**God and vows** 6/7/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 21:1-14, 2Samuel 21:15-22

Text: 2Samuel 21

Psalms: 61, 18:1-6, 48:1-8, 134a

As Christians we must be careful in what we say, particularly when we make promises. The Lord will hold us accountable for every idle or careless word we speak (Mat 12:36). Jesus warns against taking vows or oaths, solemn promises witnessed by God and sometimes associated with the proclaiming of a curse if the person breaks their promise (Mat 5:33-37, James 5:12). Even so, Jesus himself took the high priest seriously when he put Jesus under oath to tell if he was the Son of God (Mat 26:63, 64). The apostle Paul took what seems like a Nazirite vow, resulting in him cutting off his hair at Cenchrea (Acts 18:18). Maybe the vow was associated with prayer for safety; the point here is that Paul was keeping his vow. Are you keeping your vows?

Most of us take a vow some time in our life. The most common vow we take is associated with marriage; so-called wedding vows. The husband and the wife solemnly promise to be faithful to each other ‘till death do us part’. They do not announce a curse upon themselves if they break this vow, but we do see a curse come upon those breaking their vow anyway even if it is not seen as a divine curse. It is tragic, yet instructive, to see the richest men in our land being divorced. Such men probably thought money could solve all their problems but not their marriage so it appears, and certainly their riches will not solve their broken relationship with almighty God.

Becoming a member of the church does involve a vow; we simply ask you to profess saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But office -bearers like ministers, elders and deacons are required to sign what we call a ‘Formula of Subscription’. They solemnly swear belief in the Bible, and to uphold the doctrines set out in the Westminster Confession of Faith, our subordinate standard. Among other promises made in this ‘Formula’ they promise ‘to submit to the decisions of my brothers in the various courts of this church’.

Here in chapter 21 of 2Samuel we come to the closing four chapters of this book of the Bible, chapters often referred to as an epilogue. David survived a rebellion led by his son, Absalom, and another led by Sheba from the tribe of Benjamin. What we find in these closing chapters is not necessarily chronological, although chapter 23 records the ‘last words of david’. But when Shimei called David a bloodthirsty man because of ‘all the blood of the house of Saul’ (16:8), he may have had in mind David’s giving of seven sons of Saul for execution by the Gibeonites, as recorded here in this chapter.

Chapter 21 refers to a famine in Israel that went on for three years, a natural disaster that led David to pray, asking the Lord, ‘Why?’ Famines were often caused by a drought; remember the seven year drought and subsequent famine in Egypt. David did not know about climate change so did not run to the scientists and the politicians demanding something be done about stopping climate change! David was the government anyway! What David did was run to God because, ‘God’s in charge of the weather’ as the children’s chorus says. David also knew that under the terms of the covenant the Lord made with his people, drought could be a curse from God for disobedience to his covenant commands (Deut 28:23, 24) - one of which is ‘do not bear false witness to your neighbour’.

**1. Broken vow to the Gibeonites**

After three years of famine, David went to the Lord asking, ‘Why?’ and the Lord answered him (21:1). The Lord had not forgotten the vow that Joshua and the rulers of Israel had made with the people of Gibeon, even if David and especially Saul had. These Amorites or Canaanites had tricked Joshua into thinking they were from a faraway place when in fact, their town of Gibeon was close by (Josh 9:14-16). King Saul had broken this vow or treaty made by Joshua and the current drought was God’s curse or punishment upon the nation for this sin.

There is no previous mention of Saul killing the Gibeonites but their town was near to Saul’s home town of Gibeah. Maybe the descendants of the Gibeonites has upset Saul in some way or maybe he just wanted their property. So, ruthless and violent man that he was, Saul set about exterminating the Gibeonites. The reason given as, ‘In his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah’, sounds more like an excuse than the truth; Saul’s zeal for David and Judah was to get rid of them also (21:2). Both Saul and David should have been aware of what is written in the book of Joshua. Ignorance of what is written in the Bible is no excuse for breaking the commands of almighty God!

After asking the Lord about the drought/famine crippling the country and being told by the Lord it was because Saul had killed the Gibeonites in breach of the treaty signed by Joshua, David called the Gibeonites to come and speak with him (21:2). He didn’t ask the Lord how to make atonement for King Saul’s sin but asked the Gibeonites, ‘What shall I do for you?’ (21:3). The current drought/famine was God’s curse upon the nation for this sin of their king. To remove God’s curse and restore the blessing of these people upon ‘the inheritance of the Lord’, atonement had to be made, but what would this atonement be? David asked the Gibeonites to choose. Maybe these people had been praying for God to avenge them of this broken vow for a long time.

Many of their number had been killed by the bloodthirsty Saul in breach of the vow or treaty made. Nothing would bring these people back, and no amount of money could atone for their death. The Gibeonites were not interested in monetary compensation (21:4). In atoning for sin retribution may be demanded, depending on the nature of the sin. Saul’s sin was more than theft of property or goods; it was unlawful killing. But the Gibeonites did not want David to ‘kill any man in Israel for us’ (21:4). If David was thinking in such terms he would have been relieved by what he heard.

David repeated his question saying, ‘Whatever you say, I will do for you’ (21:4). The Gibeonites then told David what they wanted, what they thought was appropriate atonement. ‘Let seven men of his [Saul’s] descendants be delivered to us, and we will hang them before the Lord in Gibeah of Saul’ (21:6). David had asked what they wanted so he had to accept their demand. Saul would have killed many more than seven Gibeonites, but seven was the number of completeness, and satisfaction for them.

To be hanged was a curse in itself within Israel (Deut 21:23), where executions were by stoning. For this to be done in the city of Saul made the atonement a public witness to the community. The law in Israel prevented children being put to death for the sins of their fathers (Deut 24:16), but the Gibeonites were not Israelites. Even so, the men David gives them may have been complicit in Saul’s killing of the Gibeonites.

David would have been relieved that they required only seven from Saul’s family be put to death, and also relieved that he was allowed to choose these seven. David himself was bound by an oath he made to Jonathan (1Sam 20:14-17). Remembering this oath he previously asked if there was any left in Jonathan’s house and was told about a cripple called Mephibosheth (21:7). David kept his covenant promise to Jonathan back then, and again here as he looks for men to atone Saul’s failure to keep the oath given to the Gibeonites.

David took two sons of Rizpah, a wife or concubine of Saul, one of whom happened to be called Mephibosheth also (21:8). He took another five men from Saul’s house, this time grandsons through Saul’s daughter Merab; it was Merab not Michal who was married to Adriel, the son of Barzillai the Meholathite- a different Barzillai to the rich man from Gilead (1Sam 18:19, 2Sam 19:31). David delivered these seven descendants of Saul to the Gibeonites as agreed, and they ‘hanged them on the hill before the Lord’ (21:9). ‘The execution of the seven atoned for Saul’s sin and propitiated divine wrath’.

The reference to the time or season of these public executions is interesting; it was the beginning of the barley harvest, meaning it was April. If there was any harvest that year it must have been meagre because there was a famine at the time. With atonement being made, the Lord could have brought about a good harvest; although the reference to ‘late rains’ in verse 10, and to God heeding the prayer for the land in verse 14, indicate that the drought was not yet broken.

**2. Bones buried with honour**

A famine caused David to ask the Lord, ‘Why?’ He was told by the Lord, and he acted to make atonement for Saul’s breaking of the covenant made with the Gibeonites, a human covenant. Remember that the Lord also holds us accountable to the covenant he has made with us in the blood of Jesus Christ. Breaking of this divine- human covenant is also called sin, and must be atoned for. The Lord Jesus Christ made such atonement of us in the blood-sacrifice of the cross.

Rizpah watched her sons get hanged but could not leave them exposed to attack from birds or beasts. In India we saw what is called the ‘tower of silence’ where a religious community once exposed the bodies of their dead. Another religious community threw their dead bodies into the river where birds, beasts and even fish attacked them. Rizpah threw sackcloth on a rock and kept watched over the bodies of her sons day and night as they hung before the Lord in Gibeah (21:10). She did this until the late rains poured down from heaven.

The rains signalled the Lord’s lifting of his curse from the land. Yet there was something else that David need to do. The conduct of Rizpah, the mother of Armoni and Mephibosheth, touched David such that he acted to honour Saul and Jonathan by bringing their bones home for an honourable burial. The bodies of Saul and Jonathan were hung on a wall at Beth Shan by the Philistines and taken down at night by the men of Jabesh Gilead. David was moved to bring their bones home (21:12-14). He had them buried in their father’s tomb, along with the bones of these recently hanged men from the house of Saul. ‘And after that God heeded the prayer for the land’ (21:14).

Is God heeding your prayers? If not, is there anything you need to confess or to set right in your life? If we are able to right wrongs of the past in our life, or the life of our family, then let us do so now and see the Lord bless us and our family.

**3. Brother and relatives of Goliath**

This chapter ends with a brief record of David’s ongoing encounters with the Philistines. David became famous after he killed the Philistine giant called Goliath; he was only a boy at the time, a boy who trusted in the God of Israel. He went on to become a great warrior, a warrior king. But he did not always fight alone, and as he got older he relied more and more on younger men. This passage tells us about some loyal and brave men who helped David, especially in battles with Philistine giants, or ‘Rapha’ in Hebrew. Sometimes called Anakites, these giants were enlisted by the Philistines, and were formidable foes on the battlefield.

Probably because of advancing age, David felt faint on the battlefield as he fought with a giant called Ishbi-Benob (21:16). This giant had a bronze spear half the weight of the Goliath David killed as a boy (21:16, 1Sam 17:7). Thankfully Abishai, the brother of Joab, came to David’s aid and killed this Philistine. The men later told David to stay at home in future because they wanted to keep him alive as ‘the lamp of Israel’ (21:17). David would die eventually but his importance as the lamp of Israel would one day be fulfilled in his descendant who is the light of Israel, and the whole world (John 8:12).

In another battle with the Philistines another giant was killed (21:18). In a third battle, Elhanan from Bethlehem killed Goliath the Gittite (21:19). This is not the Goliath killed by David but his brother, as indicated in the text of our NKJV Bible on the basis of 1Chronicles 20:5. In a fourth battle recorded in this chapter, a giant with an extra digit on each hand and foot was encountered down in Gath. He came out defying the armies of Israel and David’s nephew came forward to kill this fourth and final giant enlisted in the Philistine army. Like the original Goliath killed by David, all these Goliaths were killed by warriors taught by David and loyal to him.

While this chapter ends with this listing of warriors who killed Philistine giants, let us not forget the important lesson learned by David from a crisis in the country, namely the importance of oaths or vows made with other people, and above all with the Lord himself. Be careful and prayerful in making a vow, and when you do be careful and prayerful to keep it.