

The Life of David

Week 12: Power of a Covenant

2 Samuel 21:1-14

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- November 12, 2023

In our story of David we're going to look at, honestly, a strange and shocking story that has a very powerful lesson and every potential to change our lives. It's in 2 Samuel 21, but I would encourage you to not even go there. This is a story to be told and we'll get lost if we're fiddling around trying to follow along. I'm just going to tell you the story as I would like to. Think of it as a movie. And if I were directing the movie, I would start at the end. I would start at the very end in 2 Samuel 21:10.

And this is the prelude. The scene opens in a city called Gibeah. It's the capital city of a province. It's just north of Jerusalem. It's in the hills. It's just before dawn. Gibeah ... Gibeah of Saul. And this region is receiving the first rain it's had in three years. And as the sun comes up the clouds part. And as they part, you see on the highest hill the silhouettes of seven men hanging or impaled--executed. And the people of Gibeah have grown callous to seeing these corpses. They've been rotting for months.

And there's a lesson there, though. Why were seven men publicly executed? What lesson are they and their bodies trying to stream at us? Here's what happens. They're going to reveal to us an attribute or an attitude that Jehovah has. We're going to see a value and a powerful lesson to all who follow Christ. And that powerful lesson is quite likely to change our lives. That's how it ends.

Act One

Here's how it begins. Act One, 1000 BC. Just a few months earlier (that was in June, this is maybe April), and in chapter 21, verse 2, we look at the land around us and it is parched. It's West Texas dead. The ground is cracked and you could fall into the cracks themselves. And we're at the palace of David, and this is the context of our story.

2 Samuel 21:1a

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year.

It says, “And now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year.” Look, there’s a drought and a famine, but that’s what happens in the Middle East. That’s what the Middle East does. But this is different, because it says it’s not like the other ones. It’s been three years, year after year.

2 Samuel 21:1b

And David sought the face of the Lord. And the Lord said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.”

And so, David the king realizes, I think it’s the very hand of God doing this. So, he is inspired to ask the Lord. So, the next verses say, “So David sought the face of Jehovah. And Jehovah said, ‘There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.’” It’s the bloodlust of the first and former king, Saul. And when it says he put the Gibeonites to death, some translations will say that he destroyed them, he decimated them, he tried to wipe them out. And because of what Saul had done years before, all of Israel, the nation of Israel, is in a three-year famine. Everybody’s paying.

So, you’re thinking, *Well, who are the Gibeonites and why does God care so much about them? I mean, Saul has killed his thousands. We all know the song “Saul Has Killed His Thousands.” That’s what kings do. That’s why we needed a king in the first place.*

So, if you look carefully at your Bibles in 2 Samuel 21, particularly when it says the Gibeonites have been put to death by Saul, look at the cross-reference there. You’ll zoom in and it will say that you need to go to Joshua 9.

Act Two

That’s Act Two. The year is 1500 BC, it is 500 years earlier. And this is Joshua, so this is what is called “The Conquest” period of time. And in this place during this time, Joshua and

Caleb are leading a blitzkrieg across Canaan to take the land that was promised to Abraham. He's going to occupy that. The place where we're meeting here is a place called Gilgal. It's just west of the Jordan River and just at the very top of the Dead Sea. And that's base camp. When all of Israel comes over they stop right there. That's where they're going to do all their maneuvers. And inside the middle of that camp is a tent, and Joshua and Caleb are planning their next move. They've taken Jericho—it's leveled to the ground. Ai has been defeated, absolutely destroyed. And now they're thinking, *Let's move west to the Mediterranean Sea and divide and conquer, and we'll take the land for the glory of God.*

Now while all of that is happening in Gilgal, meanwhile, the coastal kingdoms—six of them—have conspired together to form a confederation. They're going to work together to fight Joshua, because they know he's coming and they don't have a chance to defeat him by themselves. So, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. That's what the coastal plain is going to do. But between Gilgal and the Mediterranean the next stop is a region called Gibeah. It's a town, but it's also a region. And they're going to try a different strategy. Those villages get their leaders together, and the passage says "they acted with cunning." The leaders say, "Look, this is what we're going to do. Pack up, we're going on a trip. Here's how we're going to do it. We're going to saddle our tired donkeys with worn-out sacks for the donkeys. And then, I want you to get worn-out wineskins, those that have been torn and patched over. I want you to get your shoes—go back to Goodwill, pick them up again—I want the worn-out shoes. And the clothes that you wear need to be worn out." (Four times "worn out" is used.) And he says, "Go into your hamper there, the stuff in the very back, and get some of that old, moldy, flaky bread. We're going to load that up. And our only hope is this. We can't beat them on a battlefield; maybe we can beat them on a chessboard. Maybe we can outthink General Joshua."

So, they ride up to Gilgal from Gibeah. They ride up to Gilgal and they say to Joshua, "Hey, we're from a far-off country. Make a covenant with us right now."

So, Joshua says, "Wait a minute ... who are you? And if you live close by, we're not going to make a covenant with you."

And they said, "But we're your servants."

And Joshua says, "Yeah, but who are you and where are you from?"

And they respond by saying, "We're from a very distant country. And we're your servants. We've heard about all of your exploits and how many victories you've had. We heard

about what happened in Egypt, how you defeated the Egyptians, and all that really crazy, great military stuff east of the Jordan River. We don't know anything about any recent battles—Jericho and Ai—because we're from a far-off land." They don't even mention recent battles. "We took a long journey. Make a covenant with us."

And then they say, "Look at the evidence. Look at our provisions. Look at the bread. It was right out of the oven when we left, and now look at it—it's flaky and dry. Our wineskins were brand new and they were filled to the top, and now they're torn and patched. Look at our shoes and our clothing—they're also worn out. So, make a covenant with us."

Joshua 9:14-15

So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the Lord. ¹⁵ And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them.

The music changes. It becomes harrowing. And this is what happens in Joshua 9:14: "So the men took some of the provisions"—they're looking at the evidence—"but they did not ask counsel from Jehovah. And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them."

Two points of interest—one, Joshua did not consult the Lord on this. And the second one is they made a covenant with the Gibeonites.

So, let's look at the word "covenant." A covenant is an agreement between two people. It can be pretty simple. It's a contract in some respects. It's between two people. But what makes it different is that there's an appeal to a higher source to enforce or to ensure that all the promises are made. Sometimes it was the local mayor, sometimes it's the king himself. But in a covenant with God, you swear to God. You swear to Jehovah that you will fulfill all the promises that you make. And that's what we're talking about here. Joshua says, "I swear to Jehovah we will let you live." That's what happens.

Three days later the front of Israel is moving to the west. And the next town they come to is Gibeah. And all the Gibeonites out there run out to meet them. "Hey, hi, Joshua! Remember us? They're waving their contract. Remember the covenant you made with us? Yeah."

So, the soldiers are arming up and saying, “Let’s destroy these people.” And here’s the line: *No, we can’t, because we made a covenant. We swore to Jehovah not to touch them.* “Let them live, lest the wrath be upon us, because we made an oath to Jehovah.” The soldiers are not amused. They are mad.

Joshua goes and sits down with the leaders of Gibeah and says, “Why? Why did you lie to us and tell us that you’re from a far-off country?”

And they just said, “Really?”

He said, “We’re going to make you our servants. Forever you’re going to be our woodcutters and our water haulers.”

And they said, “Okay, yeah. Because you were going to kill us. You could not be defeated. The hand of God is upon you. So our only hope was to become woodcutters and water haulers. And we’re okay with that, because now we get to live.”

And then they end with this: “But, behold, in your hands we have placed our faith. Do whatever is right in your own eyes.”

And Joshua said, “Aww, man ...” He knows he can’t do anything because he has made a covenant before God.

And so, this scene ends with the Gibeonites cutting wood and hauling water with a little smirk on their faces, because they outwitted this master general. And they are going to be in the protective custody of Israel forever. That’s who the Gibeonites are. That’s Act Chapter Two.

Act Three

Let’s go to Act Chapter Three. We’re back now at the palace 500 years later, 1000 BC. And David realizes what is happening. Remember what we call Saul—Gibeah of Saul? Saul of Gibeah? He grew up in Gibeah. Gibeah is part of the Benjamin area. The Gibeonites live there. That’s where Saul spent his life. That’s where he ran his kingdom from—in Gibeah under a tree. And he grew up with these woodcutters and these water haulers everywhere with a smirk all the time. Those people were the stench of his town. And when he became king—what’s the purpose of power unless you’re going to abuse it? So, he started slaughtering the Gibeonites to rid the land of them. It says he struck them down with zeal.

And so, David goes to the leaders of the Gibeonites, now that he realizes what's going on, and he says, "What can we do to atone for what the house of Saul has done so that you may bless Jehovah?"

And the Gibeonite leaders say, "Look, as far as atonement goes, it's not about gold and silver. Our problem is with the house of Saul."

And David says, "Okay, what do you want me to do?"

2 Samuel 21:5-6

They said to the king, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord." And the king said, "I will give them."

And here's their answer: "They said to the king, 'The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before Jehovah at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen one of the Lord.' And the king said, 'I will give them to you.'"

And so, now at high noon on the highest hill in the hill country of Gibeah, all the Gibeah townspeople gathered together to see the righteousness of God, the justice of God, shown on that hilltop, where it says, "And the seven men perished together." "The seven men hung together." Other translations say, "The seven men were impaled together."

2 Samuel 21:14b

And after that God responded to the plea for the land.

The point? It is a solemn ritual act of execution imposed for breach of covenant. Yeah, it's an execution. It's a public execution. And because of that, the atonement was made. And the last sentence in our story here is this: "And after that God responded to the plea for the land." And it began to rain again.

That's how our story ends, with the seven men on the hill.

Application #1: Marriage Covenant

And so, what's the obvious application for our learning time today? Don't go killing any Gibeonites, not even if you're king. But I bet there's something bigger than that.

Let me summarize. Seven men are publicly executed for a covenant that was made 500 years earlier. And that covenant was based upon a lie. This is the cost of crossing even a careless covenant.

The powerful lesson is God's view of a covenant. The powerful lesson is this: God's view of a covenant, a promise made between two people where they appeal to God to be the enforcer of the promises that each one makes.

Can you think of a covenant that we might involve ourselves in today? See if this helps to bring something to mind when you swear to Jehovah to judge over you.

Jack, Jill, would you please turn and face one another? Jack, repeat after me.

I, Jack, take you, Jill, to be my wedded wife

To have and hold from this day forward,

For better, or worse,

For richer, for poorer,

In sickness and in health,

To love and to cherish

Till death do us part.

Jill, will you repeat after me?

And after that there's an appeal to the audience, and it goes like this:

As witnesses, I charge you all to hold Jack and Jill to the vows of this covenant that they have made before God and before man today.

Is there a sign of the covenant that you're making? Because throughout the Bible, the Lord always leaves us with a reminder, a sign. Oh, they have chosen rings. And let the purity of the metal that's been refined by fire represent the purity and the love they have for one another and the love that God has for them.

Jack, take this ring and place it on Jill's finger and repeat after me.

I give you this ring

as a symbol of my lifelong commitment to you,

With all that I am and all that I have

I give myself to you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Jill Yes.

Our marriage vows are a covenant before God where we call upon Him to oversee and enforce and keep us true to our words. And I must say, after thirty-eight years of marriage, when you say and hear those words in the vows, you don't know what you're talking about. Am I right? Can I hear an amen? Yeah, sure, for better? Yeah, that's going to be awesome. For worse? Ummm ... But when we love our mate in the worst, that's when we honor the marriage covenant. For richer ... I can live with that. But for poorer? That's when we worship God by showing our commitment to the covenant promises that we made in His name.

In sickness ... you mean like the cold and the flu? Well, yes, but a lot more than that. And when a mate cares and serves and loves and becomes a medical technician in ways that they never thought they could or ever wanted to; when that happens, that's when you're becoming like Christ in your marriage covenant.

I thought one of the applications we could have for today is, for those of you who have been married for some time, maybe in the next two days, just sit across the table or next to each other and maybe inventory the times that your mate has fulfilled the vows of your marriage covenant. Remember the time when we were really poor and you never held it against me? Remember the time when I was really sick and you cared for and nurtured me? I think it would be a good thing and would encourage one another in how you've practiced the marriage covenant and honored that. And maybe that could inspire you to go forward in the same way.

The marriage vows are a covenant before the Lord. And is it any wonder that when Jesus talks about the marriage covenant, He says that it is very difficult to dissolve this union. There are a few exceptions, but you made promises. You asked God to oversee this. Careful.

I think a second application is how we don't honor our marriage vows--when we put something or someone in front of that covenant. Something or someone is more important than your mate.

I remember when I was in my late thirties to early forties—admittedly, those are the grinding years of life in a lot of different ways, but particularly in careers. And that was the case here. And I was working all the time. And Melinda was trapped because I was serving the Lord and His church. She can't complain too loud. But she was clearly not first. And I say that because I didn't know what to do, because the demands that I had and the vows that I had made. So, I sought out the wisdom of four men who had spent some time with me who were considerably older and knew what to do.

One of them said this, and I felt it was particularly insightful. He said, "Look, Melinda knows that these are the grinding years. And it's not that you're spending too much time at work. It's that work is first. And once she finds out that she is first and work is second, she won't be nearly as upset with your time away. It's who is first in your life. Who is the first love of your life?"

A mate should never feel jealous about your career because you're responsible for your work ethic to God. You're responsible to God for that. But you never made a covenant with God about your work ethic. And oddly enough, because those are difficult years, I felt jealous towards my children. I felt like I was not first in Melinda's life. And we had to sit down and say, "What can we do to help you convince me that I'm first in your life?" We worked through that. But I needed to know that. And a person should never feel jealous towards their family, towards their children. Because, while we're responsible for our children unto the Lord, we never swore a covenant to God like our marriage vows.

So, our marriage vows are a covenant before God. And is it any wonder here at Grace Covenant Church that we look at our marriage vows and say, "How can we help people become like Christ in their marriage?"

Our premarital counseling ministry—if you're not married yet and you're looking to get engaged, you should get involved. For twenty years we wrote our own curriculum. It didn't seem like there was another resource available, so we did our own. And now there are better curricula out there.

We have a ministry called ReEngage, and do you know why? Because we value the marriage covenant and we want people to become like Christ in their marriage vows. And we have people who work there and serve other people who are coming.

Our adult Sunday school classes, our various Bible studies work in curriculum so that we can honor our marriage covenants. And so, I think even today, one of the assets that we have at Grace Covenant Church that is absolutely priceless is this: we have multigenerational wisdom cascading down. And if you've been married for more than eight years, you could be a premarital counselor. You and your husband—you and your wife. You could team up. Our premarital counseling is better than professional counseling, and here's why. Because professional counseling might say more stuff and better stuff, but after the last lesson you're done. At Grace you become connected to your premarital counselor. You might become friends and mentors for life. And that shows itself to be a stronger influence over time.

Do not get engaged, do not get married without premarital counseling. Maybe some of you could consider joining our premarital counseling. Our ReEngage ministry is cascading wisdom, generational wisdom. If you've been married for a certain amount of time, not too many years, and you want to go to ReEngage and learn what they have, and then circle back around and become a giver. Why don't you consider being involved in our marriage ministries, and then mentoring in our marriage ministries? That's the power of what we have going on at Grace Covenant Church—so many different ages that have so many different stories about how to win in a marriage, and also, how not to lose—let's put it that way—how not to put work or children in front of your mate.

Application #2: Salvation Covenant

The marriage vows are a covenant before God. That's a lesson in 2 Samuel 21. But here's another one that I go to quite frequently. Remember, the lesson is about God's view of a covenant. The powerful lesson here that can change our lives is God's view of a covenant. And I go to this passage and another one in Genesis to remind myself of the salvation covenant that we have before God. If you understand the salvation covenant, you know that if we sincerely accept what He's promising to us, He can and will completely absolve us of our previous sins by covering them with His blood, and then give us His righteousness. We inherit His righteousness. And He proves that by His death on the cross and His resurrection. If we just honestly and sincerely receive that ... if you understand the salvation covenant and then God's commitment to covenants, the salvation covenant is that God is the only one making promises. God swears by His own name. He goes through and says, *I swear by my own name that you are mine.*

And I love the lesson here about God's commitment to His covenant because it stabilizes where I'm putting my hope—not on my conduct or on my whimsical commitment levels that vacillate, but on His promise and His promise alone.

This also comes up when ... being in a church this big for many years, I've seen some beautiful children give their lives over to Christ in their teenage years, and then sometimes they go off and they play the prodigal son or the prodigal daughter. And in the story of the prodigal, the story ends too soon. And it's in the midst of that that our lives are lost. And so often people who don't understand the power of covenant start doubting and they start wondering. *How's this end and where is He going to be?* I just go back to this. I think, *What are we looking for?* That person's conduct? Or God's commitment to covenant? God is the promise keeper. His words will never fail. It's a grace covenant. Will someone name a church after that? Anyone? It's a grace covenant. And He swore by His own name that He would give us this gift of salvation. So, we forget that. In the storms of life, we take our eyes off the lighthouse that is stable and true, and we look at the waves around us, and we start to panic. We become victims, like a flag flapping around wherever the wind is blowing it, instead of focusing on the promises of God, the pole that never moves. His promises never fail.

We are fragile souls. We forget God's commitment to covenant and the details of the covenant that He made with us, the promises that He made. And when Jesus was here, He made promises about our past, about our present, about our future. He said, *Listen, your past is gone. You are a new creature.* He says about our present, *I will never leave you and I will never forsake you.* And then He makes a promise to our future when He says, *I will return. It will not be in a manger. I won't be riding a donkey. I'll be riding a warhorse, and when I come I will return to bring justice. I will bring justice, and the oppressed will finally be set free and the poor will be made well, and there won't be any more tears.* Those are the promises that Jesus made, and He swore by His own name.

And yet we keep forgetting. Jesus, in His mercy, said, *Can I help you remember? Can I give you a symbol of the covenant?*

Yeah, we'd like that.

And so, He gives us the Lord's table, where He reminds us of the promises that He's made about our past, our present, and our future.

My friend Jason Jupe is going to lead us in that after our prayer time. I hope you had a life-changing lesson today about God's view of covenant. I hope that it affects your future marriage or your current one. And I hope sincerely that it radically alters the way you view your salvation. God made promises and you didn't. You just received them. And He's the promise keeper, and His words never fail.

Let's praise God for that.

Lord, Holy Father, we are grateful that You have laid out such a strange story in Holy Writ that we might know Your value of covenants and what You mean and what it says to us. Lord, I'd ask that You would help us apply this passage in our lives this very day, in maybe the way we've been neglecting our promises that we made on that wedding day; that we might fulfill them as being selfless and sacrificial in our love for our mate like we promised, like we swore to You we would do.

Lord, I'd ask that You would give us the ability to courageously encourage our mates when they are loving us in the way that they have promised; that that might inspire them to become like Christ in our marriage vows.

Lord, I especially ask that You would return this somewhat strange story to have this powerful lesson so that our lives might be changed by Your grace covenant relationship with us. You swore by Your name, Jehovah God, that You would save us if we sincerely receive by faith the promise of Christ's death and resurrection, the redemption of sins, and the giving of righteousness. We celebrate who You are, and not who we are. We celebrate You as the Rock. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.