

When Death is All Around You

2 Samuel 21:1–22

The Twenty-Second Sermon on Second Samuel

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As much as our culture has tried to shield us from it, death is all around us. The culture talks about “pro-choice”—the choice to do what?—we have designer coffins to make us feel better, we no longer talk about cemeteries but give them names like “Eternal Hills,” and we have a celebration of life instead of a funeral. Yet just pay attention to what’s going on in our world today and you know it’s full of death.

As we come to the final four chapters of 2 Samuel this morning, we come to chapters that summarize for us of all that God has been doing in 1–2 Samuel with his kingdom and with the king after God’s own heart, David. This section begins with two episodes full of death. Now only are we surrounded in our lives by death but the Word of God is full of death today as well. First there is the death of Saul’s family and then there is the death of the Philistines. And what we learn today is that by death comes deliverance so that God’s people can experience life.

I want to say at the beginning, then, that as Christians we need to have a biblical worldview about death so that we do not fear it, but understand it. Death was the threatened curse of God to Adam for disobedience to the law of God. Death, therefore, is unnatural to this world. Because of Adam’s sin death has

entered the world as an enemy that we try to run from but that we cannot escape. It is appointed for man once to die then comes the judgment. Jesus Christ, though, conquered death after his own death by rising again, bursting the bonds of death, destroying death's dominion. Are you afraid of death today? The answer is to put your hope in Jesus Christ, who says to you that he is the resurrection and the life and that he holds the keys of death as its master. When you do, you do not need to fear death because you know after it your soul will go into the presence of God and one day your body will be raised again to be reunited with your soul in the new heavens and the new earth.

Our story today is so full of death. I had originally intended two truths about death here, but I really want to focus in on just one point this morning. I've just given you a practical point about death and fear, so let me focus in on a major theological truth in this passage:

1. *By Death, the Wrath of God is Propitiated*

May the Holy Spirit lead us into the truth of his Word today.

By Death, the Wrath of God is Propitiated

We learn from the death in this chapter is that *by death, the wrath of God is propitiated*. We see this in the first episode in verses 1–14. Now realize that when we read in verse 1, **now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year**, that this chapter is not chronological with what we've just read in chapter 20. Biblical writers often do this in order to summarize or highlight some

truth in the lives of the God's people. So this happened sometime earlier in the narrative of David's life. And as David was praying— isn't it a beautiful description of prayer to say that he **David sought the face of the Lord?**—he hears the voice of God saying, "**There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death**" (v. 1). Way back in Joshua 9 the Gibeonites tricked Israel to enter into a covenant with them, although the Lord had commanded Joshua to defeat them in battle. Yet once a covenant was made in the name of the Lord it had to be kept. That's what they remind David of in verse 2: **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.** But even as Joshua had said in Joshua 9:20, if they violated this covenant there would be wrath on them from the Lord. This three-year famine is the wrath of God upon Israel in the days of David.

We don't think in these terms, but think of it like when there is a problem in your relationship with your spouse, or your family, or at work. You have done something to cause strife between the two of you. It's like there is a heavy weight upon you or a wall between you. And what's the only way to get rid of that weight or wall? You have to go them, confess and repent, and make amends, right? Children, if you hit your brother or sister, what do you have to do? You have to go up to them, say you're sorry, ask for forgiveness, and give them a big hug, don't you? But here we're talking about the ultimate strife between God and sinners.

So David goes to the Gibeonites and asks, **“How shall I make atonement?”** This is a Hebrew word related to the “mercy seat” on top of the Ark of the Covenant, where blood was sprinkled to turn away or propitiate the wrath of God. And notice their answer back: **“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”** (v. 4). They recognize that it’s not a matter of money but a matter of blood. A humans has sinned, this sinner must die! But there’s a problem: Saul is dead. So they ask David to give them **seven of his sons...so that we may hang them before the Lord** (v. 6). And David does this in verse 8, sparing Mephibosheth **because of the oath of the Lord that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul** (v. 7).

“But that’s not fair!” You should be thinking that. After all, earlier passages in the law of God like Deuteronomy 24 say that fathers are not to be put to death for their children’s sin and children are not to be put to death for their father’s sin. But here’s how we see Deuteronomy 24 and 2 Samuel 21 come together. Deuteronomy 24 is talking about individuals like you and me. Saul, however, is not a mere individual. Saul is what is called a “public person;” as king he represents the kingdom, the entire land and the entire people. What he does affects everyone else.

Are you into 24 and Jack Bauer like I am? Maybe not, but this past season the whole story was about a terrorist whose husband was killed in a drone strike authorized by the President and because of that she hijacked U.S. drones and began attacking London, where the President was visiting. The only way to end the

terrorism was for the President to turn himself into the terrorist, stand at the center of a soccer field, and be executed by a drone strike himself.

Back to our text, it was because of Saul's sin that everyone was now under the curse of his guilt. Saul sort of looks back to Adam in that sense as well as looks forward to Jesus in that sense. And because Saul tried to execute a holy war on all Gibeonites, David reverses this in a representative way by giving the Gibeonites seven—the number of completion—of Saul's family in response.¹ The end result is that sin, death, and the means of turning away wrath are heinous things, aren't they.

This story illustrates for us a much larger biblical truth that by death, the wrath of God is propitiated. Here in 2 Samuel 21 we have one man's sin, the sin of Saul. And because of his one sin, all those whom he represents experience the consequences of a dreadful three-year famine. From the beginning of Scripture God has made clear that the one man, Adam, sinned, and that his one sin leads to all his posterity being guilty before God. And because we are guilty in this one sin—let alone all our own actual sins—our guilt results in the wrath of God coming upon us. Now, you may feel this is not “fair” or that this is “unjust,” but biblically-speaking, if Adam would have been obedient all his posterity would have had eternal life and not eternal death because of Adam's one act of obedience. And the same is true in Jesus Christ, because of his obedience on the cross, Paul says in Romans 5 that we have life. We did nothing to deserve it; we didn't do the work

¹ Leithart, 296.

ourselves, but Jesus did it for us. Biblical-speaking, public persons like Adam, Saul, and Jesus represent others for good or for bad. That's how God has ordered the world.

So we have one man's sin leading to wrath upon all the people he represents. And the only way to turn that wrath away so that the blessings of God would once again he experienced is through sacrifice. The Gibeonites recognized that; David recognized that. And again, from the beginning, God signified this truth when he came to sinful, cowering Adam and Eve and covered them in animal skins from animals that he had sacrificed. Later, all the sacrifices of the Old Testament tabernacle and temple ritually covered the people from the wrath of God. But here's where the real problem or the real injustice lies. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away even one sin. Why? Because the animals that were sacrificed didn't sin, we, like all those who brought the sacrifices, sinned. And the biblical truth is that because we are sinners, have offended a holy God, and have therefore deserved his wrath upon us, we alone must make amends or die.

This is why Jesus Christ came to the world. We are a world of helpless people. I recently watched a short video of a helicopter dropping food and water in Northern Iraq to the thousands of people who have run for their lives from lovers of death. Once the helicopter landed, hundreds and hundreds of people ran for it in the hope of being rescued. Quickly the men had to close the doors after taking in a few. Now imagine that on a global scale throughout history! We are a helpless people because our sins have incurred guilt and the wrath *of God*, not merely the

wrath of men.

But Jesus Christ has come as the second Adam. Adam sinned and brought guilt, death, and condemnation upon us. But Jesus has come as a representative to bring forgiveness, life, and justification to us. He has come as a human, for humans, because we humans have sinned. And he offers himself in our place, like all those Old Testament animal sacrifices, yet not as an animal, but as a holy, obedient, perfect, righteous, sinless, and spotless man. And to turn away God's wrath from us, God the Father himself offers up his only Son. He didn't ask us to send the seven greatest men the world has ever known to be sacrificed for us. No! He sent his Son for us! In 1 Peter, Peter says some beautiful words that summarize all this. Let me read them to you with some elaboration in light of our text: "knowing that you"—*sinful and guilty offspring of Adam*—"were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold"—*not by sacrificing an animal, someone else on your behalf, or even yourself*—but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18–19). We sing of our Savior when we say of ourselves in the words of the hymn:

Not what my hands have done
Can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears
Can bear my awful load.²

² From the hymn, "Not What My Hands Have Done," in *Psalter Hymnal* #389:1.