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The Cost of Sin II Samuel 21:1-14

Intro: If you were to jump from II Sam 20 over to I Kings 1-2, you would have a smooth & uninterrupted narrative explaining how Solomon came to succeed David as king of Israel. For many OT scholars, ch21-24 of II Sam merely serve as an unnecessary intrusion into the comfortable flow of the story of that Succession. Why did the writer have to reach into the misc. file & tack on these seemingly unrelated anecdotes & mess up a perfectly fine account?

Well, everyone has their own sacred cows (especially theologians) but if you've been studying with us thru the OT, you should know by now that nothing has been included into the biblical text by accident or to just take up space. If it is in the Bible, it's there for a reason. These last 4 chapters are often seen as a collection of fragments, but they're also seen as a carefully organized collection of fragments. The various parts of this last section are arranged in a deliberate structure which assures us the writer had a definite purpose for including them. In keeping with the focus of the rest of II Sam, the writer gives us a final perspective of God's kingdom as it is represented by David's kingdom. He's showing us how we are to consider the kingdom of YAHWEH as it is structured under His anointed king David.

1-2- Before we launch into the text, let's talk about chronology. Vs1 reports on a famine that occurred "**in the days of David.**" This type of general time reference allows us to assume that this famine did not necessarily follow the events of ch20. The writer merely states that it occurred sometime during David's reign. The only clue we're given of a time frame is that it happened after David brought Mephibosheth to Jerusalem. Thus, it takes place after II Sam 9.

Something is not right here; there's a famine in Israel. Now, a famine can happen anywhere but they were not supposed to happen in Israel. YAHWEH had promised His people that if they obeyed Him, He would bless them; but if they refused to obey, He would curse them & 1 of those curses was drought & famine. This is no ordinary dry period, this lasted 3 yrs! Clearly, Israel's under the curse for some covenant failure but who knows

what it could be? David didn't! Because David was "out of the loop" on this, he began to seek the Lord & guess what? **YAHWEH** answered him(**1b**)!

Gibeonites are Canaanites who tricked Israel's leaders into making a covenant of peace with them (**Josh 9**). Tho they did it by deception, Israel's leadership did swear in **YAHWEH's name** to preserve them. Thus, when it came out that they were pagan residents of Canaan & deserved to be destroyed, Israel had no choice but to grant them immunity. Since Joshua could not destroy them, he made them woodcutters & water carriers for the tabernacle in perpetuity. Now, fast-forward a few centuries. It seems that Saul, in a fit of pro-Israel fervor, had attempted to wipe them out. We don't know when this occurred in Saul's reign; we wouldn't even know that it had occurred but for this passage.

If Saul's life was puzzling, his religious life was even more so. In order to appear godly, Saul made some ridiculous vows that nobody should make, let alone try to keep. Yet, when given the chance, he **refused** to obey the clear commandments of the Lord. God commanded him to completely wipe out the Amalekites & he didn't do it; now we find out he tried to exterminate the Gibeonites, a people he had no business attacking. With Saul, it was all for show.

So, centuries later, Saul wants to clear out non-Israelites; what's the big deal? Saul **violated** Israel's oath! When you swear an oath in **YAHWEH's** name & then **violate** it, you **discredit** **YAHWEH's** reputation. Your actions say God cannot be trusted, that His name guarantees nothing. In essence it's taking His name in vain! At the same time, swearing an oath in **YAHWEH's** name means you're asking **YAHWEH** to bring the covenant curses upon you if you fail to keep your part of the covenant. That's what's happening here. Saul's religious fervor violated the covenant; **YAHWEH's** famine is the just curse for the violation. The Lord's name has been **desecrated** & the curse is applied to Israel & Saul's family.

Full disclosure: we're in for a horrible story, but do we notice how God pours out His **mercy** right at the start? **How**? He doesn't keep David guessing. When David seeks Him, He reveals the problem plainly. God's not cruel; He doesn't leave David (& Israel) hanging, wondering what failure caused the famine. God reveals the guilt which can then be addressed & hopefully, atoned for. God's mercy makes guilt clear. His kindness is the mercy of

clarity!

3-9- David knows what the problem is, but what's the solution? That's what he asks the Gibeonites. They stated that they weren't seeking punitive damages (\$) or direct retribution (**eye-for-eye**). No, for them, the only way to seek justice against Saul was thru his descendents. David consents, picks the doomed & turns them over. The Gibeonites then carry out their ghastly task – they impale Saul's hapless descendents on the hill in Gibeah **before the Lord**.

Of course, this shocks us! Our culture teaches us there's always a way to solve a problem that will suite all parties but that's **our** western mind-set. Like the congressman who asked why Arabs & Jews couldn't settle their differences like good Christians! In this particular case, a nice, tidy solution was impossible for 2 basic reasons: **blood & wrath**.

1st) Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites polluted the land with their innocent blood (**Num 35:33**). **2nd**) Saul's actions violated a covenant oath. When Israel's leaders swore this oath, they asked **YAHWEH** to bring His wrath upon them if they ever broke their word & that wrath would be deadly! Joshua didn't just make a covenant; he cut a covenant with the Gibeonites. They took an animal, cut it right down the middle (stem to stern), laid the pieces opposite each other & walked between them, all the while, asking that the same exact thing be done to whomever violated that covenant. The Gibeonites were now demanding that this curse be carried out & God's **wrath** sided with their request. Now, God's **wrath** must be appeased, satisfied (**propitiated**). The curse of the covenant **must** be carried out.

None of this changes the fact that, no matter who you are, this is a horrific story! But, instead of getting offended, we should note that this is the primary application of the text – atonement is horrible, it's gruesome! It's not meant to be enjoyable, it's always gory. Atonement is not just a doctrine, an abstract concept to be studied & explained. It's nasty & repulsive. The Israelite worshipper knew this; every time he brought a young bull to the tabernacle for sacrifice he had to slit its throat, skin it, cut it in pieces & wash the insides & legs = all mess & gore. From **Lev 1** all the way to Calvary, God's always shown us that atonement is a dripping, bloody, smelly business. It must be so! The severity of atonement points to the seriousness of sin. The smell of death hangs wherever the wrath of God's been

quenched.

But, amidst all the horror of covenant curses & atonement for sin, there is still some divine light & love to be found.

7- Lord's oath points back to **1 Sam 20** to the covenant between Jonathan & David; where David promised to show devoted love to Jonathan's descendants. David was faithful to that promise in **2 Sam 9** & his fidelity continues here. **Vs7** is important because it stands in contrast: Saul violated the Lord's covenant but David kept the Lord's covenant. In the midst of a passage focused on the tragic fallout of covenant-breaking, we're given an example of covenant-keeping. Here is a king who keeps covenant. Meph was prime candidate for suffering but David was committed to his safety.

David's covenant had drawn a circle of security around Jonathan's son. But, David's determined commitment is just a small glimpse of the unwavering faithfulness of David's greatest descendant: **Jesus**, who promises: that He'll **lose none** of all those His Father has given him (**Jn 6:39**); to **protect** His people from the evil one (**Jn 17:11-12**); that no one can snatch His sheep out of His hand (**Jn 10:28**). This is the blessing of the new covenant: we enter into it by accepting Jesus into our hearts as Savior but He is tasked with meeting all requirements & bestowing all benefits.

10-14- Here we see the sorrow of love. The executions been carried out & the bodies are set up on stakes. Rizpah, mother of 2 of them, decides to camp out at the site to keep the vultures & predators from tearing up the bodies. She couldn't prevent the executions nor the exposure of the corpses but she'll do what she can: guard & defend the rotting flesh of her dear sons around the clock. We don't know how long she did this. It seems the bodies were exposed until the rains came signaling not just the end of the drought but the satisfaction of God's wrath. David heard of Rizpah's devotion & was moved to action. He collected the bones of Saul & Jonathan from Jabesh-Gilead & along with the remains of the 7; he gave them a proper burial in their own home town in the territory of Benjamin.

I can't image what horror Rizpah endured to accomplish her labor of love. The thought is both so sad & horrific, how can the writer include this here? we must assume that the writer tells this solemn story because he wants us to be solemn. He wants us to be sad over this & to ruminate in that sadness.

Why wallow in this heart-wrenching misery? Because the point should pierce our hearts: ***this*** is what results from covenant-breaking: **death, corruption & unimaginable sorrow.**

The psalmist asks a rhetorical question in **Ps 90:11** "**Who knows (considers) the power of your anger?**" Who ever stops to consider the wrath of God? Almost no one! But we should because it will do us some good. See, until we begin to wrestle with the breadth of God's wrath against sin, we'll never fully comprehend the depth of God's love for sinners (**I Jn 4:10**). Rizpah acted out of maternal love & loyalty for Saul's family but God's love is without reason or condition. As sinners, God rightly regarded us as worthy targets for His judgment (wrath). We were rebels & enemies of God, even if we didn't know it. But on the cross, Jesus took the punishment that our sin rightly deserved. His sacrifice turned away the judgment we would have received. Only when we begin to understand the horror that sin brings can we better comprehend the great lengths God went to in order to extend His love, grace & mercy towards us.

There's still a problem to address with this text. The Mosaic Law stipulated that a child should never bear the punishment for the sin of their father, so why's it happening here with God's approval? 1st) That particular law dealt with individual criminal cases but this situation is much broader in scope. Saul didn't attack the Gibeonites as an individual, he was king of Israel. As king, his actions had an official character. As king, he represented the entire nation. Thus, his offence, tho committed by him personally, was a national sin not just an individual's sin. The entire nation of Israel fell under God's judgment because of the sinful actions of her king in breaking the Lord's covenant.

This same principle applies to all humanity. Tho none of us were around when Adam sinned, he was the representative head for all of man kind. When he chose to sin, the curse of sin (**susceptibility**) passed to all humanity. No one is born innocent; we all face the judgment of a broken covenant. But, we are not without hope. Jesus, by His blood, offers us a place in His new covenant. His death on the cross makes it possible for us to enter into it.

So, the choice for humanity is clear: continue to stand in violation of God's covenant & face the terrible judgment that will result it that or run to the

safety & security of the new covenant. Of course, it will require doing something about our sin nature, but the Lord will take care of that as well (**John 1:7**) *For if we walk in the light as He is in the light , we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.* 😊