

The Cost of Promise Breaking, the Price of Mercy 2 Samuel 21:1-14

Psalm 90:11 *“Who considers the power of your **anger**, and your **wrath** according to the fear of you?”*

Introduction: “Contracts are like hearts: *they are made to be broken*”. If you’ve been on the receiving end of this statement, you may have twitched a little bit. There is irony in the statement, obviously, since a contract by definition is intended to be entered into to give **mutual assurance** that both parties would live up to whatever agreement is made. But someone can easily get out of a contract, either by paying a fine or daring the other to pursue litigation, and thus most contracts are only worth the integrity of the one signing it.

One of the most iron clad contracts Americans could enter into is that of a **marriage covenant**, since it is NOT a social construct but a Biblical creation. When Adam proclaimed, *“This is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”* (Gen. 2:23) when he saw Eve, he entered into marriage with her using covenant language that would be adopted by David with the nation of Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-5). This covenant was NOT made with the governing authorities or the law of the land, but before God alone. And God is clear about making vows or covenants before Him:

Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 *“When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”*

Up until 1969, the US honored this in principle, since to get a divorce required proof of fault by one party before a judge who could, often reluctantly, grant it. The basis would have to prove of infidelity, abuse, or sin that satisfied the legal standard. But in 1969, a fundamental shift took place from an unlikely source:

California, ever the pioneer, was the first state to legalize no-fault divorce in 1969. Other states followed suit — New York, the last, in 2010, about two whole generations later.

*“Thereafter, **at-fault divorces** could still happen, and they still can. But with no-fault divorces, a couple could split amiably, without accusing or proving anything like bigamy or fraud or abandonment. Under **California no-fault law**, breakups weren’t even called “divorce” anymore, but “**dissolution of marriage**.”*
One becomes two; go in peace.

Ronald Reagan was governor of California when, a few days after Labor Day 1969, **he signed the nation’s first no-fault law**. His statement: *“I believe it is a step towards removing the acrimony and bitterness between a couple that is harmful not only to their children but also to society as a whole.”* Divorce is a “tragic thing,” but the new law will “do much to remove the sideshow elements in many divorce cases.”

Many years before, Reagan had starred in the sideshow. His first wife, actress Jane Wyman, went to court to end their eight-year marriage. She claimed one of the standard grounds for at-fault divorce: an elastic legal term, “extreme mental cruelty.”¹

In a tragic story of *unintended consequences*, this decision created a gateway and proliferation of divorces, and has continued to do so. By making divorce *easier*, there are those who will jettison a covenant relationship for mere selfish motives, which has contributed to **lower marriage rates** among generations to come, cohabitating outside of the marriage covenant, and in reversing God’s intention in marriage.

We come to a concluding section of 2 Samuel, as the last four chapters end the chronological story of David’s life and lay out a type of **wrap-up**. In fact, if we do not understand this shift in writing style, these chapters would be confusing and seemingly a random set of information. It seems clear that the writer uses **inclusio**, a bracketing or bookending device to bring order and emphasis to a section of Scripture. The last four chapters’ highlight **six features** in a clear pattern as follows:

- A. Narrative of Saul’s sin and consequence (21:1-14)
 - B. Lists of battles and heroes against Philistines (21:15-22)
 - C. Poem of David of God’s Deliverance (22:1-51)
 - C. Poem of David’s Last words (23:1-7)
 - B. Lists of battles and heroes against the Philistines (23:8-39)
- A. Narrative of David’s sin and consequence (24:1-24)

Why does this matter? It signals a different emphasis and helps us make sense of what the author intends. Granted, these are challenging chapters, both in content and intention, but we are reminded that all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). In a **brutal** and initially **shocking** narrative, we are reminded once again that life is NOT about us, nor should we put our hope and trust in mankind, but that we rest in the **sovereign hand of God** who does all things for His glory and our good. That’s why this section and the conclusion of the book itself end the same way, with God responding to the plea of the land. (see 2 Sam. 21:14 and 24:25). In the midst of sinful choices, painful consequences, brutal and bloody realities, we see a God of **mercy and grace**, always responding in love **according to His nature**, and One who always keeps His promises.

A Promise Broken (21:1-2)

*Now there was a **famine in the days of David for three years**, year after year. 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.” 2 So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. 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.*

When bad things happen in life, outside of our control or choice, we are left with a bit of a dilemma in our fallible minds. *Where is God in the midst of it?* We know He is sovereign AND good, bringing good

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<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-05-24/california-settled-the-no-fault-divorce-question-decades-ago-why-is-it-back-in-the-news>

gifts AND taking credit for calamity (Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6), and brings trials for our good AND allows Satan to tempt. Though God is not the author of evil (which is contrary to His nature), He works all things out according the purpose of His will for the good of those He's called (Rom. 8:28). So when there is a prolonged or concentrated calamity, we are left to wonder: *what is God doing in and through it?*

Israel, at some point in David's reign (most likely *after* 2 Samuel 9), were faced with a **3 year famine**. Now, if you are familiar with the climate of Israel, you'll know that a stretch of time or even a year without rain is NOT completely unusual, but at 3 years, one begins to wonder. You could imagine David racking his mind as to why, whether there was something going on that he didn't know about or what God was up to. In a demonstration of **trust and faith** (which means it was probably *before* 2 Samuel 12), **he sought the face of the LORD**. This is a great model and example for all when we face unknown pain, uncertain futures, or unwelcome trials. We seek the face of God in **both prayer and His Word**, seeking to remind ourselves of His nature and works, and understanding how He uses trials in our life (see James 1:2-18; 1 Peter. 1:3-9). In God's gracious dealing with David, God answered David's request with a clear answer: *the reason for the famine was sin, and particularly the sin of Saul who put the Gibeonites to death*. This demands some context to understand, so let's look at where this came from.

In **Joshua 9**, Joshua and all of Israel made a short sighted and unwise promise to the **Gibeonites**, primarily because *"they did not ask counsel from the LORD"* (Josh. 9:14). They had just crushed the city of Ai after the demolition of Jericho, and the neighboring nations knew about it and were shaking in their boots. The Gibeonites came to Gilgal, which was only 20 miles away, and presented themselves as coming from hundreds of miles apart. Showing crusty bread and thread bare clothes, Israel believed them and **made, or literally cut, a covenant** with them, swearing allegiance and a promise of non-aggression. The idea of "cutting a covenant" was an animal was cut in two, with each party walking between the pieces, acknowledging that this would happen to them if they broke faith or went back on the promise². After 3 days, Israel heard they had been duped, and though they cursed the people of Gibeon and forced them into service, they **COULD NOT BREAK THE COVENANT** without consequence!

Though this was known, Saul still refused to abide. Saul had a history of making self-driven, seemingly altruistic-yet-very-much-self-seeking decisions (like wiping out all the priests after David was helped by one!). Somewhere along the way in his reign, under the guise of helping Israel, Saul went back on the covenant and **struck down and killed many Gibeonites**. One could imagine the justification: *this was an OLD covenant, I want to help our people NOW, and they are a wicked people, and I want to bring peace and stability in the land!* There may have even been TRUTH in these or other reasons, but that did NOT counteract or nullify a **covenant made before man and God**. This is why "getting out of a marriage" that is unhappy or hard is NOT the will of God, since marriage is a covenant made before man and God, and He takes it seriously.

Atonement Made (21:3-6)

And David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?" 4 The Gibeonites said to him, "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." And he said, "What do you say that I shall do for you?" 5 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, 6 let seven of his sons

² Dale Davis, "2 Samuel: Out of every diversity", p. 267.

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.”

What happened next is understandable disturbing and hard to understand, even causing us to wince backward a bit (and it should). David asked the Gibeonites how Israel was to **“make atonement”**, and their answer did not come back in monetary amount or to go to war, but to have a **representative payment to satisfy the wrong done**. This came in the form of **7 sons/grandsons of Saul** who would be given over to death to atone for what Saul had done to their people, which **both David and God accepted as worthy payment**. This causes considerable questions for us.

1. **How does this square with Deuteronomy 24:16?** *“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.”* It is clear in Scripture that we are NOT beholden to the sins of our parents (see Jer. 31:29-30; Ezek. 18:2-3) and that we can break cycles of generational sin. But here, Saul is not just representing his family but **all of Israel**, and his sin affected the whole, much like Achan in Joshua 7.
2. **The concept of “ATONEMENT” is one of the dearest truths in all of Scripture** – To “atone” means to *“wipe out, cover, erase, or remove”*. Atonement, biblically defined, is the *work of God* (He initiates) *and the process of reconciliation between God and humanity*.
3. **Atonement is necessary because of the break of relationship between humanity and God** – Sin separates us from God, but it does MORE than that. Because we are *dead in our trespasses and sins*, we are **by nature children of wrath** (Eph. 2:3), storing up wrath for the **day of wrath** (Rom. 2:5), when God will give everyone what they deserve according to their works, culminating in people being thrown in the **lake of fire** whose names were not written in the book of life (Rev. 20:11-15).
4. **The OT Law required a life for a life** – Not only would a murderer be put to death (Num. 35:31, 33), but a life was required for a life taken (Deut. 19:21)
5. **Atonement was representative** – In the OT, Israel would participate in the **Day of Atonement** (Lev. 16), where the blood of a goat would be poured on the **mercy seat** once a year as a representative of the sin of the nation, and God would look on the sacrifice as a covering for their sin.
6. **Reconciliation encompassed BOTH propitiation and expiation** – These are two words that will make you smarter than your friends and we’ll explain more in a bit, but for now, understand that **PROPITIATION** – *SATISFACTION, satisfying the demand for the penalty of sin*; **EXPIATION** – *The REMOVAL of sin and GUILT that comes with that sin*.

Atonement was **bloody, messy, gory, horrifying, and representative**. Some have called the Day of Atonement as the OT version of Good Friday. For now, it necessitated that **7 of Saul’s decedents would have to get hung** on the mountain *before the LORD* (a ‘hanged man was cursed by the LORD’ Deut. 21:23). They took **5 grandsons** from Merab and **2 sons** from Rizpah.

Mercy Given (21:7-14)

But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul’s son Jonathan, because of the oath of the LORD that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul

The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite;⁹ and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the LORD, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

*¹⁰ Then **Rizpah** the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day, or the beasts of the field by night. ¹¹ **When David was told what Rizpah** the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, **had done**, ¹² David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. ¹³ And he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and **they gathered the bones of those who were hanged**. ¹⁴ And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father. And they did all that the king commanded. **And after that God responded to the plea for the land.***

In the midst of this bloody and hard scene, we see God's **mercy shine through**. Mercy is where one does NOT receive what he deserves. Here, David spared **Mephibosheth**, since David had made a covenant promise with Jonathan to care for his offspring. We also see the cry of the heart of a devoted mother in **Rizpah**, a concubine of Saul who was given 2 sons by him. Think about this woman who at one point had felt the blessing of the Lord to be brought into the house of the king and was given two princes', and now Saul was dead and her two beloved sons were unceremoniously left outside to die and get pecked at by the birds of the air. In a final act of motherly care, she camped out by the bodies to shew away the birds all day and night until the rains came, giving one last bit of dignity to her cursed yet innocent sons. Upon hearing about this loving deed, David **acted mercifully**, gathering all the bones of the Saul's sons, Jonathan, and Saul himself and buried them together in the tribe of Benjamin. This allowed a family who felt the sting of death in defeat to have a legacy together.

The chapter alludes to the fact that God **responded to the plea of the land** and the rains came. God's mercy delivered, his wrath satisfied, and His love shined through.

At first blush, this is a tough passage to apply, but there are several implications that shine through:

- 1) This is a sobering and solemn text, and it should be felt and understood that way. It is clear that mankind has a problem with taking the fear of the Lord and God's wrath seriously, and these kinds of passages are highly important to consider. Moses understood this when he wrote **Psalms 90:9-11**:

*For all our days pass away under **your wrath**; we bring our years to an end like a sigh.*

¹⁰ The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty;

yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

*¹¹ **Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?***

The consideration of God's anger and wrath should drive us to **fear Him**, and in that fear to run TO Him. *But how do we do that?*

- 2) We run TO God because of the **atoning work of Jesus Christ, whose perfect life produced a substitutionary death, satisfying the wrath of God and reconciling us to Him.** Jesus' death was bloody, gory, and necessary. His death took our place. God poured out His wrath, stored up for us, on Christ, so we are saved FROM the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9). He did this once and for all, since the blood of goats could never accomplish what His blood did (Heb. 9:11-14).

Romans 3:23-25a *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are **justified by his grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a **propitiation by his blood**, to be received by faith."*

This is our hope not only in **justification, but in sanctification, or our progress of holiness:**

1 John 2:1-2 *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an **advocate** with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the **propitiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world"*

- 3) **This was the ultimate expression of love** – God's grace is free in that we cannot earn it, but it was not cheap. The price to be paid for God to give us mercy was the death of an innocent Lamb, the son of God who takes away the sin of the world. This love was not some kind of sentimental, flimsy, emotional, meet-my-felt-needs kind of love. It was love that was willing to pay the ultimate price to offer. Our salvation is NOT God somehow begging us to acknowledge Him, as if He NEEDED US, but Him **pursuing us!** The sobriety that this passage brings is the fact that despite our sin, our broken promises, our deserving of His wrath, He did all the work to reconcile us to Himself. What He demands is that we **believe Him, turn from our sin, ask for forgiveness, and follow Him!** **No one should leave today without first understanding the active love that God has for His own and what He requires for salvation.** Mercy is available and grace is lavished on us in love.

1 John 4:10 *"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that **he loved us and** sent his Son to be the **propitiation** for our sins."*