

Covenant Faithfulness

2Samuel 21:1-14

A few weeks ago I found myself at the Honda dealership in Windsor to get some service work done on our van.

The job took a few hours and so I took my computer and my books along to work while I waited.

As I was working away translating the passage I was working on from Hebrew into English the woman sitting next to me asks, "Is that Hebrew?"

I said, "Yes it is." She replied, "I'm Jewish I speak Hebrew".

I had to clarify that I didn't speak Hebrew and that I only know the basics of the language and need the dictionary on my computer to translate it.

Despite my linguistic shortcomings, it led to a rather interesting conversation.

I learned that she was not a big fan of religion generally speaking, that her daughter had converted to Christianity which she was not a fan of, and she told me a little bit about how she feels about the bible.

Two things in particular stood out to me in our chat.

She said, "There are a lot of things in the bible that I don't like. There is a lot of bad stuff in there."

If you have stuck with us through this series in 2Samuel I'm sure you can empathize with her on that.

I asked her, "Would you like to know why those things are in the Bible?"

She said, "Why are they in there?" I said, "Because God shows us what happens when people don't listen to Him."

The other thing that she said that I thought was incredibly profound is she said, "It is impossible to keep all the rules in the Bible (she was talking about the OT)"

She went on, "There is something like 613 rules that must be followed, and nobody can do that."

I said, "You are exactly right and that is why we need a Saviour!"

[She wasn't interested in hearing much more and she left shortly after that, but even though she didn't want to hear about Jesus, I think she could clearly see the problem between people and the LORD as laid out for us in the scriptures. That conversation came to my mind as I was thinking about the Bible passage we are looking at this morning. Like several others we have dealt with over the last several months this is one where we might ask the question, "Why is this in the Bible?" It is one that we may read and be troubled by. I confess this has been a challenge for me as I have tried to wrestle through it and I confess there are still some

unanswered questions for me from these verses. That said, there are some important lessons for us about bible interpretation and most importantly we are clearly reminded of our need of a Saviour. The heart of this passage is about covenant keeping. A covenant is a solemn promise made between people to live up to a certain set of obligations. We see covenants all over the place in the bible. Covenants between individuals, covenants between nations, and covenants between God and people. In this passage we are looking at a covenant that was made between two nations, how the covenant was broken, and what is done to try and fix the failure to keep the covenant. From these things I want to call our attention to three lessons. The first lesson that we can clearly see in this passage is that...]

Point #1 – Covenant keeping is important to God. (Verses 1-2)

The LORD is deeply concerned that His people honour their promises.

We see God get the attention of David and all the people of Israel in verse 1.

Some commentators explain the length of time it takes David to seek the Lord's face, by suggesting that the famine was fairly mild in nature.

It is also possible that the famine increased in severity year or year.

Whatever the case may be it is clear that by the third year the situation had the attention and concern of the king and so He goes to the LORD.

Why does David seek God's face when there is a famine? Because David rightly understands that the LORD is the One who controls the weather, it is He who permits the crops to grow, and the harvest to be plentiful.

I fear we have lost a good deal of that right thinking in our time.

Most of us live somewhat removed from agriculture these days as we go to the grocery store instead of the fields for our food.

On top of that many in our time have a godless view of how the world works from day to day.

Since our understanding of how weather and agriculture has increased dramatically through the centuries we are given to think about weather patterns and soil conditions than we are about the sovereign hand of Almighty God.

Science can tell us many important things about how things work, but it often falls short on the question of why things happen the way they do.

David understood that both bounty and famine are things the LORD brings about and he wants to know why God has brought famine into the land.

The answer is that Saul, the king before David, had put the "Gibeonites to death."

We are told why that is significant in **Verse 2.**

The key phrase in this verse is ‘the people of Israel had sworn to spare them.’

They had promised, that is, they had made a covenant with this people.

You can read about it in Joshua 9. The people of Israel had come into the Promised Land and God told Joshua to wipe out the people who were living there on account of their wickedness.

While most of the people of the land decided to go to war with Israel, the Gibeonites came up with another plan.

They chose to pretend to be people who came from a great distance and they dressed up and brought props to convince Joshua that they came from far away.

In Joshua 9:14 it says something really important, it says, “...the men...did not ask counsel from the LORD.”

They looked at how they were dressed and the stuff they brought with them, but they didn’t ask God about what they should do.

Then it says, “Joshua made peace with them and **made a covenant** with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation **swore** to them.”

Shortly after that, Joshua and the Israelites find out the truth that they are inhabitants of the land and even though the Gibeonites lied the Israelites are bound by the covenant to let them live.

Honouring a promise to people who don’t deserve it? Does that sound familiar to you?

It is what God does for His people all the time.

Saul decides to ignore that covenant and seeks to “strike them down in his zeal for the people.”

His zeal, however, is misplaced and like he had done on a number of occasions he disregards the LORD choosing to follow his own passion and pride.

In his actions he was not breaking a covenant between himself and someone else, he was breaking a covenant between two nations.

As king he was acting as the representative for the whole nation and therefore his breaking of the covenant is as though the whole nation has broken the covenant.

Through this famine God is calling David’s attention to this problem, He is concerned that His people be a covenant keeping people.

[You probably know the third commandment. “You shall not take the name of the LORD in vain!” Most of us rightly understand that to mean don’t use God’s name as a curse word or speak it carelessly. But is also deeper than that. It has the sense of bearing or representing God’s name. In other words the people of God are supposed to show the world what the LORD is like in how they live.]

God is a covenant keeping God and his people are to be a covenant keeping people.

This is why Jesus warns us against making oaths lightly.

He says, “Don’t be the kind of people who swear by heaven, earth, or your head.”

He says, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.”

Making a solemn promise is no small thing and how we live those things out as people who name the name of Christ reflects and image of Jesus/of the LORD to the world.

Is it a good one? What picture of God does the world see in our lives?

Are we people of our word? Are we trustworthy?

[God is and that is why He cares about whether or not we are. It is important enough to Him that He is willing to bring a famine to a nation of people to call their attention to this. In this case it is a situation where a covenant has been broken. The question then becomes what needs to happen to make things right? David searches out the answer to that question in the next part of this text and the answer show us that...]

Point #2 – Covenant breaking can be costly. (Verses. 3-9)

The very nature of a covenant usually involves a pledge of considerable value that will be forfeit if the promise is broken.

Verse 3 is very important to our understanding of this text.

Since the covenant is between the Israelites and Gibeonites and through Saul the Israelites have violated the covenant, the issue that needs to be resolved is how will the Gibeonites be satisfied?

The heart of David’s question here is, “How can we make this right?”

Verse 4 takes something off the table and also gives us another key piece of information.

Silver and gold can’t solve this problem. Most literally translated they say to David “*silver and gold are nothing to us with Saul and his house.*”

Money cannot pay for blood that has been spilt.

Notice also that they mention ‘Saul and his house’ which suggests a level of participation by Saul’s family members in the breaking of this covenant (I’ll come back to that in a bit).

We also learn here that the Gibeonites have no authority to take action on their own.

That is because in the covenant that was made with Joshua, the Gibeonites are made slaves to the people of Israel.

By saying they have no right to put anyone to death in Israel they are recognizing their status as slaves which suggests that they have been faithful to their end of the covenant.

David responds by saying, he will do what they ask of him at the end of verse 4.

Verses 5-9 tell us what they ask for and how David grants their request.

Money can't fix this because this is a matter of blood, since Saul is no longer living they ask for seven of his sons to be given in his place.

Seven is significant because it is a number of completion or fullness.

If they are given then the Gibeonites will be satisfied.

It is not a big surprise that people of Amorite descent would make this ask, the surprise here is that David agrees to it.

Jonathan's son Mephibosheth is spared on account of David's covenant with Jonathan, but two sons and five other grandsons are given and put to death.

Do descendants pay for the sins of their ancestors? Some people teach that. They say if you are suffering it may be that God is punishing you for the sins of your father or grandfather. It is what some people call generational sin.

It is easy to see how someone might read a text like this and come to that kind of conclusion, but we need to remind ourselves of a very important principle in Biblical interpretation which is that "Scripture interprets Scripture."

There are several passages that we can point to here to help shed some light on this text, one of them is Deuteronomy 24:16 which says, *"Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin."*

No one is punished by God because of what their ancestor has done.

So either David wrongly agrees to this or Saul's sons and grandsons to one degree or another "walked in Saul's ways" as Matthew Henry puts it.

Based on how God responds at the end of verse fourteen, we must conclude that they participated in this breaking of the covenant in some way.

It is entirely reasonable to think that Rizpah's sons were directly involved in putting some of the Gibeonites to death.

The same is possible of his grandsons as well.

It could also be that his grandsons took up his hostility towards the Gibeonites beyond the lifetime of their grandfather.

While the text is silent on the details, if we allow Deuteronomy to speak into this text then these men have in some way

participated in the covenant breaking and the cost for doing so is their lives.

Showing a disregard for God's covenant faithfulness often comes with a high cost.

[How many people here this morning have a driver's license? You know when the MTO gives you that license it comes with an expectation of operating vehicles according to the rules of the road. While it is true accidents can happen when we are doing our best to live up to the expectation of our license, we greatly increase our chance of something bad happening when we break the law. Excessive speeding, distracted driving, or driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs can come at a very high cost. That cost often affects more people than just the driver.]

That is the kind of thing we are talking about here.

Saul broke a covenant that affected far more than just him.

It affect his nation and it affected his family.

The very same thing can happen to us.

When parents choose to walk in disobedience to the LORD that effects our children.

Show me a father who treats his wife poorly and there is a good chance we will find a son who does the same.

Show me a mother who show contempt for her husband and there is a good chance we will find a daughter who does the same.

I can't tell you the number of times people have said something to me like, "That is the way my parents were..."

[I think it is safe to say we often think far too individualistically about our sin. How often do people say, "I'm not hurting anyone leave me alone"? Listen, that statement is never true. Yes it is true that some sins affect other people to greater degrees and some to lesser degrees but it is always bigger than just us. Let's ask ourselves parents/grandparents are we helping to lead our children to heaven or hell? If there is anything this text shows us it is that the stakes are really high. With stakes this high a very important question comes to my mind. Where do we find hope? We have all, like Saul and his house, failed many times along the way. What do we do with that? I don't believe this text leaves us in despair but instead points us to God's covenant faithfulness and shows us that...]

Point #3 – God's covenant faithfulness is our only hope. (Verses 10-14)

Since human beings fail to keep what is required of us, our only hope is that the LORD never fails to fulfill all that He has promised.

Verse 10 tells us a bit more about Rizpah, the mother of two of the men given to the Gibeonites.

Sackcloth is often associated with lament or mourning in the bible which is what we would expect from a mother who has lost her sons.

There is more than lament here though, there is also a picture of perseverance in her devotion.

You see, the way these men are put on display 'before the LORD' is a declaration that they are under a curse according to Deuteronomy 21:23 and because that is the case they should not be left like that for more than a day.

The Gibeonites, however, don't follow that instruction, but instead leave the bodies out for a long period of time, some commentators think as much as six months.

It is showing everyone the severity of covenant breaking and its effects upon the people and the land.

While Rizpah makes no attempt to change that picture, she is completely resolved to keep her sons and Saul's grandsons from the further desecration of being consumed by wild animals according to Deuteronomy 28:26.

Hearing of her unrelenting devotion David does this according to **verses 12-14**.

By any reasonable measure the conditions that the Gibeonites had set were fulfilled and so David acts to put an end to the humiliation of these men and gives them a proper burial along with Saul and Jonathan in their family tomb.

Practically speaking what happens to a person's remains doesn't change anything for them in either a physical or spiritual sense.

It does, however, serve as a message to the living.

The message here is that the covenant breaking has been dealt with and what was wrong has been made right.

The LORD, we are told, clearly agrees with that assessment because we are told at the end of verse 14 that He 'responded to the plea for the land.'

What is He responding to? The fact that everyone here does everything right?

Given the fact that there is so much to be troubled over in these verses that hardly seems reasonable.

Does He respond because the people deserve it? Not at all! The bible says that all of us are covenant breakers and we all deserve the curse that the sons of Saul receive here.

Why does He respond? Because He has made a covenant with Himself in all eternity past to love and save those who belong to Him.

David was willing to give the sons of another man, who most likely shared in the guilt of their father, for the sake of his people, but God gives His only Son who was completely innocent and completely

faithful to become a curse for us so that the curse of our covenant breaking would be lifted.

Listen to what it says in Galatians 3:13, it says, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us-- for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'.*"

The failings of your parents and grandparents can't keep you out of heaven.

I don't believe the idea of being under a curse for the sins of your ancestors is taught anywhere in the bible, even in passages like this one.

There are powerful voices in our culture that want to hold certain groups of people accountable for the sins of their ancestors and excuse the sins of certain groups today for the same reason.

The church should have no part of that. Should we acknowledge wrongdoing? Yes! Should we repent from our own sin? Absolutely! Are the sins of our ancestors to be laid upon us? No, that is antithetical to the gospel.

Any sin we inherit from our parents and grandparents is sin that we willfully choose to walk in on our own.

The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus those chains can be broken.

We don't have to walk in the failings of those who have gone before.

If you belong to Jesus He has broken every curse and you are the object of God's eternal love and because He is a God Who never breaks His covenants you can rest in that.

If you are filled with the Holy Spirit you are not a prisoner of your DNA, you can grow in grace being changed from "one degree of glory to another" according to 2Corinthians 3:18.

That brothers and sisters is the hope of the gospel.

Does God care about covenant keeping? Yes because He is a covenant keeping God.

Is there a cost for covenant breaking? Yes, and often it is high.

Is there hope in the face of all of our failure?

The greatest hope we can imagine, God's unwavering commitment to all the promises He has made in His precious Son.

We may not have all the answers but we have that one and that is enough.