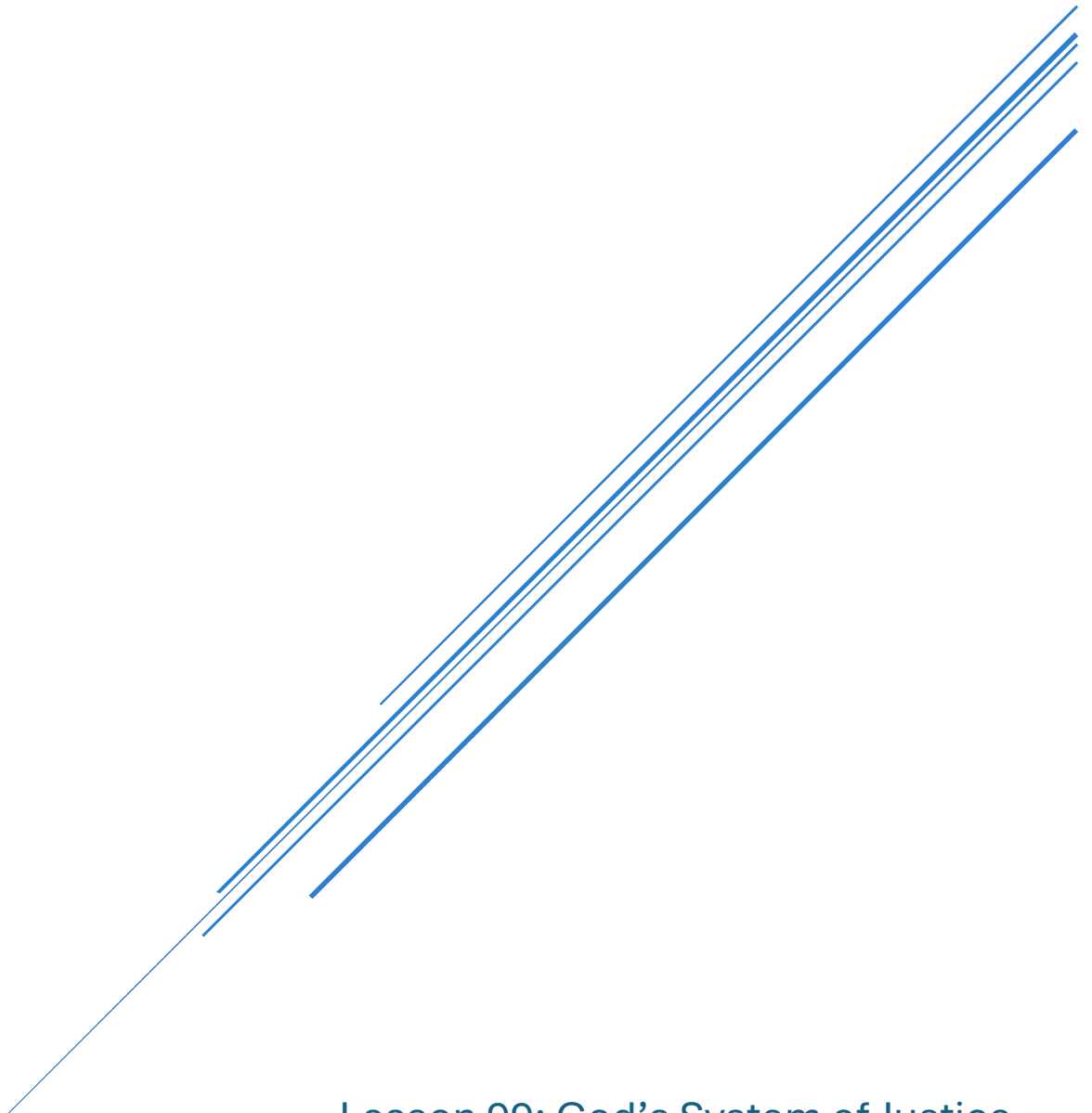


THE KINGDOM, THE BIBLE, & US

Understanding the Bible's story, Jesus' importance, & our place in God's kingdom plan



Lesson 99: God's System of Justice
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Introduction

This lesson explores a very difficult passage to wrap our heads around. We will explore how David handled a three-year famine in Israel. The way it was handled implies God was pleased with the outcome, yet the actions taken by David may strike readers as unethical. This will be a lesson where we take our time to examine the details from the Bible and work out a process to solve this ethical dilemma.

The Three-Year Famine

2 Samuel 21:1

Scholars are not sure as to the timing of this famine. It is possible it happened after the events of Absalom's revolt. However, most believe it happened sometime after David agreed to protect Mephibosheth and before Absalom's revolt. Either option is possible because we know that Hebrew writers did not always care about a chronological retelling of stories. They cared more about convey theology or principles. Thus they often told stories based on the category of teaching it fits within rather than the timing of events.

This famine must have been severe as it lasted for three years. David responded by seeking the Lord on the matter. Notice God's answer, "It is because of Saul and his bloody house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." God warned in the Law of Moses that if Israel violated His commands, then one of the forms of punishment God might bring on Israel would be severe famines (Lev 26:20; Deut 28:18)

God says the reason for the famine is a situation of injustice that has not been addressed. Someone has wronged someone else and there has been no justice issued. The someone is Saul and who he violated are a group of people called the Gibeonites. God says Saul "put the Gibeonites to death." Let's look at this story for context.

The Gibeonites

The Gibeonites are first introduced back in the book of Joshua. In Joshua chapter nine we read that the Gibeonites were a Canaanite people who heard about the powerful Yahweh and His people Israel, and all that God did to Egypt and Jericho. Rather than fight Israel, the Gibeonites sought to spare their own lives by forming a peace treaty with Israel. They knew Joshua would destroy them if they were discovered to be

Canaanites. They deceived Joshua and Israel by making their provisions and clothing look as though they had traveled from a far distant land outside of Canaan.

“So the men of Israel took some of their provisions, and did not ask for the counsel of the Lord. And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them” (Joshua 9:14-15).

This is the premise we need to keep in mind to rightly interpret the story in 2 Samuel 21. Israel foolishly made a covenant with the people of Gibeon. They should not have done this and the text points out they did not seek God’s counsel in the matter. However, they did make a covenant with them and that covenant must be honored.

Joshua 9:16-21 records that Israel found out they had been tricked. They discovered the cities of the Gibeonites because they were next to be attacked, but once they got there, they realized who they were.

But the sons of Israel did not attack them because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel. And the whole congregation grumbled against the leaders. But all the leaders said to the whole congregation, We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them (Joshua 9:18-19).

Notice the wording in these verses is very clear, Israel knew the Gibeonites were under the judgment of God as Canaanites, however Israel made a valid covenant treaty of peace with them. They had “sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel.” By the honor of Yahweh Israel had agreed to peace with the Gibeonites. Israel was in a conundrum. How could they attack people, whom they are supposed to attack, yet they had sworn an oath by the Lord’s name to have peace with them?

Joshua 9:20 says, “This we will do to them, even let them live, so that wrath will not be on us because of the oath which we swore to them.” Israel recognized that if they violate the covenant of peace and attack the Gibeonites, then Israel would face the wrath of God.

Israel decided to make the Gibeonites their servants. They put them into forced labor to serve the needs of Israel as they settled the Promised Land.

Saul’s Gibeonite Attack

2 Samuel 21:1 records that God places the blame squarely on Saul’s action to put the Gibeonites to death. Verse two adds a little more detail. “So the king called the

Gibeonites and spoke to them (now the Gibeonites were not of the sons of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites, and the sons of Israel had made a covenant with them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the sons of Israel and Judah).” Notice the commentary added by the narrator. “Saul had sought to kill the Gibeonites in his zeal for the sons of Israel and Judah.”

This story is nowhere recorded in the Bible. We have no further details about what Saul did to them except for these two verses. The wording implies that Saul sought to kill off all the Gibeonites because he thought it was part of his duty to fulfill God’s order that Israel judge all the Canaanites. However, Saul wrongly violated the valid peace covenant between Israel and Gibeon. Given Saul’s rash character and reckless disobedience, it is not difficult to believe that Saul would do this. Saul did not finish the job and a remnant of Gibeonites remained in Israel, but this injustice had not been rectified, and God was displeased with Israel.

David’s Negotiation with Gibeon

2 Samuel 21:2-6

David asked the Gibeonites what they would like to be done for them to bring justice for Saul’s crimes against them. At first, they say there is nothing they want, nor do they have the right to request anyone be put to death in Israel. It’s as if the Gibeonites recognize their place as Israel’s servants and do not want to rock the boat too much. David presses them further for an answer.

“So they said to the king, ‘The man who destroyed us and who planned to eliminate us so that we would not exist within any border of Israel—let seven men from his sons be given to us, and we will hang them before the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord.’” And the king said, ‘I will give them.’” (vv. 5,6)

The Gibeonites want seven of Saul’s male descendants to be killed in Saul’s city of Gibeah.

What is your first reaction to the Gibeonites’ request and David’s agreement?

The Gibeonite Revenge

2 Samuel 21:7-9

David was responsible for choosing seven men from Saul’s lineage to be handed over for execution by the Gibeonites. David spared Mephibosheth since David swore an oath to Jonathan that he would always care for Jonathan’s descendants. David chose

two sons of Saul from Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines. Then, he chose five grandsons of Saul's. These were sons of Merab, one of Saul's daughters. There is a textual dispute over which daughter of Saul this was. Some manuscripts say it was Michal, David's wife. But 2 Samuel 6:23 says Michal had no children as a punishment from God. Thus, most believe this is referring to another daughter of Saul, named Merab.

Some of tried to claim this was Michal, David's wife, but that she must have had sons from other husbands besides David and that 2 Samuel 6:23 means she never had sons with David specifically. However 1 Samuel 18:19 suggests that this must be Merab's sons.

David handed over these seven male descendants of Saul's over to the Gibeonites. We do not know the manner of execution the Gibeonites carried out. The phrase "hanged them in the mountain" in verse 9 means they *exposed them*. It's possible they hanged them after they were executed by another means. This was also done "before the Lord" suggesting it was done with due consideration of God's will. They were also put to death on what would be the first day of the barely harvest. There might be symbolic significance to this since it was meant to remedy a famine.

God Responds to Israel's Prayer

2 Samuel 21:10-14

After these men were killed, Rizpah engaged in severe public mourning. Once David heard what she was doing, he sent men to collect the bones of Saul and Jonathan that had been stolen. He also took the bodies of these seven men that were killed and gave them all a proper burial. David had the bones of Saul and Jonathan buried with their kinsmen in the land of Benajmin.

Verse 14 ends with, "and after that God responded to prayer for the land." This suggests that what David did was considered an act of justice that satisfied God's reason for bringing about the disciplinary famine in Israel.

The Moral Dilemma of this Story

The moral dilemma in this story comes when we factor in passages such as Deuteronomy 24:16. "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin alone." Also, Ezekiel 18:20, "The person who sins will die. A son will not suffer *the punishment* for the father's guilt, nor will a father suffer *the punishment* for the son's guilt; the

righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”

What are your initial thoughts about how we can wrestle with the ethics of this story?

Anytime we encounter an ethical dilemma it is helpful to first gather as many facts as possible. The more data we can bring in, the better chance we have of finding a reasonable solution. We must also remember a few key ideas: (1) The Bible will not contradict the Bible; (2) God will never contradict Himself; (3) God will never sin and do wrong; (4) God’s ways may be mysterious to us at times, but they are never unjust. Thus, any solution to this story’s moral dilemma must do justice to God’s character and standards as well as the relevant Bible verses.

Verse three is helpful. David asks the Gibeonites what could be done for them to “make amends.” The Hebrew word for *make amends* is the same word used throughout the Old Testament often translated as *atonement*. This word describes the act of smearing pitch or wiping away something. Theologically it means to wipe away sins and clear someone of their guilt before God.

David recognized that what Saul had done to Gibeon was a great evil in God’s sight, a sin. Therefore, something must be done to *atone* for that great sin and wipe away the guilt Israel bore. This is important because it helps us understand that even God viewed Saul’s actions against Gibeon as a great evil that must be atoned for.

David then said this phrase in verse three, “so that you will bless the inheritance of the Lord?” This shows us that David recognized Israel was under punishment by God because of the Gibeonites’ animosity against Israel. This is very ironic because the Gibeonites were Canaanites who should have been killed off by Israel but were spared due to a peace agreement. Furthermore, Gibeon is not the Lord’s chosen people; Israel is. But David’s wording shows that he realized that even though Israel is “the Lord’s inheritance,” Gibeon’s view towards Israel swayed God’s dealing with Israel.

For Israel to be relieved from God’s discipline required that Gibeon held a favorable view towards God’s chosen people, since it was God’s chosen people (Israel) who had wronged Gibeon. Once atonement was made that would cause Gibeon to change their view of Israel and “bless” them, then David knew the famine would end because God’s justice would be satisfied.

No matter how we resolve this moral dilemma in the story, we must factor in these facts: (1) God viewed Saul's actions against Gibeon as a great sin; (2) Justice had not been served for the people of Gibeon as of yet; (3) God held Israel accountable for the unrectified injustice done to Gibeon; (4) God accepted the deaths of the seven descendants of Saul as an appropriate action that satisfied His justice; (5) the proof of point #4 is the phrases "before the Lord" in v.9 and "after that God responded to prayer for the land" in v.14.

To put it more simply, God does not seem to be upset with David for handing over these seven men to be executed for Saul's sin. In fact, God seemed to respond favorably to this action. But again, how do we account for this when God said in the Law that children would never be punished for the sins of their fathers?

The Retribution-in-Kind Laws

God called for the execution of people if it was a case of a life unjustly taken. Here are some examples. If a pregnant woman was injured by someone and it caused her or the baby to be killed, God said "But if there is *any further* injury, then you shall appoint as a *penalty* life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exodus 21:23-25)

This concept in the Law of God meant that the punishment must be equal to the crime committed. For example, if someone murdered another, then the punishment must be the death of the murderer. Therefore, per God's standards in the Law, Saul's crime against the Gibeonites must be punished with equal severity. But the question is, who should pay for Saul's crimes? Obviously, Saul should pay for his crimes against the Gibeonites. The problem is that Saul is already dead. Saul cannot pay for his own crimes against the Gibeonites.

This means that Saul's death in battle was considered judgment by God for other sins on the part of Saul. Therefore, the crimes against the Gibeonites is still considered an open case of injustice. The question remains, who then must pay for Saul's crimes against the Gibeonites?

Per the laws of equal retribution that God established, however many Gibeonites were murdered, there should be a 1-for-1 execution against those responsible. The Gibeonites however ask for only seven people to be executed. The number seven may have been symbolic to represent completion. In a sense, the Gibeonites may have shown mercy to Israel. For instance, if Saul murdered 500 Gibeonites, then Gibeon could have asked for 500 Israelites to be executed; however, they only asked for seven.

Leviticus 24:21-22 says, “So the one who kills an animal shall make restitution, but the one who kills a person shall be put to death. There shall be only one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the Lord your God.” Notice again the divine standard of the punishment must fit the crime. Additionally, Leviticus says that this law applies to both native Israelites and foreigners in Israel, which would include the Gibeonites.

Also, Numbers 35:30-34 is helpful. It says that if innocent blood has been shed in the land of Israel, only the blood of the guilty could bring justice back to the land. Numbers 35:33 says, “So you shall not defile the land in which you live; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.”

A Possible Solution

We must keep in mind that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow but God did in fact deal with the Old Covenant people differently than He does in the present New Covenant era. Israel in the Old Covenant era was a nation of people that were to be directly governed by God and His divine law. They were not a nation like ours with branches of government and checks and balances. Even when Israel had kings, the king was to rule according to the Law of Moses.

God certainly punished people on an individual basis, however, He also upheld a type of corporate solidarity. Meaning that at times God viewed the entire nation of Israel as if they were one person. If Israel committed national-level sins, then God judged the entire nation. God did not punish a son for his father’s *personal* sins. However, it is quite logical that God would punish a son for his father’s *corporate* sins.

When it comes to Saul’s sin, we must also remember that he committed this sin against the Gibeonites while he was the king over Israel. Saul did not act alone in this sin. It is true that he bears the primary responsibility for triggering this sin, but more than just Saul alone took part in murdering Gibeonites. Saul’s sin against Gibeon, since he was the king who called for the nation of Israel to carry this out, was viewed by God as if the entire nation of Israel had sinned against Gibeon.

A somewhat related illustration might be to think of our own country, America and our President. When the President acts, he acts as if it is the entire country acting. We individually may not agree with his actions. But make no mistake about it, when the President decides to enter a peace treaty or launch an attack on a country, it is considered by the rest of the world as if “America” did these things.

I believe we can resolve this moral dilemma when we factor in that Saul carried out this great sin while he was exercising his duties as the king of Israel. Therefore, God was just to hold the entire nation responsible. Saul shed innocent blood, and so therefore Israel had shed innocent blood. Saul died in battle and God considered his death as judgment for his personal sins against God. However, the sin of the murdering of the Gibeonites had not yet been atoned for. God got the attention of Israel with the famine. This suggests God viewed the whole nation as responsible for this injustice and something must be done about it.

It hits our nerves probably to think that David chose seven unlucky descendants of Saul to be executed for something they may or may not have personally been involved with. Nonetheless, this is in line with God's standards of justice, especially in the Old Covenant era. God called for eye for eye and tooth for tooth justice. Saul, and the nation of Israel, violated a valid covenant with the Gibeonites and tried to exterminate them. Saul tried to wipe out Gibeonites, including their descendants. Therefore, in God's eyes, the only acceptable form of justice would be for Saul's house (descendants) to be killed as a type of retribution judgment.

Conclusion

Here is a summary way to go about studying ethical dilemmas in the Bible

1. Gather all the relevant facts
2. Remember that God will never sin, His judgments are always right
3. God will not contradict God
4. Search for the relevant Bible verses that help shed light
5. Your solution must do right by God's character and the teachings of the Bible

In this story, I believe we can conclude that God did not do wrong to these seven men. They did not pay for Saul's personal sins. They paid for a particular sin that Saul led *all Israel* into. God has the rights over life; He is the sovereign ruler. God's justice demands that sins be paid for. In this instance, Saul (and thus Israel) had acted with injustice against Gibeon. Therefore, God's standards of retributive justice demanded life be given from Saul's household to atone for the bloodshed Saul caused.

Stories like these remind us God is the sovereign God who is in charge. He will do as He sees fit. We must trust that He will never act sinfully nor in ways that create injustice. However, God may call for justice in ways that we do not always understand at first. Thankfully, we live in the New Covenant era and through Jesus Christ, God satisfies His just demands. Nonetheless, our sins can at times have consequences beyond ourselves.