultural context to make sense. The Gibeonites are using this sacrifice to appease their gods and bring rain. Their plan is to leave the bodies out until the rains start. This is in violation of Deuteronomy 21:23, but the Gibeonites don't care (or maybe even know) about that.

his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God. — Deuteronomy 21:23

But the mother of two of the hanged sons (Rizpah) sets up a sackcloth guard-shack and defends her sons' bodies against scavengers. She intends to do this until the rains come. When David gets wind of this, he is shamed into taking bold action to give a proper burial to all seven, plus Saul and Jonathan.

Then, and only then, does God bring rain.

It's interesting to consider David's thought process in all this. It begins when David *inquired of the LORD* (literally, “sought the LORD's face”) about the three-year famine. He gets a direct answer; it's on the house (בֵּית, *beth*) of Saul because he killed Gibeonites. So David meets with the Gibeonites and sets up an atonement plan. But then Rizpah boldly protects her sons from being disgraced by wild animals.

Then it hits David, who is trying to figure out how to end the famine, that it's all about righteousness.

3 2 Samuel 21:15–22

When the Philistines were at war again with Israel, David and his servants with him went down and fought against the Philistines; and David grew faint. Then Ishbi-Benob, who was one of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose bronze spear was three hundred shekels, who was bearing a new sword, thought he could kill David. But Abishai the son of Zeruiah came to his aid, and struck the Philistine and killed him. Then the men of David swore to him, saying, “You shall go out no more with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel.”

Now it happened afterward that there was again a battle with the Philistines at Gob. Then Sibbechai the Hushathite killed Saph, who was one of the sons of the giant. Again there was war at Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaare-Oregim the Bethlehemite killed the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam.

Yet again there was war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number; and he also was born to the giant. So when he defied Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimea, David’s brother, killed him.

These four were born to the giant in Gath, and fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.

David has lost a step. He goes into battle and almost collapses. One of the Philistines is about to kill him, when he’s saved by Abishai.

It dawns on David’s men that he shouldn’t be there; so they force him to retire from battle. Curiously, the text makes no mention of any further discussion.

David has to concede that his career as a warrior is finished.

The Philistines think they’re hot stuff because they have a bunch of extra-large soldiers. The text is unclear as to whether they are relatives of the Goliath whom David killed, or just called goliaths as a colloquialism.

In any case, they aren’t all that effective in battle, and they drop like flies. “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

There are four notable omissions in this passage. One is the afore mentioned lack of discussion about keeping David out of battle. We also don’t hear how these giants were killed, only who killed them. There’s also no mention of any of the rest of the Philistine army. Finally, there’s no hint of the LORD’s intervention anywhere. Everything that happened was the natural, normal, expected result.

So, this is all a lesson about overconfidence in celebrity. The great warrior David isn’t as great anymore as his reputation. The Philistines counted on a group of celebrity champions to fight for them, but they aren’t as tough as they look.

The big loser in all this is hype.

4 2 Samuel 22:1–7 (ESV)

And David spoke to the LORD the words of this song on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said,

*“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold and my refuge,
my savior; you save me from violence.
I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
and I am saved from my enemies.*

*“For the waves of death encompassed me,
the torrents of destruction assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me.*

*“In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I called.
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry came to his ears.”*

This song of David reads like an early draft of Psalm 18. The Psalm’s Hebrew is a bit more poetic, but otherwise, they’re virtually the same.

David is looking back over his whole life and recognizes the cause and effect relationship he had with his trials and with the LORD.

But it’s not all in the past. David writes, *“The LORD is my rock,”* not, *“The LORD was my rock.”* He can still say, *“I call upon the LORD ... and I am saved from my enemies.”*

But this is still rooted in the past. David has learned to trust in the LORD the hard way—from trials. He has had his share of close calls, and he describes those close calls in poetic terms—with phrases like, *“the snares of death confronted me.”*

But those close calls were essential. They’re why David, *“called upon the LORD.”*

“I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.” — Abraham Lincoln

Of course, these close calls were just the set up. David got to know God from what happened next.

*From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry came to his ears.*

5 2 Samuel 22:8–16

*“Then the earth shook and trembled;
The foundations of heaven quaked and were shaken,
Because He was angry.
Smoke went up from His nostrils,
And devouring fire from His mouth;
Coals were kindled by it.
He bowed the heavens also, and came down
With darkness under His feet.
He rode upon a cherub, and flew;
And He was seen upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness canopies around Him,
Dark waters and thick clouds of the skies.
From the brightness before Him
Coals of fire were kindled.*

*“The LORD thundered from heaven,
And the Most High uttered His voice.
He sent out arrows and scattered them;
Lightning bolts, and He vanquished them.
Then the channels of the sea were seen,
The foundations of the world were uncovered,
At the rebuke of the LORD,
At the blast of the breath of His nostrils.”*

God’s response to David’s prayers was, to put it mildly, attention getting. Why?

To get his attention.

This isn’t about granting wishes; it’s about His glory. God’s plan to bring David around to true faith didn’t include soft-pedaling the message.

David didn’t ask for all the fireworks, but they help get the point across.

God has a style that takes some getting used to. He obviously likes action. The plot twists of life are often more “twisty” than we’d like. It’s as if He’s easily bored.

But there’s a flip side to this that seems, at first glance, contradictory—answers to prayer often come slowly. If we took one of those silly online surveys about our answered prayers, God would get a lower satisfaction score on “Prompt Service.” How is this compatible with His apparent love of action?

Both are designed to teach. The goal isn’t entertainment, it’s personal growth—David’s and ours.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What covenants in our society are you aware of?
2. Have you ever been "hit" by a realization of what God wants?
3. Have you been disappointed, even shocked by a celebrity?
4. Have you learned trust from a trial?
5. How have you grown in the last year?

Items for prayer: